Summary

Self-Insert. Gregor Clegane was one of the worst people to have ever existed. But what if someone else lived his life? What if a modern person of sound mind and honorable character was reborn as The Mountain? How would his rational and reasonable mind impact the ultimate outcome of Westeros? He just might be able to change the world for the better... Feedback is appreciated.

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own A Song of Ice and Fire or Game of Thrones. I am aware that George R. R. Martin himself is an avid opponent of all types of fanfiction, but that does not discourage me in any way whatsoever. Besides, he's the one who feels the need to address a "what if" scenario in literally every chapter of his books. So at least some of the blame for all the ASoIaF and GoT fanfiction must be placed on his shoulders!

Plot: A young American federal agent is killed in the line of duty. He is reborn into his favorite fantasy world... as one of its most feared, most hated, and most notorious characters. He quickly discovers that he can make that work to his favor, and to the favor of many others.

Note: These first few chapters will go by very quickly. Say, the first ten or eleven chapters will take place between the prologue in "A Game of Thrones." After that, the story will begin to follow some of the events in the beginning of the first book, but many things will happen differently or be avoided altogether.
Renewal

He did not know what went wrong.

One moment, he and his partner had cornered the suspect into a one-way alley. The next, the sound of a gunshot filled the air. After that, all he felt was a rush of pain in his back. He had dropped his gun and collapsed onto his chest.

He vaguely registered the image of his partner turning around and firing at the source of the first shot. A shout of anguish was heard as the assailant crumpled lifelessly to the ground.

After securing the first suspect, his partner rushed to his side. He just barely discerned the words "Oh, God…"

He did not know how badly he had been wounded, but evidently, it was bad. Really bad.

His partner contacted HQ and hastily reported "This is Special Agent Vincent Moreno. We have an agent down. Repeat, agent down!"

After giving their location, his partner turned him onto his stomach. He supported him gently and beseeched him "Come on, Greg! Stay with me!"

Greg. That was his name. Special Agent Gregory Welch of the Central Intelligence Agency. That had been his job for the last five years. He and Vincent had been working together for two months. This was their first major case together. It would also be their last.

Greg struggled to respond via speech or movement to Vincent, but he found himself unable to do much of anything at that moment. He could not even catch his breath.

His senses gradually began to fade. All he could make out was a strange humming noise that blocked out all other sounds. Then, his vision became impaired. Everything around him seemed to get brighter and brighter. It was as though he was staring directly at a quasar.

Suddenly, all the pain vanished. It was replaced by a very peculiar sensation. Gregory felt as though he was immersed in liquid, yet he was not drowning. He also felt as though he was encased in an odd container, and its only opening was the bright light in front of him.

He had a strange inclination to rush towards that light. Alas, he found himself unable to move. However, that did not keep him within the container. Somehow, he was moving, anyway. He felt as though he was being propelled towards the light by some unseen, unexplained force. Progress was very gradual, but it was consistent.

Finally, he reached the light and exited the container. Upon his departure, he noticed he had been holding his breath. He let out a sharp gasp to take in some oxygen, and an ear-piercing wail emerged from his lips.

He abruptly felt large hands take ahold of him, and he was lifted into the air. There was a momentary lapse of pain on his navel – or where his navel should have been. But it quickly faded away.

He soon realized he was naked. Luckily, he did not stay that way. He was swiftly wrapped up in a blanket by the hands that had picked him up. Once he was securely wrapped up, he heard a feminine voice announce "You have a son, milord."
He was then transferred to another pair of hands. That brought him face-to-face with a middle-aged man. The man was tall, strapping, and gruff, but he held a warm countenance. He appeared to be bristling with pride.

"Hello, my boy," the man said happily.

Apparently, he was a baby. That alone was remarkable. But the fact that he was aware of it… that was rather unique. Was he supposed to remember this? If not, somebody had some explaining to do.

As his new father held him, he took note of his surroundings. There were three other people in the room. One of them was a young woman lying on a bed. Obviously his new mother. Another man and another woman were tending to her. The woman must have been the midwife. The man may have been a doctor, but since when did doctors dress in black and wear large chains around their necks?

"He's quite a large babe," the father remarked.

"You need not tell me that, Husband," the mother mumbled. She was clearly exhausted.

The father looked to the man with the large chain, as though he was expecting some news from him. The man grinned and proclaimed "Your wife is doing well, milord."

The father nodded and declared "Ryna, Maester Velix, you may go."

He assumed Ryna was the midwife. So Maester Velix had to be the man with the chain. Odd first name, that one. Then again, maybe it was a title. But had had never known anyone who had such a title. At least not in real life.

"Yes, milord," Velix said obediently. He and Ryna took a bow and left the room. The father carried his son over to the bed and sat down next to his wife. She moved closer to her husband and smiled down at their newborn child.

"Welcome to the family, little one," the mother cooed softly.

Greg had never believed in reincarnation. Then again, he had never been a strong opponent of it, either. He had admitted that reincarnation may have been possible, but he never would have thought he would experience it firsthand.

However, he soon realized this was something even bigger than reincarnation.

His mother turned his father and asked "Have you decided on a name, my love?"

"Yes," his father replied, still gazing down at his son, "He shall be Gregor. Gregor of House Clegane."

The fact that he had almost the same first name in this life would have been bizarre enough. But when he heard his new last name… he was downright flabbergasted.

He knew that name, Gregor Clegane. It was one of the most universally despised names in the whole of the fantasy genre. It belonged to a man… who was more a monster in human skin.

This particular man was from Greg’s favorite fantasy franchise. It had started as a book series, but it had been made into a TV show, as well. He had read all the novels and seen all the episodes respectively. There were so many characters that it was nearly impossible to keep track of them all.
But Gregor Clegane was unforgettable. For all the wrong reasons.

Greg was beyond stunned. This had to be a dream. A very long, very graphic, highly realistic dream, but a dream nonetheless. He must have gone into a coma after he was shot. This was just a fantasy he was going through until he recovered.

That was what he told himself at first. As time went on, he began to feel less and less sure of that. Before too long, he decided that even if this was a dream, he may as well see how it played out.

Life as a newborn and infant was far from eventful and glamorous. The soiling, the messes, the feedings, the teething, the endless cajoling, the feeling of total helplessness… it was no wonder the human mind was not supposed to form memories until the age of three. Nothing that occurred before his third name day was something he had any desire to remember.

Fortunately, Greg (or Gregor, he supposed) was asleep for around half of that time. So he was spared a number of degrading experiences.

His third day came around soon enough. Once it did, things started to improve. His mother and father began to treat him with a little more dignity. So did his father's soldiers and servants. Even at that age, they showed proper respect to his independence and his authority. He began to believe that he might actually be able to get by in this world.

Nothing very notable happened over the next twelve months. However, a little over a year later, his mother got with child again. Gregor was elated when his parents gave him that news. They assumed it was because he was looking forward to being a brother. Unbeknownst to them, the true reason for his joy was because he knew what – or rather who – was coming.

A few months after his fifth name day, Gregor became an older sibling. His little brother, Sandor, was born after a lengthy labor. Gregor was not allowed to witness the birthing process. But as soon as his mother's screams were replaced by a babe's wails, his father let him into the room.

Even as a babe, Sandor Clegane was large. Not as large as Gregor himself had been, but large all the same. Gregor noted that their father stood taller than any other man at Clegane's Keep. He had long ago come to the conclusion that all the members – or at least the men – of House Clegane were inherently big-boned.

Ryna and Maester Velix assisted with this birth, as well. They were soon dismissed by Gregor's father, but Gregor was allowed to stay with his parents and his newborn brother.

He gave his parents a few moments to fawn over their second child. After that, he asked their permission to hold Sandor. Even at the age of five, Gregor was abnormally big. His parents had no reason to worry that Sandor would be too heavy for his brother or that he would drop him.

Gregor's parents beckoned him over to the bed. After he was seated between them, his mother carefully placed Sandor in his arms.

Gregor held his brother tenderly. He could not imagine the original Gregor Clegane ever doing such a thing. Nevertheless, he had an even harder time fathoming a reason why Gregor had so deliberately and cruelly harmed this boy. He vowed on that spot that he would never do such a thing to Sandor.

He stayed true to that vow. He played an active role in Sandor's upbringing. His mother was delighted by her elder boy's willingness to help with her younger's rearing.

Although he spent a fair amount of time with his mother and brother, he spent just as much time in
the training yard with his father. He spent many hours each day watching the master-at-arms drill the soldiers of Clegane's Keep at various exercises and combat techniques. But he only observed from afar whilst he was young. The moment he was deemed mature enough to wield a sword, he joined his father and his father's guards in the training yard.

By the time he was eight name days old, Gregor was convinced that this was not a dream, a hallucination, a fantasy, or any other figment of his imagination. There was no point in denying it any longer. Somehow, he really was in Westeros, and he would not be leaving it anytime soon.

Before he knew it, Gregor reached his eleventh name day. But at a glance, one would think it was his fifteenth. All his time in the training yard – as well as his 'Clegane genetics,' as he called them – really paid off. He was over five feet tall, and his arms, legs, and chest were bound with muscle. People were already starting to refer to him as "The Mountain."

Still, Gregor had been dreading his eleventh name day. After all, that year coincided with one of Sandor's most traumatic life experiences. The moment he received that toy knight from that travelling merchant, he knew it was coming.

Naturally, Gregor was not going to burn his little brother. Even so, he was not going to avoid that encounter altogether. While the experience had been one of the worst moments of Sandor's life, it had left him with a very somber and advanced viewpoint of the world. That mindset was one of the things that kept Sandor alive where so many others had fallen. Gregor wanted him to have that mindset, but he wished to spare him the physical scar that would have accompanied it.

One day after training with his father, Gregor headed up to his bedchamber. There he found Sandor playing with his toy knight. He was so mesmerized with the toy that he did not even notice Gregor entering the room.

Feeling a little devious, Gregor crept up on his little brother and shouted "Boo!"

Sandor jumped in alarm and turned around. Gregor could not help but chuckle at the expression on his brother's face.

As for Sandor, he looked horrified. But not because his brother had snuck up on him. He dropped the toy knight, backed away, and told him uneasily "Gregor, I… I was just borrowing it. I was going to take it, I swear! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

Gregor held up his hand, knelt next to his brother, and told him in assurance "It's alright, Sandor. I'm not mad you took the toy. I don't really care about that stupid thing. If you want it, it is yours."

"Really?" Sandor asked, looking both relieved and joyful.

"Of course," Gregor stated. He picked the toy knight up and handed it out to the younger Clegane boy. As Sandor received it in his hands, his older brother stated "But Sandor, next time, I would prefer it if you ask me first."

"I will," Sandor insisted, "I promise I won't ever take anything that doesn't belong to me."

"Oh, you don't have to promise that much," Gregor debated with a smirk, "Just don't take anything that belongs to a friend or family member. Or anything you couldn't get away with taking. Only take that which no one would miss."

Sandor looked confused. "Are you asking me to steal, Gregor?"

"No, I am not telling you to be a thief," Gregor simplified, "It's a hostile world we live in, little
brother. One might call it 'survival of the fittest.' We're from a small House. We have the means to seize power, but we need the strength to hold onto it."

"How do we do that?" Sandor asked in interest.

"It will not be easy," Gregor contended, "There are few people we can call our friends. There are even fewer we can trust. Anyone – I mean, anyone – could turn against us at any time. We must choose our allies and our goals with care. Otherwise, we will fall."

Sandor absorbed his brothers' words. He looked off to the side and muttered "You're... you're scaring me, Gregor. Do you mean we'll never be safe? Everyone might be an enemy?"

"Not everyone," Gregor proclaimed. He knelt down, turned his brother's eyes towards his own, and told him "Even if every other person in the world turns against you, I never will. No matter how bad things get, you can count on me to stay by your side. I'll be there for you, Sandor."

That seemed to put the younger boy's mind at ease. He smiled at his brother and stepped forward to embrace him. Gregor happily returned the gesture. He was very pleased with himself. He had gotten Sandor to learn the truth about the harshness of reality, and he had learned that lesson without suffering a deformation.
The Inevitable

A few days later, Gregor's mother informed him, Sandor, and their father that she was with child again. Initially, Gregor was surprised. Then he remembered; in the first book, there was a chapter that mentioned that the Clegane brothers had a sister. So this must have been her.

From what Gregor recalled, the sister had died under "mysterious" circumstances. Just as his father had died turning a hunt "accident." Come to think of it, a number of servants and residents of Clegane's Keep vanished "suspiciously" during the original Gregor's tenure. He was not about to let those rumors take root. As long as he was around, even the dogs in the Keep would all remain accounted for.

While Gregor's greatest strengths involved a sword and a suit of armor, he had not spent all of his childhood in the training yard. Often, he took private lessons with Maester Velix. He had a bit of an innate desire to learn anything that could be useful. Perhaps that was a trait that had lingered from his previous life. The original Gregor Clegane certainly never gave much thought to education, after all.

Velix was relatively young for a maester, but he was full of wisdom and eagerness to teach his young charge.

Gregor already knew that his house had been created when his grandfather Alyver – the kennelmaster of Casterly Rock – saved Lord Tytos Lannister from a lioness. Three of his grandfather's dogs had died fighting alongside their master; those were the same three dogs in the Clegane family's sigil.

House Clegane was not run by a lord. It had attained knightly status, but not masterly or lordly. Basically, it was a house of landed knights. All the "milords" Gregor and his father received were mere courtesies.

Clegane's Keep was not very large or alluring. It had already been in a sorry state when Ser Alyver and his wife had settled into it. So far, the Keep had not fared much better under the command of Gregor's father, Ser Tarrence. If anything, it had gotten even more unpleasant to look at. Gregor hoped that whenever he became the lord of the Keep, he would be able to refurbish it or make it look less foreboding. He had proposed the idea to his father, but Ser Tarrence seemed to care very little for the building's cleanliness or appearance.

At the very least, Ser Tarrence had a better marriage than his own father. Ser Alyver's wife, Lady Tessia, was not a lady by birth. She had been one of the kitchen wenches of Casterly Rock who simply had the fortune to be wed to Lord Tytos' one-time savior.

As for Ser Tarrence, his wife – Lady Daliah – was born a Lydden of Deep Den. She was the youngest daughter of Lord Lewys Lydden. That was something of a special privilege for House Clegane. It was not often that lords of noble houses married their children into newly-formed knightly houses.

Strangely enough, even though that had been an arranged marriage, there was now more love between Ser Tarrence and Lady Daliah than there had ever been between Ser Alyver and Lady Tessia. That was demonstrated quite well by how Alyver and Tessia only had one child, yet Tarrence and Daliah had two, soon to be three.

Lady Daliah's third pregnancy went by without incident. Maester Velix tended to her every need,
and her husband and sons were very mindful of her well-being.

Throughout the nine months leading up to his sister's birth, Gregor was fearful that Lady Daliah might die in childbirth. Neither the books nor the show ever specified how Gregor and Sandor's mother died, and the miracle of birth was not without risk. Gregor had actually come to love Daliah as much as he loved his mother from his previous life.

His worries turned out to be unfounded. In fact, this time, the birthing process for was much more straightforward than Gregor's or Sandor's had been. As before, Maester Velix oversaw the procedure. Ryna, sadly, had perished during the last winter. The role of midwife went to Gregor and Sandor's wet nurse, Bernice.

After two hours of labor, Ellyn Clegane came into the world. She was rather small, compared to the sizes her brothers had been. But she was by no means frail or weak. Maester Velix declared that she would grow up to be strong. Her parents and her brothers were elated by that news.

Gregor had a fairly decent family in this world. However, he knew that he would not be able to stay within them in Clegane's Keep forever. It would have been naive and foolish to have assumed so. Also, if he never went anywhere, his new life would be full of nothing but wasted opportunity.

He spent the first dozen years of his life contemplating what he would do when he left the Keep and saw more of the world. So far, he did not even know if this universe followed the events of the books, the show, or if it was a combination of both. As a precaution, he made plans for all three. Of course, things rarely ever went according to plan in any of the franchise's worlds. Luckily, he got around this by having a backup plan to almost any possible scenario.

On his thirteenth name day, Gregor decided he had spent enough time planning. It was time for him to get out and start making a name for himself. After all, if he was to get anywhere, he had to have a reputation.

A month after he turned thirteen, Gregor rode to Casterly Rock and offered his sword to Tywin Lannister. He had forecasted that his first encounter with Lord Tywin would not be a pleasant one. It was not. Tywin was every bit as cold, calculating, and wary as he had been in any medium. He was less than receptive of Gregor, despite knowing that his grandfather had rescued his lord father. Or maybe that was why he was so unwelcoming. Lord Tytos' eldest son had held little affection for him, after all.

Still, had he not stood a whole foot higher than Lord Tywin, and had he not been aware of Lord Tywin's ultimate fate, Gregor probably would have been intimidated by their first meeting. But he was careful not to let his apprehension show. That would have been seen as weakness, and the last thing he needed was to be seen as weak.

Tywin Lannister was impressed by Gregor's prowess, swordsmanship, and resilience. However, he was never one to render a judgment from appearance alone. So Lord Tywin gave Gregor an assignment to prove his usefulness.

A couple days earlier, three of the Rock's servants had stolen a hundred golden dragons from the vault's treasury and killed two of the guards in their escape from the city. Gregor's job was to go after the thieves and bring back the gold.

Gregor left Casterly Rock with a promise that he would return. Less than twenty-four hours later, he did. He presented Lord Tywin with two chests. The first one held all one hundred golden dragons. The other one contained the heads of the three thieves.
Those were the first men Gregor had killed in this universe. But they were not the first ones he had ever killed. He had been forced to use his firearm on several occasions in his previous life. Killing brought him no personal pleasure in either of his lives. But at least in this world, whenever he killed someone, he would not have to fill out an excessive amount of paperwork to explain why.

At any rate, Tywin Lannister was satisfied with Gregor's performance. He granted him the right to function as a keeper of his peace, and he tasked him with maintaining order in the Westerlands.

The next four years of Gregor's life witnessed a fair amount of excitement. Many times, Lord Tywin Lannister called on him to bring renegade criminals to justice. Every time, Gregor delivered.

It did not take long for his name to be recognized beyond the Westerlands. He had successfully developed a reputation. It was not stained as heavily with blood as the original Gregor Clegane's, but it was still fearsome.

Gregor was ruthless in his dispensing of the King's justice. Thieves lost their hands. Rapists lost their cocks. Murderers lost their heads. He did not allow any guilty party to sway him. Anytime a crime was committed in the Westerlands, the perpetrator was punished severely and harshly. Oftentimes, Gregor saw to the chastisement personally. He made it quite clear that no breaches of law would be tolerated.

Gregor did, however, have standards. For instance, he went out of his way to ensure that all innocent parties were left unmolested. He would not have guiltless blood be spilt on his account. He also gave every criminal he captured alive the option to take the black. Anyone who accepted that option was sent unharmed to the Wall.

When he worked for the CIA, regulations required him to give a suspect the chance to yield. In this world, offering mercy was viewed as a weakness. Instead, the suspect had to voluntarily surrender, or his life was forfeit.


Most of them lived in the towns adjoining Clegane's Keep. The majority of them were natives of the Westerlands. All of them were at least a few years older than Gregor. Yet they all looked up to him (both literally and figuratively), and they respected his authority and his orders without question.

Their biggest defect was their notable lack of intelligence. By himself, Gregor was smarter than the lot of them combined. But interestingly, being so stupid also made them rather impressionable. It turned out that most of the Mountain's men were not actually cruel and sadistic by nature. Almost all of them must have been that way because they had so devoutly followed the original Gregor's actions and temperament by example.

Never one to waste a resource, Gregor decided to take advantage of how dim-witted his men-at-arms were. He laid out the fundamental guidelines of his squad. Mainly, they could be summarized in four points: no harming the innocent, no using excessive force, no showing too much leniency, and no allowing crimes to go unpunished. To his good fortune, nearly all of his men seemed to understand and accept those rules without question. Anyone who could not comply with them was dismissed from the unit.

Normally, Gregor would have felt guilty for being so manipulative. Then he remembered what these men could have been capable of under less favorable guidance. So he quickly set his mind at
Amazingly, a few of The Mountain's Men were actually capable of exhibiting compassion and empathy. Like Gregor, they could be merciless towards the guilty, but tender towards the innocent. That gave Gregor hope that he really could instill some form of positive change in Westeros.

During his travels throughout the Westerlands, Gregor had the opportunity to become acquainted with members of many of the region's noble houses. He actually managed to make a few friends along the way. Chiefly among them were Forley Prester, Flement Brax, Addam Marbrand, Lyle Crakehall, and Jaime Lannister himself. The six of them became a tight circle of friends. Whenever Gregor was not with his men-at-arms, he was almost always in the company of one or more of those men.

Gregor was unable to prevent Jaime from entering the Kingsguard. As Gregor knew, the only reason Jaime ever wished to join the Kingsguard was because Lord Tywin was so certain that Mad King Aerys would choose Cersei as Rhaegar's bride. Even after Aerys refused the betrothal, the idea of naming Jaime to the Kingsguard had not died. This time, the Mad King planned to appoint Jaime to that position with the sole intention of depriving Tywin Lannister of his heir. In response, Tywin had resigned his office as Hand of the King.

Gregor had his fifteenth name day in 280 A.C. That was the year before the infamous tourney at Harrenhal. It was also the year the tourney was announced. Rhaegar Targaryen had gone to Casterly Rock to invite Lord Tywin personally. Frustrated by the upcoming loss of his heir, Tywin refused. Jaime, however, was looking forward to go. It was at the tourney that he would be knighted and added to the Kingsguard.

Gregor had been at Casterly Rock when Rhaegar arrived. He had the pleasure of meeting the Crown Prince in person. As a reward for all his hard work with keeping the peace in the Westerlands, Rhaegar himself knighted the Mountain, making him Ser Gregor Clegane of Clegane's Keep.

Although Lord Walter Whent was hosting the tourney at Harrenhal, Gregor knew that the tourney was actually Rhaegar's idea. He also knew that Rhaegar was plotting to remove his insane father from power, and that the tourney was just an excuse for him to speak privately with the great lords in the realm. What really concerned Gregor was the scandal that would result from the tourney. He doubted he would be able to prevent it, but he had to try, all the same.

Gregor was not about to invite himself to the tourney at Harrenhal. One did not request an invitation from a royal. So this may have been his only opportunity to speak with Rhaegar. He used his time and chose his words carefully.

Basically, he advised the prince to be careful, and to consider all the possible repercussions of all his actions. He subtly suggested to Rhaegar that he not do anything impulsive before, during, or after – especially after – the tourney.

Unlike his paranoid father, the Crown Prince was not one to ignore words of caution. He willingly listened to the Mountain's counsel. However, Gregor's anxiety was not hard to notice. During their conversation, Rhaegar ask the younger man if there was a reason why he seemed so restless. Gregor claimed he was merely concerned for the prince's welfare. He pointed out that anything could happen at the tourney, especially since all the great houses would be represented.

Ultimately, Rhaegar just gave Gregor his assurance that he would be mindful of his actions, and that he would do nothing hasty or irrational. Gregor saw no reason to mistrust the Crown Prince, so he took him at his word.
Alas, Rhaegar's word turned out to be insufficient.

Soon enough, the year 281 A.C. arrived. The weather of that year was erratic. At first, it appeared as though the current winter would end. But just when the snows seemed to completely recede, the temperature dropped substantially. For that reason, it was known as the Year of the False Spring.

The tourney of Harrenhal was held, and it happened exactly as it was supposed to. Rhaegar Targaryen ended up naming Lady Lyanna Stark his Queen of Love and Beauty over his wife, Princess Elia Martell.

Everyone in the Seven Kingdoms was reveling in that bit of gossip for months after the tourney ended.

The year after the Year of the False Spring, the already fragile balance of Westeros was finally shattered by a tragic chain of events:

Lyanna Stark being supposedly abducted from Winterfell by Prince Rhaegar Targaryen and three of the Kingsguard. Brandon Stark riding all the way to King's Landing, publicly demanding for Rhaegar's head. Brandon's arrest and subsequent murder (or execution, as some called it), along with that of his father, Lord Rickard Stark. The Mad King demanding the heads of Eddard Stark and Robert Baratheon from their mentor, Lord Jon Arryn. Lord Arryn's refusal to comply and calling of his banners.

The country was officially at war then.

The Vale, the North, the Riverlans, and the Stormlands (save for House Connington) were all in open rebellion against the crown. The Crownlands could only rely on support from the Reach and Dorne. The Iron Islands and the Westerlands stayed out of the fighting.

The Iron Islands' neutrality was no surprise; the Ironborn cared little for the politics of the Seven Kingdoms. The Westerlords' refusal to choose a side was a little more astonishing.

The Westerlords knew that their liege lord was merely bidding his time and waiting for the opportune mount to call his banners. He would not do so until he could determine with absolutely certainty which side would be the victorious one.

Some may have called that a craven's tactic. Lord Tywin Lannister cared not; this course of action would ensure his peoples' survival.

So while the rest of the realm bled, the Westerlands stayed whole. There were some houses who would have been content to join either side, but out of fear for what Lord Tywin would do to them, they stayed home. If it had been up to him, Gregor would have sided with the rebels without question. Still, he was hoping to avoid losing favor with Lord Tywin.

Lord Tywin kept the Westerlands neutral throughout almost the entire Rebellion.

It was not until the Battle of the Trident, when Robert Baratheon killed Rhaegar Targaryen in single combat, that he finally called his own banners.

The Westerlords were quickly and deftly assembled. In his father's place, Gregor himself commanded the soldiers of House Clegane. Including his contingent of men-at-arms, there were less than a hundred men, but each and every one of them was fierce, hardened, and loyal to the bone.

As the Westerlords began the long march to King's Landing, Gregor became increasingly worried.
The most atrocious thing the original Gregor had ever done took place during the Sack of King's Landing. Even though Gregor would never do that horrible thing now, he had no reassurance that someone else would not do it in his stead. His own men, he could trust not to harm Princess Elia and her children. But they were less than a hundred men among twelve thousand. Their numbers were far too few to protect the royal family.

This was the first occasion where all of Gregor's planning paid off. The solution to this dilemma could be found through a means other than fighting. All he had to do was search for a certain spider.

If the spider proved to be elusive or stubborn, Gregor would just have to rely on himself to rescue Princess Elia and her children. One way or another, he was determined to get them out of that shithole of a city.
On the road to King's Landing, Tywin Lannister had informed his officers that there would be no need for a siege. The gates to the city would already be opened for them. Gregor knew that was because Grand Maester Pycelle was a Lannister spy. Pycelle would get the Westerlords access to King's Landing by misinforming King Aerys Targaryen that Tywin's forces were coming to support the throne. While there were few that Aerys would actually believe, he still heeded the counsel of the Grand Maester.

Although Tywin had not mentioned the fact that Pycelle was a double agent to his soldiers, Gregor knew full well that entering the city would not be an issue for the Westerlords. What really bothered Gregor was what would come after.

Gregor could not recall the exact number of people that had died when Tywin's forces took King's Landing, but he knew it had to be thousands. While he had no intention of abandoning Elia and her children, they were still just three people. Before he could focus on rescuing them, he would have to take measures to minimalize the damage of the Sack of King's Landing.

The day before the Westerlords reached King's Landing, Lord Tywin assembled his officers in the lords' tent. He explained that their forces would be divided into ten different contingents, each with a different objective. One would monitor Blackwater Bay, one would patrol the outskirts of the city, seven would enter the city through the seven gates, and one would guard the gates after those seven passed through them.

Lord Leo Lefford and his units would monitor Blackwater Bay and ensure that no one in the city got out through the harbor. Lord Regenard Estren and his units would guard the gates and ensure that no one used them to exit King's Landing. Lord Garrison Prester and his units would enter through the Old Gate. Lord Roland Crakehall and his units would enter through the Lion Gate. Lord Lewys Lydden and his units would enter through the Iron Gate. Lord Andros Brax and his units would enter through the River Gate. Lord Damon Marbrand and his units would enter through King's Gate. Ser Harys Swyft and his units would enter through the Mud Gate. Lord Quenten Banefort and his units would enter through the Gate of the Gods.

Lord Tywin Lannister himself would lead the units that would remain on the outskirts. Some may have thought it quaint that Lord Tywin was staying at a distance during the whole affair, but none of his bannermen dared to suggest he was a craven.

Although he was not tasked with leading any of the ten divisions of the Westerland forces, Gregor managed to put himself in a position to control the level of damage inflicted during the Sack of King's Landing. After the other officers left the lords' tent, he approached Lord Tywin and requested to speak with him alone. Since they were pressed for time, Lord Tywin allowed him a ten-minute audience.

Those ten minutes were all Gregor needed to convince Tywin that when the Westerlords seized King's Landing, they would need someone to supervise their forces within the city. He pointed out that if the city was to be taken properly, they would have to limit the number of civilian casualties and the amount of destruction. He contended that if they took those precautions, the smallfolk would more apt to cooperate with the Westerlanders.

Gregor spent five of his ten minutes convincing Lord Tywin that one of his generals should be charged with keeping track of all the activities of their forces within King's Landing. He spent the other five convincing Tywin that HE should be that person.
Gregor was easily the youngest of the officers in the Westerlander army, but based on his service record, Lord Tywin knew that he was competent, qualified, and capable of doing this job. So he charged Gregor with overseeing the actions of their soldiers once they were inside the city.

When Gregor stepped out of the lords’ tent, he came face-to-face with a portly man of average height. This man also had a pale face, and he bore a queer resemblance to a pig.

"Ser Amory," Gregor greeted him with a feigned grin.

"Gregor," the older man said dismissively, sauntering past the Mountain and into the tent.

Gregor had taken note of the conspicuous absence of Ser Amory Lorch during the officers’ meeting. But he did not linger around to find out why he was speaking with Lord Tywin now. It would not be worth the risk if he was caught eavesdropping. Aside from that, it was not hard to imagine what Lord Tywin was discussing with Ser Amory.

While he had never failed any of his assignments from Lord Tywin, his policy of always getting the job done through the course that involved doing no harm to the innocent had not gone unnoticed. Evidently, even if Gregor had not made that proposal, Lord Tywin only entrusted someone who was willing to kill indiscriminately with "taking care" of Rhaegar's wife and children.

Like Polliver and the rest of Gregor's men-at-arms, Amory Lorch could be classified as simple and dim-witted. Unlike the Mountain's Men, though, Amory Lorch truly was a monster. Gregor had only seen him thrice, but that was enough to persuade him that the plump knight was cruel and murderous by nature. Reasoning with a man like him was impossible.

Fortunately, Gregor was prepared to deal with him.

When the Westerlords were within sight of King's Landing, Gregor assembled the commanders and informed them that Lord Tywin had charged him with heading the invasion force. He laid out the guidelines for how they would seize the city:

Their units would only attack anyone who raised arms against them, which meant the Gold Cloaks, the Targaryen soldiers, and any Crownlander militias within the city. No harm was to come to anyone who threw down their weapons voluntarily, or to anyone who brandished no weapon at all. Most of all, the injuring or slaying of women and children was strictly prohibited. Anyone who violated those guidelines would be punished in accordance with his crime. He claimed that these orders came directly from Lord Tywin himself.

Some of the generals assumed Gregor was jesting; civilian casualties were practically unavoidable, especially under these circumstances. To prove that he meant business, Gregor conducted a public display of what would await anyone who defied these guidelines.

For the duration of their march, the westermen army had amassed quite a few camp followers. The day before, a particularly attractive camp follower had been raped by three of the men from House Serrett, and when she tried to flee, one of the rapists killed her.

Gregor had already had the other two rapists gelded. The murderer he kept alive until that moment. He was brought forward in chains, pleading for his life. Eggon placed a block of wood in the clearing, and Chiswyck forced the murderer to kneel over the block. There, in front of all the officers, Gregor Clegane cleaved the man's head off with a single blow of his longsword.

His exhibition must have been rather effective. When the westermen entered King's Landing, the vast majority of them stayed away from the smallfolk and concentrated solely on eliminating and
subjugating the city's armed defenders.

As a precaution, Gregor had tasked his own soldiers with keeping an eye out for anyone who broke the aforementioned rules. If anyone did, they were to make a note of who, and then report the offenders to the Mountain later on.

Once the city had been secured, Gregor concentrated his efforts on preventing the original Mountain's most infamous act of barbarism.

Even when lightly clad, Amory Lorch was a very slow-moving person, and Gregor had seen him clad in armor that morning. With that in mind, Gregor doubted Ser Amory was even halfway to Aegon's High Hill by that point in time.

Still, given what was at stake, Gregor was taking no chances. He and a dozen of his best men-at-arms swiftly made their way to Maegor's Holdfast. Since the drawbridge was up, they had to gain entry by scaling the walls. After subduing the guards at the top, they entered the Red Keep and navigated their way to the royal apartments.

As they got closer to Rhaegar and Elia's bedroom, Dunsen thought aloud "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Tobbot queried, looking to his colleague.

Dunsen gestured for the others to stop and beckoned them "Listen."

The thirteen men stood by and pricked up their ears.

"I don't hear anythin'," Eggon remarked after a few seconds.

"Yeah, your buggin' ears is playing buggin' tricks on you, bugger," Shitmouth claimed.

"No, wait," Raff stated, placing a hand to his ear, "Sounds like... gruntin'."

"And slashin'," Chiswyck observed.

Gregor also heard both those noises. It sounded as though someone was hacking a sword at a wooden door. The group continued on their current route. The further they went into the holdfast, the louder the noises got.

Soon, they reached the corridor that housed the royal apartments. As they walked around the corner, they spotted the source of the commotion.

Ser Amory Lorch was standing with his sword drawn in front of Rhaegar and Elia's bedroom. He was hacking incessantly at the door with his blade. He must have been at it awhile; his breathing was somewhat labored. Even so, the door looked as though it would give at any moment.

"Oh, fuck," Gregor drily mumbled. He promptly drew his sword and sprinted down the hallway. Unfortunately, due to his size and the weight of his armor, he was not able to run very fast.

When he was almost halfway there, Amory finally broke the door down. Gregor heard a high-pitched scream, which must have been Princess Elia.

"Stay away!" she yelled in fright.

The only response she got from Ser Amory was a malicious chuckle.

"Where's the girl?" he demanded.
"She… she's not here," was all Elia could sputter.

It was a pitiful response, but it was the best response she could think up in her desperation. In any case, Ser Amory did not believe her.

When Gregor was two-thirds of the way there, he heard the sound of a cat meowing. That had to be Rhaenys' kitten, Balerion. He then heard the sounds of Amory Lorch's armored kneecap striking the ground as he knelt down, and Rhaenys' scream as he dragged her out from underneath her parents' bed.

"Father, help us!" the small princess shrieked.

"No, no, please!" Elia begged the plump knight.

Then there came the sound of a gauntleted hand making contact with flesh, which must have been Amory striking Elia in the face. Elia's subsequent moan of pain and distress seemed to substantiate that.

Right then, Gregor reached the entrance of the bedroom. Princess Elia was propped against the wall. One arm was wrapped protectively around Prince Aegon; the other was pressed against a fresh bruise on her cheek.

In the center of the room, Ser Amory Lorch had Princess Rhaenys pinned down with one hand. In the other, he held his sword high over his head.

Before Ser Amory could thrust his blade into the little girl's body, Gregor lifted his own sword and gave a mighty swing.

Amory Lorch's sword went flying through the air. His right forearm was still clasped around its hilt.

Immediately, Amory shrieked at the new stump on his right arm. Gregor wondered what was more overwhelming: the pain or the shock.

At any rate, Gregor was not finished with him yet. He roughly shoved the portly man away from Princess Rhaenys. Amory groaned as he collided with the wall. Before he had a chance to get up, Gregor approached him and grimaced down at him. Then he gripped his sword in both hands and raised it high into the air.

Amory feebly lifted his remaining hand as though it would shield him. He pleaded pathetically "No… Gregor, don't! Please, don't!"

Gregor did not even acknowledge the portly man's pleas. Without hesitating, he plunged his sword into the older knight's chest. He stabbed him directly in the heart. As blood began to seep through the new opening in his armor, more appeared at the corners of his mouth. Gregor twisted his sword around and muttered angrily "Just fucking die already, you worthless pile of shit."

Amory Lorch slowly moved his left hand to the blade, as though he was thinking of pulling out the blade. Just before he could wrap his fingers around the cold steel, his endurance gave out. His left hand dropped to his side, and his eyes stared into oblivion.

Gregor withdrew his sword from the false knight's chest. He continued staring down at Amory Lorch's remains, breathing in and out rapidly.

By then, Gregor's men-at-arms had reached the bedroom, too. Polliver, Dunsen, and Tobbot
stepped through the threshold; the others remained out in the hallway.

"Ser, what's going on?" Dunsen asked in confusion.

Gregor elected not to answer him straightaway. He focused his attention instead on Princess Elia. Princess Rhaenys had picked up Balerion and rushed over to her mother. The Dornish princess now had one arm wrapped around each of her children. Her gaze, however, was fixed on the massive figure in front of her. She did not know whether to be afraid or relieved.

Gregor slowly approached Elia. When he was within a meter of her, he placed his sword on the ground between them, fell to one knee before her, bowed his head, and said solemnly "I am sorry you had to be a witness that, Your Grace."

"My daughter lives because of it, Ser," Princess Elia told him, suddenly seeming less terrified, "You have no reason to repent. Might I know your name?"

Gregor looked up at her and removed his helm. Holding it under one arm, he replied "I am Ser Gregor of House Clegane. I once had the honor of making your husband's acquaintance."

"Yes, Rhaegar did mention you," Elia recounted "He spoke highly of your principles. He even referred to you as a 'guardian of the innocent.'"

Gregor momentarily grinned at that and gave a light nod of his head. Then he stated "For that reason and others, I am here."

He then adorned his helm again and picked his sword up with his right hand. He extended his left hand to Princess Elia and told her "You must come with me. You and your children are still in danger."

Both of Elia's arms were full at the moment. She briefly let go of Rhaenys long enough to take Gregor's hand so he could pull her to her feet. Then she picked Rhaenys back up.

"Do you have a travelling cloak, Your Grace?" Gregor inquired.

"Yes, in my wardrobe," the Dornish princess replied.

Gregor looked over his shoulder and called out "Eggon, get the princess's cloak."

The bald man nodded in acknowledgment and made his way over to the wardrobe. He opened it up and searched through the contents. While most of his men-at-arms had little to no sense of fashion, Eggon at least could tell a cloak from a dress.

When he found the cloak, he fished it out and brought it over to Princess Elia, saying "Here you are, Your Grace."

Once more, Elia had to set her daughter down. That enabled her to take the cloak from Eggon and fasten it around her shoulders.

As she reached down to pick Rhaenys back up, Gregor interceded and observed "This is not going to work. You are going to need one hand free, Your Grace."

He looked over his shoulder again and called out "Rafford, get over here."

The Sweetling approached the Mountain and asked him "Yes, ser?"

"Look after Princess Rhaenys," Gregor ordered him.
Raff saluted the massive knight, turned to the little girl, and lowered himself to her level. Initially, Rhaenys hid warily behind her mother's skirts.

Gregor could not fault her for being cautious. After all, children felt an innate mistrust of all strangers. Some would say they were wiser than adults in that regard. Even so, that mistrust would be an obstacle in this situation.

Gregor turned to Elia and claimed "I would trust this man with my own child. If I had one. So, if you have no objection…?"

Princess Elia thought it over, and she lightly shook her head, meaning she had none. She looked down at her daughter and gestured for her to come out of hiding.

Rhaenys tentatively emerged from behind her mother and hesitantly approached Rafford. When she reached him, he gently picked her up in her left arm and told her softly "Don't be afraid, dear one. I'll keep you safe."

Somehow, Rhaenys brought herself to trust this man. She still held her kitten Balerion in her small hands. The little tom stretched out one of his paws and lightly patted Raff's shoulder. Rhaenys giggled and proclaimed "He likes you."

"So he does," Raff concurred, scoffing a little.

Gregor could not help but smile at the scene. This would never have happened in the original universe.

Here, the Sweetling was not an entirely inaccurate or scornful moniker for Rafford. Certainly, at times, Raff could be as vicious and hardhearted as anyone else who served under Gregor Clegane. At other times, he could be surprisingly gentle and affectionate. Gregor actually found it hard to believe that under different circumstances, this very same man could casually stab a child in the throat.

"I have a task for you, gentlemen," the Mountain told his men-at-arms, "You must escort the princess and her children to safety. Kill anyone who tries to stop you or harm them. Anyone. Do not stop until you are out of the city. Is that clear?"

"Aye, Ser," Rafford declared, "We won't let anyone lay a finger on them."

Everyone else gave murmurs of agreement.

The massive knight, the princess, and the twelve men-at-arms exited the bedroom. Gregor murmured in a candid tone to "Here, we must part ways."

That made Chiswyck ask "Where will you be, Ser?"

"I have some business here I must attend to first," Gregor notified them, "When it's over, I'll rejoin you all. Polliver, you will be in command until we regroup."

The black-bearded man nodded and muttered "As you say, Ser."

All twelve of the men-at-arms drew their swords.

Polliver went over to Elia and softly placed a hand on her shoulder. She turned to him, and he used his sword to gesture down the corridor. He beckoned her "This way, Your Grace."
Elia nodded her head and let the tall man lead her down the hallway. Dunsen, Chiswyck, Rafford, and the others all followed close behind.

Gregor was not concerned that his men would fail him; he knew they would not. They had a talent of slipping unnoticed through enemy and ally lines alike, and each of them was worth ten soldiers from any other house in the Westerlands. Plus, he had already informed his men of the secret passageway that led out of the Red Keep by way of the sewers. That was how they would be getting the princess out of the city. Even Lords Lefford and Lannister would not have sighted them during their getaway.

Gregor was not worried that Elia and her children would be in jeopardy outside of the city, either. He had seen to it that the soldiers of House Clegane set up their camp a little way away from all the other houses. That would guarantee that Elia and her children would not be exposed, as it was very unlikely that anyone would go wandering through the camp of a knightly house when its commander was away.

Of course, Lord Tywin would expect Ser Amory Lorch to have the bodies of Elia Martell and her children on hand when he entered the city. Now that Ser Amory was… indisposed, Gregor had to see to that matter himself. Luckily, he had a plan to make the Old Lion believe that Rhaegar's line had been wiped out successfully, but for the moment, that could wait.

While his men were preoccupied with moving Elia, Aegon, and Rhaenys to safety, Ser Gregor Clegane busied himself with other matters. It turned out he did not need the aid of a certain spider to rescue the Princess and her children. However, this spider could still be of use to him.

He was fairly certain that this spider would be willing to cooperate with him. That was not just because of the five-foot piece of steel in his right hand. It was also because he could be equally useful to the spider. After all, the spider was never one to squander potential resources, and at the risk of seeming vain, Gregor felt he was the greatest resource of all.
"Dragonspawn."

That was the only word Robert Baratheon, the new King of Westeros, had for the two small corpses that had been placed before the Iron Throne. The bodies were ruined almost beyond recognition, but there was little doubt for almost everyone present that they were all that remained of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen.

There were a couple people there who happened to know better.

Be that as it may, several of the others were horrified or appalled by the sight of the two tiny children wrapped up in a red sheet. Lord Eddard Stark was the most shocked of all.

"Robert, you cannot tell me this does not unsettle you," the Lord of Winterfell barked furiously, "This was an atrocity."

"It had to be done, Ned," Robert Baratheon said facetiously.

"Then could it not have done more in a more civil manner?" Ned Stark debated, "Such as a pillow pressed against their faces, or poison? Even cutting their throats would have been more humane."

"I must agree with Lord Eddard," Ser Jaime Lannister pronounced, "The children should have been granted a merciful death."

Gregor was surprised to see the young lion knight backing up the wolf lord. Especially since the latter had been the first one to daub the former "Kingslayer." Then again, Jaime had come to care for most of the Targaryen royal family. If he had not been preoccupied with putting down Mad King Aerys, he probably would have attempted to save Elia and her children, just as Gregor had.

"If you seek justice for this, Lord Stark, you need not bother," Tywin Lannister declared, "The culprit has already paid for his actions."

"Yes," Eddard shiftily agreed, "By the hand of one of your own bannermen, if what I've heard is to be believed, Lord Tywin."

"It is, Lord Eddard," Gregor Clegane professed.

When Lord Tywin arrived in the city, Gregor had shamelessly admitted to killing Amory Lorch.

He had given Lord Tywin two very understandable and logical reasons to justify that deed. The first reason was that when he saw how Ser Amory had butchered the royal children, Gregor had
felt his blood boil, and he had taken his rage out on Ser Amory for his misdeeds. The other reason was that Ser Amory had been on the verge of doing the same abominable thing to Princess Elia, and unlike her children, the Dornishwoman was no danger to the throne.

He was asked to explain those reasons in further detail to King Robert and the other men present.

"Before we entered the city, I declared that the harming of innocent lives would not be tolerated," Gregor revealed, "I made it clear that anyone who disobeyed my orders would be severely punished. Depending on the crime, they would face penalties as great as death as the consequence. When I saw what Ser Amory did, I did nothing more than keep my word."

"That may be," Lord Jon Arryn conceded, "But Ser Amory was not the only one who violated your commands, Ser Gregor. There are over thirty other westermen that are being held on charges of thievery, rape, murder, or other crimes."

"They will be chastised soon enough," Gregor asserted, "Ser Amory is the only one who already has been simply because he was the only one I caught in the act."

"Even so, Ser Amory was simply following my orders," Tywin Lannister pointed out, "Any order I give supersedes any order you give, Ser Gregor. You all but prevented Amory Lorch from carrying his out."

"It was not my intent to countermand your authority, Lord Tywin," Gregor Clegane claimed, "If you were led to believe that, then I beseech your forgiveness. However, I was not informed of Ser Amory's assignment."

The lion lord folded his arms and stated inquisitively "If you had been informed, would you still have intervened?"

Gregor was spared the burden of answering that question. Robert Baratheon sat up in the Iron Throne and remarked "That is not important, Tywin. Whatever his motives, Ser Gregor has done his duty. He has helped us take King's Landing, and he did it without endangering most of the smallfolk."

Gregor felt the urge to smirk. Robert Baratheon may have been a fool, but even he comprehended the benefits of minimizing civilian casualties in wartime.

"I thank you for your recognition, Your Grace," Gregor said humbly, bowing his head a bit.

"Spare me your thanks, Mountain," Robert Baratheon spat, suddenly tense, "I still have reservations about your decision to spare Princess Elia."

"As do I," Tywin Lannister muttered, "Enlighten us, Gregor. What motivated you to extract the princess from the city?"

Even before he rode for King's Landing, Gregor had prepared an explanation for that question. He informed those assembled "I was being strictly diplomatic. If Princess Elia was murdered at our hand, her brothers would be outraged. That outrage could have sparked a wave of disobedience and hostility against both the Westerlands and the throne. I was hoping to avoid creating any more political turmoil with Dorne."

"Very sensible of you, Ser Gregor," Jon Arryn muttered in approval.

"Maybe," Robert Baratheon uttered with a light shrug, "In the meantime, what should be done with Elia Martell?"
"Perhaps she should remain in King's Landing," Tywin Lannister suggested, "Her presence here would secure Dorne's fealty."

"I must advise against that, Your Grace," Jon Arryn proposed, "Princess Elia was used as a hostage by the Mad King to prevent Dorne from rising against him. While the Dornishmen remained loyal to Aerys, that decision made him quite unpopular with them. If we appear to treat her as your predecessor did, Prince Doran will not hesitate to show the full extent of his protest."

"I asked what should be done, not what shouldn't," Robert grumbled, leaning on his hand.

"There is no need to keep her here any longer, Your Grace," Eddard Stark told his best friend, "If you ask my counsel, the best course of action would be to let her go home."

"I would have to agree with Lord Eddard," Gregor declared, "Princess Elia has already lost her husband and both of her children. She has endured enough grief for one lifetime. The least we could do is permit her to live out the rest of her days peacefully."

"Indeed," Varys professed, "Princess Elia should be allowed to return to Sunspear. Her safe return would guarantee Dorne's loyalty to the crown far more than keeping her captive would."

"But is it possible that she is with child?" Robert hypothesized, "What if Rhaegar managed to plant his seed in her cunt one last time before he rode off to war?"

"That is entirely unlikely, Your Grace," Varys countered, "Even for a Dornishwoman, Elia Martell is small of frame. Princess Rhaenys's birth devastated her. Prince Aegon's practically killed her. After that, she was deemed incapable of bearing any more children."

"Lord Varys speaks the truth," Jaime Lannister coincided, "Princess Elia is barren now. Were the Grand Maester here, he would be able to confirm that."

Alas, Pycelle was unaccounted for. Gregor had seen to that.

Not long after the Mountain separated from Princess Elia and his men-at-arms, he had gone off to search for Vays. Before he got to the eunuch's chambers, he made a slight detour. He found Grand Maester Pycelle in his quarters underneath the rookery.

He told Pycelle that Lord Tywin Lannister was on the outskirts of the city, and he wished to be informed the instant the Red Keep was secured. That was a lie, but the Grand Maester bought it, and it was sufficient to coax him out of his chambers.

Gregor had then bidden Pycelle to come with him up to the rookery so that they could send a raven to Lord Tywin. He claimed that he needed the maester to compose the message, as he could not read or write (also a lie).

The massive knight and the elderly maester had made their way up the staircase to the rookery together. They ascended in that order.

When they got to the top of the staircase, Gregor had opened the door and stepped to the side, as though he was holding it for Pycelle.

Just before the Grand Maester entered the room, Gregor grabbed his shoulder and gave him a slight push backwards. That soft nudge was all it took to send the elderly maester tumbling down the steps. Gregor stood idly by and waited until the sounds of Pycelle's groaning and falling ceased. Then he made his descent.
When Gregor reached the base of the stairs, he found Pycelle sprawled on the ground with his head turned at an unnatural angle in relation to his body. In other words, he had broken his neck. That was precisely what Gregor had hoped would happen.

The original Gregor Clegane had been the primary suspect in a series of accidents that concerned his family and servants. Of course, those had only been referred to as accidents because no one had been brave enough to accuse Gregor of foul play.

Still, if HE could get away with those actions, Gregor was confident he could, as well. Because of his experience as an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency, he was an expert at covering up his tracks.

So far, it appeared as though he had managed to do so. Pycelle's death had already been written off as an accident. Even at the beginning of Robert's reign, he was old and feeble. In addition to that, his lengthy maester's chain would not have been difficult to trip over.

Gregor noted that nobody seemed particularly distraught by the Grand Maester's sudden demise. Not even Tywin Lannister was moved by the loss of his spy. That gave Gregor some relief; it implied that no one would bother with an investigation.

Pycelle was far from the most despicable character in the franchise, but Gregor had disliked him ever since the first book. He had known the truth of the parentage of Cersei Lannister's children, yet he had looked the other way when Eddard Stark had confronted Cersei. Worse yet, he had the gall to call Lord Eddard a traitor.

Gregor would lose no sleep over what he had done to Pycelle. The entire realm would be better off without him. His only problem was that he had no way of knowing whom the next Grand Maester would be or where his loyalties would lie. In any case, he would have been content so long as the Conclave picked someone less cowardly, dishonorable, and lecherous than Pycelle.

At any rate, Robert spent a minute reflecting on everything he had heard. Then he let out a sigh and bluntly proclaimed "Rhaegar's heirs are dead. His wife has no claim to the throne, so I suppose there is no need for her to share their fate. Very well. I will allow Elia Martell to return to Dorne."

Eddard Stark, Gregor Clegane, Varys, Jaime Lannister, Jon Arryn, and nearly everyone else in that room were pleased with that decree. Tywin Lannister was the only one who was somewhat opposed to it, but he held his tongue.

"Where might we find the princess, Ser Gregor?" Varys inquired, "I only ask out of concern for her well-being."

Gregor gave a nod and announced "After my men-at-arms took her out of the city, they brought her to House Clegane's camp. She is still there, and she's currently under my protection. My men have standing orders to cut down anyone who tries to harm her."

"That won't be necessary for much longer, Ser Gregor," Robert Baratheon declared, "I will commission a ship to transport her to Dorne tomorrow. Since you seem to be so invested in her welfare, I am charging you with bringing her home."

"As you command, Your Grace," Gregor conceded, taking a bow. And thanks for making it a command. You saved me the trouble of asking.

Lord Tywin then looked to Gregor and stated "As 'content' as Princess Elia must be in your camp, she may be more comfortable back here in King's Landing."
"Lord Tywin makes a good point," Jon Arryn agreed, "Perhaps you should send a raven or a rider to invite her back in, Ser Gregor."

"There's no need for either, my lord," Gregor claimed, "When I saw her last, the princess mentioned that she has no desire to set foot in this city ever again. After what happened to her children, I cannot blame her."

"None of us can," Eddard commented.

Robert leaned back in the Iron Throne and muttered "In any case, tell her she's going home. And to show her I mean well, I'll send her a wee peace offering."

I'm not even going to ask what.

Gregor gave a nod of acknowledgement and requested "Have I your leave to depart, Your Grace?"

"Yes, yes, you do," King Robert responded, rather disinterestedly.

The massive knight bowed his head and left the throne room. He waited until he was all the way through the threshold to smile.

His ploy had worked beautifully.

Despite the stern orders he had given to attack no unarmed persons, the Sack of King's Landing still had not been without some innocent bloodshed.

In all fairness, Gregor had been expecting that. As far as he knew, no city had ever been seized by force without incurring at least a few civilian casualties. That was how it had been both in reality and in fantasy since the days of Troy.

While Gregor was disappointed and upset by this needless loss of life, the victims managed to serve some useful purpose. Albeit a posthumous purpose.

After King's Landing fell, Gregor had all the casualties gathered in one large pile near the Red Keep. There were a few infants and toddlers amongst the casualties. Gregor had searched through the pile until he found a male babe and a female toddler. They did not look very much like Aegon and Rhaenys, but only those who had seen the prince and the princess up close could tell the differences. Still, Gregor had to make a few… alterations.

He was not proud of what he did next. First he took his dagger and stabbed the toddler girl's body over and over until it was a mess of red. Then he took the babe and dashed his head against a wall until the skull and brains were visible. The bodies were still warm enough that the blood was fresh. So only a maester would be able to tell that the wounds had been inflicted after death.

Desecrating the dead made Gregor feel nauseous at first. Then he reminded himself that he was doing it to ensure that two children who still were living would continue to live. That made the process a little easier to stomach. Only a little though.

Unbeknownst to almost everyone in King's Landing, Elia Martell was not the only guest in Gregor Clegane's camp. Rhaenys and Aegon were there with their mother, as well.

Luckily, Gregor had succeeded in faking their deaths. He knew Tywin would have killed them to eliminate future contenders for the throne, and for personal reasons, Robert was determined to wipe out the entire Targaryen line. Gregor had appeased and fooled both of them with a mummer's farce.
Interventions

Chapter Notes

Note: For those of you who are wondering, the subject of Gregor and Varys' private, unseen conversation will be addressed in two more chapters.

The *Diligence* was a magnificent vessel. It was originally from the Stormlands, specifically House Estermont of Greenstone. It was made of ironwood and cedar, and it had three decks. It was relatively small, as it was not meant to accommodate more than fifty individuals. In spite of its size, it was swift and lithe when at sea.

For his most recent assignment, Gregor had requested the quickest ship that was currently docked in King's Landing. King Robert had granted his request. He had assumed that Ser Gregor only wished to return Princess Elia to Dorne as quickly as possible.

While that was true, the Mountain had another reason for wanting the fastest ship available. Princess Elia Martell and her children were not the only people whose deaths he could prevent. He had a window of opportunity to save a number of knights, noblemen, and a noble lady in Dorne. But he had to move with haste; otherwise he would miss this window.

The previous night, Gregor had sent word to his men that they were leaving the Crownlands. He informed them that they would be sailing for Sunspear in the early morning. As such, they had to be ready to travel at first light.

Sure enough, at daybreak, the *Diligence* sailed out of Blackwater Bay. After exiting the harbor through the east, it headed due south. Gregor was the only Westerlander onboard; every member of the crew was of the Stormlands. All the same, he had command of the vessel for the duration of this voyage.

Gregor had notified the crew that they would be making only one stop until they reached Dorne. The purpose of that stop would be for them to pick up their passengers.

House Clegane's camp was located on the shoreline southeast of King's Landing. The servants and most of the soldiers would be staying there until Gregor returned. However, Elia, her children, and Gregor's men-at-arms would all be brought aboard.

Gregor had the crew to go below deck when Elia and the others came on-board. That way, none of them would see Princess Rhaenys or Prince Aegon. He also had the crew cleared out of the corridors in the lower decks so that Elia and her children could be moved to their quarters. For lodgings, the three of them were give a private cabin; the crew had strict orders not to disturb Elia under any circumstances.

Two of Elia's ladies-in-waiting had been in King's Landing when it fell. Gregor had opted to bring both of them aboard, as both of them were Dornish, and their first loyalty was to the princess. They were two of only three people who were permitted to enter Elia's cabin.

Gregor was the third.
Despite his enormous stature and his intimidating stride, Gregor Clegane did not frighten Elia Martell. That was not solely because he had saved her and her children from a terrible fate. Even though her opinion of the Westerlords was not especially high due to recent events, he was kind, patient, and sympathetic. He was able to convince her that at least some of the westermen had honor.

Their only unpleasant encounter occurred when Gregor presented her with Robert's "peace offering." Before Gregor left the city, the stag king had given him a locked chest; Gregor was given the key, but he had instructions not to open the chest until he gave it to Elia.

When Elia opened the chest, she and Gregor found Ser Amory Lorch's head inside. The Princess appeared to accept the chest gratefully, but she was clearly disgusted. Gregor was just glad Rhaenys and Aegon had not been nearby at the time. He apologized for causing her discomfort, but she did not blame him for that.

There were approximately 800 miles between King's Landing and Sunspear. Unfortunately, the straightest route was composed neither entirely of land nor entirely of water. Going by boat was the more popular and preferred method of travel.

Once out of Blackwater Bay, the Diligence headed south by southwest. It remained in the Narrow Sea for the majority of the voyage. The crew had to alter course a few times to avoid a number of obstacles, such as Driftmark, Tarth, and Greenstone.

When they passed Shipbreaker Bay, Gregor and the crew spotted an armada to the west. That was the Redwyne fleet; the Reachmen were maintaining the blockade of Storm's End. Luckily, none of Lord Paxter's ships spotted the Diligence.

Gregor was aware that Lord Eddard Stark was currently on his way to lift the siege of Storm's End. He did not know how long that would take, but Gregor was hoping it would not be done quickly. After all, he knew where Eddard would be going after he liberated Stannis, and if Gregor really was going to save the aforementioned lives, he had to get there first.

The Diligence had a maximum sustainable speed of 16 knots. To avoid exhausting the crew or overstressing the vessel, Gregor had the ship keep an average speed of 13.5 knots. That meant it went approximately 15.53 miles per hour.

Due to the various impedients the Diligence had to evade – as well as abrupt changes in wind or weather – the original distance of 800 miles between King's Landing and Sunspear was nearly doubled in this voyage. Luckily, the vessel never had to halt. In the end, it only required slightly more than nine days to reach Sunspear.

Gregor took full advantage of those nine days. He spent a lot of that time with Elia in her cabin. Her ladies-in-waiting remained wary of the Mountain, but her children became comfortable around him. Aegon never cried when Elia let Gregor hold him, and Rhaenys started to call him "Uncle Gweg."

At first, Gregor's conversations with Elia were casual. They talked about their homelands, their upbringings, and their families. Both of them spent a fair amount of time divulging information about their families.

The day before they reached Sunspear, Gregor and Elia were in the latter's cabin. Her ladies-in-waiting were elsewhere; Elia suspected they were getting "acquainted with Chiswyck and Tobbot. Aegon was asleep on the bed, and Rhaenys was playing in the corner. The Mountain and the Princess were having another of their amiable conversations. Like the others, it started out as
casual, but by the end, it would be anything but.

"Wait until your first meeting with my brothers," Elia remarked, "Doran will wish to shake hands with you personally."

Gregor smiled at that. Then an odd thought entered into his head. "And Oberyn?"

"Oh…" Elia muttered with a devious smirk, "He'll want to give you much more than a handshake."

"I see…" Gregor commented, gazing awkwardly off to the side. He then turned back to the princess and asked "Will he?"

"Only if you permit him to," Elia assured the massive knight.

"But how does one decline an offer such as that?" Gregor thought aloud.

"Cordially and with a lot of bluntness," Elia advised him.

Gregor Clegane nodded in acknowledgment, folded his arms, and said presumptively "So it's true that your younger brother does not… discriminate on basis of gender in anything?"

"Indeed not," the princess affirmed, "He never has."

The Mountain scoffed a bit at that. That caused Elia to raise an eyebrow and inquire "Do you, Ser Gregor?"

Gregor chose his words carefully: "Generally, I do not. I would argue men are no greater than women, nor women than men. Both are capable of ruling a house, and both should be allowed to train in the ways of war."

"The whole of Dorne shares that perspective," Elia proclaimed. She leaned forward and queried "What about your personal interests?"

"If you must know, I respect my fellow man," Gregor revealed, "But I have no desire to share my bed with him."

"Oberyn would call that ignorance," Elia said cheekily, "All the same, he and I both think every person is entitled to choose their own tastes."

"I must concede there, as well," Ser Gregor declared.

There was a moment of silence. It ended when Elia stated "I assume you like women?"

"You assume correctly, Your Grace," Gregor replied, seemingly nonchalant, despite the strangeness of that question.

"Have you ever lain with one?" Elia enquired abruptly.

Gregor could not fathom what prompted that question. He was not very certain how to answer it, either. As Gregory Welch, he had been intimate with a few women on more than a few occasions. As the Mountain, he had yet to do so even once. He was certain that Elia Martell had not been the original Gregor's first, though.

Ultimately, he admitted to the princess "Alas, I have not. Yet, I mean."

"Most men who enter Dorne as virgins do not leave as such," Elia informed him, "If you are not
heedful, that may be the case with you, Ser Gregor."

"I will take your warning seriously, Your Grace," Gregor pronounced, "After all, I have heard tell that the most beautiful women in the realm are from Dorne."

Elia grinned in a sly manner and asked "What do you say to that?"

"Well, pardon my forwardness, Your Grace," Gregor contended, "But if the rest of the Dornishwomen look anything like you…"

He stopped himself there. Up until this point, he and the princess had simply been engaging in friendly banter. Even the remarks about Gregor's… personal life had been relatively informal. But he had inadvertently begun to flirt with Elia. That was a very unwise idea for several reasons. For one thing, Elia was twenty-six years old; he was only seventeen. Furthermore, she was a princess of Dorne and the former Crown Princess of Westeros. He was just the heir to a third-generation knightly house in the Westerlands. It would not do well for him to seek such companionship so far above his station in this life. Aside from that, even if Elia ever did remarry, she would never be able to give her second husband children, and the continuation of one's line was the primary concern of every lord.

Fortunately, Elia did not seem offended in any way. She merely giggled at the expression across the massive knight's countenance and told him "Thank you, Ser Gregor."

"I only speak the truth, Your Grace," Gregor assured her. He had been meaning to address a certain topic with Elia ever since she came aboard. He had not gotten around to it yet, as he had never found the right opportunity. He realized that due to the nature of this conversation, this was perhaps the perfect opportunity. So he decided to address that topic. He spoke very cautiously with "On that subject… I've also heard that in Dorne, marriage is not as strict as it is everywhere else."

"That is true," Elia professed, "Husbands and wives often take paramours, but doing so is not regarded as unfaithfulness."

"Do you agree with that sentiment?" Gregor said inquisitively.

Now it was Elia's turn to look stunned. Raising an eyebrow, she inquired "Why do you ask?"

"There is something occupying my mind, Your Grace," Gregor informed her, "Does the phrase 'the dragon has three heads' hold any familiarity with you?"

Elia seemed taken aback by that question. She enquired anxiously "Where did you hear that?"

"Your husband told me it when I met him," Gregor claimed. That was not true, but only Rhaegar could prove it false. "He never explained it. But I'm beginning to understand what he meant."

"What do you believe he meant?" Princess Elia asked, definitely interested.

Gregor did not give a clear answer right away. Instead, he started his explanation with: "As I recall from my history lessons, several of the Targaryen Kings had two wives. That includes Aegon the Conqueror himself, who wed his sisters Visenya and Rhaenys."

"This is true," Elia Martell coincided with a sigh, "Two of those three people were my children's namesakes. If Rhaegar and I managed to have a third child, we would have named her Visenya."

"I'm sorry that you will never have a third child," Gregor stated sincerely
Based on his emphasis of that word, Elia could tell that he was not referring to both her and Rhaegar. Even so, she did not think much of what he was insinuating. She pointed out "Rhaegar never will either."

"Unless…" Gregor said in response. He had no intention of finishing that sentence; he just wanted to ensure that Elia would listen to him closely and take him totally seriously. That single word had that intended effect.

"Speak your mind, Ser Gregor," she bade him.

The massive knight debated 'By combining the Targaryens' polygamous relationships with your… Dornish tolerance, as you might call it, you and Rhaegar would in theory have the most open relationship in the entire country."

Elia shrugged and supposed "One could make that argument."

She may have seemed calm, but Gregor could see that she was becoming a little tense. He remarked bluntly "I must ask you a personal question, Your Grace."

Princess Elia nodded in approval, and Gregor inquired in a very straightforward tone "Was your husband the only one who took an interest in Lyanna Stark?"

Elia's eyes widened in astonishment. She looked as though her voice was caught in her throat.

Her silence was enough for Gregor. That and Rhaenys' reaction to that question. The little girl had looked up from her toys when she heard Lyanna Stark's name. Evidently, she recognized it, but she seemed giddy.

"You do not have to answer that question, Your Grace," Gregor hastily declared, "Just tell me this: am I getting somewhere?"

"Yes, you are," Elia proclaimed.

"That's all I need to know," Gregor murmured. There came another long pause, and at the end of it, he stated "As soon as we dock in Sunspear, I must go somewhere, Your Grace. I would like you and your brothers to accompany me. And your children, as well; if at all possible."

"Ser Gregor, we continue to draw breath because of you," Elia contended, "If you wish it, we'll go with you all the way to the Wall."

"We needn't go that far," Gregor told her, snickering, "We do not even have to leave Dorne. I only ask for you to ride with me to the Red Mountains."

"Very well," Elia conceded, "Might I ask why, though?"

"Because the lives of several good people are at stake," Gregor replied, "Including someone whom I believe you care deeply about, and who cares deeply for you in turn."

Despite the vague nature of Gregor's statements, Elia could fully understand the true meaning behind them. In response to it, she merely nodded her head in both acceptance and confirmation.

Shortly before noon the following day, the Diligence pulled into the docks of Sunspear. Once more, the Stormlander crew was summoned below deck. Then Princess Elia and her children disembarked, along with her ladies-in-waiting, Ser Gregor Clegane, and his men-at-arms.
They were received rather warmly by Elia's brothers. They had already been informed of what the Mountain had done for her sister. A raven from King's Landing had arrived a couple days beforehand. It had contained details of how Elia's children had been savagely murdered by Ser Amory Lorch, but Ser Gregor Clegane had saved Elia by slaying his own ally.

Elia's brothers were delighted to see that Rhaenys and Aegon lived after all. They were also impressed by how Gregor had gone to great length to ensure their survival. Especially since in the process, he had knowingly defied his liege lord at his own risk.

Just as Elia had foretold, Prince Doran had approached him and shaken his hand. He was already in his mid-thirties, but it would be over a decade before his affliction with gout. At this age had a very firm, vigorous handshake.

Elia's other presumption about her other brother proved true, as well. While Oberyn also shook Gregor's hand, he looked as though he wanted to show his appreciation even further by kissing him on the lips. Gregor was just glad he stood a foot and a-half taller than the Red Viper.

At any rate, once pleasantries were exchanged between the Martells and the Mountain, Prince Doran offered to hold a small feast in Gregor's honor. The Mountain claimed that while he was grateful for the offer, celebrating would have to wait. He and Elia jointly explained that it was urgent that they all ride for the Red Mountains.

Fortunately, it took little convincing to win Doran and Oberyn over in this proposal. They agreed to leave at once.

Doran hurriedly assembled a small company of knights and servants. At the head of the company was his captain of the guard, Areo Hotah. Between Gregor's men-at-arms and Doran's retainers, there were about fifty people in their party. Each one had his or her own horse.

Gregor made sure that Maester Caleotte joined them. That was critical, as a maester's services would most certainly be needed when they reached their destination.

Rhaenys and Aegon were brought along, as well. Elia bundled up Aegon and carried him close to her chest as she rode. As for Rhaenys, her Uncle Oberyn shared his saddle with her.

The party rode across the vast deserts of Dorne for thirteen days. They generally restricted their movements to the late morning and the early evening, as it was usually too hot to travel in the middle of the day and too cold to travel by night.

Finally, at the end of an exhausting 400-mile trek, the party came within sight of a majestic stronghold. There were three figures standing watch at the base of the building. They were clad in the white armor of the Kingsguard. They were Ser Oswell Whent, Ser Gerold Hightower, and Ser Arthur Dayne.

Gregor had his men-at-arms remain behind. Doran did the same with his soldiers and servants.

While everyone else set up camp five miles away, Ser Gregor Clegane, Prince Doran Martell, Princess Elia Martell, Princess Oberyn Martell, and Maester Caleotte galloped on to the Tower of Joy.

When they reached the top of the hill that overlooked the Tower, they brought their horses to a halt. By then, the three Kingsguard knights had noticed them, as well.

Elia proceeded onward by herself. Her brothers, the maester, and Gregor watched as she galloped down the hill and approached the Tower of Joy. They observed her as she spoke with Ser Arthur,
Ser Gerold, and Ser Oswell.

Gregor could not discern anything they said, but he could imagine it was a fairly heated discussion. More than a few times, one of the four of them raised his or her voice. Evidently, a lot of personal feelings and thoughts were being brought into the matter.

Elia did pull through in the end, however. After nearly an hour of trying and failing to reason with the three Kingsguard knights, they yielded to her logic. Subsequently, Elia turned back to the others and waved them over.

Gregor noticed the look of skepticism and disdain the Kingsguard gave him as he neared the Tower of Joy. He did not believe that was due to anything he personally had done. He assumed that the three of them were simply mistrustful by nature. After all, he had done nothing to warrant their antagonism.

Still, Gregor was hoping he would not have to fight them. He himself was a very adept swordsman, but the skills of these three were well-known, particularly Ser Arthur.

Once Gregor, Doran, Oberyn, and Maester Caleotte caught up to Elia, the Princess and Maester Caleotte went up the stairs to the Tower of Joy. Elia brought Aegon and Rhaenys with them. Gregor would have liked to have gone with them, but he was not about to interfere in what could be regarded as a family affair.

For several days, Gregor waited anxiously as Elia Martell and Maester Caleotte tended to Lyanna Stark. The wolf girl's screams could be heard for over a mile in any direction. Gregor wished he could have done something to relieve her suffering, but he had no idea how to ease the process of childbirth. He could only stand by and hope for the best.

For once, the best actually came about. Eventually, Lyanna's screams subsided. They were replaced with the wailing of an infant. That was when Maester Caleotte allowed the others to enter the Tower. Doran and Oberyn accepted the offer to enter, but Gregor decided to wait. Another prominent group was about to arrive, and Gregor was not going to be absent when they turned up.

Just a few hours later, he spotted seven riders approaching from the north. Quite appropriate, considering their origins. One-by-one, he identified them all. Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell. Martyn Cassel, his captain of the guard. Ethan Glover of Deepwood Motte, the only member of Brandon Stark's party to survive the Black Cells. Lord Willam Dustin of Barrowtown. Theo Wull of the Mountain Clans. Ser Mark Ryswell of the Rills. Lord Howland Reed of Greywater Watch. Only two of them were originally destined to survive. Gregor was determined for all seven of them to.

As the Northmen trotted closer to the Tower of Joy, Gregor stayed out of sight. He did not wish to give them the wrong impression by appearing to be on the side of the three Kingsguard. So he went up to fetch Elia. The Dornish princess was able to pry herself from Lyanna's side long enough to avert this needless loss of life.

Soon enough, the Northmen dismounted their horses and approached the Tower very slowly. Gregor and Elia stood at the top of the steps and witnessed the confrontation between them and the Kingsguard.

"I looked for you on the Trident," Ned said to them.

"We were not there," Ser Gerold answered.
"Woe to the Usurper if we had been," said Ser Oswell.

"When King's Landing fell, Ser Jaime slew your king with a golden sword, and I wondered where you were."

"Far away," Ser Gerold said, "or Aerys would yet sit the Iron Throne, and our false brother would burn in seven hells."

"I came down on Storm's End to lift the siege," Ned told them, "And the Lords Tyrell and Redwyne dipped their banners, and all their knights bent the knee to pledge us fealty. I was certain you would be among them."

"Our knees do not bend easily," said Ser Arthur Dayne.

"Ser Willem Darry is fled to Dragonstone, with your queen and Prince Viserys. I thought you might have sailed with him."

"Ser Willem is a good man and true," said Ser Oswell.

"But not of the Kingsguard," Ser Gerold pointed out. "The Kingsguard does not flee."

"Then or now," said Ser Arthur.

"We swore a vow," explained old Ser Gerold.

Ned's vassals moved up beside him, with swords in hand. They were seven against three.

"Now it ends," Ned said with sadness in his voice.

"No," said Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, with a grin that was wholly uncharacteristic of him, "Now it begins, my lord."

With that, he gestured to the top of the stairs. The wolf lord and his retainers gazed upward, and there Gregor and Elia were, smiling as well.

"Welcome, Lord Eddard," Gregor said cordially, "Your sister awaits you."

Ned Stark and his six companions were notably confused by this sudden development. The seven of them had come, fully expecting a skirmish. Instead, they were being greeted peacefully.

Fortunately, Eddard chose to have faith in Ser Gregor's words. He and his men sheathed their weapons, and they made for the staircase.

"Just you, Lord Eddard," Elia requested, "Lyanna is still recovering."

"Recovering from what?" Eddard asked, perplexed.

"See for yourself, my lord," Gregor proposed in good humor.

Ned kept one hand on the hilt of his sword as a precaution. He swiftly made the ascent up the staircase to the Tower of Joy. There, Gregor held the door open for him, and the Lord of Winterfell passed through.

He found his sister on a bed.

She looked the vision of health. That was all thanks to the persistent efforts of Maester Caleotte.
She did not just look healthy; Lyanna was definitely going to live.

Gregor felt a little annoyed. Lyanna's life could have been saved all along if Rhaegar had been smart enough to leave a maester with her. Did he think childbirth was effortless or something?

There were three people there that Eddard had not expected to see at all. They were not Maester Caleotte, Prince Doran, and Prince Oberyn. Instead, they were the small girl sitting on Doran's lap, the tiny babe in Oberyn's arm, and the newborn babe Lyanna was cradling close to her breast.

"Lya…" Eddard whispered, amazed.

He rushed to his sister's bed and embraced her warmly. The wolf girl began to cry tears of joy as she hugged her brother with her one free arm.

When they came apart, Eddard gazed down at the babe in his sister's arms. He asked with a smile "Who is this?"

"The third head," Gregor remarked.

"I beg your pardon, Ser Gregor?" Ned stated.

"I shall explain in time, Lord Eddard," the Mountain asserted.

Eddard Stark was content with that answer for now. When he turned back to his sister, Lyanna informed him "Ned, this is your nephew, Jon. Jon Targaryen."
While Eddard Stark was elated to be reunited with his sister at long last, he was stricken with confusion, as well. That confusion was only heightened when he heard the full name of his newborn nephew.

Ned turned from baby Jon to his mother, and he repeated "Targaryen?"

Lyanna merely nodded her head twice. Her momentary joy had disappeared alongside his.

"I know this raises a lot of questions," Lyanna admitted, "All I ask is that you give me a chance to answer them."

Eddard had not ridden hundreds of miles to find his sister just to judge her prematurely. He agreed to allow her the opportunity to explain herself. To her good fortune, she did not have to do so alone. Elia was there to assist her.

Five minutes later, Lord Eddard Stark, Lady Lyanna Stark, Ned's six companions, the three knights of the Kingsguard, Prince Doran Martell, Princess Elia Martell, Prince Oberyn Martell, and Ser Gregor Clegane were gathered in the main chamber of the Tower of Joy.

Jon, Aegon, and Rhaenys were being tended to by Maester Caleotte and Wylla, the midwife Rhaegar had afforded Lyanna.

Lyanna was still too weak from childbirth to rise, so she remained in bed. She did manage to sit up straight with Elia's help.

Once she had the attention of everyone in the room, she proceeded to provide an explanation. "First of all, you should know that I was not kidnapped."

Eddard had already surmised that much, but he and his companions were still astonished to hear it from the wolf girl's lips.

"After Rhaegar crowned me at Harrenhal, I sought out Elia," Lyanna revealed, "My aim was to give her the crown of roses and beg for her forgiveness. At the time, all I could think of was of how much shame I must have caused her. Yet when I found her, she greeted me with kindness instead of hostility."

"I did not fault her for my husband's decision to give her the crown," Elia took over, "I was touched by Lyanna's bravery and empathy; not many women would have done what she did. I bade her to stay with me in my tent for the night. We talked well into the late hours. By daybreak, we were sharing our most intimate secrets with each other."

I'll believe that. Gregor had done the same with Elia aboard the Diligence.

"We each assumed that Rhaegar had a different reason for naming me his Queen of Love and Beauty," Lyanna stated, "Both our reasons turned out to be correct. My reason was the lesser, but it seemed the more obvious at the time."

"What was it?" Eddard Stark queried.
"Do you remember the Knight of the Laughing Tree?" Lyanna asked rhetorically.

Ned gave a light nod, and Lyanna announced "When Lord Howland Reed arrived at the tourney, he was harassed and beaten by three ruffians. Those ruffians were squires to knights from Houses Blount, Frey, and Haigh. I stepped in and chased them off."

Eddard Stark turned to Howland Reed, and the crannogman proclaimed "It's true, Lord Eddard. At her own risk, Lady Lyanna fought to protect my honor. I am indebted to her for that."

"Although I had given the squires a taste of Northern justice, I was determined to teach them humility, too," Lyanna continued, "With Lord Howland's help, I acquired some armor and weapons, and I entered the tourney lists under a false name."

Realization quickly dawned on those who did not already know the truth.

"You were the Knight of the Laughing Tree?" Eddard presumed.

"Yes," Lyanna Stark confirmed, "As you know, I succeeded in my goal. I unhorsed the knights of Blount, Frey, and Haigh, and I encouraged them to guide their squires to be better people. Even after, I considered continuing to compete in the joust. Unfortunately, I had to cut my act short. You all know why."

"The Mad King had another of his many delusions," Oberyn Martell recounted in a dry undertone, "He was led to believe that the Knight of the Laughing Tree was plotting to murder him."

"When Aerys commanded the Knight to be brought before him, I fled," Lyanna went on, "Rhaegar was sent by his father to find me. He stumbled upon me whilst I was removing my armor. Seeing no other way out, I explained my actions to him. To my relief, he found no wrong in them. He promised he would not deliver me to his father… on the condition that I attend the rest of the joust. As a spectator only, of course."

"Then Princess Elia was not the only admirer of your 'bravery and empathy,'" Eddard noted, smirking. He was quite amused by this discovery. Brandon may have been known as "The Wild Wolf," but Lyanna had always been the uncontrollable one. It was just like his sister to do something as rash and reckless as partake in a tourney.

"So Prince Rhaegar crowned you for your heroics in the joust, my lady?" Martyn Cassel conjectured.

"That was what I assumed at first," Lyanna contended, "Then Elia told me her reason."

At that, everyone's focus shifted from Lyanna Stark to the older woman at her side. Elia Martell thusly stated "In his youth, Rhaegar became obsessed with a prophecy. To explain it would take more time than we can spare. It can be abridged to five words: 'The dragon has three heads.'"

Gregor could guess what was coming next. Even so, he listened as intently as everyone else.

Elia illuminated further "The prophecy forecasts the ending of the world itself. It will come in the form of coldness, darkness, and death. Only fire, light, and life can repel this terrible threat. The three-headed dragon will provide all three."

"But what does that have to do with Lady Lyanna?" Gregor inquired, hoping to confirm an old fan theory.

"The three heads of the dragon are supposed to represent three Targaryen children," Elia
elaborated, "At least, that was what Rhaegar believed. He also believed that sometime after those three children are grown, actual dragons would return to the known world."

"Dragons have been extinct for over a century," Ser Mark Ryswell pointed out.

"Well, who's to say they cannot come back?" debated Theo Wull, ever the superstitious one.

Paying no mind to those comments, Elia revealed "Rhaegar saw all the signs leading up to the prophecy. Overtime, he became more and more convinced that the end would soon be upon us. As the heir to the Iron Throne, he made it his duty to prevent it. He even tasked himself with being the father of the three heads of the dragon."

After a brief pause, she muttered despairingly "Alas, I was only able to give him two. After Aegon, my womb would never quicken again."

"Even so, Rhaegar did not relent in his efforts to conceive a third child," Lyanna disclosed, "Hence, what happened at Harrenhal."

Eddard Stark's eyes widened in astonishment, as did those of his companions.

"I know how this sounds," Lyanna claimed, "When Elia told me of the prophecy, I assumed she was jesting. Even so, I let her take me to see Rhaegar the following morning. He confirmed everything she said, and I found out that his crowning of me was merely a pretext to his true intention. He told me that he wished me to be the mother of his third child."

Lyanna scoffed and mumbled ruefully "I thought he was mad as his father. I was tempted to leave him and Elia without another word."

"Why didn't you, my lady?" Lord Willam Dustin queried.

"Elia persuaded me to hear them out," Lyanna explicated, "So I did. By the end of that conversation, I must have been a little mad myself. Because I began to believe in the prophecy's validity, as well."

"After just one conversation?" Eddard remarked, clearly amazed, "What did they say to you?"

"Words can leave a great impact on people, Ned," was all Lyanna told her brother in response.

"What came next?" asked Howland Reed.

Lyanna continued with: "Rhaegar only asked me to be his third child's mother. The decision was mine to make. He did not force me to choose on the spot, either. He allotted me a full month to decide. He said that at the end of one month, he would come for my answer. Whatever it was, he would accept it."

Lyanna gazed at the wall languorously and muttered "For a full moon's turn after Harrenhal, I considered my options. For a while, staying in the North seemed preferable to going south. I also felt I was too young to be a mother."

"There we can agree," Eddard conceded, chuckling.

Lyanna chuckled with him, but then she became a little sterner and pronounced "To help me make my decision, I did some research. I spent a lot of time in the library at Winterfell. Probably more than I ever did in the rest of my life. I found some northern legends that bear tremendous similarity to the prophecy of the three-headed dragon. The accounts varied, but they all declared that the
"The world would eventually cease to be through otherworldly means."

"Those were legends, Lya," Eddard argued, "I'd take no more stock in them than I would in Old Nan's stories."

"Some of Old Nan's stories might have actually been history lessons, Ned," Lyanna contended, "The more I read, the more ground I found to believe Rhaegar's prophecy. Soon I was split between going and staying. A week before my reply was due, I concluded I could not make the decision on my own. I elected to seek someone's counsel. Unfortunately, you were already back at the Eyrie with Robert and Lord Jon, Brandon was down in Riverrun, and I was too afraid to approach Father. That just left Benjen."

Eddard's brow furrowed at that. He loved Benjen as much as Lyanna did, but Ben was still a child. Between the four Starks of their generation, Benjen was the one who would not lose interest in Old Nan's stories. He may even retain some belief in them. Ned beckoned his sister "Go on."

"I told Ben all about the prophecy," Lyanna reminisced, "When I was finished, he gave me but one piece of advice. He counseled me to do what I thought to be right."

She let out a slow sigh and murmured "Of course, only I could decide what I thought was right. Running off with a prince might have been irresponsible and silly, but letting the world end when I could have helped save it was far worse. Either way, I knew I would be taking a risk, but the risk of the prophecy being true was just too great to ignore."

"So you willingly chose to go with Rhaegar Targaryen," Eddard Stark concluded.

"Which was no easy task," Lyanna continued, "My betrothal to Robert complicated matters. I did not wish to disgrace our family or his. The only way we could accomplish Rhaegar's plan was if it was done quietly. I swore Benjen to secrecy, and in the middle of the night, I snuck out of Winterfell. Since Rhaegar wanted his third child to be a legitimate one, he and I were wed in front of a heart tree near Castle Cerwyn. Ser Arthur, Ser Gerold, Ser Oswell, and Elia stood as witnesses."

"Didn't Prince Rhaegar's first marriage come into question?" enquired Howland Reed.

"Targaryens have had two wives before, Lord Howland," Gerold Hightower disclosed.

"Indeed," Arthur Dayne concurred, "Furthermore, Prince Rhaegar's marriage to Princess Elia was done in a sept for the New Gods. His marriage to Princess Lyanna was done in front of the Old Gods. Neither nullifies the other."

"That may be," Eddard Stark declared, suddenly a little rigid, "But there's something I must know, Lyanna."

"What, Ned?" the wolf girl asked.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Eddard all but demanded, "To just up and leave without a word… that's reckless, even for you. You could have at least left a note."

Lyanna looked flabbergasted. "But I did leave a note, Ned."

Eddard's aggravation was rapidly replaced with bewilderment. "You did?"

"Yes, I wrote messages for you, Father, and Brandon," Lyanna asserted, "To ensure that they got to you, we sent out three riders and three ravens. Two were destined for Winterfell, two for Riverrun,
two for the Eyrie."

"We never received any of them," Eddard countered.

"I sent them, Ned!" Lyanna insisted, "I was so certain they would reach you in time. I was just as shocked as you were when Brandon rode to King's Landing and demanded Rhaegar's head."

"Now look where we are," Eddard mumbled through gritted teeth, "Father… Brandon… Rhaegar… so many others, gone. The fact that you weren't abducted changes everything. I am somewhat comforted by the knowledge that you tried to inform us of your activities. But it makes little difference in the long run. Everyone who died in the rebellion died for nothing."

"No," Ser Oswell Whent disputed, "Not for nothing, Lord Eddard."

"Because of some prophecy…?" Eddard began.

"Ser Oswell is not referring to the prophecy," Gerold Hightower interrupted him, "Prince Rhaegar was conspiring to remove his father from power. That was the true purpose of the tourney at Harrenhal. It was Rhaegar's way of sorting out those loyal to the crown and those loyal to the realm."

"As one who was subjected to the Mad King's 'hospitality,' I can say with certainty that the realm is the obvious choice," Ethan Glover claimed irately, still bearing his wounds from his time in the black cells.

"War was unavoidable in any case," Arthur Dayne debated, "Within two years, the realm would have bled. It was merely a grim misfortune that it did so before we were ready."

"Well, I should congratulate you; you succeeded anyhow," Eddard snapped in anger, "Aerys is no longer on the throne. But neither is his son. Worse yet, before the rebellion, I was third in line to Winterfell. Now, all because of carless negligence, I'm its lord."

"We all sincerely regret that your father and brother were the first of the war's casualties, Lord Eddard," Elia professed, "But please do not place all the guilt for their deaths at Lyanna's feet. I am just as much to blame for your sister's flight as she or my husband is."

"I can accept that, Your Grace," Eddard uttered, still quite furious, "But my father and brother might still live if you had not been so hasty."

"Enough!" Gregor Clegane bellowed, causing everyone present to jump. When all eyes were on him, he pronounced "What's done is done and cannot be undone. There is no use lamenting over it. I understand your frustration, Lord Eddard, but you just waged a war to rescue your sister. I would do the same for mine. I would not care whether or not she was the reason for all the fighting. I would thank the gods if they just kept her alive and reunited me with her."

There came an interval of silence as everyone absorbed the Mountain's point. Eddard let out a slow breath and commented "You've an excellent point, Ser Gregor. I am happy to be with Lya again, I assure you. I could never hate her for this or anything. But even so…"

He did not finish his sentence. He just sighed and leaned against the wall, brushing his long dark brown hair out of his eyes.

"Ned, when I heard about Father and Brandon, I was devastated," Lyanna apprised her brother, not wanting him to think her heartless or thoughtless, "I was so overcome with guilt that I wanted to kill myself at one point. Luckily, Elia and Rhaegar talked me out of that. Later on, I thought about
coming out of hiding, but they talked me out of that, too. My reappearance would not have been
enough to cease the fighting; it would have only made things worse. Also, I was already with child
by then. There would have been no way to explain that without telling the truth. The only solution
was for me to go somewhere untouched by the war. So Elia and Rhaegar sent me here for the
duration of my pregnancy. Ser Arthur, Ser Oswell, and Ser Gerold have not been holding me
prisoner. They've been protecting me."

"They performed their job admirably," Doran Martell noted.

The three Kingsguard knights appeared indifferent to the prince's remark, but they were evidently
pleased to have their obedience acknowledged.

"So, where do we go from here?" Oberyn Martell asked curiously.

Gregor stepped forward and announced "For now… I'd recommend doing nothing."

At least Doran will approve of that strategy.

Few others there did, though.

"Nothing?" Gerold Hightower murmured, as though he was disgusted.

"What would you do?" Gregor firmly debated, "The rebellion is over. The realm has been torn
apart by war. Most of those who were loyal to the Targaryens have sworn fealty to the Baratheons.
There is no point to start the fighting up again. Not when the Seven Kingdoms have been
weakened so. Tomorrow you can plan a counterrevolution. Tomorrow you can scheme to restore
the Targaryens to the throne. Tomorrow you can plan another war. For today, we should cut our
losses and focus on repairing Westeros."

Once again, the Mountain had everyone at a loss for words. They could all agree on at least one of
his points. None of them wanted another war so soon after the last one.

"Ser Gregor is correct," Prince Doran contended, "The best course is the gradual one. After all,
was it not Rhaegar's impulsiveness that incited the rebellion?"

"Does anyone have anything to say against that?" Arthur Dayne inquired in interest.

When no one spoke, Ser Arthur observed "Then we're all in agreement. Much as the concept of the
Usurper on the Iron Throne may repulse some of us, there is little we can do to protest."

"Then for now, we'll allow Robert Baratheon to keep his crown," Doran Martell proclaimed.

"But only for now," Oberyn Martell added in.

Gregor was positive that the Martells were already plotting to put the Targaryens. Needless to say,
they would do it in a way that would benefit Dorne heavily. While he doubted he had the capacity
to talk them out of this venture, he figured he could at least attempt to get them to consider
alternate different approaches.

"I have a proposal," Gregor declared. Once he had everyone's attention, he went on with: "Give
Robert Baratheon a chance. He may be a Usurper, but his grandmother was a Targaryen. He does
have some claim to the Iron Throne, small though it is. Aside from that, he was the one the rebels
selected as their king. They could have chosen Lord Eddard, Lord Tywin, or even Lord Jon. They
picked Robert. I would like to believe they did not pick him without reason. They have faith in
him. That's more than anyone ever had in Aerys."
"Well, he could hardly be worse than Aerys, either," Elia argued.

"Anyone is better than that fucking madman," Lyanna said flatly.

Except maybe for that shitstain Walder Frey.

"Very well," Gerold Hightower proclaimed, "We'll give your proposal some consideration, Ser Gregor. The wisest course of action would be for some of us to remain in hiding. The children in particular."

"You will provoke no argument from anyone there, Ser Gerold," Gregor proclaimed, "As long as the children are alive, they are not safe. When I placed those decoys in front of the throne, Robert smirked and called them 'dragonspawn.'"

"Yet you would still have us support his reign," Oswell Whent pointed out, grimacing.

"I am holding out hope that he may eventually overcome his prejudice," Gregor claimed, "Until then, the survival of Rhaegar's heirs must be assured."

"Indeed," Doran Martell concurred. A few seconds later, he proposed "Perhaps the surest way to guarantee their safety would be if they were not all kept in the same location."

"I agree," Arthur Dayne coincided, "The children should be kept separate for their own protection."

"I refuse to part with Aegon," Elia declared straightaway. An answer to her concern was devised almost as quickly.

"It would not be difficult for us to keep him in Sunspear," Doran told his sister, "Oberyn could claim him as one of his bastards."

"Certainly," Oberyn stated approvingly, "I already have four daughters. Some would say I was overdue for a son."

"Fair point," Elia stated, amused at her other brother's logic.

"I can shelter Princess Rhaenys in Greywater Watch," Howland Reed offered, "I can ascertain that she will be happy and comfortable there. She would not even have to go under a false name. As long as she is under my protection, no one will ever find her in the Neck."

"Are you absolutely certain of that, Lord Howland?" Elia enquired out of concern for her daughter.

"Quite, Your Grace," the crannogman asserted, "Even little birds can get lost and drown in swamps."

Varys won't like that.

"There is just one aspect that bothers me," Elia pronounced, "She won't have anyone she knows with her."

"Not so, Elia," Lyanna refuted, sitting up a little more, "I'll go with Rhaenys. In what time I've spent with her, I've come to think of her as my own daughter."

Elia was notably pleased by that revelation. She placed her hand on Lyanna's shoulder and remarked "As long as you're with her, I know Rhaenys will be in good hands, Lya."

Lyanna placed her own hand on her friend's hand "Thank you."
Gerold Hightower then stepped forward and observed "But, my princess, that implies that you will have to disappear, as well."

"You assume rightly, Ser Gerold," Lyanna affirmed, "It may be best for all of us if I remain in hiding, as well."

"What of Prince Jon?" Oswell Whent inquired.

"He should be with his family," Lyanna declared, gazing to her brother.

Eddard Stark nodded and stated "I'll take him back to Winterfell and raise him alongside my own son."

"How will you explain him?" Doran Martell asked.

"I'll claim him as my own," Ned stated decisively.

"That would be unwise, Lord Eddard," Gregor immediately disputed, "If you say he is yours, your wife will hold ill will towards both you and Jon. Jon more than you."

"How can you be certain of that, Ser Gregor?" Eddard queried.

"You must trust me, my lord," Gregor contended, "Princess Elia may have been willing to share her husband with your sister, but not all women are as open-minded as she. Furthermore, the Riverlands are full of inherently unforgiving families. The Blackwoods, the Brackens, the Darrys, the Freys... the Tullys are no exception. Catelyn Tully may tolerate Jon if he was your bastard, but she would never accept him."

"Then what would you do, Ser Gregor?" Eddard inquired.

"Would it not be more practical to claim he was Brandon's?" Gregor advised, "From what I've heard of your late brother, he was quite popular with the fair sex."

"He was," Eddard and Lyanna replied in unison.

"In that case, I might have a solution," Ser Arthur Dayne interjected, "My sister Ashara was quite taken with your brother during the tourney at Harrenhal. Recently, she gave birth to a stillborn daughter whom she claimed was his. We could use that situation to our advantage."

"You want me to tell everyone that Jon is the product of Brandon and Ashara's free union?" Eddard assumed.

"If you've a better proposal, I am listening, Lord Eddard," Arthur retorted bluntly.

"No, I think that one may actually work," Eddard thought aloud, "Yes, it could... the timing works out, the concept is fairly plausible, no one could challenge its legitimacy... yes, it would work."

"Then it's settled," Prince Doran announced, "Aegon will grow up in Sunspear, Rhaenys in Greywater Watch, Jon in Winterfell. Does anyone have any objections?"

Only Eddard did. He had just one. He muttered "Robert planned to make Lyanna his queen, as she is still his betrothed. Since that is not to happen, my only other option is to tell him that Lyanna is dead. I worry about how he will handle that news."

"Truthfully, so do I," Lyanna proclaimed, "I do not love Robert, but I certainly do not hate him, either. I already shamed him once when I disregarded our betrothal. I don't wish to be the cause of
any further suffering on his part."

"You needn't worry about that, my lady," Gregor stated, "When we get back to King's Landing, Lord Eddard and I are supposed to have a private audience with Robert Baratheon. There I will talk to him."

"Talk to him?" Eddard muttered in disbelief, "Ser Gregor, Robert's a man of action, not a man of words."

"Oh, don't be too certain, Lord Eddard," Ser Gregor Clegane contended, "It's as your sister said; one should never underestimate the influence words can have on people."

Chapter End Notes

Note: Some people will probably make the observation that Eddard is strangely forgiving of Lyanna's rash behavior. I would like to clarify right now; he has NOT fully accepted her reasons for eloping with Rhaegar. That will be discussed in further detail in future chapters. Also, some people seemed heavily against the theory that Lyanna went with Rhaegar willingly; their reason being that all the casualties of Robert's Rebellion essentially died simply because of a very bad idea. I would ask those same people to consider this: The War of the Five Kings started simply because Ned was stupid enough to trust Littlefinger. I call that a far poorer decision than Lyanna choosing to go with Rhaegar voluntarily, and that one's canon. Oh, and some people will find it odd that I did not go through with the idea of making Lyanna Robert's queen. The answer is simple; I found that in the wars to come, that arrangement would generate too many conflicting loyalties for the Starks and the Northmen alike. So Cersei will still be Robert's queen, but their marriage MIGHT not be as strained as it was in the books and show. Just wait for Gregor's talk with Robert. Lastly, Lyanna may seem strangely indifferent to the idea of parting with Jon. Believe me; she is NOT. That will be made evident in the next chapter.
The Power Of Speech

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A large company had assembled at the Tower of Joy. However, no one in it lingered for long.

It was decided that one of the Kingsguard would each travel with Rhaenys, Aegon, and Jon. Aside from their inborn obligation to protect Rhaegar's heirs, Ser Oswell, Ser Arthur, and Ser Gerold were adamant in their refusal to bend the knee to Robert. So the three of them would have to go into hiding, as well.

Lord Eddard Stark declared that when he returned to King's Landing, he would tell Robert that there had been a skirmish at the Tower of Joy, and all three of the Kingsguard had been slain. Then there would be no inquiries as to their whereabouts.

Ser Arthur Dayne, Ser Oswell Whent, and Ser Gerold Hightower were all brothers to the current lords of Starfall, Harrenhal, and Oldtown respectively. Their families were from Dorne, the Riverlands, and the Reach.

Ser Arthur was the only one who had the option to stay in his homeland. Furthermore, even if he was not famous for his swordsmanship, Dornishmen were fairly easy to recognize in the other regions of Westeros. So Arthur would be the one to remain in Sunspear with Aegon.

Ser Oswell and Ser Gerold would both be going to the North. Lady Minisa Tully – the mother of Lord Eddard's new wife Catelyn – had been a Whent by birth. Thus, if one was to look close enough between Ser Oswell and Lady Catelyn, they would eventually notice a number of similarities.

As a result, it was deemed safer if Ser Oswell accompanied Rhaenys to Greywater Watch. That left Ser Gerold to go to Winterfell with Jon.

Naturally, the White Bull and the Sword of the Morning would have to assume a new identity where they were going. They would have to change their names and their facades, but they would worry on that later. They had bigger issues to worry on than their appearances.

Eddard knew it would have been ludicrous to claim that the three knights had fallen without taking some of his party with them. With that in mind, a few of Ned's companions would have to disappear alongside the Kingsguard. For a while, at any rate.

Obviously, Eddard Stark and Howland Reed would have to be among the survivors, otherwise the plans to protect Jon and Rhaenys would fail. Additionally, neither man had any desire whatsoever to feign his death, and the North and the Neck relied heavily on both of them. So the casualties would have to be selected from the other five Northmen.

Martyn Cassel did not wish to leave his son Jory fatherless, and Willam Dustin was the last of his house. They were omitted as potential casualties thusly.

Mark Ryswell, Ethan Glover, and Theo Wull had no children of their own, and they all came from relatively large families. For those reasons – along with a few person ones – the three of them agreed to play the victim. Lord Howland would give them asylum at Greywater Watch, too.

Gregor was impressed by just how much those men were willing to sacrifice. They were leaving
behind everything in their own lives all for the sakes of three small children they hardly knew. Then he remembered; the chief characteristic of the North – the one that distinguished it from the rest of Westeros – was that almost every house was indisputably loyal to its liege lord, so long as he was a Stark. They must have been doing this more for Eddard than for Jon and his half-siblings. In any case, their actions were honorable.

Two days later, Lyanna was well enough to travel. That was when the company at the Tower of Joy broke off into the three smaller groups and made ready to depart.

Elia tearfully said good-bye to Rhaenys. The little girl wept, but she promised her mother that she would be good and that she would stay strong. She did find some comfort in her kitten Balerion, and she was overjoyed when she was told that Lyanna would be going with her.

Lyanna assured Elia that she would raise Rhaenys as though she was her own child. That seemed to reassure the older woman, who embraced the wolf girl the way she would a sister.

Gregor knew that Lyanna meant well by her pledge. Even so, it could have been interpreted in a good or bad light, seeing as how Lyanna was not even bringing her own child with her. Instead, she had charged someone else with the care of her son, much like Elia had.

Lyanna may have seemed indifferent to the concept of parting with Jon when the idea was first put forth. But now, when she was on the verge of going through with it, her maternal instincts fully rose to the surface. When Wylla asked for Jon, his mother held her newborn very close to her, as though she would never let him go. Gregor found her protectiveness somewhat reminiscent of Lysa Arryn. Only not as possessive, far less unstable, and not immune to reason.

So strong was Lyanna's reluctance to relinquish custody of her son that it threatened to ruin all their plans then and there. Fortunately, Eddard Stark stepped in and reminded his sister that this would not be the last time she would ever see her son. Someday, when it was deemed safe, the two of them would reunite. Until then, Eddard swore he would do right by his nephew.

Lyanna had not forgotten how the realm had already bled because of her carelessness. She had no desire to be the cause of any more trouble in the world so soon after. Plus, she knew she could trust her brother. He had always been the responsible one. He was also one of the few truly good men in Westeros. So she forced herself to give Jon over to Wylla. However, just before they parted, Lyanna went to Eddard and whispered into his ear "Promise me, Ned. Promise me..."

Gregor was the only one close enough to hear her. I can almost taste the irony.

Just as in the franchise, those had been the last words Lyanna shared with her brother at the Tower of Joy. The difference was that in this universe, they would not be the last words she ever had with him.

After Ned gave his sister his vow to protect Jon, the three groups split up.

Prince Doran Martell, Prince Oberyn Martell, Princess Elia Martell, Prince Aegon Targaryen, Areo Hotah, Maester Caleotte, and the entirety of Doran's procession went east by southeast. They rode straight back to Sunspear through the vast deserts of Dorne.


Ashara Dayne had been Elia Martell's lady-in-waiting and her closest friend. As the rumors
suggested, she had indeed been involved with Brandon Stark during the tourney at Harrenhal. He may have meant their affair to be nothing more than a fling at first, but Brandon secretly remained in contact with Ashara afterwards. He had died before she could inform him that she was carrying his bastard. Then the bastard herself died during birth.

In the weeks that followed, Ashara had been extremely depressed over the loss of both her one-time lover and their unborn daughter. There were even some concerns that her life might end by her own hand. That day when her brother returned home, he restored her will to live.

Ashara was surprisingly eager to go along with Gregor Clegane's plan. She was willing to enforce the claim that she and Brandon were Jon's parents. In fact, she went so far as to offer to accompany Lord Howland's party north. When questioned on her motives, she just said that helping Brandon's sister and Elia's daughter would give her a renewed sense of purpose.

Lyanna happily accepted the Dornish beauty's offer for aid. At Harrenhal, she had gotten very close to Ashara. That was due in large part to their relationships with Brandon and Elia.

To account for Ashara's disappearance, it would be said that she had flung herself from a cliff. It was not a dignified fate for her to have, but what mattered was that it was a believable one. Given how much tragedy Ashara had witnessed recently, including the supposed loss of her brother at the Tower of Joy, one could not blame her for finally breaking and taking her own life. In his first life, Gregor would have classified it as an instance of post-traumatic stress.

Ser Arthur Dayne kept a very profile whilst he was in Starfall. He managed to commission a ship to take his sister and the others north. After watching the ship sail into the horizon, he swiftly mounted his horse and rode for Sunspear.

Lord Eddard Stark, Ser Gregor Clegane, Prince Jon Targaryen, Wylla, Ser Gerold Hightower, Lord Willam Dustin, Martyn Cassel, and Gregor's men-at-arms went directly northeast. They were headed for King's Landing.

While all of Gregor's men-at-arms knew that Aegon and Rhaenys were still alive, none of them were even aware of Jon's existence yet. For Jon's safety as well as theirs, both Gregor and Eddard were hoping to delay them finding out for a while. So they had Wylla and Ser Gerold ride at the front of their column, and the men-at-arms brought up the rear. That way Jon was hidden at all times.

The march to King's Landing took about three weeks.

In the early phase of their journey, Gregor noticed Eddard was very morose. It was not difficult for Gregor to guess why. His father, his brother, and many of his friends had died in the last year. That by itself was something he could cope with. But to discover that all those deaths were actually the result of a misunderstanding concerning his ister… that was incomprehensible to him.

Gregor could not fault Eddard for harboring some feelings of resentment towards his sister. If Sandor died because of a reckless thing Ellyn had done, he would probably be cross with her, too. But he would love her no less.

Personally, Gregor thought Lyanna had made the right decision to go with Rhaegar. Considering what was going to happen north of the Wall in about twenty years, his belief in the apocalypse might not been wholly irrational.

All the same, Eddard had no way of knowing that. As such, he was inwardly fuming over his sister's actions. Eddard was not as easy to provoke as his late hot-tempered brother, but he was
equally capable of being enraged. Gregor decided to do something about that. He felt the wolf lord had enough worry about without harboring a lasting grudge towards his sister.

Five days after their departure from the Tower of Joy, Gregor made a solemn effort to open Lord Eddard's mind.

He waited until nightfall, when the group made camp. Polliver and Chiswyck were guarding the horses, and Wylla was tending to Jon in her tent. Eddard was sitting alone in front of the camp's fire. Nearly everyone else had settled down for the night.

Gregor walked over to the fire and sat down opposite the wolf lord. Eddard was staring intently into the flames, as though he was a red priest. Gregor could tell he was not really trying to look into the future; he was simply lost in thought.

The Mountain gazed at the radiant embers, as well, and the two men sat in almost total silence. Finally, Gregor remarked softly "I would ask you not to be so hasty to judge your sister, Lord Eddard."

Eddard did not look up, but Gregor did not doubt that he was listening. He asked "Why is that?"

Gregor leaned back, folded his arms, and firmly stated "For all we know, there may very well be some stock in that prophecy."

That made Ned shift his gaze upwards. He bore the countenance of one who is stunned. "I did not take you for the superstitious type, Ser Gregor."

"Because I am not," Gregor claimed. As he fed a log to the fire, he muttered "What are your house's words? 'Winter is coming'?"

"They are," Ned affirmed.

"Have you ever pondered on their meaning?" Gregor inquired, "Or why they are your words?"

"Of course I have," Eddard professed, "I believe they serve as a reminder. A reminder that no matter how prosperous and beautiful life can be, there will always be suffering and hardship in this world. Like or not, we must all face our own trials and tribulations in time. Attempting to avoid them would be futile. The proper course is to face them as they come."

"You've a wise and heedful interpretation, my lord," Gregor admitted, "But it could mean something more. Perhaps they are a premonition."

"A premonition of what?" Eddard enquired, suddenly more interested in the conversation.

Gregor blew on the flames thrice to feed some air into them. After that, he spoke bluntly "I assume you are familiar with the Long Night?"

"I am," Ned responded, "It happened long ago, during the era of the First Men. It brought about a seemingly endless winter, which in turn threatened the demise of sunlight and the end of all life. There was no hope of it ending until the Night's Watch chose to ally with the children of the forest. Together, they repelled the Others and defeated the Night's King."

Gregor could not recall if Eddard's version of how the Long Night ended was in accordance with the widely-believed version of its resolution, but that was not what was really important. What really mattered was that Eddard was willing to talk on it.
"So you do not think the Long Night is a myth?" Gregor presumed.

"No," Eddard contended, "The world was young then. Momentous wonders and unspeakable horrors alike were commonplace in those days."

The fact that Eddard was not denying the Long Night as a historical event helped Gregor considerably here. He tossed some dried leaves into the bottom of the fire pit, and he commented "According to Rhaegar's prophecy, when the apocalypse comes, it will bring with it coldness, darkness, and death. What does that remind you of?"

Eddard quickly caught on to what Gregor was implying. For a moment, he appeared to be aghast. Then he eased down and said dismissively "The Long Night is centuries over, Ser Gregor."

"Who's to say it cannot happen again?" Gregor countered, "The Night's King was not destroyed; he was simply banished beyond the Wall. Eight thousand years would give him plenty of time to regain his strength and build up his forces. Think of all the watchmen and wildlings that have died in that timeframe. There must be millions, and every one of them could rise again."

By now, Eddard was at full attention. He sat up straight and murmured inquiringly "That's why you're willing to consider the validity of that prophecy? You believe 'winter is coming' is actually a warning that the Long Night will relapse?"

"Your ancestor Brandon the Builder erected the Wall," Gregor replied for emphasis, "If he made it solely to keep out the wildlings, he could have stopped at seventy feet. He stopped at seven hundred. No one builds an obstruction that massive unless the thing they wish to keep out is an absolute monstrosity. So I say he knew that the Long Night never actually ended. It merely went on hiatus."

Ned gradually returned his gaze to the flames. He stared longingly into them, as though they had become the world's last rays of hope. He mumbled in a chillingly calm voice "If that's true, then the war we just fought is nothing against what's to come."

"Do not lose faith, my lord," Gregor beckoned him. Throughout the conversation, the fire had gotten larger, warmer, and brighter. The Mountain used his sword to prod the branches around and replenish the kindling. He then pronounced "Westeros survived the Long Night once. It can do so once more."

"Aye, it can," Eddard conceded. He rested his chin on his hands and muttered "But suppose it returns during our lifetime. Will we be ready when winter finally comes?"

"That is entirely up to us," was Gregor's brief yet straightforward answer. 

_Us, and a trio of airborne, fire-breathing reptiles. Rhaegar was right about that much, at least._

Gregor was certain that by the following morning, Eddard would regard the second Long Night as little more than a probable occurrence. Within a month, he would most likely shove his newfound anxiety over it to the back of his mind. For now, Gregor was content with that.

He was just pleased that he had lessened Ned's feelings of resentment and fury towards his sister, and that he had succeeded in opening Ned's eyes up to the biggest threat Westeros would imminently face. He now knew he possessed the capacity to gain Ned's trust. That was imperative, as he would need men like Eddard Stark on his side in the days to come.

Slightly over a fortnight later, Eddard Stark, Gregor Clegane, and the rest of their party reached the capital city of Westeros. The outskirts of the city were far less crowded than they had been upon
their departure. Evidently, most of the Westerlords and their forces had gone home.

House Clegane's camp still stood along the southeastern shore of King's Landing. Gregor sent his men-at-arms to inform the soldiers and servants that they too would be leaving for the Westerlands soon. Until he could don a disguise, Ser Gerold Hightower was bidden to stay with Gregor's men-at-arms. Only Lord Eddard, Ser Gregor, Jon, Wylla, Willam Dustin, and Martyn Cassel entered the city.

Eddard and Gregor were immediately summoned to the King's solar. They were informed that Robert wished to have a private audience with them.

Thankfully, it really was a private audience. When they arrived at the solar, they found two Baratheon knights standing guard outside it, but their liege lord was the only person inside it. He was seated at his desk; a goblet of wine in one hand, a stack of papers in the other. He seemed to be favoring the one over the other.

The stag king beckoned the wolf lord and the Mountain to take the seats before his desk. Once they both were seated, Robert asked them a single question: "How did it go?"

That was his way of demanding a report for how they had accomplished the tasks they had set out to do. In Gregor's case, it was escorting Princess Elia to Sunspear. In Eddard's case, it was lifting the siege of Storm's End and rescuing Lyanna.

Gregor could tell by the tone of Robert's voice that he had not lost hope that Lyanna would return to him. The Mountain was not looking forward to crushing Robert's spirits. He was not very comfortable with lying to him so prodigiously either. Even so, he knew it had to be done. He had to convince Robert that Lyanna was dead. Not only that, but Gregor also had to cure him of his infatuation of her.

Right before they had gotten to the solar, Gregor had asked Eddard to let him to handle the explanation of what had happened at the Tower of Joy. Eddard gave his consent to that arrangement, though he was suspicious as to what the massive knight was going to say.

After briefly going over the liberation of Storm's End and Elia's return to Dorne (with certain details removed from the latter account), Gregor told Robert a much-altered version of what had transpired at the Tower of Joy.

He claimed that he and his men-at-arms had arrived on the scene in the midst of the combat between Rhaegar's Kingsguard and Ned's company. Ser Oswell Whent had already fallen, but so had Theo Wull and Ethan Glover. Ser Gerold Hightower would have slain Martyn Cassel, but Gregor was able to join the fray and stop the Lord Commander before Jory Cassel lost his father. Gregor himself eliminated Ser Gerold, but Ser Arthur Dayne killed Ser Mark Ryswell only seconds later. After that, Lords Eddard Stark, Howland Reed, and Willam Dustin all fought Ser Arthur. Lord Willam was injured, but Gregor managed to get him to safety. Martyn managed to distract Arthur long enough for Lord Howland to wound him, and Lord Eddard delivered the killing blow.

While Lord Howland attended to Martyn and Willam, Eddard rushed into the Tower. Ser Gregor accompanied him as backup.

When they entered the Tower, they found Lyanna abed. She was in the final stages of a fever. Ned knelt by her side and pleaded with her to hold on for him. She struggled to obey her brother's wishes, but she was too weak to cling to life for very long. Her fever had not made her delirious, however. She was able to think and speak coherently right up to the moment of her death. She had not wasted her last minutes on Earth; she had used them to share her personal thoughts with the two
Ned had been too immersed in his grief to remember his sister's exact words. However, Gregor had committed everything she had said to memory.

By this point in the explanation, Robert had become notably distraught over the loss of his beloved. He had lifted his goblet of wine to his mouth several times. However, when Gregor claimed that he could perfectly recall Lyanna's final words, the King's curiosity heightened. He leaned closer and asked expectedly "Were her last words… about me?"

Putting on his best mummer's face, Gregor gave a nod and proclaimed "I shall never forget them, Your Grace. She said 'When you go back to Robert, tell him I'm sorry. I'm sorry he couldn't be my husband. I'm sorry I never got to be his wife. Most of all, I'm sorry I'll never see him on the throne. I know he'll be a great king. I also know he'll miss me terribly. But tell him not to mourn me forever. I could not bear to be the cause of his grief. His grief could ruin him. If it does, he could ruin the realm. The realm has paid enough because of me. The only way he and the realm can thrive is if he finds happiness elsewhere. Our betrothal ends with my death. Now he is free to love another woman. I want him to love another woman. After everything he's done, he deserves to have a queen who will make him happy. I know he'll find someone like that. He's a good man. But if he can love another, he can be a better man. I want him to be the best man he can be. Promise me you'll tell him that. If you tell him that, I can die in peace, knowing that he and the realm will be in good hands.'"

Gregor had spent the past twenty days composing and rehearsing that monologue. It had to be outlined in such a way that Lyanna would actually say every one of those sentences, and they were all things one would be capable of saying even when on the verge of death. He had no writing mediums on him, so making notes was not an option. He had to rely entirely on his own memory.

He also paid careful attention to how he delivered that soliloquy. He spoke in a sorrowful tone, he paused frequently for emphasis, and he made his voice crack occasionally. He even forced himself to produce a few tears. Amazingly, Lord Eddard shed a tear of his own, even though he was fully aware that the entire monologue was false. That was how convincing Gregor was.

When Gregor finished, he paused so that Robert could absorb the words. The King looked as though he was going to drown in his own tears. Gregor did not relish in the older man's misery. Part of him felt genuinely guilty about deceiving Robert, but for the good of everyone in Westeros, he had to continue this charade.

After about two minutes of uncomfortable silence, Robert turned his gaze to the goblet in his right hand. He slowly set it down on the table and pushed it out of his reach. Then he looked around at the two men on the other side of his desk and proclaimed "If Lyanna's dying wish was for me to find happiness and strive to be a better man… then I shall endeavor to honor her wish."

Eddard was flabbergasted by this sight. This was the first time he had ever seen his best friend push away a wine goblet that wasn't empty. If he could pick sobriety over drunkenness once, he could certainly make of it a routine. That implied that he might have actually meant what he said, and that he could change.

Gregor looked over at Eddard out of the corner of his eye. The wolf lord was staring at him. His expression was one of awe. Gregor just smiled at him.

*Words, Ned. Words.*
In canon, Jon Arryn, Stannis Baratheon, and Eddard Stark had failed to change Robert through speech. That was because they never played on his greatest weakness: Lyanna. Gregor had, and already, he was seeing promise in Robert's ability to change. At the very least, he had ensured that Robert would not be drunk at his wedding to Cersei Lannister. Because of that, Robert would not say the wrong name during the bedding.

Of course, there was still no guarantee that Robert and Cersei's marriage would be a happy one. But at least the incident that drove them apart in the first place would be averted. Now Robert would not give Cersei grounds to seek comfort in the arms of another man. Especially not her brother's.

Chapter End Notes

Note: I know I said that I would explain Gregor's conversation with Varys (the one which took place in between chapters 3 and 4). However, this chapter turned out to be a lot longer than I planned it to be. Plus, I lost about half of it last night when my hard drive crashed, and I had to reconstruct it from memory. So I hope you'll forgive me this delay. The next chapter will fully explain the details of Gregor and Varys' secret discussion.

By the way, I'm going to go ahead and ask this now – who would you prefer to sit the Iron Throne at the end of this story? Here are the options:

Robert/Cersei
Robert's heir/Sansa
Robert's heir/Arya
Robb/Margaery
Aegon/his consort
Rhaenys/her consort
Jon/Daenerys (my personal choice. They may be nephew and aunt, but in my mind, they form perhaps the most ideal pair to rule Westeros together.)
Jon/other woman
Daenerys/other man

Choose any of the nine pairings above. If you cannot decide on a favorite, just pick your top three. If you have another pairing (one that's at least somewhat plausible and practical), feel free to share it with me, and I'll consider it. I'll keep a tally of how many votes all the pairings get. The vote won't be the sole deciding factor on which couple will ultimately be in power, but it will be a significant variable.
The Games Begin

Chapter Notes

Note: Someone pointed out that it would be odd for Jon to still have that name, as the name was mostly liked bestowed on him by Eddard in canon. Here's my justification for him retaining that name: originally, Rhaegar intended to name his third child Visenya if a girl and Jaehaerys if a boy. Lyanna preferred to call their child by a shorter, more common name, so Rhaegar offered an alternate name for either case. For the male one, he suggested to call their son Jon after his best friend, Lord Jon Connington. Lyanna agreed, as she could also name Jon after Lord Jon Arryn, whom she had come to respect for fostering Eddard and protecting him from the Mad King. So his real name is actually Jaehaerys Targaryen; Jon is essentially his – for lack of a better term – nickname.

By the way, Lyanna's messages aren't just going to be a load of McGuffin. In time, the fate of the ravens and riders she dispatched to Winterfell, Riverrun, and the Eyrie will be explained. And no, Littlefinger won't be responsible for any of them. Some people were concerned that I'd make him the guilty party. I have no intention of that. While I personally hold no love for Petyr Baelish, enough people already blame Littlefinger for everything, including things that were clearly not his fault. He's like the Donald Trump of Westeros.

One more thing. I have gotten some remarks about how Gregor is only doing things that benefit others, essentially making him seem little more than a servant. From this chapter onward, he continues to do so, but he also seeks to benefit himself. Here we begin to see just how ambitious he really is.

"I'm truly sorry for your loss, Your Grace," Gregor told Robert sincerely, "Lord Eddard has told me how much Lady Lyanna meant to you."

"You have nothing to repent for, Ser Gregor," Robert Baratheon murmured, "I thank you for going to such trouble as to memorize her last words on my behalf."

"It was no bother," Gregor asserted. He then folded his arms and asked "For my curiosity's sake, have you any suitable prospects for queen, Your Grace?"

The stag king shrugged and mumbled "Lord Tywin Lannister has put forth the idea of wedding his daughter to me in passing many a time. I have been avoiding giving him a response, as I held out some hope that Lyanna would be rescued. Now that she is gone, and now that I have her blessing to seek another woman… I suppose I may as well accept Tywin's offer."

"It's still your prerogative to choose your own bride, Your Grace," Eddard Stark pointed out.

"Lord Eddard is correct," Gregor conceded, "However, I doubt you'll find a more advantageous marriage than the one Lord Tywin is presenting you with. Lady Cersei is a rather comely woman. She is also very politically astute, and she can be loving to people close to her. I emphasize 'can,' because she truly is a lioness. So be careful not to spite her. Otherwise, you'll live in fear of your safety. And your manhood."
Robert and Eddard gave a hearty chuckle at that statement. They could not tell if Gregor was japing or speaking seriously, but they heeded his words all the same.

"I will remember that," Robert proclaimed, supporting his head on his arm, "I'll take Cersei Lannister as my bride. I may not know her all that well, but a king must make sacrifices for the good of the realm. And you needn't be concerned for Lady Cersei, either. I'll be good to her. Just as good as I would have been to Lyanna, if I can manage such."

Eddard and Gregor were pleased to hear that. Especially Gregor. It had made him additionally certain that Cersei's children would also be Robert's in this universe.

Robert gradually leaned back in his chair and queried "So, what happened after Lyanna died?"

"First we took her remains – along with those of Ethan, Mark, Theo, and Ser Arthur – all the way to Starfall," Eddard disclosed, "Lady Ashara was less than pleased to receive us, even though I returned her brother's bones and sword to her. Of course, I did take something from her in turn."

"What might that be?" Robert inquired.

"I discovered that she recently bore a bastard," Eddard replied.

Robert's eyes widened, and he said in astonishment "Not yours, Ned?"

"Brandon's," Eddard enlightened him.

Raising an eyebrow, the stag king commented "I thought you were the one Ashara favored at Harrenhal."

"So did I," Eddard contended, "It would seem Bran got to her first."

Robert gave a nod in acknowledgment, and he enquired "What did you do about the bastard?"

"I did the only thing I could do," Ned revealed, "I claimed him as my own family, and I brought him back with me."

"You mean Ashara let you take away her child, just like that?" Robert assumed, seeming a little dubious.

"No, she protested strongly," Eddard recounted, adopting a gloomy undertone, "But I ultimately won over. Alas, my victory came at a price. Lady Ashara committed suicide shortly before we left."

Robert was visibly stunned. He said apologetically "How unfortunate. I'm so sorry it came to that, Ned."

Ned smiled gratefully at his friend and wrapped up his recollection with "Whilst in Starfall, Howland boarded a ship with the bodies of Lyanna and our fallen comrades. After he set sail for the North, Ser Gregor, Martyn, Willam, and I rode back here with all due haste."

"That brings us to where we are now," Robert noted. There was an interval of quietness that immersed the whole room, and then the King gradually shifted his gaze to the massive knight. He uttered inquiringly "Tell me something, Ser Gregor. Why did you not return to King's Landing aboard the Diligence? Would it not have been quicker to travel by sea than by land? Furthermore, what led you to the Tower of Joy?"
"I have my reasons, Your Grace," Gregor asserted, "Firstly, most of my men had never been aboard a ship before. That was my first time on one myself. I am not saying that maritime travel did not wholly agree with us, but after we docked at Sunspear, we were keen to remain on land."

"I can understand having an adversity to sailing," Robert murmured, "My own parents were lost at sea. Within sight of Storm's End, if you can imagine. But even though the road from Sunspear to King's Landing goes all the way through Dorne, you could have bypassed the Red Mountains altogether. What business did you have at the Tower of Joy?"

"Strictly speaking, it was Lord Eddard's business," Gregor proclaimed, "I was aware that he was out to rescue his sister. So I made it my objective to assist him."

Robert was astonished. He remarked "You hardly even knew him at the time."

"Makes no difference," Gregor debated, "If somebody has a problem, I feel obligated to help them remedy their predicament. Lord Eddard sought to recover his sister. I merely assumed he'd appreciate some aid. I certainly would, had it been my sister who was abducted."

Robert could comprehend that logic. He rubbed his chin, as though in deep thought, and he asked "Would you have done this for anyone?"

"Indeed I would," Gregor pronounced firmly, "The world has enough wrong in it already. If I see an opportunity to right one of those wrongs, I do not ignore it. So long as it's in my power to make a positive difference, I'd always strive to make one."

A wide grin crossed Robert's face. He declared "That mentality will get you far, Ser Gregor. In fact, it's precisely why I called you here."

Gregor had been waiting for the stag king to say something such as that. Feigning bewilderment, he sat up and asked expectantly "How so, Your Grace?"

Robert elaborated with an observation: "Before the war, you already had a great reputation in the Westerlands. Of course, that can be attributed to your being a native of that region. However, in the past couple months, your fame has extended beyond there. Because of your actions in King's Landing, you helped secure the throne for the Stormlands, and you earned the gratitude of Dorne. Now three of the Seven Kingdoms are in awe of you and your principles."

"Four," Eddard amended. When the other two men looked to him, he provided some clarity: "After everything he did here and at the Tower of Joy, Ser Gregor's deeds have gained him the recognition and appreciation of the North, as well."

Robert gave a slight nod, and he smirked, saying "That's high praise, coming from you, Ned."

He then turned back to Gregor Clegane, and he apprised him with "Getting back on topic, the realm is broken. I have the unenviable task of mending it. Alas, there is only so much I can do from King's Landing. I still have yet to fill in all the vacancies on the Small Council. Since I first sat on the throne, Lord Varys, Lord Jon Arryn, and Lord Tywin Lannister have been my only source of guidance. All three men have given me very different counsel, but there is one point that they all agree on: while I myself can accomplish much in this city, what I really need are people who can travel throughout the Seven Kingdoms and fix their problems at the source. People… such as you."

Gregor pricked up his ears in interest, folded his hands together, and stated excitedly "You have my undivided attention, Your Grace."

Robert went on: "Lord Varys has proposed that I establish a new position on the Small Council:
"May I ask what it would involve, Your Grace?" Gregor asked rhetorically. Assuming that Varys had followed his instructions, the Mountain already knew the entire answer to that question.

Robert informed him "Like the other positions on the Small Council, the holder of this office is not required to remain in King's Landing. He is free to roam Westeros to his heart's content. However, his travels are supposed to coincide with the interests of the realm. In essence, Ser Gregor, if you take this position, you'll be tasked with policing the Seven Kingdoms. Should any disputes, crises, or disagreements arise between houses, you would mediate in them and resolve them as an impartial third party. You will also be in charge of crime control from the North to Dorne. If any criminals evade justice, your job is to capture them. Furthermore, this position gives you authority that overrules that of all others, save the crown's. Even the Lords Paramount would answer to you."

Gregor certainly had no difficulty getting his intent across to Varys. Robert had described the position of Master of Order almost exactly as the Mountain had envisioned it to be. Of course, he had to seem overwhelmed by the prospect of being handed so much power and responsibility. Otherwise, Eddard and Robert would suspect that he had known about this offer in advance.

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly to suggest he was astounded, and uttered in mock awe "I would be honored by this appointment, Your Grace. Please… excuse me if I seem shocked. I… I just think this is a tremendous proposition to receive. Particularly at my age. I mean… it was not long ago that I witnessed my eighteenth name day."

"Don't let age discourage you," Robert advised him with a smirk, "Ned here just began his third decade in this world. Even before that, he became Lord Paramount and Warden of the largest of the Seven Kingdoms. I myself am in the midst of my twenty-first year. Never be the less, I am by no means the youngest man to ever sit the Iron Throne."

"You… you raise a very valid counterargument, Your Grace," Gregor admitted, "Still, maintaining stability and peace throughout Westeros… that is hardly a job for one lone man."

Robert snickered at the apparent misunderstanding and told the knight "I do not wish to give you the impression that you will take on this burden all by yourself. No one can be expected to keep the peace of this country singlehandedly. You'll have leave to form your own company to assist you in your duties. You may assemble this company however you wish."

Gregor had hoped for the freedom to create a private legion of soldiers that served under him. Evidently, Varys had not neglected that part, either. Better yet, Robert had not given Gregor any restrictions on recruiting his soldiers.

"This is all very appealing," Gregor commented, "Is there anything more to the position?"

"Just one additional detail," Robert responded, "Call it a change of surroundings."

"I'm listening," Gregor avowed.

Robert had a map of Westeros in front of him. He smoothed it out and gazed down at it, saying "It occurred to me – actually, it occurred to Varys first, and then me – that Clegane's Keep is not found in a very strategic location in the Westerlands. Study this map, and you can see why. The Vale, the Stormlands, and the Crownlands are over a month's travel away. The North isn't too far,
but it would still take a long time to reach the Neck. The Reach and Dorne are acceptably close, but the Riverlands and the Iron Islands are the only regions that are conveniently close."

Gregor had already been aware of Clegane's Keep's problematic location (relative to the rest of Westeros), but Varys had provided those reasons for why it was an unsuitable base of operations. He would have to relocate, preferably outside the Westerlands. Right then, Gregor shrugged and mildly proposed "Perhaps I would be better able to carry out my duties if I was stationed elsewhere?"

"Precisely," Robert agreed. He looked back and forth between Gregor and Eddard, and added in "That's why I wished for an audience with both of you at once."

"Robert?" said Eddard, somewhat perplexed.

"I could have spoken with you about Storm's End and the Tower of Joy first and Ser Gregor about Princess Elia later," Robert pointed out to his friend, "Of course, at the time, I was unaware that both of you had a hand in recovering Lyanna. Be that as it may, you may be able to help us with finding a new stronghold for the Master of Order."

"Help in what manner?" the wolf lord enquired.

Robert Baratheon rose and gestured for Eddard Stark and Gregor Clegane to approach him. When all three men were standing and gathered around the desk, Robert drew their attention to the map. He placed his right index finger on a certain marking in the Neck. He professed "There is a fortress along the southern border of the North. It is currently abandoned; it serves mostly as a barricade now."

"Moat Cailin," Ned recognized the marking on the map. He frowned and remarked "The moat is a ruin, Robert."

"Ruins can be restored, Ned," the stag king argued dismissively, "Aside from that, Moat Cailin is quite formidable. It has never been captured."

"Not from the south, at least," Eddard pointed out, "It is still vulnerable from the north."

"Then fortify its northern defenses," Robert proposed, a little annoyed, "Think on this, Ned. Next to Harrenhal and the Twins, Moat Cailin has better overall location than any other holdfast in the country. The North and the Riverlands are within spitting distance. It is equally far from the Westerlands and the Vale, as well as equally far from the Reach and the Stormlands. Only Dorne is more than a fortnight away. One would have fast access to the entire realm from the moat."

There are a lot more advantages to setting up base in Moat Cailin. But I'll keep those to myself. Distance is the only one that you should be concerned with for now.

Eddard studied the map intently, and ultimately, he released a deep sigh and murmured "I would be a fool to dispute any of that. Very well. If you command it, Your Grace, I am willing to give Ser Gregor charge of Moat Cailin and the adjoining lands."

"Good," Robert stated approvingly. He looked up and asked "What say you, Ser Gregor?"

"I must agree with Your Grace," the Mountain replied straightforwardly, "Moat Cailin would be the most ideal place for your new Master of Order."

"Then you will accept the office?" Robert presumed.
"I cannot think of a single reason not to," Gregor contended slyly. A sudden thought intruded on his mind. He inquired "Would I be named the lord of Moat Cailin?"

"Certainly," Robert affirmed, "You will even be given the title of Lord."

Gregor grinned and observed "You present a fine bargain, Your Grace. Am I to understand that I'll have two holdfasts to my name; one in the North, one in the Westerlands?"

At that, Robert's gleeful expression faltered. He said in an uneasy tone of voice "Well…"

"Is something amiss, Your Grace?" Gregor queried. This time, he was genuinely concerned.

Robert stared at the wall and slowly sat down in his chair. Then he proclaimed "Before I grant you the position, there is one minor issue that must be addressed, Ser Gregor. Then again, it is almost certainly not minor on your part. You may wish to sit back down for this."

Gregor and Eddard returned to their chairs. Once they were settled, Robert illuminated the situation: "When Varys suggested moving you outside the Westerlands, Lord Tywin Lannister was none too pleased. From what he's told me, he sees you as one of his most valuable assets. Unsurprisingly, he is reluctant to part with any of his assets. But he is even more reluctant to share them. He argues that by relocating you to Moat Cailin, your loyalties may be split between him and Lord Eddard."

"Sounds like a typical Lannister worry," Eddard commented sardonically.

"Lord Tywin's qualms are not entirely unwarranted," Gregor debated, "He knows I am always obligated to do the honorable thing. Honor means much more in the North than it does in the Westerlands. For that reason, if blows were ever exchanged between the North and the Westerlands, I may be more inclined to side with the Northmen."

"He made such the same argument," Robert disclosed, "So he told me to give you an ultimatum."

"An ultimatum?" Gregor did not like where this was headed.

Robert gravely nodded and stated "Lord Tywin will allow you to receive lordship over Moat Cailin and to move to the moat without objection. But only on the sole condition that you renounce your claim to Clegane's Keep."

For the first time since that meeting began, Gregor was dumbfounded. He had suspected that Tywin would not be willing to part with him easily, but he never would have thought that the lion lord would result to this. He was all but cutting him off from the Westerlands.

Judging by his countenance, Eddard was shocked, too. He spat angrily "That is outrageous. Clegane's Keep is Ser Gregor's birthright. How could he expect him to give up his birthright?"

Gregor had already conjured up a few ideas for Tywin's motives. He thought aloud "This must be his way of chastising me for the incident with Ser Amory Lorch. Clearly, he doesn't trust me as he used to. Now he's testing me to see if I really would choose the North over the Westerlands."

"But in this matter, if you did pick the North, it would only be to serve the crown," Eddard pointed out.

"I know that, Lord Eddard," Gregor uttered plainly. "Lord Tywin must know that, too. He knows I cannot refuse the appointment King Robert just offered me. That's why he's forcing this decision upon me. He expects me to voluntarily give up my domain in the Westerlands."
"You honestly believe he's that eager to be rid of you?" Eddard assumed.

"He must be," Gregor disputed, "He could have exiled me from the Westerlands instead, but that action would have made him unpopular with a lot of people. The King's offer saves Tywin the trouble of having to exile me. Since the choice of my removal from Clegane's Keep rests solely on my shoulders, so does the fallout."

Robert and Eddard could not deny that Gregor made a very excellent analysis of Tywin's possible motivations for wanting the Mountain out of the Westerlands. It was as cunning as it was ruthless. Two primary characteristics of the lion lord.

"Why didn't you protest against this ultimatum?" Eddard almost demanded of his friend.

"How could I, Ned?" Robert countered, "Tywin won the city. His son killed Aerys. His daughter is to be my queen. I am indebted to Ser Gregor for ensuring the least amount of bloodshed in the taking of King's Landing, but I cannot afford to favor him over Lord Tywin."

"I understand, Your Grace," Gregor assured the older man, "I do not wish to put you in such a difficult position, either."

Robert was thankful to be relieved of that burden. He stated "All this aside, I still wish to put you in a position, Ser Gregor. The position of Master of Order is yours for the taking. However, I will not ask you to make any sacrifices you are unwilling to make. If you wish to refuse the appointment for the sake of your birthright, I will not object."

Gregor needed a minute to contemplate his options.

Clegane's Keep was hardly a structure to be proud of, but it had been his home for the last eighteen years. That was the entirety of his second life. Plus, how could he leave behind his family? How could he turn away from his father, his mother, his brother, and his sister? What would the Westerlords think if he left them so willingly?

Then Gregor viewed this scenario from the other side. Just because he had to remove himself from Clegane's Keep's line of succession, there was no reason to presume that he was forbidden to enter the Westerlands ever again. Additionally, both he and Sandor would have a castle to their names. That seemed to be a fair trade.

He could still execute his duties as Master of Order from Clegane's Keep, but the keep was too small, too rundown, and too out-of-the-way to house an army. He intended to create his own army.

That was one of the reasons why Moat Cailin was critical to his plans. It was abundant in unharnessed resources, it could garrison an entire legion of soldiers, and it was almost in the very center of Westeros. For those and other reasons, Gregor had to gain lordship over the moat. Otherwise, all his plans for the future of Westeros would be in jeopardy of failing.

Besides, if his plans succeeded as he envisioned, he could always regain his influence in the Westerlands at a later date. If Sandor did not want lordship of Clegane's Keep, he could regain that, as well. He was hoping Sandor would take it; his brother deserved a castle just as much as he did.

After a lengthy period of considering his options, Gregor pronounced "I can accept Lord Tywin's condition."

"You are certain?" Robert enquired, wanting to leave no room for doubt.

"Yes, Your Grace," Gregor confirmed, "This is for the good of the realm. If I am unwilling to
make sacrifices such as this for the realm, I am unworthy of the office of Master of Order."

"So be it," Robert said, nodding in acknowledgement. He then picked up the stack of papers on his
desk, shuffled through them, and extracted three near the bottom. He slid them towards the end of
his desk, along with a quill pen and an inkwell. He instructed the Mountain "Sign these documents.
The first relieves you of your right as the heir to Clegane's Keep. The second makes you lord of
Moat Cailin. The third puts you on the Small Council as Master of Order."

Gregor gradually stood up, stepped up to the desk, and took the quill pen. After briefly skimming
over the content of the documents, he signed each one at the bottom. Following that, Robert took
back the documents and stamped them with the royal seal.

To make the process seem more official, the massive knight declared "I, Gregor of House Clegane,
do hereby renounce my claim to Clegane's Keep. I pass my right as the heir to the title and all its
incomes to my brother, Sandor of House Clegane."

Robert was pleased by the taller man's fondness for ceremony. Deciding to humor him, he rose and
announced "Then I, Robert Baratheon, First of my Name, do hereby on this day bestow upon you,
Ser Gregor Clegane, lordship over Moat Cailin. Furthermore, I entitle you to create a new house:
the Cleganes of the North. This new house shall be given lordly status upon its creation. Lastly, I
name you, Ser Gregor Clegane, to the position of Master of Order, and I charge you with upholding
and assuring the peace and endurance of all Westeros."

"I accept these decrees, Your Grace," Gregor conceded, speaking in a formal tone.

Robert nodded in acknowledgment. He then picked up a fourth slip of paper and handed it to Ser
Gregor. It was a bank note signed in his name. He disclosed "As a further sign of gratitude, I grant
you 20,000 golden dragons from the royal treasury. I shall not order you to spend it on anything.
You may give it to your family or use it to better your new stronghold. You can give it to the faith
or the poor, if that be your desire. In any case, it is yours to do with as you wish."

"I assure you it shall be handled wisely, Your Grace," Gregor proclaimed. He was pleasantly
surprised by this gift. Money had not been part of his discussion with Varys. Originally, Gregor
had intended to finance his operations in the North through different means. Still, he could hardly
complain. 20,000 dragons would definitely get him off the ground.

As Gregor tucked the bank note into his doublet, Eddard rose from his chair and held out his hand
to the Mountain, saying "I must congratulate you… Lord Gregor."

Gregor smiled and shook the wolf lord's hand, shaking it vigorously.

*I'm shaking hands with Lord Eddard Stark himself. Not many people can say that, even in this
world.*

Soon after, Gregor was given leave to exit Robert's solar. Eddard and the King still had other items
of business to discuss, but they did not concern the Mountain. Plus, Gregor intended to leave King's
Landing soon. Among other things, he had to return to his old home and move into his new home.

As Gregor made his way through the Red Keep, his ear caught the sound of slippers shuffling
across the floor. His nose also caught the scent of Lyseni perfumes. That was a telltale sign on who
(or what) was in the vicinity.

Gregor quickly went to nearby darkened hallway and lingered there. Soon enough, the shuffling
steps and the perfumes were upon him. The silhouette of a short, bald, round figure clad in a full-
body robe was standing before him.

Gregor smiled softly and remarked "It appears I owe you quite a few favors, my lord,"

"You can repay them by keeping you word, Ser Gregor," Varys softly contended, "Lord Gregor, I should say."

"Believe me, I will," the Mountain asserted, "My word means everything to me. When I told you that I plan to guarantee the security of the realm through my new position, I meant it."

"Your position certainly gives you the ability to do so," the eunuch admitted, "But tell me; what motivates you to be a keeper of the peace in all of Westeros? Aside from the feelings of pride and accomplishment, what do you get out of all this?"

Gregor just smirked and inquired "Isn't it obvious?"

Varys tittered and speculated "Well, you could become a very rich, powerful, respected, and loved man through your new position. But you could have acquired any of those qualities through alternate means. Simpler means, at that. So why shoulder a burden as immense as this one?"

Gregor explained himself: "The King is the one who governs the realm. We are sworn to follow and obey him by default. But those who actively strive to ensure the safety of the realm are the ones who are recognized and remembered. I anticipate to be recognized and remembered by everyone."

"So it is fame and adoration you are after?" the Master of Whisperers conjectured.

"Oh, no," Gregor refuted, a wide grin across his face, "I don't just plan to be an idol for the smallfolk. I am going to unite Westeros. That's what everyone truly wants; a country that is not just a single nation in name only. That's how I intend to be remembered. As the man who finally and truthfully brought the Seven Kingdoms together."

"Then you would succeed where the Targaryen Kings of the last three hundred years failed," Varys observed, skepticism evident in his voice.

"Do you doubt my ability, Spider?" Gregor stated, trying to come off as humorous rather than mocking.

"I believe your intentions and your objective are true," Varys contended, "They are only missing one key aspect: realism. Ever since the era of the First Man, Westeros has been stricken with conflict. The level of conflict can be lowered, but it can never be purged entirely."

"My goal is not to do away with conflict altogether," Gregor clarified, "I would never attempt that or any other impossible task. Trying to eliminate suffering from this world would be a hopeless endeavor. Be that as it may, I can still do much to lessen all the suffering. I will not force anyone to give up any of their rights, nor will I request any of the Great Houses to surrender their domain over their respective lands. But I will purge all the old feuds, even the ones that are centuries old. I shall start by mending the wounds from those disputes a little at a time. Progress will be gradual but definite. It would be foolhardy to think that the unification process can be done overnight. But twenty years from now, Westeros might actually be truly united for the first time in its long and bloodstained history."

Varys cocked his head and remarked "You and I clearly share a similar aim, Lord Gregor. Both of us want what is best for the realm. I believe you are genuinely sincere and convinced that your
plans will be successful. So I will not impede upon your plans. Even so, I must mention that twenty years still strikes me as something of an overestimate. Two decades to undo all the grudges, quarrels, and hatred of the past eight millennia? You should be careful not to overreach your bounds."

"Twenty years is what I'm aiming for," Gregor insisted.

*After all, two decades from now, the peoples of Westeros will be faced with a threat far larger and far greater than any of their current worries.*

It suddenly dawned on Gregor. That moment right there marked the moment when he officially entered the game of thrones as a player.

*My only option is to play the game. If I play it just right, by the time the Long Night arrives, the Westerosi will have put their petty squabbles aside and opted to stand together.*
A Promise And A Forecast

On the day of his meetings with Robert Baratheon and Varys, the Mountain had arrived in King's Landing as Ser Gregor Clegane. The following day, he departed the city as Lord Gregor Clegane. He also left 20,000 golden dragons richer than when he entered.

When he arrived at the site of House Clegane's camp, his vassals had already disassembled the tents, saddled the horses, and packed the supply carts. They were ready to set out. All they were waiting on was their master. Then again, because of what happened the previous day, it was debatable as to whether Gregor still was their master.

It was there that Ser Gerold Hightower left Gregor's company. The Lord Commander of the Targaryen Kingsguard had dawned a full-body cloak, and his hair was much shorter than it had been when the Mountain last saw him. As part of the knight's disguise, the Tickler had given Ser Gerold a close haircut. It turned out the interrogator had more than one special talent with regards to blades. He was quite crafty with a pair of shears.

Ser Gerold's white armor was in the safekeeping of Lord Eddard Stark. The Reachman instead wore a doublet of boiled leather and a pair of thick woolen breeches which the Northlord had lent him. The two men would return their belongings to each other when they were safely back in Winterfell. This was no concern of Gregor's, though.

With his servants, soldiers, and men-at-arms alongside him, Lord Gregor Clegane began the march back to Clegane's Keep.

On the way there, he prepared himself for his reunion with his family. He would soon face the unappealing task of explaining his business with Robert to his family. He knew he could have sent a raven from King's Landing, but that would have been largely ineffective. After all, this was the type of news that should ideally be delivered and discussed face-to-face.

The loss of his birthright to Clegane's Keep was no longer any major concern to Gregor. He would miss the keep, certainly, but he could see it again in the future. Aside from that, Moat Cailin was vital to his long-term goals. The moat may have been rundown, but he had great plans for it.

What really unsettled him was his family's reaction. He could imagine that he would be greeted with mixed emotions once they learned that he had been all but disowned from Clegane's Keep. They would probably be even more displeased when they learned that he had given up that right by choice.

He tried not to be too pessimistic when thinking about how his parents and siblings would take the news of his relocation to the North. He just concentrated on how best to avoid upsetting them or giving them the wrong impression. After how well he had mollified Robert's infatuation with Lyanna, Gregor was very confident in his ability to get his family to understand his reasons.

On the morning of the sixteenth day after his company set out from King's Landing, Gregor reached Clegane's Keep at last. He was accustomed to the experience of coming back to it upon completion of an assignment that had been given to him by Lord Tywin. All those times, he had taken his returning home for granted. This time, when he passed beneath the raised portcullis, he enjoyed the feeling of riding into the main yard of the Keep. He needed to savor this sensation, knowing it would be a long time before he would do so again.

The courtyard of the keep was small, but it was packed with many of the smallfolk. All of them
were occupied with their various daily duties. Many of them paused long enough to salute Gregor or give him a courteous "milord" as he passed.

Soon Gregor and his companions arrived at the stables, where they all swiftly dismounted. While the horses were being taken by the stableboys, Gregor was approached by a middle-aged man with a head of red hair and a thin red beard that covered his cheeks and his chin. He was the keep's steward, Sylas Vikary.

"Welcome home, my lord," the steward said cordially with a genuine smile.

"Good day to you, Sylas," Gregor rejoined. After collecting his armor and weapons, the Mountain looked down at the older man and stated "I must speak with my family. Are you aware of everyone's current whereabouts?"

"I suspect they will gather in the Main Hall soon," Sylas replied, "It is very early, my lord. They have yet to break their fast. Perhaps you'll join them?"

"I would be delighted," Gregor proclaimed happily, "Tell the cooks to serve the meal in my father's solar."

The steward appeared perplexed. "May I ask why, Ser?"

"I have news to share," Gregor revealed, "Currently, this news is too private for discussion in the Main Hall. The solar would be a more discreet place. I would like you and the rest of my father's council to break your fast with us. In a way, the news concerns all of us."

"Very well, my lord," Sylas Vikary conceded.

The ginger man went to carry out this command. Gregor remained out in the courtyard long enough to assist with unloading the provisions and armaments he had taken to King's Landing. Once everything was sorted out and accounted for, Gregor bade his men to get some food and rest. Some had a mind to get a woman, as well. All that riding could really tire a man. But not enough to dissuade him from that OTHER form of riding.

Gregor was certain that no less than a third of his men would try to get laid within the next hour. As Sylas noted, it was quite early in the morning. Then again, some of Gregor's men would argue that it was never too early for a fuck.

Apart from his armor and weapons, the only things Gregor took from the supply carts were three locked chests. Those chests contained the twenty thousand golden dragons Robert had awarded him. Any other man would have needed some help with carrying the chests. Luckily, Gregor's unnatural strength allowed him to hold all three in one arm.

By the time Gregor arrived in his father's solar, everyone he wished to speak to had gathered there, as well. His mother Daliah, his father Tarrence, his brother Sandor, and his sister Ellyn were all seated at his father's desk. In other parts of the room four more men were seated. Sylas Vikary and Maester Velix were two of them. The other two were the master-at-arms Ser Wallis Peckledon and the castellan Erryk Ruttiger.

The instant Gregor entered the room, he felt a tightness around his waist. It was as though someone had lassoed him with an invisible rope. He looked down and saw Ellyn standing before him. His little sister was embracing him warmly.

Gregor chuckled and set aside the contents of his arms so he could hug his sister back. He knelt so that they were more level with each other. Interestingly, when he knelt, his sister was the one
looking down.

Long ago, Gregor had suspected that all Cleganes were genetically big-boned. Ellyn provided some fine proof for his theory. She had only just celebrated her seventh name day, but she was already over four feet tall. At this rate, she and Brienne of Tarth would be of a height when they were both grown.

"Missed you, Greg," Ellyn told her massive brother.

Gregor placed a loving kiss on the girl's forehead and said affectionately "I missed you, too, Ell."

A firm hand was then placed on Gregor's right shoulder. He turned and saw that it belonged to Sandor. When he got his brother's attention, the thirteen-year-old boy then removed his hand from his shoulder and held it out to him. Gregor smirked, clasped Sandor's hand in his own, and squeezed it slightly. Sandor brightly smiled back.

"The training yard, later?" he suggested.

"Absolutely, San," the Mountain affirmed.

After this exchange with his siblings, Gregor went to properly greet his parents. He kissed his mother on the cheek, and he gave his father a firm handshake. He also shook Ser Wallis Peckledon and Erryk Ruttiger's hands, and he gave Maester Velix and Sylas Vikary a courteous nod of acknowledgment.

When he was done distributing his greetings, Ser Tarrence proposed "Shall we eat?"

"Let's," Gregor contended, pulling up a chair near his father's desk, "I'm famished."

The morning meal came in the form of boiled potatoes, fried eggs, blood sausage, bread fresh from the ovens, an assortment of fruit, and iced lemon water. Clegane's Keep may have looked impoverished, but food was never a scarcity for Gregor's family. Maybe that was another reason why they were all so big.

The nine people in the solar spent about five minutes eating in almost complete silence. In the sixth minute, Daliah looked to her firstborn and asked "So, Gregor, how went the siege?"

Gregor's mouth was full of potato at that moment. After taking a few seconds to swallow, he answered her with "Wasn't really a siege, Mother. The Mad King opened the gates of King's Landing to us. So we pretty much just rode right into the city."

"We've heard a rumor that King Aerys was slain by Ser Jaime Lannister," Maester Velix pronounced, biting a sausage in half.

"Not a rumor," Gregor bluntly revealed. That statement produced a number of gasps.

"It was Ser Jaime killed the Mad King?" Erryk Ruttiger presumed.

"That's correct," Gregor confirmed with a grimace, "Bastard deserved it, though."

That remark stunned most of the others a bit. Not that any of them would disagree with it. The frankness of the remark was actually more alarming than the remark itself.

Sandor appeared unfazed. He drily perceived "If you say he deserved to die, he must've."

Gregor flashed a grin at his younger brother. Sandor must have believed very strongly in his
concept of right and wrong.

"We expected you back a month ago," Ser Tarrence uttered abruptly. He spoke in a tone one might use when making an accusation.

"I was busy," was all Gregor said at first.

"With what, my lord?" Ser Wallis Peckledon inquired.

Gregor stuffed a large strawberry into his mouth. As he chewed, he commented "Just a few errands, Ser Wallis. Errands the king himself sent me on."

There he succeeded in gaining the full attention of his family members and the men on his father's council.

"Tell us more, Gregor," Ser Tarrence bade his son.

Gregor briefly went over everything he had done since the Westerlords marched for King's Landing.

He first described how the capital city had been seized with barely any bloodshed, thanks in large part to his instructions not to harm any unarmed civilians. In the heat of battle, some soldiers had deliberately violated Gregor's orders. All those soldiers had already been either severely chastised or sent to the Wall. Gregor then recalled how he had saved Princess Elia Martell from Ser Amory Lorch. Naturally, he left out the part about Rhaenys and Aegon surviving, but he kept the part about how he had escorted Elia home to Dorne personally. Ser Wallis and Ser Tarrence were amused when Gregor mentioned how Prince Oberyn Martell wished to show the Mountain his appreciation for bringing back his sister.

He also recounted the events of the Tower of Joy. Of course, his account of those events was much different from what had actually transpired. In accordance with the false story he and Lord Eddard Stark had told Robert, Gregor told his household that Mark Ryswell, Ethan Glover, Theo Wull, Oswell Whent, Arthur Dayne, and Gerold Hightower had all perished. He also claimed that Lyanna Stark had died of a fever, and Howland Reed was charged with taking her body and the other Northmen's back home. At the same time, Gregor had gone back to King's Landing with Eddard Stark, Willam Dustin, Martyn Cassel, and all of his men-at-arms. Immediately upon their return, Gregor and Eddard were summoned to King Robert's solar for a private meeting.

"That was a very interesting meeting," Gregor proclaimed cheekily, "As Sylas has told you all, I wish to share some news. The subject of my meeting with the king is the source of that news."

"What did you and King Robert talk about?" Daliah queried, captivated already.

By now, everyone had more or less finished eating. Gregor concluded the meal right then when he drained his mug of lemon water, wiped his mouth, and set the mug aside. He looked around at the solar's other occupants and informed them "The King was impressed with how I helped to capture King's Landing, how I saved Princess Elia, how I secured diplomatic relations with Dorne, how I aided Lord Eddard Stark with recovering his sister, and how I gained the respect of the North because of it. He has even acknowledged the full extent of my abilities, as he claimed that his reign will need men like me to repair and improve the realm. In fact… he has a very special part for me to play."

At that, Gregor reached into the inner pocket of his doublet and pulled out three folded documents. These were copies of the three documents Gregor had signed and Robert had stamped at their
meeting. He held onto the first one for the moment, and he handed the other two to his parents.

Gregor wordlessly gestured for the four men on his father's council to approach the desk. They all stood behind his parents and read the documents over Ser Tarrence and Lady Daliah's shoulders. By the time they finished reading, all six adults bore a facial expression that indicated they were astounded, but in a pleasant way.

"You've been given a spot on the Small Council?" Ser Wallis Peckledon muttered in amazement.

"And a fortress to complement it?" Maester Velix added in, astounded.

"Yes, and yes," Gregor said, trying and failing not to sound smug, "I'll be King Robert's Master of Order. That office was founded specifically for me, believe or no. I am tasked with the supervision of the entire realm. I will carry out my duties from Moat Cailin. I have also been named Lord of the moat."

"You're a lord now?" Daliah asked, agog in amazement.

"Indeed," Gregor avowed.

Ser Tarrence remained staring at the two documents for a few seconds. Then he grinned and remarked proudly "I'm the father of a lord. Who would have thought?"

"I'd be the first to congratulate you, young master Gregor," Maester Velix stated giddily, "But your father or mother should be given that privilege."

"This is cause for rejoicing," Erryk Ruttiger contended.

"Quite so," Ser Wallis Peckledon concurred.

"There's more," Gregor proclaimed. He then went to retrieve the three chests. He placed one of them on his father's desk and gestured for everyone to gather around. Once they were all crowded around the desk, Gregor removed the lock and opened the lid. A collective gasp circulated the room when the inside of the chest was revealed. As the other eight people stared in shock at the glittering pieces of metal, Gregor announced "The King allowed me the use of twenty thousand golden dragons. I'd like you to have seven thousand."

He then pushed the chest farther so that it was directly in front of his father and mother. His parents kept their gaze fixed on the chest. They looked almost mesmerized by its contents.

"Gregor... I don't think we could accept this," Lady Daliah uttered quietly, though her voice suggested they could.

"It's mine to give away," Gregor countered bluntly, "I expect you to get plenty out of this gold. You could refurbish the keep, increase the number of soldiers, build another small town... the possibilities are many in number."

"Then we must thank you, Gregor," Ser Tarrence decided, smiling once more. As he closed the lid to the chest on his desk, he noticed the other two chests in his son's arm. Curious, he inquired "What will you do with the remaining thirteen thousand dragons?"

"They'll be coming with me," Gregor responded. He spoke a little more hastily than he intended, but there was no point in being vague about his future whereabouts. He knew he could not put off the part of this conversation that he had been dreading.
"Are you going back to King's Landing?" Sylas Vikary assumed.

"No…" Gregor said tentatively.

At that, everybody's awe turned to bewilderment. Daliah asked in concern "Gregor, is there something more you wish to tell us?"

Gregor was still clutching the first document from his meeting with Robert in his right hand. He stole a momentary glimpse at it, and then he released a heavy sigh and declared "There's a setback to all this."

He then held the document out to his father. Ser Tarrence took the document swiftly, but he read it slowly. Gregor's mother stood by his side and read the document alongside him. All the while, the solar was immersed in absolute silence.

Gregor stood by, as he anxiously waited for his parents' reaction. Overtime, his father's eyes narrowed, and his mother's mouth slowly dropped open. That was not a promising sign. Even so, it was simply a preview of what was to come.

Finally, Ser Tarrence shifted his gaze upward, looked his firstborn in the eye, and muttered tensely "Gregor… this is a decree removing you as my heir."

"Yes, Father," Gregor affirmed, not bothering to hide his gloom, "My signature is at the bottom."

"You agreed to this?!!" Daliah mumbled. She sounded more distraught than angered.

"I had to," Gregor debated, managing to stay calm, "It was the only way I could make everyone content."

"Certainly," Tarrence spat heatedly, throwing down the document, "If 'everyone' does not extend to us!"

His parents were not the only ones unsettled by this development. The other four men were obviously outraged, Ellyn seemed on the verge of sobbing, and Sandor just stood still without any display of emotion.

"Who does Robert Baratheon think he is?" Ser Wallis snapped furiously.

"How could he force you to give up your right to Clegane's Keep?" Sylas Vikary murmured.

"This was not the King's idea," Gregor firmly disclosed, "He was forced just as I was. This deed was the doing of Lord Tywin Lannister."

Once more, everyone in the room was greatly baffled by the Mountain's information.

"Why would Lord Tywin want you to give up your footing in the Westerlands?" Erryk Ruttiger muttered in confusion, "You're one of his most prestigious generals."

"I was," Gregor Clegane disputed, "I can fathom his reasons. I believe Lord Tywin harbors some feelings of resentment towards me for the episode with Ser Amory Lorch. It was not the fact that I personally killed Ser Amory that displeased him. It was more the fact that I interfered with Ser Amory's assignment. By doing that, I almost directly challenged Lord Tywin's authority. That's one thing he'll never forgive or forget."

"I must agree, my lord," Sylas Vikary coincided, "For as long as he's lived, Tywin Lannister has
never tolerated any act of defiance."

"True, just recall the fates of the Reynes and the Tarbecks," Erryk Ruttiger observed.

"By comparison, I'd say this outcome is far more fortunate and desirable," Gregor debated. He picked up the first document, held it up, and looked around at the other eight people. He solemnly declared "I know you all must be furious about this. I certainly am. Please understand; I did not do this without hesitancy. Nor did I do it simply to serve my own purpose. I had your interests at heart, as well."

Everyone had eased down a bit by this point, but Ser Tarrence and Lady Daliah were still somewhat cross. Daliah asked in a patient yet upset voice "How is this in our best interests, Gregor?"

The Mountain illuminated "This was the only way I could protect the rest of you from Lord Tywin's wrath. He has no conflict with you; only me. By cutting myself off, I have ensured that he will let you be."

"Ser Gregor makes a very valid point," Maester Velix proclaimed. With his gaze locked on the first document, he added in "This is perhaps the most prudent course of action available to him now. It keeps him in favor with the crown, and it guarantees the survival of this family."

"I would have to agree with the maester," Erryk Ruttiger contended, "Lord Tywin is a ruthless man, but so long as Ser Tarrence remains loyal to him, there should be peace between Clegane's Keep and Casterly Rock."

"Exactly," Gregor professed, "Anyway, although I'm being evicted, I have not disowned my family. I will not be severing my ties to you or any other part of the Westerlands. My travels will take me all over Westeros. If I have an opportunity, I could come to visit you, or you could visit me."

"My lord, Moat Cailin is all the way up in the Neck," Ser Wallis Peckledon pointed out, "You'd actually have to enter the North to reach it."

"Think of how much distance that is," Sylas Vikary proposed.

"I've been farther than that," Gregor claimed casually, "Besides, the moat was established there because of the location. Its location makes it a key stronghold that separates the North from the rest of the Seven Kingdoms. It also offers quick access to the other regions of Westeros. Those are just a couple of the advantages I'd have as the Lord of Moat Cailin."

Those points were enough to convince Ser Wallis and Sylas that Gregor had the situation in hand. Now the only people who needed some assurances were Ser Tarrence, Lady Daliah, Sandor, and Ellyn.

Gregor needed an additional fifteen minutes to sway his parents and siblings. Logical reasoning was not as effective here, given how his relationships with them were based on much more emotion. So he had to appeal to their sense of obligation and familial bonds. What ultimately swayed them were the points he made about how his deeds would gain greater respect and appreciation for the Cleganes, and that he would be able to better secure their position in the Westerlands. He also emphasized strongly that he was not turning his back on his family. He argued that he would not really be leaving home; he would just be away on business for prolonged periods of time.
By mid-morning, all eight of those people had submitted to Gregor's decision. They were still not pleased with his long-term relocation to Moat Cailin, but they were not vehemently against it, either. Whatever he did next, they decided to support him in it.

"How much longer can you stay?" Daliah queried.

Gregor had already worked that out in advance. He announced "I plan to be at the moat within a moon's turn. It generally takes a fortnight to get there by horse. But since I'll be traversing unfamiliar terrain with, it could take longer. Perhaps a week and a-half longer. So I'll be riding in three days."

"So soon?" Ellyn noted sadly.

"Yeah," Gregor stated, gazing down at his sister, "But if we make the most of these next few days, my departure won't be as hard."

Ellyn seemed to brighten up at that prospect. She stepped up to her brother and embraced him again. He wrapped one of his arms around her tenderly.

He then turned to Sandor and opened his other arm to him. Gregor's brother stared at him in contemplative silence. Then he began to walk towards him. Sandor gradually approached him, one step at a time. Right before he could enter the embrace, Sandor scowled and bolted towards the entrance of the solar. In just a few seconds, he yanked open the door and sprinted out.

"Sandor!" Daliah called out. Her younger son did not respond. The sounds of his hurried footsteps soon faded down the corridor.

"Poor lad must be taking this hard," Erryk Ruttiger supposed.

"You can hardly fault him," Sylas Vikary proclaimed.

Gregor released his grip on Ellyn and declared "I'll talk to him."

The Mountain proceeded to gather up his armor, weapons, and the other two chests of golden dragons. He made a slight detour and stopped by his bedchamber first. There he deposited most of those materials. He kept his longsword, as well as the belt that accompanied it. After strapping the five-foot piece of steel around his waist, Gregor went off to find his brother.

He did not have to look for long. He already knew where to go. Ever since he was old enough to swing a sword, there was one place Sandor always retreated to whenever he got upset or frustrated.

Sure enough, Gregor found Sandor in the training yard. He was by himself, and he was armed with his favorite sword. At the moment, he practicing his offensive tactics on a wooden dummy near the far wall. Based on how he was hacking viciously and grunting loudly, he was quite agitated.

Thinking of Benjen Stark's introduction in the first episode, Gregor climbed down to the yard, smirked, and shouted jokingly "Is he dead yet?"

Sandor promptly whipped around and came face-to-face with his brother. Unlike Jon Snow, he did not adorn a welcoming grin for his relative or spread his arms to embrace him. Sandor was undeniably aggravated by something. Gregor did not know what, but he knew he had to be responsible for it.

"Leave me alone," Sandor mumbled angrily.
"I will not," Gregor refuted sternly. As he continuously neared his brother, he pronounced "Taking your fury out on a dummy is pitiful. Not to mention ineffectual."

He then drew his longsword in one swift motion. He balanced it effortlessly in his right hand and suggested stoically "Try using a live opponent instead."

At that, Sandor's demeanor shifted from irate to maliciously gleeful. He grinned wickedly and murmured in a somewhat menacing tone "Why not? You agreed to 'later.' May as well be now."

Gregor moved to a spot in the center of the yard. Sandor moved to a place ten feet in front of his massive brother. He lifted his sword and pointed it towards Gregor in an offensive stand. Gregor held his sword up vertically to assume a defensive stand. After he and his brother spent a minute staring each other down, he told Sandor "You first."

Immediately, Sandor raised his sword and charged forward. Even before the blow was delivered, Gregor could see where it would land. He almost listlessly moved to deflect the blow.

Sandor quickly rebounded and slashed at Gregor's legs. The Mountain's blade intercepted his brother's sword when it was still over a foot away.

Sandor hastily prepared to strike a third time. He thought he spotted an opening on Gregor's shoulder, and he focused on that. But before his blade was halfway up, Gregor's blade came at him from out of nowhere. Gregor timed the thrust very carefully. The point of his sword was pressed against Sandor's Adam's apple. Another centimeter and Gregor would have drawn blood.

Luckily, Gregor did not bleed his brother. He just commented drily "You're dead."

Sandor groaned in frustration and lowered his blade. He and Gregor then returned to their original positions.

Now it was Gregor's turn to make the first move. He examined Sandor's defense position for any exploitable weaknesses, and he spotted one within seconds. He lunged forward with his sword in midair.

The Mountain issued a volley of blows in rapid succession. Sandor managed to parry the first four, but the fifth one got through. Gregor struck Sandor in the chest with the flat of his blade. As the younger boy stumbled and groaned, Gregor cockily declared "Dead again."

The two Clegane brothers went four more rounds. Each one had a very similar outcome to the first two.

The third round ended when Gregor delivered a blow that caught Sandor in his right side. "Dead."

The fourth round ended when one of Gregor's blows made contact with Sandor's left side. "Dead."

The fifth round ended when Gregor seized Sandor by his left arm, pulled him close, turned him around, and brought his blade up to his throat. "So fucking dead."

Those last three rounds involved a cumulative total of less than twenty blows.

Sandor was generally much better at sword fighting than this. His current form suggested a substantial lack of discipline, Gregor noted. That was almost definitely attributed to the anger he felt. Anger was the bane of discipline, and discipline was the most important aspect of swordsmanship.
Alas, the dueling was doing nothing to lessen Sandor's anger. Ever the same, Gregor had no intention of going easy on him. Ever since his brother had been old enough to spar with him, Gregor had never gone easy on Sandor.

Gregor had always looked out for Sandor. He had guided him, protected him, supported him, and encouraged him in nearly everything. However, he knew that if his brother was to become the Hound, he would have to toughen Sandor up. So he figured, what better way to do that than with steel in hand?

Outside the training yard, Gregor had never laid a hand on his brother. In the training yard… anything went.

Gregor became an entirely different person when he and his brother dueled. That was probably the closest he would ever get to the original Gregor Clegane. He was brutal, merciless, and even a little cruel when he and his brother faced off.

Gregor never let Sandor gain the upper hand, never let him see his weaknesses, never let him win if he could help it. On a couple occasions, he had even gone so far as to humiliate Sandor.

He derived no joy or pleasure from those experiences. He did all that simply so Sandor would take their lessons seriously and remember that a true opponent would be just as ferocious, if not more so.

Oftentimes, Sandor became furious or resentful of his brother for treating him so harshly, but he always reminded himself afterward that his brother just wanted to sculpt him into an ideal warrior.

Up until now, Gregor was fairly confident that he had managed to do just that. Now he was having some doubts, as Sandor was demonstrating a near-total disregard for his teachings.

The sixth and final round began. This one lasted longer than any of the previous five, but it had the most unpleasant ending. For Sandor, that is.

First, Gregor struck his brother behind the knees with the flat of his sword. Then he kicked his legs out from under him and shoved him onto the ground. Once Sandor was on the ground, Gregor grabbed him by the throat and forced him to stay there. Then he slowly brought his sword into the air and plunged it downwards.

He stopped when the tip of the blade was less than an inch away from Sandor's eye. Anyone else would have shrieked, squirmed, or fainted out of fear. Sandor did nothing more than blink. In fact, he looked as though he could not care less about losing. That was very uncharacteristic of him; he was usually very competitive about winning.

Gregor sneered, withdrew his sword, and rose to his feet. Then he held his hand out to his brother. After a moment's hesitation, Sandor grudgingly accepted it. Once he was back on his feet, the Mountain muttered bleakly "Sandor, in the past three minutes, I killed you six times. Had this been a real battle, you would not have lasted the first thirty seconds."

"So this was not one of my better days," Sandor said in a very sarcastic voice, picking up his own blade.

As the two brothers sheathed their swords, Gregor glared down at Sandor and stated critically "Did you forget everything I taught you while I was gone?"

"No," Sandor mumbled in annoyance, "But would it have mattered if I did? 'Cause I wouldn't have been the only one who forgot something important."
Now Gregor was confused. "What in the Seven Hells are you talking about?"

"Don't you remember?" Sandor responded crossly, "Nearly eight years ago, you opened my eyes up to the harshness of the world. You startled me at first. But then you comforted me and shared with me words of kindness. Words that have stayed with me ever since."

"Any specific words?" Gregor inquired.

"Yes, five in particular," Sandor informed him, "'I'll be there for you.' Those were your own words, and I'll never forget them. It seems you have, though."

"I have not," Gregor asserted, "I meant them then and I still do. Don't think I'm going back on them simply because I'm going away for a while. You can be there for someone without being there physically."

Sandor scoffed and spat angrily "Oh, don't give me that 'being there in spirit' shit."

"I won't," Gregor contended, "I'll still be there for you, Sandor. For you and everyone we loved. I'll be building a legacy for House Clegane. A legacy that you can be a part of."

"I don't care about any godsdamn legacy," Sandor claimed. His anger began to fade at this point. He let out a faint sigh and mumbled "Why did you have to kill Amory Lorch?"

"Because he would have killed Princess Elia," Gregor answered bluntly, "In that one act, he would have made us an enemy of Dorne. Instead, I've made them our ally."

"Was it worth making a potential enemy of Tywin Lannister?" Sandor snappily retorted.

"Yes," Gregor replied without any pause, "Lord Tywin may be the Lord Paramount of the Westerlands and the Warden of the West, but he is not infallible. He may see what I did as disobedience. I see it as the prevention of a huge mistake. He's just too pompous to admit it."

Sandor then looked around the area, and he cautioned his brother "Gregor, you should be careful about saying things like that out in the open. Lord Tywin's spies could be listening."

"What do I care?" Gregor said nonchalantly, "He's no longer my liege lord."

Sandor chuckled at that. By now, his anger appeared to have subsided. He gazed up at the Mountain and suggested hopefully "Can't I go with you?"

"Believe me; I'd love to take you with me," Gregor proclaimed, "If I could, I would. But it would be irresponsible of both of us. With me dispossessed, you're now Father's heir. You represent the future of this house. Aside from that, you're practically a man now. You must choose your own road in life."

Sandor spent a minute pondering on those statements. There was both wisdom and advice to be found in them. Both of which could be very useful if he heeded them. After a minute, he lightly shrugged and admitted "I suppose you're right."

"Of course I am," Gregor conceded, grinning. He placed a hand on his brother's shoulder and told him "I'm counting on you to manage the keep well in my absence. I expect it to be in a far better state when I come back."

"What if you never come back?" Sandor supposed.
"I will," Gregor proclaimed sternly.

"You don't know that," Sandor theorized, "For all we know, this could be goodbye."

"Yes, it could," Gregor acknowledged, "But goodbye doesn't mean forever."

*As David Gates would say.*

Although he had quoted a popular song from the late 1970s, that sentence seemed to have a soothing effect on Sandor. He finally yielded to his brother's logic, and he stated "You're right, Greg. I guess I spoke to soon. I'm probably just being negative."

"No, you're considering the worst," Gregor pointed out, "There's nothing wrong with having low expectations, but you'd do better to have high hopes while I'm away."

"I'll try," Sandor assured him, "Anything else I should keep in mind?"

"Yes," Gregor disclosed, "I want you to find a good marriage match for yourself. More importantly, find a good marriage match for Ellyn, too."

Sandor scoffed and bluntly remarked "Our sister is seven, Gregor."

"Our mother was seven once, too," Gregor reminded him.

Sandor scoffed again and rolled his eyes, saying "Somehow, I doubt Grandfather Lewys was already planning on marrying her off at that age."

"You know what I mean," Gregor sardonically stated, "Just find a decent husband for Ell when she's of age. You get a decent wife for yourself, too. Now that you're the future of this household, you'll need heirs of your own."

"I suppose I will," Sandor admitted. After a brief lapse of silence, he murmured "Alright, I will. So long as you do, too."

"Hmmm?" Gregor uttered, uncertain what his brother was implying.

"If you're starting another house up in the North, you'll need heirs, too," Sandor apprised him, "You shouldn't have any trouble finding someone to give you some. I hear women in the North fight alongside the men. You might end up wedding and bedding one of them."

"It's possible," Gregor alleged, "But let's not rush ahead of ourselves. I'll be all over Westeros these next several years. I'll meet many houses and their members. I'll become acquainted with plenty of highborn ladies. Whoever my bride turns out to be, she could come from anywhere in the Seven Kingdoms."

"No, I'd bet you your other thirteen thousand dragons that she'll be a Northwoman," Sandor hypothesized.

Sandor did not have the gold to match Gregor's, so that wager was meaningless. Besides, he was mostly just making a jape when he said that.

Still, unbeknownst to Gregor, Sandor's jape would turn out to be somewhat prophetic; the Mountain's future wife would indeed be from the North.
Chapter Notes

Note: For all you non-American readers, prepare for a short lesson on United States geography. By the way, this chapter and a few of the ones after it are going to witness a number of time-jumps. But it won't just be a summarization of events, I assure you.

By the way, I've got a lot going on with graduate school this week. I've got a midterm in two of my classes on Thursday and Friday, and I've got a project report in the third one due on Monday. I'll be fairly busy with all that, so it's possible I will not be able to update for a week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gregory Welch was born in Seattle; the eldest of five children. He and all his siblings had been raised there for the entirety of childhood.

Neither of his parents was a native of Washington. They had moved there shortly before Gregory was born. Most of his father's family was from Michigan, and most of his mother's family was from New York. A couple times each year, he and his family had gone out-of-state to visit some of those relatives.

Despite those traditional semi-annual vacations, Gregory had never been anywhere south of Nebraska until after he turned eighteen. In all that time, Seattle had been his only true home.

Similarly, Gregor Clegane had rarely ever left the Westerlands before his eighteenth name day. His first notable exceptions were his recent journeys through the Crownlands and Dorne.

That reflected one of the events of his previous life in more than one way. For his college education, Gregory earned a full scholarship to the University of Texas at Austin. He subsequently moved to central Texas and lived there for the next four years.

As for his studies, his major was in Criminal Justice – Law Enforcement, and he minored in Psychology.

For all his life, he had been driven by a strong sense of morality and a desire to work for the greater good. Growing up, he had always imagined himself holding a job that involved upholding harmony and security in the country. That was what primarily led him to apply to the CIA. He had sent in his application the year before he graduated college.

The process of applying to the CIA was a long, exhaustive, and somewhat tedious one. The interviews, background check, and personality tests proved to be especially trying. But Gregory felt they all paid off when he finally received a phone call from a CIA recruiter, informing him that his application had been approved. After he earned his Bachelor's Degree at UT Austin, Gregory moved once more. This time he relocated to Virginia, where the CIA headquarters was situated.

The shortest route from Austin to Fairfax went almost directly northeast. It took less than two hours to get there by airplane.
The route between Clegane's Keep and Moat Cailin also went northeast. Interestingly, the distance between those holdfasts was substantially smaller than the distance between Austin and Fairfax. Unfortunately, travelling by air was not an option.

Plus, the straightest path went directly through a swamp. There was no telling what could happen in there, even if the crannogmen offered safe passage.

The best method of travel was to go by horse. So getting from the keep to the moat was actually much more time-consuming.

The move to Moat Cailin took the Mountain and his company nearly a month to accomplish. The easiest part of the journey was definitely the first stage, when they rode through the Westerlands. They knew those lands, after all. Once they entered the Riverlands, the going was considerably slower.

As Gregor recalled, relations between the Westerlords and the Riverlords were fragile, even before the War of the Five Kings. As such, Gregor saw the most ideal course as the one that involved as little contact as possible with the locals. So he and his convoy steered clear of all villages, holdfasts, and castles in the Riverlands.

Gregor was especially careful to avoid the Crossing. He had no desire to go anywhere near the Twins, if he could help it. Instead, he searched for the narrowest, shallowest part of the Green Fork. Once he did, he and his company forded the river. That took much longer than it would have to simply use a bridge, but to Gregor, the extra effort was worth it. Just being that close to Walder Frey and his den of weasels made him feel unclean.

Anyway, once Gregor and his men were assembled on the eastern shores of the Green Fork, they went almost directly northward. The terrain was just as alien to them, but there were fewer settlements in the northern part of the Riverlands. So they did not have to alter their course as often.

What none of them – not even Gregor – had anticipated was the sudden drop in temperature.

Having grown up in the northern half of the United States, Gregor was accustomed to cold weather. However, Seattle was a relatively temperate city. Winters and summers were both typically bearable. It had generally been the same in Austin and Fairfax.

The moment he crossed over into the Neck, Gregor could literally feel the change in climate. His companions could, as well.

"Gods, it's fookin' cold," Dunsen mumbled, tightening his cloak.

"Oh, it gets better," Rafford muttered sarcastically, "From what I hear, this is normal for summer."

"So that's why the Starks' words are 'winter is coming,'" Tobbot muttered.

That's ONE of the reasons. What are they complaining about, anyway? It can't be less than fifty-five degrees right now.

"Get used to it, boys," Gregor advised his men, "Remember we're here on the King's business."

"That's all well and good, Ser," Chiswyck proclaimed, "So long as the King don't mean for us to freeze our balls off."

"Well, don't take 'em out as often," Gregor cheekily proposed, "If you can help yourself, that is."
The other men-at-arms got a good laugh at the jest. Chiswyck laughed with them, even though it was made at his expense. After that, no one said anything else about the frigid weather for the duration of the trek.

All of Gregor's men-at-arms had accompanied him on his march north. They had never officially sworn to serve House Clegane; they had sworn to serve Gregor. Wherever he went, they would follow. They composed half of his retinue.

The other half was composed of former retainers of House Clegane. Ser Tarrence had ordered fifty of his servants to join Gregor. Among them were Sylas Vikary and Erryk Ruttiger. They would be serving as the new steward and castellan of Moat Cailin respectively.

The Citadel would later assign a maester to Moat Cailin, and Gregor would worry about finding a master-at-arms once the moat had been restored. Apart from the fact that they were longtime friends of his father, that was the foremost reason why Maester Velix and Ser Wallis Peckledon were not going with Gregor.

Ser Tarrence Clegane would be able to replace all his lost servants easily, now that he had seven thousand golden dragons reserved for the benefit of Clegane's Keep.

The last stage of the journey was spent traversing the Neck. Gregor's entourage was surrounded by the swamps on the east and the west for that entire interval. They had to be mindful of their step and their fresh water supply; the bogs began on both edges of the Kingsroad.

Due to the lack of dry land, they were forced to camp on the Causeway every night that week. To their good fortune, they encountered no other parties from either north or south. At the very least, they were spared the burdens of traffic.

At long last, the company made it through the Neck. Once they reached the end of the Causeway, they saw Moat Cailin for the first time.

Gregor felt a number of mixed emotions at that moment. While he was awestruck by the moat's size and structure, he was shocked by its current state of decay. It was not hard to believe that the moat had not been steadily inhabited for over a century.

Still, Moat Cailin was a magnificent fortress to behold. Or rather, it would be, once it was restored. There was no telling how long that would take, but Gregor was confident it could be done.

His companions did not seem to share his optimism. They took one look at the shabby condition of the moat and frowned.

"That's it?" Polliver murmured, as though he was disgusted.

"A shithole if I ever saw one," Shitmouth eloquently observed.

"No wonder the King gave you all that money, my lord," Erryk Ruttiger contended, "He knew he'd have to pay you to take this fortress."

"Maybe, Erryk," said Gregor, humoring his associate, "Or, one could argue, he gave me the money to improve it. Like or not, gentlemen, this is our new home. Don't be so quick to judge it. It's kept the North safe for thousands of years. Now, under our care, it will be used to protect the whole of the realm."

"Careful not to set your expectations too high, my lord," Sylas Vikary cautioned the massive knight.
Gregor slowly turned to the older man and gazed down at him. He spoke calmly "I am going to say this once, Sylas: I would never strive to complete a goal that I knew to be impossible. If I declare that this fortress will be used for the good of all Westeros, it will be."

Sylas Vikary meekly nodded his head and stared at the ground. He uttered quietly "Indeed. I beseech your pardon."

"You needn't my forgiveness," Gregor asserted, "I have need of your faith, however. In the years to come, I will need you and Erryk and everyone else who came north with me."

"And you shall have us, Ser," Polliver declared, suddenly brightening up.

"All of us," Erryk Ruttiger conceded. All along the column, there were strong mutters of agreement. Even the most dubious of them were convinced that Gregor knew what he was doing. The Mountain had to grin at how willing his companions were to trust in him. Soon enough, he would prove that their trust was well-founded.

"Let's press on," Gregor firmly pronounced, "We've got work to do."

And we've only got twenty years to do it.

According to legend, there had once been as many as twenty towers in Moat Cailin. Although the Children's Tower, the Gatehouse Tower, and the Drunkard's Tower were the only three remaining, they were still sufficient to ascertain that the moat was impenetrable from the south.

However, Gregor wanted the defenses to be more than "sufficient," and he wanted to guarantee that the moat would be impregnable from the north, as well. Not that he mistrusted the Northmen or the Free Folk. The greatest danger to ever befall Westeros would originate from the North, but it would not be posed by either of them.

The first six months of Gregor's occupation of Moat Cailin were mostly devoted to making long-term preparations. His thirteen thousand gold dragons saw a lot of usage in that time frame.

Their first use was an investment. After settling into the moat, Gregor commissioned a team of Essosi architects to sail across the Narrow Sea and rebuild it. Of course, it took time for them to arrive. Gregor spent that time devising a comprehensive outline of the refurbishments he had in mind.

He also took that time to organize his plans to carry out his duties as Master of Order.

His goal to unite Westeros would be a difficult one. Back home, such an objective would have been attained through negotiation and diplomacy. Here, in this hazardous and unpredictable world, they were inadequate. Even if Gregor somehow managed to get the Lords Paramount to sit down at a table and parley, none of them – not even the Starks – could speak for all of their vassals. In this world, peace could never be reached without bloodshed.

Be that as it may, this was not entirely a disadvantage. There was one thing that every house in the realm desired: safety. They were all willing to fight to ensure the survival of their families. If the situation called for it, they would go so far as to ally with their enemies to purge a common danger. Even if the alliance was only temporary, it was still legitimate.

Gregor could use that to bring everyone together. He would not be able to tell the realm about the Long Night (at least not yet), but he could inspire in its people the notion of fighting for a higher cause. One that transcended any of their old rivalries. If he could do that, he would have the opportunity to create one of the grandest fighting forces in the known world.
That was his plan. Gregor was going to build an army. An army comprised of warriors from all over Westeros. Its composition would include Northmen, Riverlords, Valemen, Ironborn, Stormlords, Westerlords, Reachmen, Dornishmen, and Crownlords alike. In time, perhaps it would also receive some members from Essos, or even the Free Folk.

He would begin the formation of that army very soon. Westeros was currently in a volatile state. Its inhabitants were still recovering from Robert's Rebellion. At this time, they would be willing to consider anything to avoid further loss. In other words, this would be the optimal time for Gregor to reach out to the Westerosi and start recruiting.

Unfortunately, when he first came to Moat Cailin, he lacked the items needed to communicate with the whole realm. Thankfully, that problem remedied itself a fortnight and a-half later. That was when the maester assigned to the moat arrived.

The maester was in his early thirties. His first name was Kennick. Before he gave up his family name, he had been a Hersy of the Vale. He was a first cousin to the current Lord of Newkeep. He became an acolyte of the Citadel at the age of fourteen. Now his maester's chain contained links of over a dozen different metals. He was more than amply qualified to counsel Gregor Clegane.

Gregor had requested enough ravens so that one could be dispatched to each stronghold in the country all at once. To some, that would seem rather unusual. Only King’s Landing ever had that many ravens, but even so, Robert granted his request.

When Maester Kennick arrived in Moat Cailin, he brought with him hundreds of ravens; one for every house in the Seven Kingdoms.

The journey from Oldtown to Moat Cailin had been an exhausting one. It was nearly twice the distance from Clegane's Keep to the moat. As such, Gregor allowed Maester Kennick a few hours to recuperate and become acquainted with the other residents of the moat. After that, the maester's services and his ravens' were put to use.

Maester Kennick had already been informed of Gregor's status on Robert's Small Council, as well as the responsibilities that went with it. Gregor summoned Kennick to his solar (which was located in the Gatehouse Tower), and he briefly explained his plan to create the most diverse army in the history of Westeros. The maester found his plan to be a risky one, but a credible one all the same.

Gregor had Maester Kennick draft a letter that would be sent out to every house in the realm. He dictated to him the following:

"Our King, Robert Baratheon, First of His Name, has named me, Gregor of House Clegane, as his Master of Order.

Those of who wonder on that title's meaning have a right to. The office was founded very recently.

Simply put, I am now the foremost upholder of armistice, enforcement, and justice in Westeros. The King has charged me with ensuring peace, security, and tranquility throughout his reign.

In these troubled times, I believe I am right to assume that there are others who wish for no further tragedy to fall on this country. There are even those who would do anything to protect their own. Those are the ones this message is meant for.

I ask you: what is more peaceful, secure, and tranquil than a country whose inhabitants cooperate to guarantee its endurance?

I say there is no such thing. As Master of Order, I aim to prove that."
I shall see to the establishment of a private legion of soldiers. This legion will not be founded on any bias. Rivalries and prejudices of all types will be set aside for the well-being of Westeros. Its units will fight alongside each other to rid Westeros of its afflictions.

This company will be known as the Legion without Banners.

Whether you are of the North, the Vale, the Iron Islands, the Stormlands, Dorne, the Westerlands, the Reach, the Crownlands, or the Riverlands, you have the option to join the Legion. It will be akin to the Night's Watch in that respect.

But whereas the Night's Watch guards the realms of men, this army shall protect those realms more directly. Furthermore, any person who joins the Legion will not be expected to serve for life; only as long as they wish to.

Any person who desires to join the Legion need only come to Moat Cailin and enlist. It matters not whether you are highborn or lowborn; whether you are a bastard or legitimate; whether you are green or hardened. So long as you can prove your usefulness somehow, you are welcome here.

Anyone who has committed a crime or intends to, do not think of the Legion as an alternative to taking the black. The whole purpose of its existence is to hunt down and capture people like you. Unless you have been pardoned by the King or the individual you have wronged, no criminals will be granted quarter or entry.

For the ambitious ones who require more of an incentive, there is more to be gained in the Legion than the fulfillment of one's sense of duty. Those of you in pursuit of money have the ability to become rich. Those of you who desire glory have the option to become famous. Those of you who yearn for adventure have the chance to become great.

Whatever your case, once you join the Legion, your first and only true responsibility is to make this country better. So I appeal to your love for your homeland and your obligation to do what is just. Fight with me so that future generations will be spared further conflict.

Gregor Clegane, Lord of Moat Cailin, Master of Order.

None of that was thought up on the spot. Not wanting to make any revisions, Gregor had decided what he was going to say well in advance. All the same, it took Kennick over five minutes to write that letter.

Once the maester was finished, Gregor took up the letter and examined it. He tried to imagine how it would appear to the lords and knights of the Seven Kingdoms. It was meant as a summons, albeit an optional one. He could actually see himself answering this summons of his own free will. After all, he had joined the CIA without any encouragement. The Legion without Banners would have a lot more freedoms than the CIA ever did, and the people of Westeros has simpler needs to satisfy.

Given how many houses there were in the Seven Kingdoms, it would take Kennick days to compose a letter to all of them. So Gregor ordered every one of his retainers who could write to assist him. That only accounted for about forty of them out of a hundred. Still, the process went by forty times faster. By twilight that same day, all the letters had been written.

Immediately after, the ravens were dispatched. There was nothing more to do at that point but wait for responses.

He thought the "Legion without Banners" was a clever designation. He thought about sticking with "Brotherhood," but that term did not effectively emphasize the full scope of his intended army.
Plus, it would be a little TOO ironic when considering the reason why the original Brotherhood without Banners had been formed.

While waiting for the Essosi architects and replies to the ravens, Gregor received news on various events. These were events that had occurred in canon.

Near the start of the next year, Queen Rhaella Targaryen had died birthing her last child, Daenerys Targaryen. Not long after, Stannis Baratheon launched an assault on Dragonstone. He succeeded in seizing the island fortress, but Ser Willem Darry managed to flee across the Narrow Sea with Prince Viserys and Princess Daenerys in his custody.

Gregor had not forgotten about any of those affairs. Even so, he had done nothing to alter or prevent them. Then again, he was never in a position to effect much change. Although Dragonstone was relatively close to King's Landing, the ships loyal to the Targaryens would never have allowed him near the fortress.

Aside from that, Gregor was inclined not to interfere in Dany's storyline for the present. He did not wish to subject Dany to the torment of her brother, but he had to ensure that the dragons would be born. After all, the dragons would be instrumental in the Long Night. Maybe Khal Drogo would not have to die in order for their eggs to hatch. Maybe Dany would not even have to meet Khal Drogo. Still, Gregor had no way of knowing where Illyrio Mopatis was storing the eggs, or if he even had them at this time. Until Gregor found out where they were, he would have to wait until the Magister presented the eggs to Dany at her wedding.

Still, if he found a way to aid Daenerys in some minor capacity, he would do so. The dragons would be quintessential to his plan. Perhaps once Jon, Rhaenys, and Aegon were of age, they would be able to go after Daenerys.

There was also Robert Baratheon's wedding to Cersei Lannister. Gregor had been given an invitation to attend that event, but he respectfully declined, claiming that he was far too busy with other matters. To his good fortune, Robert was very understanding, and he accepted Gregor's reasons for refusal.

According to what he heard of the royal wedding, King Robert had remained surprisingly sober throughout the ceremony and the feast. By the bedding, he had only had two cups of wine. One of which he had not even emptied.

The bedding ceremony was particularly memorable. The unfortunate guards posted outside the bedchamber could hear everything that went on inside.

In fact, Robert Baratheon could be heard yelling "Cersei" all the way from the Tower of the Hand. Lord Jon Arryn could attest to that.

If what Gregor heard was true, King Robert and Queen Cersei were smitten with each other.

That could have been interpreted as merely the elation typically experienced by newlyweds, but it was a hopeful sign. Maybe the marriage between Robert and Cersei would actually work out. They were already showing more affection to each other than they ever had in canon.

Not long after the Royal Wedding, the first volunteer for the Legion without Banners appeared in Moat Cailin. Interestingly, it was Gerion Lannister, youngest brother to Lord Tywin.

That came as a pleasant surprise to Gregor. He greeted Gerion warmly. He was glad to know that he had not lost face with all the Lannisters. Based on the books, he had been Jaime and Tyrion's
favorite uncle, and by far the most equitable of Tytos Lannister's brood.

A few days after Gerion arrived, the Essosi architects got to Moat Cailin, as well. Gregor presented them with the outline he had drawn up for the moat's renovations.

The architects followed his outline almost flawlessly.

They drained part of the swamp and built a canal so that passage between Moat Cailin and the Narrow Sea was possible. They also built a harbor just outside the moat. The canal began in that harbor, and it ran all the way to the Bite, just a few leagues southwest of White Harbor. The primary purposes of the canal would be to transport supplies and provisions to the moat, and to enable the Legion to travel by sea when they had to.

The harbor was large enough to station over a score vessels. In order to uphold the moat's defensive capabilities, the canal was made very thin; even if an entire armada tried to lay siege to Moat Cailin, they would have to enter the canal one at a time. There was also an iron gate at the entrance of the canal that could only be opened from the inside. Those precautions and the swamp's exploitable surroundings would make sinking invading ships fairly easy to do.

The architects also built an aqueduct so that fresh water was more readily available. That would be critical, based on how large he expected the Legion would ultimately become.

Additionally, the walls were reinforced, the towers were strengthened, and the gates were reconstructed. By the end of those six months, Moat Cailin truly was a magnificent sight to behold.

Even after Moat Cailin was restored, Gregor had the architects stay on for future developments he had planned. They were willing to remain in Westeros, so long as he had work for them.

Gregor's forces had also gotten larger in that time. The Legion without Banners was up to eighty recruits.

So far, no one from the Iron Islands or the Crownlands had signed up. Apart from Gerion, only a couple Westerlanders had showed up. A handful of people from the Vale, the Riverlands, and the Stormlands had enlisted. The Reach and Dorne had a slightly larger turnout. More volunteers came from the North than any other region by far. That was probably due to how Eddard Stark had vouched for Gregor.

There was one other change Gregor made: his sigil.

His father and the future Cleganes of Clegane's Keep would keep the original sigil of the three hounds. Gregor needed a new sigil for the Cleganes of Moat Cailin.

For the new sigil, Gregor adapted the illustration of a mountain with nine small figures at its base. The mountain, obviously, represented him. The nine small figures were supposed to represent one person from each of the regions of Westeros. They were a symbol of what was to come. He did not explain that bit to anyone else, but they were free to guess.

The first two years of Gregor's tenure as lord of Moat Cailin were mostly uneventful. The Legion without Banners was called upon often enough, but their errands were generally composed of little more than hunting down bandits, rogue lawbreakers, and the occasional band of outlaws.

Overtime, however, the crime rate in Westeros steadily rose. Gregor saw that as a sign that things would get worse before he and his soldiers could make them better. Strangely, he felt relieved. That implied he would have plenty of opportunities to demonstrate the Legion's aptitude. The more opportunities he used, the greater impact he would leave on Westeros.
In the third year after Gregor assumed lordship of Moat Cailin, a lone rider approached the moat from the north. The rider was hooded and cloaked. When the rider reached the gate, the guardsman called out "Who goes there?"

The rider declared in a deceptively deep voice "I would have words with your lord."

"Whatever message you have, I can relay to him," the guardsman claimed.

"I would prefer to speak to him face-to-face," the rider rejoined, "I will not waste his time, I promise you."

The guardsman stood thinking on what to do for a moment. Then he told the rider "I will send for him. I cannot guarantee he will come straightaway, though."

"I can wait," the rider asserted.

At that time, Gregor had been conversing with his council, which was composed of Sylas Vikary, Maester Kennick, Erryk Ruttiger, and Rodrik Cassel.

Since Rodrik's brother had not perished in Dorne in this universe, Martyn now served as Winterfell's master-at-arms instead. That gave Rodrik the freedom to join the Legion without Banners. Now he also served as Moat Cailin's master-at-arms.

The council was just finishing a meeting when the guardsman sent a servant to find Gregor. Right before they exited Gregor's solar, the servant entered the room and informed the Mountain that a rider with a concealed face was at the northern gate, and this rider desired to speak with him directly.

Gregor had nothing of immediate precedence on his agenda, so he decided he could spare a few minutes to interact with this mysterious rider. The members of his council accompanied him.

By the time they reached the northern gate, the doors had been opened and the portcullis had been raised. Gregor gradually passed the threshold of the gate. He did not stop walking until he was less than ten feet from the rider.

He noticed very quickly that the rider's head was higher than his. That did not happen often, even when the other party was mounted. He also noticed that the figure had a very slender figure, although the chest was exceptionally pronounced.

Gregor folded his arms and asked rhetorically "You asked for me?"

"Yes, my lord," the rider replied in the same false, deep voice, "I'm here to offer you my services."

Gregor lightly shrugged and stated "There's plenty of work to be found here. But might I see your face first?"

The rider promptly took ahold of the hood and threw it back.

Immediately, Gregor discovered why the figure was so slender. Behind that hood was not a man's face, but a woman's. Actually, "woman" may have been a stretch. The rider was more a girl. Judging by her countenance, she had to be in her teens.

Then again, she may have been a girl, but she did have a womanly figure. She was tall, she was
strapping, and her form was rather curvaceous. She had black hair that went down to her shoulders. Her face was a little long, but it complemented her physique nicely.

"You've come a long way to serve as a kitchen wench," Erryk Ruttiger japed.

Sylas Vikary snickered at that. Maester Kennick lightly rolled his eyes and Rodrik Cassel glared at the castellan. Gregor simply ignored him.

"I'm not here to work in the kitchens, ser," the female rider stated bluntly, "I'm here to enlist in the Legion."

That surprised everyone there except Ser Rodrik Cassel and Gregor Clegane. As a Northman, Ser Rodrik was used to the concept of warrior women. The Mountain had been looking forward to having some women enlist in his army.

He was actually surprised that it had not happened sooner. Especially when considering that a larger percentage of his numbers came from the North than anywhere else in the Seven Kingdoms.

Although no women had joined the Legion yet, Gregor had never doubted for a moment that some eventually would. Now, one finally had.

After a bit of silence, Gregor stepped forward, gave a nod of his head, and stated "Very well, my lady."

While the expression on the rider's face suggested that she had fully expected to be welcomed into Gregor's army, she seemed a little stunned by how readily accepting he was. She cocked her head and said assumingly "You have no objections to a woman serving in the Legion?"

"Of course not," Gregor professed, "It is well known that the Legion does not discriminate on basis of status, age, reputation, birth, or religious beliefs. There is no reason why we should discriminate on basis of gender, either."

"Fine argument, my lord," the rider admitted, giving a shrug of her shoulders.

Gregor smiled at her, held his hand out to the gate, and bade her "Come, please."

The rider grinned back and urged her horse forward. She followed the Mountain back through the gate. After the portcullis was lowered and the doors were shut, Gregor led her over to the stables.

As the stableboys took charge of her horse, she dismounted. When she was on her feet, Gregor realized just how tall she really was.

He had initially supposed that she simply appeared that tall whilst mounted. Perhaps she had been sitting on a blanket or two.

As it turned out, she had not. There was nothing on her horse's back other than its saddle. So her height had not been embellished. It was all her.

On foot, she still had to look up at Gregor. Of course, everyone else did. But they would probably have to look up at this girl, as well. She was over six feet tall. She had to be the tallest female he had ever seen, and one of the five tallest people he had ever seen.

He was surprised even further when the girl opened her cloak, revealing her surcoat. Emblazoned on it was her sigil: a bear standing on its hind legs with its teeth and fangs bared. Furthermore, the girl's cloak and clothes were predominantly green.
Right then, Gregor knew who was standing before him. He stated assumingly "You're from Bear Island?"

"Yes, ser," the tall girl answered, turning back to Gregor, "My name is Dacey Mormont."

She then extended her hand to the Mountain. He grasped it, shook it firmly, and told her warmly "Welcome to the Legion, Lady Dacey."

Chapter End Notes

Note: So, any guesses on who the future Lady Clegane of Moat Cailin will be? Heh heh heh...

I've gotten a lot of remarks about the possibility of a romance between Sandor and Sansa developing in this story. Some people are highly for it; some are firmly against it. Truth be told, I'm pretty indifferent to that pairing. I don't particularly adore it, but I certainly don't detest it, either. I know I can never appease everyone, but I try to appease as many people as possible. So I'm going to ask; how many of you would prefer it if I incorporated San/San, and how many of you would prefer if I avoided using it? I'll keep another tally, and regardless of the vote, I'm alright with either option.
Gregory Welch had gone back to his hometown of Seattle a few times after he joined the CIA, but for the last six years of his first life, his officially town of residence was Fairfax.

Then again, he had only spent about twenty-three months of that time in Virginia. For the remaining forty-nine he was elsewhere.

During his days as a Special Agent, Gregory had been all over the United States. At some point or other, he had visited all fifty of them, including Alaska and Hawaii. He had also been in Mexico, Canada, and several countries in Europe and Asia. He rarely stayed in any one place for very long. Oftentimes he felt like a nomad. Even so, he enjoyed the lifestyle. Although the main reason for the traveling was to solve the problems of others, they did not come without recompense. He got to see more of the world and have his own adventures on the sideline.

That was why he formed the Legion without Banners as he did. His frequent travels around Westeros had the same purpose as his operations in the CIA, and they came with the same benefits. He was able to protect the realm and fulfill his thirst for adventure simultaneously.

Reading about Westeros was one thing. It was entirely another to see it firsthand. In the span of its 2,000-plus miles, there were glaciers, mountains, swamps, grasslands, forests, and deserts. All those landscapes could be found in the United States, too, of course, but not all in such a small distance.

Gregor was aware that the terrain of the Seven Kingdoms was supposed to be modelled after that of Ireland, and that the terrain of the Free Cities and Slaver's Bay was modelled after England and Scotland. He had been to all three countries as Gregory Welch, and he could verify firsthand that the sizes and shapes were the only things they really had in common with Westeros and Essos.

Still, despite the other dissimilarities, he had to appreciate this world. It was huge, it was exhilarating, it was gorgeous, and it was breathtaking.

The same could be said for the first female member of the Legion without Banners.

Dacey Mormont became accustomed to the Legion with little difficulty. That was not to say Gregor's decision to recruit her had faced no disapproval. Of course, he had anticipated that.

In this male-dominated society, the concept of a person wielding a sword without having been born with one did not sit well with many men. That did not bother Dacey in the slightest. After all, Gregor himself authorized her entry. With his approval, no one could reject her. That did not prevent them from voicing their opinions, though.
The Northmen and the Dornishmen presented no opposition whatsoever to Dacey's enrollment. The Valemen, the Ironborn, the Stormlords, and the Riverlords only put up a little protest. The Westerlords, the Crownlords, and the Reachmen were the most vocally opposed. Some went so far as to challenge her competency with a blade. That was a grave error on their part.

They did not provoke Dacey into lashing out, but they did encourage her to challenge their skills in turn. She managed to defeat Robert Brax, Godry Farring, and Axel Florent in a three-on-one duel. After that, overall opinion of Dacey's participation in the Legion was strongly directed in her favor.

There were still some men who did not acquiesce with her being among them. At the very least, all the men respected her now. Dacey and Gregor were pleased by that.

That was the beginning of something grand.

Dacey demonstrated her abilities many times over in the Legion. She was deadly with any weapon, be it axe, sword, or any blunt object. She could kill a man as easily as charm him, and she was a superb rider. After just three months of service, she became one of Gregor's top lieutenants.

Through her actions, Dacey became an inspiration to women all over Westeros. Her involvement in the Legion incited many other women to enter in the Legion, as well.

Two of them were Obara Sand and Nymeria Sand, Oberyn Martell's eldest bastards. Interestingly, the Red Viper himself enlisted alongside his daughters.

Given how daring, venturesome, and infamously impulsive Oberyn was, Gregor was hardly surprised that the Dornish prince opted to partake in the largest free company west of the Narrow Sea. Gregor vaguely recalled reading somewhere that Oberyn had once served in one of the free companies of Essos. Most likely the Second Sons, seeing as how he was a second son by birth. The Red Viper was always one to add a touch of irony in things.

On the subject of irony, Gregor formed a quite unexpected friendship with Doran Martell's younger brother whilst the latter was in the Legion.

In the original universe, Oberyn Martell would have died (and did) for the chance to slaughter the Mountain. Of course, he had done that because the original Gregor Clegane had brutally assaulted and murdered Elia Martell and her children. Since the Gregor Clegane who had once been Gregory Welch had risked everything to save Oberyn's sister, niece, and nephew, Oberyn harbored no hostile feelings towards the massive knight. They would not be fighting a skirmish to the death anytime soon.

Still, Gregor wondered who would actually win in a fight: him or Oberyn? He was the younger by seven years, and he was also far larger and stronger. All the same, Oberyn was quicker, more agile, and adept with just about any weapon. All factors considered, both men stood an equal chance of besting the other.

Gregor decided not to risk finding out the hard way who was the better warrior. Not if he could help it, at any rate. If Oberyn offered to spar with him, Gregor would not refuse him. But only out of courtesy and to test his own skills. However, he partly hoped that Oberyn would not suggest a duel. Much of Gregor's influence was attributed to the belief that he was unbeatable. So long as that was the established norm, he would be recognized as a symbol of might and awe.

With that in mind, it would not do well if the soldiers of the Legion discovered that their reportedly indestructible leader could be knocked on his back by an older man who stood two feet shorter than him.
To Gregor's good fortune, aside from their friendly bouts in Moat Cailin's training yard, Oberyn never asked to spar with him. However, the Red Viper did express some interest in getting Gregor on his back in another sense of the term.

By this point in time, Ellaria Sand had already become Oberyn's paramour. She had accompanied the Red Viper on his journey north. When she arrived at Moat Cailin, she was riding near the front of Oberyn's company. She was ahorse at the time, but she only held her gelding's reins in one hand. In the other, she had been cradling an infant girl close to her chest. That was her and Oberyn's first daughter, Elia Sand.

Ellaria had not come to sign up in the Legion; she was just there in "service" to the prince. She tended to provide those services to him quite often. Several times a day, matter of fact.

It was worth noting that apart from the canal and the harbor, several new buildings had been built around Moat Cailin. They included a sept for those in the Legion that worshipped the New Gods, a vault for all the revenue the Legion had earned from their endeavors, a library for those who desired to further their knowledge of the world, a couple inns for anyone passing through the area, a small village for those of the Legion whose families had come with them, and a brothel... for those who needed some respite after an assignment.

Oberyn and Ellaria tended to spend much of their leisure time in the brothel. Within a month of their arrival, Gregor was certain they had sampled every gigolo and whore in that establishment. After that, they broadened their horizons.

There were plenty of soldiers in the Legion that were willing to bed Oberyn's paramour. However, Ellaria only accepted those of them that would accept Oberyn, as well. While that criterion severely limited their options, the two of them managed to find at least one man from each of the nine regions of Westeros who enjoyed intimate company with both sexes.

There were even a few whose interests were exclusively in Oberyn. One of them was Ser Lyn Corbray. Despite the fact that Ser Lyn had killed Oberyn's uncle, Ser Lewyn Martell of Aerys' Kingsguard, at the Battle of the Trident, the Valeman and the Dornishman got along famously. It appeared as though the Red Viper did not hold a grudge without justifiable foundation.

At any rate, while Gregor and Oberyn had a great friendship with each other, there were times when the latter vied for it to become more than that. Oberyn still did not propose a duel between them. However, every now and then, when they were alone together, Oberyn put forth the idea that he and Gregor could test each other's prowess in a less physical but equally invigorating manner.

Oberyn assured him the affair would be behind closed doors. The level of secrecy did little to sway Gregor's mind, but Oberyn was persistent. He was subtle about it at first. Then his motto may as well have been "subtlety be damned."

Gregor tried to decline his proposition as gently as possible, but Oberyn did not seem willing to accept refusal. Oberyn argued that it would simply be a new type of experience. Gregor countered by claiming that he had never been stabbed in his life, but if he ever had to get stabbed, he preferred that it would be with a knife first.

Ultimately, Oberyn agreed to respect Gregor's wishes, and he ceased his efforts to seduce the massive knight. All the same, he informed Gregor that should he ever change his mind, the Red Viper would be more than pleased to acquaint him with a form of pleasure he had not yet experienced.

Then again, Gregor Clegane's experiences with the traditional form of pleasure were not many,
either.

He did not even know whether or not he was a virgin.

Gregory Welch had not been a ladies' man, but he had slept with half a dozen women. He actually lost his virginity when he was in his freshman year of college. He was not even nineteen when that happened.

Gregor Clegane was now past his twenty-first name day. He had yet to caress a woman's bosom.

It was not as though he was blind to the charms and appeal of the opposite sex. He was too busy upholding law and order to get laid.

Or that was he told himself at least. It was probably just an excuse he had invented.

Still, all the talk about intimacy with Oberyn got Gregor to thinking about the future of his own romance life.

He wondered if he should begin to search for a wife. Most lords and their heirs at least had a marriage contract arranged for them by the time they reached his age.

His parents had considered betrothing him to Lady Alysanne Lefford. They never broached the subject with Lord Leo, though. He and his daughter belonged to the second wealthiest house in the Westerlands, as well as the holder of the largest portion of the Westerlords' fleet. An offer of marriage from a very young knightly house could have been viewed as an insult.

Ser Tarrence and Lady Daliah had investigated other prospective marriage contracts for their eldest child, but they rarely discussed them with him. That was primarily because he had been away from Clegane's Keep so often. Typically, he was out administering Lord Tywin Lannister's justice instead.

Now that Gregor had been cut off from his parents, the duty of finding a bride was left solely up to him.

Due in large part to his newfound fame and his noble reputation, he had a number of prospective candidates. Some would say he had too many. Be that as it may, picking one might not have been as hard as it seemed.

Gregor had noticed something peculiar. Beauty and strength were almost inversely proportional to each other with regards to Westerosi women. Nearly all of the most attractive and beautiful women in Westeros – such as Sansa, Cersei, and Daenerys – had no combat prowess whatsoever. Whereas all the tomboyish and strong warrior women – such as Arya, Brienne, Meera, and Asha – had absolutely no sex appeal.

There were some exceptions, of course. The first female member of the Legion was one.

Dacey Mormont was neither the most beautiful nor the strongest woman in the Seven Kingdoms. But she possessed a wondrous combination of both qualities.

Gregor was not so shallow as to believe that splendor and vigor were the only things that mattered in a woman. His parents in both of his lives had raised him better than that.

Strength and beauty were not Dacey's only positive attributes. She was also very quick-witted, and she was a brilliant tactician. She also had a broad sense of humor, which everyone enjoyed.
Gregor found that the more time he spent with the warrior woman, the more he appreciated her company. From what he could tell, she seemed to reciprocate those feelings.

After a while, he wondered if those feelings would develop into something more intimate.

Gregor knew he would have to marry someone at some point in time. In this world, the sooner he got wed, the better.

The main reason for all the haste was because every lord wished to ensure that his family line would endure. Considering how dangerous Westeros could be, they were obligated to begin making trueborn heirs as soon as possible. After all, they ran the risk of not being around long enough to do so.

While Gregor could understand the wish to continue one's lineage, he could have done without the ever-present demand to further it. Gregory Welch's parents had never pressured him for grandchildren. He had never been married or engaged. He did not even have time for a girlfriend during his years in the CIA.

Then again, he had grown up in a country that had almost never practiced arranged marriage. The only exceptions were when the ceremony coincided with one's religious beliefs. Here in Westeros, he would have to find a wife whether he wished to or not.

He knew that few arranged marriages involved love at the beginning, but all the same, Gregor would have preferred it if he and his future bride actually had some feelings of affection toward each other before they were bound together. Eddard Stark and Catelyn Tully had come to love each other. Under the right circumstances, Robert Baratheon and Cersei Lannister could, as well.

Currently, Gregor's relationship with Dacey was nothing more than a friendship. But it could certainly grow into something more.

From a political viewpoint, Dacey presented his best option. She could garner great respect and love from the other members of the Legion, she was capable of defending herself unaided, and she was very astute in matters of war and diplomacy.

Plus, House Mormont was one of Winterfell's most devoted vassals. A marriage between Gregor and Dacey could strengthen the bond between him and the Starks. That would be especially useful when the Long Night finally arrived.

Their most notable dissimilarity was the difference in age. At the time of their first meeting, Gregor was twenty-one, and Dacey was sixteen. In his first life, Gregory would never have dared to lay a hand on any female younger than eighteen. Not only because it was illegal, but also because it was immoral.

Whereas in Westeros, age of consent laws were practically nonexistent. Having lived in the country for two decades had somewhat lessened Gregor's rigid twenty-first century American views on the topic. He still thought it was disturbing that girls were deemed of eligible as soon as they had their moon's blood for the first time. One of his sisters had gotten her first period when she was only eleven.

In any case, Gregor would take his time in his pursuit of finding a bride. He would also keep his options open until he was more certain about his relationship with Dacey. He would wait a while before he even mentioned the concept of marriage to her. He would hate to address it too soon. He could handle rejection, but not when it ruined a perfectly healthy friendship.
Furthermore, Gregor had greater concerns than getting hitched. His top priority was still his objective to unite Westeros.

By this point, he had already done a fair job of bringing the Seven Kingdoms together. The process was still in its preliminary stages, but he was witnessing some progress with every passing week.

As he anticipated, Gregor did encounter some setbacks. For instance, some in Westeros were more willing to bond than others. That was reflected in the ratios of the peoples who came to Moat Cailin.

Of the nine regions of Westeros, the Ironborn composed the smallest percentage of the Legion without Banners. So far, no one especially prominent from the Iron Islands had entered the organization. Most of them were bastards, peasants, and former thralls. There were some retainers from Houses Harlaw, Botley, and Goodbrother that had signed up, as well.

At first, Gregor was unfazed by the low turnout of the Ironborn. After all, based off the canon content in the franchise, they were basically a civilization (if you could call them civil) of people who thought themselves too good to enter an alliance. Robb had approached Balon Greyjoy with the offer of a coalition, and how did he reply? He all but said "fuck you" and attacked the North.

Gregor had often wondered why the rest of Westeros had not banded together to wipe out the Iron Islands. More to the point, how had the Ironborn even survived this long? They lived on a cluster of desolate rocks, they resorted to raiding rather than trade, and they were too proud to form a friendship with any of the other cultures in Westeros. Even the masters of Slaver's Bay were not so reprehensible. While he did not condone genocide, Gregor personally believed that the Ironborn were a nuisance that the rest of Westeros could do without.

All the same, the Iron Islands could be useful in their own way. He was holding out hope that at least some of the Ironborn were wise enough to see the benefits of a united Westeros. Surely some of them had that much sense. Some of them must have been with honor.

It turned out they did. In the third year after the Legion without Banners was founded, there was an incident that even Gregor had not forecasted.

During the eighth month of that year, a lone ship sailed up the Cut (that was the name that had been given to the canal). When the on-duty lookout spotted the ship from afar, Gregor was promptly summoned to the gate.

From the top of the gate, the Mountain peered down the canal through a far-eye (that was what telescopes were called in this world), and he focused on the vessel as it approached.

Straightaway, he recognized it as an Ironborn ship. That was rather quaint. The Iron Islands were located off the western shores of Westeros. The Cut opened up onto one of the eastern banks. Any Ironman who wished to get to the canal would have had to either travel through the Riverlands or go all the way around the southern end of the continent.

Either route would have expended a great amount of time and resources. Whoever was currently traversing up the Cut must have been determined to reach Moat Cailin.

Gregor's eyes widened when they fell across the name printed on the side of the ship. It was the Iron Victory.

Victarion Greyjoy was coming. For what reason, Gregor could not fathom.
Gregor's council and the top officers of the Legion had joined him at the gate. They concentrated on the large vessel apprehensively, as well.

"What are your orders, my lord?" Ser Rodrik Cassel inquired.

Gregor stood thinking for a minute. Then he lowered the far-eye and proclaimed "When the ship nears… open the gate."

That command stunned several of the people present.

"My lord?" Gerion Lannister remarked, perplexed.

"Trust me, Gerion," Gregor asserted, "If Victarion intends to storm the moat, we can easily overpower him."

"Why even give him the opportunity?" Allard Seaworth, second son to Ser Davos, debated.

"Because I do not believe seizing Moat Cailin is his objective," Gregor observed, "If it was, he would have brought more than one vessel. However, as a precaution, we should account for the whereabouts of all the Legionnaires from the Iron Islands. Make a note of where they are, but do nothing to give the impression that something is aloof."

"It will be done, Ser," Polliver pronounced.

The Mountain's men-at-arms still tended to refer to him as "Ser," even though he had been a lord for over two years, and lords generally outranked knights in terms of status. There were some landed knights who stood higher than minor lords, but Gregor certainly was not a minor lord. Still, he allowed his men to continue addressing him by the title of "Ser."

Most of Gregor's companions went to locate their Ironborn colleagues and keep track of their movements. Oberyn Martell, Rodrik Cassel, Sylas Vikary, and Dacey Mormont were among those who remained with the Mountain.

When the *Iron Victory* reached the end of the canal, the gates were opened and it was granted entrance. Every person on the waterfront eyed the vessel warily as it came into the harbor. The entirety of the ship's crew was armed, but most of them did not have their weapons brandished.

The dockhands guided the ship into port. Once a gangplank was set up between the bridge of the *Iron Victory* and the closest dock, the vessel's captain and his senior officers swiftly disembarked onto the waterfront.

Gregor and his associates had already climbed down from the gate. They arrived on the dock at approximately the same moment as Victarion and his men. That was when he and Gregor met face-to-face for the first time.

Back when he was just a fan of the series, Gregor had thought of Victarion as the one Greyjoy who was even remotely likeable. Asha and Theon had their own redeeming characteristics, but apart from his traditional Ironborn ideals and the ruthless murder of his third wife, Victarion had nothing he had to redeem. He was only marginally more intelligent than Gregor's men-at-arms, but he commanded more authority and respect from his men than almost any other military leader in Westeros.

In terms of stature, Victarion was a brute of a man, just as the books entailed. He still stood nearly a head shorter than Gregor, but even Dacey had to tilt her head upwards at him.
One of the men standing next to Victarion had a gash in his face. It had opened his lips, rendering his front teeth visible, even when he closed his mouth. That must have been Dagmer Cleftjaw.

Gregor knew that Dagmer had served the Greyjoys for most of his life in the original universe, but he could not recall if the Cleftjaw had ever served under Victarion directly.

If he had not, then what reason could he have for being there with Victarion now?

Whatever Dagmer's reason, it must have been the same as Victarion's reason for coming in the first place.

The only way to find out the reason was to ask.

After an interval of intense silence, Gregor cordially declared "On behalf of Robert Baratheon and the Seven Kingdoms, I bid you welcome, Captain Victarion."

"Iron Captain Victarion," Dagmer Cleftjaw corrected him.

Victarion gestured for the Cleftjaw to hold his tongue, and then he turned to Gregor and pronounced "Your greetings are noted, but needless."

Evidently, Victarion was not one for Smalltalk. Gregor decided to cut right to the point. He folded his arms and inquired "What brings you to Moat Cailin? You're not here for conquest, I gather."

"If I was, you and I would be clashing steel right now," Victarion bluntly remarked, "As for why I'm here... why does anyone come here?"

Gregor could not tell if that was a rhetorical question or if it was an actual query. He raised an eyebrow and muttered "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me, Mountain," Victarion grimly mumbled. He looked around at Dacey, Oberyn, and Ser Rodrik, and he murmured "What reason do they have for being here?"

"They're members of the Legion without Banners," Gregor responded straightforwardly

"There you have it," Victarion said drily, "My men and I will soon join their ranks."

It was then that Gregor knew what was going on. "You plan to enlist in the Legion?"

"We're going to enlist in the Legion," Victarion contended.

"Lord Gregor has the final say on who enters this company," Dacey Mormont interjected.

"He would be a fool to reject us," Dagmer Cleftjaw gruffly observed, "Then again, he may be one already, if a woman must speak for him."

Oberyn looked disgusted by that slight, and Ser Rodrik grimaced angrily. Dacey merely scoffed. She had put up with sexism long enough that it no longer bothered her. Especially when it came from maritime savages like Dagmer Cleftjaw.

Gregor retained a calm facial expression, but he sternly stated "This 'woman' is one of my most trusted officers. She has fought by my side for months and never once has she let me down. On any given day, I would pick her over the lot of you."

"Then you are a fool," Victarion commented.
Gregor abruptly stepped forward, gripped Victarion by the clasp of his cloak, and pulled him closer. Dagmer and the other Ironborn reached for their swords, but before they could be drawn, they were surrounded on all sides by armed Legionnaires.

The Ironborn tentatively stood down, but they kept their hands around the hilts of their blades.

Gregor stared Victarion down intently. Then he mumbled crossly "I've heard it said that you'd beat a man to death for calling you a fool. I do not tolerate that sort of insolence here. But unlike you, I do not reassert my authority through killing. I am not one to hold a grudge, either. So I will allow you that one slight. But so long as you are here, you will treat me and your future colleagues with due respect. Understood?"

Although Victarion retained his scowl, he lightly nodded his head. Gregor then released him and stated wryly "Good. We just may get along, Iron Captain."

Gregor and his companions then led Victarion and his crew back to the moat. On their way there, Gregor came up with a few possible hypotheses on why the Iron Captain had chosen to enlist in the Legion without Banners. He was fairly certain it was not out of conscience. He doubted any Ironborn had ever done anything out of conscience.

He may have been drawn by the incentives Gregor had included in the first advertisement he had used to promote the Legion. Among them were wealth, fame, glory, and universal adoration. Those were practically the Ironmen's calling in life.

When Gregor, Victarion, and their associates got to the Mountain's solar, he discovered the Iron Captain's true motive.

Despite how dim-witted he was, Victarion was not blind to how the world saw him and his people. He was very much aware that most Westerosi hated the Ironborn. He saw the Legion as a unique opportunity for him to begin repairing his people's reputation.

Of course, there was no telling how much damage the Ironborn had inflicted over the ages. Some would say they had caused too much suffering. But Gregor was willing to give them a chance. After all, if he was going to unify Westeros, he would need others who shared similar interests.

So on that day, Victarion Greyjoy, Dagmer Cleftjaw, Nute the Barber, Longwater Pyke, Burton Humble, Rymolf Stormdrunk, Wulfe One-Ear, Tom Tidewood, Ragnor Pyke, Steffar Stammerer, and the rest of the crew of the Iron Victory became official members of the Legion without Banners.

At long last, the Iron Islands were adequately represented in the Legion.

Shortly after Victarion and his men became Legionnaires, Gregor began concentrating on some of his long-term plans.

So far, the primary reason he had been able to improve Westeros was because he had an advantage no one else possessed: he knew the actual timeline of the world.

Of course, his meddling in the affairs of the realm complicated matters. Gregor was not blind to the repercussions of his actions. He was well-aware that every change he inflicted – even the smallest – would yield vastly different changes in the outcome of the future.

Luckily, Gregor had the means to compensate for those changes. Those means could be found in his mind.
Gregory Welch's job at the Central Intelligence Agency had heavily involved scenario analysis. In other words, he was tasked with determining all the possible ways a situation might end, as well as subsequently devising appropriate strategies to counter or follow up on each outcome.

He was very proficient in that line of work. He could look at any dilemma – any dilemma – and envision all its possible endings in his head. If any unforeseen hindrances cropped up along the way, he could easily account for them as well and compensate for them.

Thanks to Gregor's interference thus far, Westeros was already turning into a better place. For the present, it was more or less at peace. But that peace would not be permanent. Sooner or later, some individuals who would shatter it for their own personal gain.

One of Gregor's top priorities was to deal with those individuals accordingly.

Like Arya Stark, the Mountain had compiled his own hit list (or shit list, considering the people on it). Several times a day, he thought the following:

*Petyr Baelish... Roose Bolton... Euron Greyjoy... Walder (and almost any other) Frey... Tywin Lannister... Janos Slynt... Ramsey Snow... Ludd Whitehill...*

He could handle Euron during the Ironborn Rebellion. He had planned on that, even before Victarion joined the Legion. Now that Victarion was on his side, his goal to kill the Crow's-Eye would be all the easier.

Ramsey, he could put down before he was even grown. That would be the only time in his life when he would have no qualms about killing a child. Once Ramsey was dead and Domeric Bolton's survival was guaranteed, Roose Bolton might remain loyal to the Starks. If not, his death would be easy enough to stage as an accident. If Domeric proved more loyal than his douchebag father, Gregor might not even have to contend with Ludd Whitehill.

Littlefinger and Janos Slynt could be eliminated quietly and discreetly. Slynt would have to be taken out in case Gregor ever needed to seize King's Landing. But overall, he was the least of Gregor's worries.

Baelish, however, was a class-A risk. Littlefinger had yet to gain any influence in King Robert's court. In the long run, he was primarily responsible for the downfall of the Starks. Gregor was determined to make him suffer for that.

He would have to be careful about Walder Frey; that ancient weasel had a habit of outliving far more honorable men. Plus, staging his death without drawing attention would be complex. Then again, he had more of a personal hatred towards the Late Lord Frey. He would not allow his personal feelings to cloud his judgment, but if at all possible, he was going to ensure that Walder Frey did not live to see the Long Night.

The only true problem was posed by Tywin Lannister. He was King Robert's goodfather and the liege lord of the Westerlands. There was also a strong possibility that the Targaryens would be endeavoring to return to power sometime in the future. As long as his daughter was Queen, Lord Tywin would never consent to that.

Regardless of who needed to be eliminated, Gregor knew that time was a luxury he could not afford. As such, he figured that he may as well begin narrowing down his list while he was still ahead in the game.

Gregor realized he could never share the full extent of his knowledge of Westeros with anyone.
Even so, he knew he could never accomplish his objectives without aid. He would undoubtedly need some assistance.

Consequently, Gregor formed his own inner circle. It was composed of nine Legionnaires; one from each of the nine regions of Westeros.

Specifically, they were Dacey Mormont of the Northmen, Brynden Tully of the Riverlords, Victarion Greyjoy of the Ironborn, Osmund Kettleback of the Crownlords, Lyn Corbray of the Valemen, Allard Seaworth of the Stormlords, Gerion Lannister of the Westerlords, Garth Hightower of the Reachmen, and Oberyn Martell of the Dornishmen.

Other than Ser Brynden, none of those people were more than ten years Gregor's elder. They had all been in the Legion for various amounts of time, but Gregor had come to trust all of them. All of them brought something special to the table. They all had principles, but they were willing to go to great length to preserve the people they loved and the values they believed in.

In the tenth month of the 286th year after Aegon's Conquest, Gregor summoned all nine of those people to the council chambers. He arrived about fifteen minutes after the rest of them. All of them were already seated around the large circular table.

After taking up the main seat at the head of the table, Gregor gazed around at the others. Then he asked them "Did you tell anyone you were coming here?"

"No, my lord," the nine of them chorused in unison.

"Good," Gregor muttered in approval, "After we leave this room, you will not address anything that was discussed here with anyone else. Not even each other. These meetings will be kept strictly confidential."

"There will be other meetings, Lord Gregor?" Dacey Mormont assumed.

"Yes, Dacey," the Mountain affirmed, "This is just the first of many."

"Well, why all the secrecy, my lord?" Allard Seaworth enquired.

"You're about to find out, Allard," Gregor said ambiguously.

Gregor sat up straight in his chair and professed "As you all know well, the primary function of the Legion without Banners is to uphold the peace and security of Westeros. We do this in a variety of manners. Our most prominent method involves rounding up all the country's criminals and subjecting them to the King's justice. That is a fairly straightforward operation. A crime is a crime. However… suppose we encounter someone who has not committed a crime, but will in the future?"

"The answer to that is simple, my lord," Garth Hightower debated, "Conspiracy to commit a crime is almost always just as grave as committing the crime itself."

"I'm not talking about conspiracy, Garth," Gregor disclosed, "I'm talking about people who have the capacity to do horrible things. These people may seem harmless or passive at a glance. But underneath their façade, they are striving to make their own lives better. If given the opportunity, they would do just about anything to fulfill their ambitions. Even if their prosperity comes at the misery of others."

"There are several people I know who meet that description," Brynden Tully commented slyly.
"I fancy I know some of them as well, Ser Brynden," Gregor told the Blackfish frankly.

"Does this conversation have a point, Lord Gregor?" Victarion Greyjoy mumbled impatiently. His mood had not improved much since he joined the Legion but at least he did not talk down to the Mountain anymore.

"Nothing I do is pointless, Victarion," Gregor asserted. "That includes this. So I will make my point now. In my time as Master of Order, I have investigated the entirety of the realm. In my searches, I have discovered that there are more than a few people who – when presented with the chance – would go so far as to see the whole realm suffer for their own gain."

"That sounds like mere speculation," Lyn Corbray noted.

"At times, speculation is all we have to guide us," Gregor contended. He looked around at his colleagues again and professed "I have never harmed an innocent in my life. The people I speak of are by no means innocent. They are amoral, unscrupulous, selfish, and borderline inhumane. Some of them may not have done any wrong in their life before, but they would have no qualms about doing so in the future."

"Do these individuals have names, or are they purely theoretical?" Gerion Lannister asked rhetorically.

"Oh, they're real," Gregor declared, "I have assembled a short list of them."

"Who are these supposed individuals?" Osmund Kettleback inquired.

"To preserve the integrity of this procedure, I will not divulge all of them at the same time," Gregor disclosed, "Instead, I will share with you one name at each meeting. The name will be given at the very beginning of the meeting. After that, the remainder of the meeting will be devoted to discussing what should be done with that particular individual."

"And by 'what should be done,' you mean...?" Oberyn Martell began.

Gregor Clegane announced in a solemn tone "We will exterminate them. One at a time."

The others were alarmed at how serene and stoic Gregor sounded when he made that statement. Had he been a lesser man, most of them would have walked out on the meeting right then. But they had been following Gregor long enough to know that he was a just and honorable man. He was a man they could all respect and follow through any trials or tribulations.

It did not take long for Gregor to ascertain that he had the full support of the nine people before him.

Once he did, Dacey Mormont inquired in interest "Who will be the first target?"

The eight other men leaned forward and waited eagerly for a reply. After ten seconds of absolute quietness, Gregor gave them one. He said firmly "Petyr Baelish."
"Who?" Osmund Kettleback asked in confusion. He was not the only one who seemed unfamiliar with that name. Victarion Greyjoy, Garth Hightower, and Allard Seaworth appeared just as perplexed.

"He's the Lord of the Fingers," Lyn Corbray revealed, "A very minor lord, at that,"

"That's why he's called 'Littlefinger,'" Dacey Mormont added in.

Oberyn Martell smirked deviously and commented "Oh, I thought it was because-

"Yes, thank you, Oberyn," Gregor Clegane hastily interrupted the Red Viper.

"Petyr can't be older than eighteen, my lord," Brynden Tully pointed out, "What possible reason would you have for wanting him dead?"

"I have several reasons, Ser Brynden," Gregor claimed, "Before I present them, I wish to make one thing clear. I am not forcing you to assassinate anyone. I will authorize this operation – and any future ones we plan – if an only if all nine of you consent to it. After I give my reasons for going after Lord Baelish, you will decide for yourselves whether or not they are sufficient to warrant his death. If you all agree, we go through with my plan. Otherwise, the plan dies here and now."

The other nine people looked back and forth between each other, as if they were wordlessly conversing. Ultimately, they all turned back to Gregor and nodded their agreement to his proposal.

Gregor then gazed over at the oldest person at the table and stated "Ironic how you of all the people present would ask for a reason first, Ser Brynden. After what Baelish did to your family…"

Raising an eyebrow, the Blackfish muttered "What are you talking about, my lord?"

Gregor elucidated with "Are you aware that not long before the Rebellion, your niece Lysa fell with child? Or that your brother Lord Hoster forced her to drink moon tea as a result?"

Brynden cocked his head and inquired skeptically "How do you know that?"

"I'll get to that soon," Gregor stated, "Tell me; who do you suppose fathered that bastard?"

The implication was enough to tip the Blackfish off. He mumbled "I knew Lysa and Petyr were close… but I never would have thought he'd dishonor her so. Apart from that, he seemed fonder of Catelyn. He fought a duel for her hand, after all."

"And lost," Gregor conceded, "But that does not keep him from fantasizing that he won. I've heard Littlefinger has often claimed to have taken the maidenheads of both of your nieces."

At that, Brynden jumped to his feet and snapped "That is outrageous."

"I know it's a lie, Ser," Gregor disclosed, "Baelish bedded Lysa twice, but he was drunk the second time and merely assumed she was Catelyn."

Ser Brynden was no longer the only one who was astonished by the scope of Gregor's insight.

"Where did you receive this information, my lord?" Garth Hightower queried.
"From the mouth of Lady Lysa herself," Gregor claimed. He sat up in his chair and elaborated with "Ever since I was appointed as Robert Baratheon's Master of Order, I have remained in contact with him and the rest of the Small Council. Particularly the Master of Whisperers. Lord Varys keeps me up to date on the affairs of the King's court. As well as what is said and done on the sidelines. That includes things that are not meant to be made public. Apparently, the Hand's wife recently confided in her maids that Petyr Baelish bedded her twice. Furthermore, she continues to keep correspondence with him behind Lord Jon's back."

Brynden scowled, sat back down roughly, and mumbled "That's enough to sway me. I say the worm dies."

"As am I," Osmund Kettleback pronounced, "Baelish insults the King and his Hand just by continuing to draw breath."

Gregor was pleased. He had already convinced two of his companions to go along with his plan. The other seven would evidently need more and better reasons before they conceded, though. Luckily, he had prepared some. But he had to be mindful of his presentation from his point onward. While the first reason had been entirely true, every subsequent reason had been embellished or fabricated in some way.

Gregor declared "By 'correspondence,' I do not mean Lady Lysa and Lord Peytr are simply exchanging letters with each other. According to the Spider, she is infatuated with him. So much so that when given the opportunity, Varys believes she would willingly have adulterous relations with him."

Brynden sighed and murmured "Lysa always did have the weakest restraint of all my brother's children."

Gregor nodded in acknowledgment and continued with "There is no doubt Lady Arryn still loves Baelish. He, however, does not reciprocate her feelings. But he is aware of them. Because of that, he's able to manipulate her to his will."

"Manipulate her how?" Lyn Corbray enquired.

"After the Rebellion, Lady Lysa persuaded Lord Jon to make Littlefinger the head of customs at Gulltown," Gregor Clegane revealed, "It was Lord Baelish's influence that made her do that. But that's only the beginning of his ambitions. The Spider discovered some very interesting things about him. Eventually, he intends to use Lysa to become the Master of Coin on the Small Council. Once he's secured his position in King's Landing, it's very well possible he will go so far as to con Lady Lysa into poisoning her husband."

"The lady adores him; yet he treats her like scum," Oberyn uttered angrily, "Any man who exploits women like that deserves to be put down."

"Do you honestly believe Petyr will try to kill Lord Jon?" Lyn Corbray queried.

"Lord Varys believes there's a very strong possibility," Gregor contended.

"Then I call for his head, too," Lyn pronounced, "Petyr and I were friends once, but my first duty is to my liege lord."

"I'm in, as well," Allard Seaworth said firmly, "My father serves Lord Stannis Baratheon. If there's one thing I've learned from them both, it's that anyone who routinely lies and cheats to make a living is a scoundrel. Baelish must atone for his crimes."
"Let's imagine for a minute that Baelish actually did orchestrate the Hand's murder," Garth Hightower conjectured, "Would that be the end of his aspirations?"

"No, he'd still be closer to the beginning of them than the end," Gregor proclaimed, "Lord Varys and I arrived at the same conclusion about Baelish. We both believe he will not be satisfied until he has everything he could ever want. And there is little he does not want. If he had the chance, he would seize the Iron Throne for himself. He would even kill Lord Eddard Stark just so he could take Lady Catelyn as his bride."

"Normally, I would commend a man for being ambitious," Victarion Greyjoy commented, "But Baelish goes too far. Even the Ironborn do not reach beyond what is realistically in their grasp. He is a danger to us all, and he must be stopped."

"If he dares to endanger my liege lord's life and lust after his wife, then Littlefinger's life is as good as forfeit," Dacey sternly declared.

"My niece's husband sits the Iron Throne," Gerion remarked, "So far, they've ruled this country far better than the Mad King ever did. I'll kill anyone who threatens their reign."

The vote was nearly unanimous. Only one person had yet to give a verdict.

Gregor turned to that person and muttered "That leaves you, Garth. How we proceed is up to you now. Give me your approval, and we will eliminate Baelish. Otherwise, this plot dies right now."

The Reachman sat thinking in silence for a while. He did not like being put on the spot, but that was his own fault for speaking last. He avoided looking around the room, as all eyes were on him.

Ultimately, he let out a deep sigh and professed "Other than the words of a spider, we've no concrete evidence that Baelish actually will make a grab for power. Still, no good can come of a man like Baelish. So even if this is all a theory, Westeros would be better off without him."

Gregor Clegane grinned and gave a light nod. He announced "Then we're all in agreement. Petyr Baelish must die."

The Mountain spent the remainder of the meeting telling the others of his plan to deal with Littlefinger. They were there for nearly an hour, as he needed to be absolutely thorough and comprehensible.

When that meeting ended, he dispatched a raven to King's Landing. The letter was addressed to Varys.

Gregor knew better than to rely on the Spider too heavily, but in matters that concerned the safety of the realm, he knew he could trust Varys to assist him. They both knew what Littlefinger could be capable of, and they agreed that the realm would burn if he was left unchecked.

Aside from that, the Spider was already implicated in this scheme of Gregor's. As such, Gregor saw no reason not to involve Varys in a more direct fashion.

In the letter was a comprehensive outline of Gregor's plan to assassinate Littlefinger. In case anyone saw the letter before Varys disposed of it, Gregor composed the outline in the form of a passage of riddles.

The letter contained both a description of the plan to kill Petyr Baelish and a set of instructions for
how Varys could play his part in the affair. All the Spider really had to do was whisper something into the King’s ear.

On that he came through. Soon after Gregor wrote to Varys, Moat Cailin received a raven from King's Landing. The letter was pressed with the seal of the Royal House of Baratheon.

Gregor promptly opened the letter and read it. It was a royal order from King Robert.

Apparently, Robert had noticed that House Whent was in danger of facing extinction. Because of that, he would need someone else to assume the lordship of Harrenhal, in the event that the last of the Whents died out. Among the list of prospects, he was considering Petyr Baelish for the title.

That idea was not Robert's originally. It had been given to him by Lord Jon Arryn, who had received it from his wife Lady Lysa, who had heard it from Lord Varys. Varys himself had been told of the idea by Gregor.

When Gregor read Robert's order, he was essentially being told the premise of his own plan.

The details of how Robert expected him to carry out the order had been Gregor's, as well. As he reviewed them, he felt as though someone was commanding him to execute one of his own brainstorm.

Since Harrenhal was in the Riverlands, Lord Hoster Tully had to give his approval before any new lands were granted to someone from outside his domain. Due to the strained relationship between Lord Hoster and Lord Petyr, the matter of succession would require some mediation from an impartial third party. Having already gained a splendid reputation for its diplomacy, the Legion without Banners would act as that third party.

The Legion would also be responsible for ensuring that Baelish arrived at Riverrun safely. They would be with Littlefinger for every step of his journey. Gregor was to assign two platoons of Legionnaires to serve as Baelish's chaperone.

One platoon would travel to the Vale by land; the other by sea. The one that went by sea would pick him up at Gulltown, where he was serving as Lord Gerold Grafton's customs officer. Those units would escort him all the way to the Bloody Gate.

At the same time, the platoon that went by land would enter the Vale from the west on horseback. They would clear away any mountain clansmen that were camped near the path. Once the clansmen were successfully repelled, they would ride for the Bloody Gate. There they would rendezvous with Baelish and the first platoon. Altogether, they would head back through the mountains and make straight for Riverrun.

Naturally, the Legion would fail in their task of protecting Baelish, but Gregor was not concerned about backlash. It would not be the first time the Legion was unable to pull through. Plus, Gregor was already in the process of composing half a dozen different explanations for their failure. Whichever one he presented to Robert would depend on how the scenario played out.

A few days after receiving that raven from Robert, Gregor put his assassination plot into motion.

Victarion and his crew set sail from Moat Cailin on the *Iron Victory*. Allard, Garth, Osmund, and a handful of Legionnaires were also on board. They plotted a course directly for Gulltown. After they arrived, they would stay there for a single night. Then they would escort Baelish to the Bloody Gate as early as the following morning.

Based on Robert's letter, Lord Grafton and Littlefinger had already been informed of the latter's
possible lordship of Harrenhal. So he would be ready to leave Gulltown whenever the first platoon of Legionnaires was ready.

As the *Iron Victory* navigated its way down the Cut, Gregor and his men-at-arms made their way down the Causeway. Dacey, Oberyn, Lyn, Brynden, and Gerion rode with them. They brought along the usual amount of provisions, weapons, and armor for a company that size.

However, Gregor had brought along an extra cart of steel-based weapons and armor. That intrigued some of his men, as most of them carried far superior chainmail and armaments. All the same, that cart was pivotal to Gregor's plan. Only his nine trustees knew that its contents would not be coming back. To some, that may have seemed a waste. But with all the revenue the Legion had earned lately, they could easily spare a cart of steel weapons and armors.

The march down the Neck was relatively quick and straightforward. Gregor and his company followed the Kingsroad south until they reached the crossroads with Masha Heddle's inn. They stayed there for the night, and then they continued their journey on the eastern road.

As soon as they passed into the Vale, Gregor had everyone in his party on full alert. It would not do for them to be caught by mountain clansmen unawares. But that was not to say he intended to avoid the mountain clans altogether.

In his youth, Gregor had done plenty of research on each of the nine regions of Westeros. For the Vale, one of the books he read was Archmaester Arnel's *Mountain and Vale*. The tome had included a thorough account of what Arnel regarded as the most notorious mountain clans in the region.

Alphabetically, he regarded the ten most infamous clans as the Black Ears, the Burned Men, the Howlers, the Milk Snakes, the Moon Brothers, the Painted Dogs, the Redsmiths, the Sons of the Mist, the Sons of the Tree, and the Stone Crows.

Of those ten, only four had been notably represented by the clansmen whom had entered Tyrion's services. Those were the Burned Men, the Stone Crows, the Moon Brothers, and the Black Ears.

Part of Gregor's plan involved making contact with one of those clans. After weighing the pros and cons of them all, he decided that the Black Ears were too extreme, the Moon Brothers were too few in number, and the Burned Men were too unpopular with the other clans.

The Stone Crows presented the best option. They were somewhat reasonable, their members were many, and they had the respect of most of the other mountain clans. Plus, they possessed the most named members out of all the mountain clans of the Vale.

According to Archmaester Arnel, the Stoned Crows' largest settlement was located fairly close to the road that led to the Bloody Gate. It could be found two miles north of the pathway and five miles east of the border to the Riverlands.

When they were three miles into the Vale, Gregor ordered his company to halt. Then he had them take inventory of their provisions, weapons, and armor. After that, he had everyone take what they would need for a short hike through the region. Everything else was hidden directly south of the road.

The spare cart of steel weapons and armor was kept separate from the other carts. Gregor and his units brought it with them on their hike. When they were about a mile north of the road, they hid the cart in a quarry. Like the other carts, no guards were posted around that cart; guards would only draw attention. It may have seemed risky and foolish to leave their baggage unattended, but Gregor
was confident that their belongings would not be stolen whilst they were away.

As the only Valeman in the company, Lyn Corbray knew the landscape better than anyone else there. He rode at the head of the group as they made their way through the mountains.

After another three-quarters of a mile, he gestured for everyone to stop. He announced that he spotted some movement a few hundred feet up ahead.

He soon verified that the source of the commotion was a small group of mountain clansman. Given their location and garbs, they could only be Storm Crows. They were coming down the mountain, right towards the Legionnaires.

Gregor had already discussed with his party what they would do once they were noticed by the Storm Crows. He and a couple others would face the clansmen alone. Everyone else would hide, and they would come out when Gregor gave the signal. His hope was that it would be an effective display of force to get the Storm Crows to cooperate.

Right there, Gregor ordered the majority of his companions to vanish. They – along with their horses – rushed to find hiding spots in the immediate area.

Before long, everyone except Gregor, Dacey, and Polliver was out of sight. The three of them remained mounted, and they patiently yet anxiously waited for the Storm Crows to reach them.

Not five minutes later, twenty men entered the vicinity. They were armed with a variety of makeshift weapons, and they wore mismatched suits of mail. All of them were unshaven, unbathed, and appeared profusely inhospitable.

Gregor knew it was too late to have second thoughts about this part of his plan. He banished his fear to the back of his mind, and he stoically called out "Who approaches us?"

"Dolf, son of Holger," the man at the head of the group said brusquely, "Who trespasses on Storm Crow lands?"

"Gregor, son of Tarrence," the massive knight declared.

"Along with Dacey, daughter of Maege," his female colleague added in.

"And Polliver, son of… someone," his top man-at-arms finished. Sadly for him, Polliver's father had died when he was very young. He barely remembered anything about him, including his name.

Gregor and Dacey would have laughed, but they did not, as they were mindful of Polliver's feelings, and laughing seemed inappropriate at the time. The clansman laughed plenty, though.

"A giant, a woman, and one whose father was nameless," another Storm Crow perceived.

"We get lot of use out of you," a third Storm Crow muttered. Based on how he and his clanmates were eyeing Gregor, Dacey, and Polliver in bloodlust, longing, and curiosity respectively, he did not intend for each of them to serve the same form of "use."

"How quaint," Gregor drily commented, "We came here to get some use out of you."

That produced a wave of bafflement amongst all of the Storm Crows. Dolf queried "What meaning have you, giant?"

Gregor urged his horse forward a couple paces, and he said "You are native to this part of the Vale.
The mountains are your domain, no?"

Dolf nodded and claimed "All mountains fall to us."

"Not all the mountains," Gregor cheekily countered. He pointed to himself and uttered "I have not bowed to you."

At that, the Storm Crows burst out laughing once more. As he chortled loudly, Dolf spat "You are mad. No mountain Dolf sees."

"I must disagree with Dolf," Gregor bluntly stated, "I am known far and wide as 'The Mountain That Rides.'"

The clansmen guffawed when they heard that. Gregor found himself in an interesting fix. A moment ago, his biggest, most immediate worry was surviving this encounter with the Storm Crows. Now, it was being taken seriously by them.

"There are no mountains that ride," a fourth Storm Crow debated.

"There is one now," Dacey Mormont heatedly refuted, "This mountain could ride all of you over."

The clansmen swiftly shifted their attention to the tall girl from Bear Island.

"Come down from that horse," a fifth Storm Crow suggested derisively, "Coratt son of Curtt will ride you all over."

Gregor grimaced and barked "Watch your tongue. Or you may find it parted from you."

Noting Gregor's reaction, Dolf commented "This man-mountain likes his mate overmuch, methinks,"

At first, Gregor was bewildered by that statement. "Excuse me?"

Then he realized what was meant by it. He vigorously shook his head and murmured hastily "No, no, no. NO. She is NOT my mate. I mean, my wife. She's not either. She and I are unrelated."

Dacey and Polliver seemed amused by how Gregor was fumbling for words. The Storm Crows gave less heed to his stammering.

A few seconds later, Gregor composed himself and shouted "Enough! We are not here to discuss who's fucking whom!"

That outburst was enough to get everyone back on track. Dolf leaned on his longaxe and inquired "Then why are you here, man-mountain?"

Gregor had taken a couple knives from the cart of steel. He got them out of his saddlebag and tossed them at Dolf's feet. Two of Dolf's men stepped forward to pick the blades up and examine them.

As they did that, Gregor announced "That's reinforced steel. Capable of cutting through bone as easily as lard. Those two knives by themselves are deadlier than all of the cheap iron all of you currently possess. They're yours now."

Dolf seemed intrigued, but Coratt, not so much. He made an observation that strangely mirrored the one his son Conn presented to Tyrion Lannister and Bronn. He murmured "They became ours
the moment you stepped onto mountain. Everything we see on you is ours. Those are our horses. Those are our swords. That is our armor. She is our woman."

"Only in your most depraved fantasies, clansman," Dacey sharply retorted.

Gregor drew his own dagger and muttered threateningly "First man who touches her, I'll cut off his manhood and feed it to the goats."

Based on the books, that was one of the Storm Crows' favorite pastimes. Or maybe they were just overly fond of using that phrase. In any case, they appeared to be impressed with Gregor's candor. Especially since he had made that threat before they could.

"Ser… we don't have any goats," Polliver whispered to him.

"I can find one," Gregor said humorously. He then turned back to the Storm Crows and told them "Somewhere on this mountain, there is a whole cartload of steel weapons and armor. You work with us, and it's yours. You attack us, and you get nothing."

"We know all of mountain," Dolf contended, "We would find steel on our own if search long enough. No need you tell us where."

Gregor had expected something like that. But he was undeterred. He shrugged a bit and uttered "Let me explain what I mean by 'nothing'."

He gave a sharp whistle that echoed all over the area. Immediately, Oberyn, Brynden, Gerion, Lyn, Rafford, Dunsen, Eggon, and the rest of Gregor's men-at-arms emerged from their hiding places. At least half of them were armed with longbows or crossbows. All such individuals had their weapons pointed directly at Dolf, Coratt, and the other Storm Crows.

Now Gregor and the mountain clansmen had switched places. Rather than launching an ambush, they had walked into one.

Many of the Storm Crows were itching to attack, but Dolf and Coratt managed to hold them back.

Gregor sternly warned them "One word from me, and they will fill you full of holes."

Finally, the clansmen were taking him seriously. Dolf glared at the massive knight and mumbled "What you want now, man-mountain?"

"Just one simple request, really," Gregor disclosed, "We need you to stage a raid."

"Stage?" Coratt enquired, seeming unfamiliar with that term.

Gregor briefly illuminated on what he meant. He wanted them to be part of what was basically a mummer's farce.

"There is nothing to be gained in this false raid," Dolf pointed out.

"Perhaps not," Gregor contented, "But there is a reward to be earned from it. You work with us, and that entire cart of steel is yours. Refuse, and we'll merely part ways. Engage us in combat, and you all die."

Dolf needed only a few seconds to respond. He stood up straight and pronounced "Come with us, man-mountain. You shall speak with Gurn, son of Gorik, chief of Storm Crows."

Gregor nodded in acknowledgment. Then he gestured for his soldiers to stand down, and he
affirmed "We will follow."

Another quarter-mile higher, they came to the main Storm Crow settlement. It was larger (and much better organized) than Gregor had envisioned it would be. There they met with Gurn.

There were a trio of young boys in the settlement who spent a lot of time around Gurn, Dolf, and Coratt. Those must have been younger versions of Gunthor, Shagga, and Conn respectively.

For a hardened clan chief, Gurn was surprisingly receptive of Gregor and his company. That was probably just because of the steel that had been offered. But at least Gregor had some assurance that the clansmen could actually be reasoned with.

Gurn agreed to assist Gregor. But he claimed that before he and his clansmen could fight (or pretend to fight) for the Mountain, he wished to see how the Legionaries were in combat. They needed to prove their ability in an actual battle.

Gurn had the perfect opportunity for them to do so.

Recently, the Storm Crows had been in the midst of a power struggle with the Milk Snakes. The conflict had started out as a simple territorial dispute, but it had practically elevated into a full-out blood feud.

Gurn made a proposition of his own to Gregor: if the Mountain and his men helped the Storm Crows push back the invading Milk Snakes, not only would they go through with the false raid, but they would also come to his aid again if ever he needed them in the future.

Gregor found this to be an acceptable arrangement. Lately, the Milk Snakes had been making a lot of trouble for the Valemen, anyway. By resolving this conflict, this would also be the chance to neutralize yet one more threat to the realm.

Gurn offered Gregor and the other Legionnaires shelter for the night. While they were still wary of the Storm Crows, they did not wish to jeopardize their new temporary alliance. Since they would risk insulting Gurn by turning down his generous offer, they decided to accept it.

The Legionnaires set up camp close to the Stone Crows settlement. That night, they shared meat and mead, as well as tales of their deeds and exploits. No one on either side ever forgot how different they were from the other side, but for a while, it actually seemed to them that they were one people united together. That was a good sign in Gregor's mind.

In the middle of the night, Gregor was sitting at the campfire by himself. Rafford, Tobbot, and Ser Brynden were on guard duty. Just about everyone else was asleep.

Or so Gregor thought. As he kept warm, he heard the sound of footsteps coming up behind him. With one hand clasped around the hilt of his dagger, he gazed over his shoulder.

To his relief, it was only Dacey Mormont. The Mountain eased down and moved over to make room for the Bear Girl.

"Thank you," Dacey said appreciatively, sitting down next to Gregor.

"Anytime," he assured her.

The two of them sat in quietness for a couple minutes as they warmed themselves by the fire. The only sound that could be heard was the crackling of the embers.
Finally, she looked to him and stated suddenly "Gregor, may I speak to you on a personal subject?"

He glimpsed at her and answered with "Of course, Dacey."

The girl from Bear Island sat up and stated "Earlier, when we first encountered Dolf's party, do you remember what they said about me?"

"Yes, I do," Gregor recounted, "I think I know what you're about to say. You're going to insist that you could have handled yourself, and that you didn't need me to speak on your behalf."

"No, that's not what I was going to say," Dacey frankly pronounced, "When Dolf referred to me as your mate, you were very quick to contradict him."

Gregor merely shrugged and admitted "I suppose that's true."

Dacey folded her arms and uttered "Why was that? Is there something wrong with me? Am I not good enough for you?"

Gregor was stunned by the abrupt change in Dacey's tone. He hastily told her "No, absolutely not. I…I just did not wish to have any misunderstandings between us and the Storm Crows."

Dacey then eased down a little, nodded her head, and said "I can believe that."

Gregor was relieved to see her less aggravated. He then commented "Though, I will admit, I would have been content with that misunderstanding."

"Because if the clansmen believed I was spoken for, they would not have harassed me as much?" Dacey presumed.

"Well, that, and any decent man should feel honored even to be mistaken as your husband," Gregor clarified.

Almost immediately, Gregor realized that he had probably said too much. The expression on Dacey's face seemed to confirm that.

She proclaimed "Gregor, you do know I was just teasing you, right? I didn't really think you were repulsed by the idea of me being your wife."

"You're right; I'm not," Gregor confirmed, becoming a bit more emboldened, "Even if everything you just said was a jape, nothing I've said is."

For a while following that revelation, Dacey was speechless. She needed some time to reflect on what Gregor just told her. Then she settled down and muttered in interest "Tell me, Gregor. If you had any say over what your future bride will be like, what are the ideal qualities she'd have?"

Gregor considering not answering that question. Not only had it come out of nowhere, but he also felt there were so many ways it could produce an unpleasant response from Dacey if he was too direct. But then he reminded himself that Dacey had tremendous respect for honesty. If he was truthful with her, his answer should theoretically be enough to appease her.

Gregor thought on his response for a minute. Then he thought aloud "Unlike most lords, I'd prefer someone who is capable of independent thought. I would like her to be comely, and hopefully she'd have a womanly figure. It would be nice if she can fight and defend herself, as well. It'd like her to be intelligent and wise. I want her to have an open mind. I would expect her to be loyal, but not submissive. I'd wish for her to rule beside me, not behind me. Most of all…"
Dacey leaned closer, and she said inquiringly "What? What do you think is the most important aspect in a woman?"

Gregor was sorely tempted not to reply there. But he was in no position to back out. So he slowly turned to Dacey, looked her in the eye, and disclosed "I'd want her to like me."

The beautiful girl from Bear Island was visibly astonished when she was informed of that. That was the type of reply she would have expected from a lovesick teenager, a wandering singer, or an overly-sentimental poet. But to hear it from the mouth of the strongest and largest man in the entirety of Westeros… she was at a loss for words.

"Is that really what matters most to you in marriage?" Dacey queried, wanting to be certain.

"Marriage is a binding of two people," Gregor contended, "What good is that binding if there is no love involved? In the long run, does anything else truly matter?"

"Those are fine points," Dacey professed, "Given how popular you've become lately, it's perfectly realistic for you to want a bride who has feelings for you. After everything you've done as Master of Order, there are a whole lot of women in this country that like you. Including me."

"I'd call that a step in the right direction," Gregor wryly stated.

After that, the two Legionnaires sat in silence for a while. They gave more of their focus to the campfire than to each other.

Finally, Gregor rose from his seat, stretched, and declared "I'm going to turn in."

"Alright," Dacey avowed, "Hope you sleep well."

"Thanks," Gregor told her, "You, too. Assuming you actually go to sleep, that is."

"Oh, I intend to sleep," Dacey insisted, "But before I do, I'd like to have some alone. I've got some thoughts I'd like to get in order."

"I bet you do," was Gregor's candid response.

Gregor then retreated to his tent, where he undressed down to his tunic and breeches. He kept his longsword nearby, just in case anything happened in the night.

As he gradually drifted away to into a somewhat uneasy slumber, Gregor reflected on the conversation he just had with his female colleague.

She's not the only one who has some thinking to do. This was the first time she and I really opened up to each other.

Maybe Sandor was right about the possibility that I will marry a Northwoman. If so… I suppose I needn't look any further. Because I honestly can't imagine a better option than Dacey. Even if I account for all the highborn girls that were just born or will be born soon.

Who knows? She could very well feel just the same about me. Maybe next time we sit around the campfire together, I can ask what her ideal husband would be like. If I'm anything like him, then I'm in luck. Even if by some chance I'm not, at least I'll know enough to form the groundwork of a meaningful and lasting relationship with Dacey.
Note: Some people have questioned the validity of how Gregor's nine companions were so readily willing to go along with his plans to exterminate the more deplorable characters in Westeros without hard evidence. Looking back on it, I realize that the whole matter was put together a little flimsily, and it was not as coherent as I had envisioned it to be. I've already revised my outline for that part of this fanfic. The previous chapters will remain as they are, but the future chapters should be much more believable.

By the way, I'm going to be busy for the following week. In addition to work and graduate school, this weekend, I'll be attending the Nightmare Nights convention in Dallas. So there probably won't be another update for at least a week. But things will be getting good, I assure you.

Gregor crept quietly up the hill, clutching his shield in his left hand. Oberyn Martell and Rafford the Sweetling moved stealthily alongside him. Both men were armed with spears, their signature weapon of choice.

They were being led to higher ground by Dolf and two of his men. Like his son Shagga, the son of Holger was a dual-wielder. He carried a battleaxe in either hand. Despite his barbaric appearance and mannerisms, he moved with the silence and subtlety of a professional assassin.

When they reached the top of the hill, the six men crouched down and peered cautiously over the edge.

Just as Gurn had forecasted, there was a Milk Snakes camp in the valley below. The camp was bustling with activity.

There had to be at least sixty Milk Snakes in this one camp. There were no women or children, from what Gregor could see. That was fortunate; he still tried to avoid incurring those types of casualties, even if they belonged to savage cultures.

The Milk Snakes certainly were savage. However uncivilized the Stone Crows seemed, the Milk Snakes were even less well-mannered. The Stone Crows at least had some form of communal unity that kept them together. Gregor witnessed a general lack of cooperation between the Milk Snakes.

Even so, they did appear to be rather formidable warriors. The average Milk Snake was a little larger and stronger than the average Storm Crow, and they appeared far less capable of being reasoned with.

It was very early in the morning. Most of the Milk Snakes were just waking up. Those that had were in the process of disassembling tents, sharpening swords, and saddling their mounts (what few there were, anyway). Strangely, none of them was making the time to break his fast.

"Looks like they're getting ready to move," Rafford observed.
"They seem in a hurry," Oberyn noted.

"Milk Snakes plan to attack Storm Crow camp," Dolf proclaimed.

"How can you be sure?" Gregor inquired.

"Because Dolf knows Milk Snakes," the clansman remarked.

"Good enough for me," Gregor muttered drily.

They remained kneeling for a few minutes. In that time, they constantly shifted their gaze between the dell and the hills around it. If they squinted close enough, they could see the heads of their comrades peeking over the tops of those hills. The Legionnaires and the Stone Crows had the Milk Snake camp surrounded on all sides.

"We should still have the element of surprise," Rafford contended.

"For now," Oberyn commented. He pointed out the eastern mountains. There was a faint haze of natural light forming in the distance. "The Sun's starting to rise over the horizon."

"We attack now or not at all," Dolf declared.

The five men turned to Gregor. Gurn had given the Mountain full command over this operation. The others were waiting for his signal to engage the enemy.

After a few seconds, Gregor lowered the visor on his helm, drew his longsword from its sheath, and told his companions "Make them bleed."

He then rose to his full height, held his sword high in the air, and let out a terrifying battle cry.

Immediately, Gregor and everyone in his company emerged from their cover and charged down into the dell. Most of them let out a battle cry of their own as they sprinted downwards. The Milk Snakes were still trying to pinpoint the source of Gregor's shout when the Legionnaires and the Stone Crows were upon them.

The area was filled with the sounds of steel against iron. More often than not, steel triumphed over iron.

Gregor caught a glimpse of Oberyn running his spear through an armored Milk Snake warrior. A few meters away, Brynden Tully was fending off three more Milk Snakes by himself.

Before long, any of the Milk Snakes that had been asleep no longer were. They grabbed for their weapons, emerged from their tents, and rushed into the fray. They were very quick to respond to this sudden threat.

One of the new arrivals spotted Gregor and ran towards him, swinging a cleaver. Gregor quickly lifted his weapon to intercept the blow. He parried with the Milk Snake for ten seconds as he studied his opponent for an opening. Then he noticed a weak spot in the center of the Milk Snake’s breastplate. When the warrior took another swing at him, Gregor caught his weapon with his shield, pushed the blade aside, and shoved his sword into the center of the Milk Snake’s chest.

Gregor had already withdrawn his sword and moved on to his next opponent before the first one had even collapsed onto the ground.

He was quickly approached by a Milk Snake with a longaxe. Gregor was able to counter his blows
easily. This Milk Snake's fighting style was too sloppy to be regarded as much of a challenge. When the warrior leaned back to strike Gregor from above, the Mountain rammed his shield into his face and slashed at his upper body with his sword. The Milk Snake's shoulder was practically severed from his neck. He sputtered noisily and fell onto his chest.

Not five seconds later, Gregor faced a third opponent. This one brandished a spear. Gregor had spent enough time training with Prince Oberyn to learn how to evade a charge with a spear. When this Milk Snake reached Gregor, he thrust his weapon at the massive knight. Gregor dodged the stab and hacked at the assailant's neck. Almost right away, blood started leaking from the slit in the Milk Snake's throat. He dropped his spear, grasped his throat with both hands, and dropped onto his back.

Gregor had killed three men in under a minute. None of them was the camp leader, though. As disorganized as the Milk Snakes were, so long as their chiefs lived, they had some order. Once the leaders fell, their subordinates would lose all discipline.

Gregor brought it upon himself to seek out the chief of this camp. All around him, people were fighting and dying. As he made his way through the camp, Gregor traded blows with two more Milk Snakes, and he cut down all of them swiftly.

However, he was so preoccupied with his search for the leader of the camp that he did not notice another of the Milk Snakes sneaking up behind him. This one wielded a greatsword. He was smaller, more agile, and faster than most of his fellow clansmen. He stealthily approached Gregor whilst his back was turned, and he raised his greatsword into the air. He was about to hack at the small visible bit of skin between Gregor's helm and shoulder plates.

Gregor managed to glimpse the assailant out of the corner of his eye, and he hastily maneuvered to meet the new foe. Right before the Milk Snake could deliver a blow, a crunching sound emanated from the immediate vicinity.

The mountain clansman was frozen in his attack stance with his greatsword in midair. Gregor positioned his shield in front of his torso defensively, but in this situation, his shield was unneeded. As it turned out, so was his sword.

A moment later, the clansman dropped to his knees, and then he fell flat on his face. Gregor realized an axe was imbedded in the Milk Snake's skull.

When he looked up, he saw the owner of that axe. It was Dacey. She was standing over the Milk Snake with her left arm outstretched. She held her sword in her right hand.

Gregor smiled at the tall girl and said appreciatively "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Dacey asserted. She leaned down and yanked her axe free from the Milk Snake's head.

Gregor and Dacey cautiously made their way through the camp. Before long, they encountered the leader of the camp. He was a fearsome, gigantic man armed with two bastard swords. He also carried a dagger in his teeth, which he was just as deft with.

He had just killed two Stone Crows singlehandedly when Gregor and Dacey stumbled upon him. He shifted his focus to the Mountain and the girl from Bear Island. He snarled wickedly and rushed at them. Two of the chief's warriors rushed to reinforce before either Gregor or Dacey could engage him.
Dacey busied herself with the new underlings whilst Gregor took on the chief. The chief turned out to be a formidable adversary, but he was no match for the discipline and brute strength of The Mountain That Rides.

The fight was over almost before it began. Less than ten seconds into the duel, Gregor managed to disarm the Milk Snake leader long enough to jump behind him and slash at his neck. As a result, the back of his throat was sliced open. Another two inches and he would have decapitated him.

His head remained attached to his body. But it made no matter. The Milk Snake chief groaned in agony and sank to the ground.

After the Milk Snake leader fell, the battle was resolved very quickly. It was an overwhelming victory on the part of the Legion and the Stone Crows. Every one of the Milk Snakes had fallen in battle.

Of course, Gregor's forces had not been without losses. Three of his men-at-arms were lost in the skirmish. Gurn, Dolf, and Coratt all survived, luckily. But eight of the Stone Crows had perished, including Jaggot.

Still, a total of eleven casualties was not devastating, considering the seventy-plus enemies they had faced.

As the Tickler and some of the other men-at-arms tended to the wounded, everyone else checked to ensure that all of the Milk Snakes were indeed dead.

At one point, Gregor came across a Milk Snake with a particular helm. He recognized it quickly. It was the standard helm worn by a standard Northman soldier. Its structure indicated that it was the most modern version of the helm. It could not have been forged more than five years ago.

That struck Gregor's curiosity. He removed the helm from the dead Milk Snake and looked around for the sole female in his party. When he sighted her, he called out "Hey, Dacey."

The tall girl turned to the massive knight, walked over to him, and asked "Yes, Gregor?"

"Look what I found," he stated, showing her the helm.

Dacey took the headgear in both her hands and examined it closely. She raised an eyebrow and remarked "Interesting…"

"Tell me," Gregor bade her, "When was the last time a Northman was lost in the Vale?"

She rubbed her chin and thought aloud "Well, Lord Eddard was fostered by Lord Jon Arryn at the Eyrie. But he always travelled to the Vale by sea from White Harbor. As far as I know, no one from the North has used the road to the Bloody Gate in at least fifty years."

"Then how could this have gotten here?" Gregor wondered.

"I don't know," Dacey confessed, gazing down at the helm, "Let's see if we can find the set of armor this thing went with."

None of the fallen Milk Snakes wore any armor of Northern design. However, Gregor and Dacey managed to locate a tent that had been utilized by the Milk Snakes as their arsenal. They found a wide variety of armaments and protective garments in there. Among them were a breastplate, gauntlets, boots, a shirt of mail, and a doublet; all Northern in origin. The breastplate and shirt of mail were lightly stained with blood; the stain appeared to be over three years old.
Obviously, whoever wore this armor had been ambushed and killed by the Milk Snakes. The armor must have been subsequently stolen by them.

But if that happened approximately four years ago…

This couldn't be…?

Gregor tentatively picked up the doublet and searched through its pockets. The outer pockets were empty, but when he frisked the inner pockets, he heard what sounded like the rustling of paper.

Gregor reached into the deepest pocket, and he pulled out an old piece of paper. It appeared to be a letter. The seal had yet to be broken, but the wax was marked by the gray direwolf of House Stark.

So that's what became of the rider that was dispatched to the Vale.

Gregor made a note to bring this up to Oberyn later when the two of them were alone. He would also have to inform everyone else who had been at the Tower of Joy, including the woman who sent it.

Dacey was standing a meter directly behind Gregor, so she had yet to see the letter. She asked him "Did you find anything?"

Gregor hastily tucked Lyanna's unopened letter into his hauberk, and then he pronounced "No, the Milk Snakes must have taken everything of value."

At that, Dacey merely nodded in acknowledgment and said "We should get back to the others."

"Right," was all Gregor said in response.

Gregor and Dacey regrouped with the other Legionnaires and the Stone Crows. There they discussed the rest of Gregor's plan. Gregor went over it three times, just to ensure that there was no confusion.

Dolf and his warriors remained at the camp. After disposing of the corpses, they dressed themselves in the trademark attire of the Milk Snakes, and they passed themselves off as the original inhabitants. Essentially, the Stone Crows were supposed to fool anyone who came by – especially other mountain clansmen – into thinking that they were the Milk Snakes.

At the same time, Gregor and his men continued on to the Bloody Gate. It took less than a day to get there.

Before he joined the Legion without Banners, Brynden Tully had served as Knight of the Gate for a time. When he left, he was replaced by Ser Gilwood Hunter.

Ser Gilwood still held that position, and he manned the Gate diligently.

Victarion's platoon was already there. They had been there for a couple days, and they had impatiently waited for Gregor's platoon to arrive.

When they finally rendezvoused, Victarion and his crewmates vocally expressed their dissatisfaction about having to traverse over land. Gregor had anticipated those complaints, but he simply disregarded them. In a united Westeros, the Ironborn would have to get accustomed to sometimes riding instead of boating.

On the plus side, Victarion had come through in his primary objective. He had efficaciously
escorted Petyr Baelish all the way from Gulltown to the Bloody Gate.

That was the first – and only – time Gregor actually met Littlefinger. He was a shorter than the average man. He looked to Gregor the way Tyrion would look to an average-sized person. He had already grown his signature pointed beard. Other than that, he had a distinct lack of facial hair.

Unlike the Ironmen, Baelish had not complained about anything. However, he had a pair of very wary and mistrustful eyes. That alone spoke volumes of his persona. The eyes watched Gregor closely with obvious skepticism.

Gregor casually approached the younger man and told him in a tone of false courtesy "Greetings, Lord Petyr."

"Hello, Lord Gregor," Baelish uttered plainly, his arms folded.

"I hope we have not kept you waiting for too long," Gregor commented.

"You did not," Baelish claimed, "But I would like to take to the road as soon as possible."

"Just as soon as we're refreshed," Gregor asserted.

To Gregor's good fortune, no one outside of the Legion had accompanied Baelish to the Bloody Gate. He had been concerned that some of the soldiers sworn to House Baelish or a few of Lord Grafton's knights might have joined the company.

It could not have been an easy task to convince Littlefinger to forgo the protection of the people in his own employ or House Grafton's. Somehow, Allard, Garth, and Osmund had pulled through in that regard, just as they had assured Gregor they would. It had fueled Baelish's suspicions even further than before, though.

Gregor had allowed for Petyr's bodyguard, Ser Bertom Lynderly, to join them. He felt that one man would not make any negative difference. Plus, if Gregor's plan was to be executed correctly, it would need a detached witness.

After taking a couple hours to eat and rest, Gregor gave the order to set off again. He, Baelish, and all the present Legionnaires stepped back through the Bloody Gate and headed back down the main road.

The ride back to the west was relatively calm. On their first pass, Gregor's platoon had taken the time to ensure that no other mountain clans were camped near the road. They had confirmed that no one other than the Stone Crows and the Milk Snakes (or "Milk Snakes") were within reach of the road. As such, Gregor knew his company would not face any delays. No unexpected ones, at any rate.

When they were halfway to the border of the Riverlands, Petyr brought his horse alongside Gregor's. He requested "A word, my lord?"

Gregor turned to the short man and asked rhetorically "How can I help, my lord?"

"There's one thing I find curious about this adventure," Baelish disclosed, "Why are we travelling the whole way to Riverrun by a land route? It would have taken just as much time – probably less – if Victarion Greyjoy picked me up at Gulltown and then delivered me to another maritime town. Couldn't his crew have sailed me to Saltpans or Maidenpool? In fact, the Iron Victory could have gone north towards the mouth of the Green Fork and followed the Trident all the way to Riverrun. So why was land travel even necessary?"
Given how observant and astute Baelish had been in the original universe, Gregor had already considered the likelihood that Petyr would question their method of travel. His theory was well-founded, seeing as how Petyr had become suspicious as to why they were trekking to Riverrun by horse alone.

Gregor did not have to conjure up an elaborate explanation. He simply told Littlefinger "The method of travel was per the King's orders. He was very specific about how we were supposed to carry out this mission. For whatever reason, he puts far more trust in horses than in ships."

Gregor suspected that successfully lying to Littlefinger would be a chore in itself, but Baelish seemed to swallow that one. He lightly shrugged and uttered "I'm honestly not surprised. The King's parents died at sea, after all. And he's well-renowned as a warrior. Other than the Ironborn, what warrior doesn't love horses?"

"Precisely, my lord," Gregor conceded, "Personally, I think we could have afforded to pick you up somewhere along the northeastern coast in the Crownlands. A port in the Riverlands would have been even better. But it is not my place to protest the King's commands. You needn't worry, though. I personally believe horses are far more reliable than ships."

"We can agree on that much, my lord," Bertom Lynderly proclaimed from behind Petyr Baelish.

"At least the sights on land are far more breathtaking," Oberyn Martell interjected, adding his own thoughts to the conversation.

"Very true," Brynden Tully concurred.

The dialogue more or less ceased there. A few miles further down the road, Gregor raised his hand in the air. Straightaway, everyone brought their horses to a halt.

"Something wrong, my lord?" Dunsen inquired. He had been practicing that line all day, but luckily, it did not sound as though it had been rehearsed.

"It's too quiet," Gregor claimed, gazing around the vicinity, "Yesterday, this area was teeming with the noises of wildlife. Now… I hear nothing. It's as though all the animals have suddenly vanished."

"They may have migrated," Allard Seaworth offered.

"Or… they were hunted," Garth Hightower nervously supposed.

Both men sounded quite believable. Their delivery was sufficient to get Petyr Baelish and Bertom Lynderly to become restless.

"But no one hunts in these mountains," Lyn Corbray debated. He paused for emphasis, and then he added in "Except…"

Gregor turned to his front and shouted "Swords!"

In the span of the next ten seconds, everyone in that company – excluding Baelish – drew a blade. Petyr did not have a dagger. Of course, he never had a dagger, contrary to what he told Catelyn in another universe.

Baelish did seem a little comforted when he was surrounded by armed soldiers. However, unbeknownst to him, all those brandished weapons would not guarantee his safety. As a matter of fact, they played a part in Littlefinger's downfall.
Gregor and the Stone Crows had decided to use this area to stage the false raid. The Mountain had instructed the clansmen to wait for a signal before they launched their attack. The sight and sound of the Legionnaires collectively unsheathing their weapons was that signal.

The moment after all that steel was exposed, the Stone Crows jumped from their hiding spots and charged down to the road.

Gregor quickly turned his gaze upward, feigning alarm. He shouted in mock surprise "Milk Snakes!"

Dolf and the other Stone Crows were still disguised as Milk Snakes, so that accusation was very credible. Gregor looked over his shoulder at Bertom Lynderly. The knight was staring in shock at the clansmen. Gregor had to resist the desire to smile. Whenever he was questioned later on, Ser Bertom would tell everyone it was the Milk Snakes that had ambushed Gregor's party.

In less than a minute, the "Milk Snakes" reached the Legionnaires. Gregor and his associates remained mounted while they parried the blows of the clansmen. They had to be quickly with their weapons, in order for their routine to appear realistic.

It certainly felt realistic to Gregor. It was just as exhilarating as a real battle, and it kept him ever vigilant and cautious.

Petyr Baelish made a desperate attempt to retreat from all the conflict. Bertom Lynderly tried to guide his charge away from all the scuffles.

But their efforts were wasted. Soon enough, Baelish and Ser Bertom were seized by the clansmen and pulled down from their horses.

The clansmen were rough with Ser Bertom, but all they really did was knock him unconscious. They managed that without inflicting any permanent damage on the knight.

Baelish was not as lucky. After he was flung onto the ground, he was surrounded by Coratt and several other Stone Crows. They each proceeded to stab him in every conceivable part of his body multiple times. Gregor heard an ear-piercing shriek as Baelish was knifed to death by the mountain clansmen.

When the shriek finally subsided, Gregor yelled over all the commotion "All clear!"

At that, the Legionnaires and the Stone Crows alike broke off their attacks. Apart from Ser Bertom, no one else was injured. The only additional casualty was Baelish.

Gregor had his horse trot over to the spot where Littlefinger had fallen. His remains had been mangled almost beyond recognition. But anyone who knew Baelish would not confuse his body for anyone else's.

The Mountain smiled at the clansmen and told them "Superbly done, my friends."

"Friends are we, man-mountain?" Dolf said sharply.

Gregor shrugged and commented "Partners in justice, instead, perhaps."

"I could get used to this form of justice," Osmund Kettleback stated wryly.

"We do our part, man-mountain," Coratt interjected, "We expect cart of steel now."
"You shall have it," Gregor assured him.

Gregor had Baelish's body loaded onto one of the supplies carts. He had Ser Bertom's unconscious form placed on another one. After that, the Stone Crows and the Legionnaires resumed heading westward.

They stayed together until they reached the spot where Gregor had hidden the cart of steel-based armor and weapons. After the cart was unloaded of all its contents, the Stone Crows were quick to take possession of them. After that, they gave their farewells and headed back to their settlement. Once again, the Legionnaires had the same numbers they had when they left the Bloody Gate. The only difference was that two of their company were in an alternate state of being.

The Legion managed to get through the Vale without any more incidents with the mountain clans. Even after they crossed over into the Riverlands, they did not look back until the mountains were far off in the distance. Even then, they did not stop.

Gregor did not allow the company to rest until they were well past the Twins. When they were nearly in sight of the Neck, they finally stopped to make camp.

Gregor planned to turn in early that night. It would be the most pleasant night's sleep he had gotten in a long while.

However, before he went to bed, he decided to talk to someone. For the past couple days, an issue of a far more personal nature had been occupying a large part of Gregor's mind. He had resolved to push it aside until the problem of Littlefinger was settled. Now that it was, he could focus on the personal affair.

In the late evening, shortly after supper, Gregor went to Dacey Mormont's tent. He lightly tapped on the front of it.

A moment later, Dacey responded with "Yes?"

"Are you decent?" Gregor queried.

" Depends on what you mean by 'decent,'" she cockily rejoined.

"Are you presentable?" he clarified with a scoff, "Specifically, presentable enough that you would face me?"

"Yeah, I suppose so," she declared, "Come on inside."

Gregor pulled open the flap and stepped into the tent.

As an officer of the Legion without Banners, Dacey had a respectably large tent. A table, a couple of chairs, and a small bed could fit in there, and it was so tall that even Gregor could stand in it without crouching. It was also big enough to accommodate two people. Not that its size would give Gregor any impure ideas.

But Dacey's current apparel might have done so.

The Bear Island girl had been in the process of undressing for bed. She was clad only in a loose pair of breeches and a corset. This corset was very different from the type women generally wore with dresses. It had been designed specifically for Dacey to enhance her form in combat situations.

The corset was tied securely around her chest, but it was also low-cut. It accentuated her full, round
breasts very nicely, and it emphasized her womanly curves. Had it ended two inches lower, Dacey's nipples would have been on display.

"This is 'presentable?" Gregor uttered, trying not to snicker. Or to stare.

Dacey smirked and pointed out "You just said presentable enough that I'd be able to face you."

Gregor chuckled at that and mumbled humorously "Clearly, 'shame' is not in your vocabulary."

As it happened, all Gregor wore at that time was a leather doublet and a pair as trousers. So it was not as though he was clad in much more than Dacey. But at least he wore enough that he could go outside without turning any heads.

Dacey sat down at one of the chairs at the table. She gestured for Gregor to take the other chair. Once he did, he gazed off to the side, as though lost in contemplation.

He just sat and wondered how to open up the conversation. For once, he was not coming to Dacey to discuss strategies, battle plans, or training schedules. Instead, he would be conversing on a more intimate topic.

Flirting had never been one of Gregor's strong suits. He was well-acquainted with the opposite sex, but he was not very good at coming up with pickup lines.

Ultimately, Gregor decided to open the discussion by speaking of a totally unrelated topic. He clasped his hands together and stated candidly "So… that business with Littlefinger… it went well, did it not?"

"I'll say it did," Dacey conceded with a smile.

Gregor looked to her and murmured "Tell me truthfully; do you think we did right?"

"Do you?" she countered.

"Yes, I do," Gregor revealed, "But I care about your thoughts, as well."

Dacey gave a nod and proclaimed "Baelish dishonored a Great Lord's daughter, he manipulated her into boosting his status in the world, he would have continued to do so at the expense of those around them, and there is every possibility that the realm would have suffered because of his greed. We may have spared the realm a great amount of agony. So, yes. Killing Baelish was the right thing to do."

Gregor was pleased to know that she agreed with him. The opinions of his colleagues were very meaningful and important to him. He enquired in interest "Anything you would have done differently?"

Dacey answered him with "Well, the only way the outcome would have been better is if it produced no casualties on our part. I know our losses were minimal, but they were still incurred. You lost three of your men-at-arms."

Gregor frowned slightly and muttered "True, I'm afraid. None of them were among my top officers, but they were good men. They had something that made each of them unique. Umrich was always making people laugh, Abbert was a fantastic archer, and Mylo never hesitated to comfort a hurt friend."

"All desirable qualities," Dacey commented, "Too bad they had to fall in battle."
Gregor nodded his head. Right then, he spotted an opportunity to transition into a more sensual topic. He looked to Dacey and stated "On the subject of the battle… I didn't get a chance to properly show my appreciation to you for saving my life."

"You did say 'thanks,'" Dacey humorously recounted.

"Actually, I wanted to show my appreciation with more than words," Gregor informed her.

She rested against her arm and queried "How so?"

Gregor then leaned forward, gently took ahold of Dacey's shoulders, and kissed her softly on both cheeks.

The Bear Island girl was stunned by this display of affection, but she did not reject Gregor's advances.

"I wouldn't mind that form of appreciation from you, Gregor," Dacey told him with a smile, "But isn't that behavior usually reserved for married or betrothed couples?"

"That's another thing I wanted to talk to you about," he enlightened her. He sat back in his chair and said inquiringly "Are you… involved in any potential marriage contracts?"

Normally, people did not ask questions of such a personal nature, but Dacey had never been one to shy away from matters that were generally private.

She informed the Mountain "I'm not in any haste to get wed. Even so, my mother has suggested a few possible matches for me."

"Any that really stood out?" Gregor queried in interest.

Dacey thought about that, and then she recounted "First, she proposed Lord Rickard Karstark's eldest son, Harrion. The idea of being Lady of Karhold did sound appealing, but nothing was made definite. My mother also proposed Robett Glover, Robin Flint, and Wendel Manderly. For a while, she even considered Benjen Stark. Then he went off and joined the Night's Watch. Oh, well. A Stark is probably too high above in status for a Mormont, anyway."

"Bullshit," Gregor debated, "The Starks may be the great house of the North, but your house is just as honorable and praiseworthy. Saying you're not good enough for a Stark or anyone else is ludicrous."

"Well, thank you for saying that," Dacey told him gratefully.

Gregor smiled at her again. Then he enquired "Did your mother ever consider anyone from outside the North?"

"No," the bear girl disclosed, "Not yet, that is."

"What about you?" Gregor proposed, "Did the thought of marrying outside the North ever enter your mind?"

"For most of my life, no," Dacey claimed, "But recently, I got the idea to do so."

"When was this?" Gregor inquired.

"Shortly after I enlisted in the Legion," Dacey illuminated.
It was not difficult for Gregor to imagine what – or who – had planted that thought in Dacey’s mind. So far, they had spoken with some degree of subtlety. But neither Gregor nor Dacey was fooling themselves or each other.

Gregor let out a slow breath and remarked "The other night, I told you what I would view as the ideal characteristics for my future bride to have. Now, I'd like you to do the same. If you had any say over what your future groom will be like, what would he be like?"

Dacey took a minute to think about that. Then she professed "I'd want him to be strong and firm. But he wouldn't have to resort to violence or threats in order to get people to follow and respect him. Hopefully, he'd also be rational, sensible, and smart. I'd deem myself especially lucky if he allowed me to continue training and fighting alongside him and his soldiers. I wouldn't want him to be in any rush to have children, but I'd definitely want him to be open to having them, too. However, to me, the most important feature is… is…"

"Go on," Gregor beckoned her.

Dacey released a soft sigh and admitted "It's the same as yours. What matters to me most is not his status or his strength, but whether or not he likes me. I'd hate to get caught in a loveless marriage."

*Then it appears we're at an advantage.*

Gregor smirked and uttered slyly "It just so happens that I like you. Very much, in fact."

"I know you do," Dacey muttered drily, "And I like you. But, of course, I already told you that. Even so, I thought that'd be obvious. I mean, we're already on a first name basis, are we not, Gregor?"

"Yes, we are," the Mountain affirmed. There came a lengthy pause in the tent. Gregor spent most of it staring at the wall. Finally, he turned back to the tall girl and told her "Dacey, I'm going to ask you a very personal question. I want you to answer it with total honesty."

"Alright," Dacey conceded.

There was another short interval of quietness, and then Gregor turned to Dacey, looked her in the eye, and asked without blinking "Could you… see yourself with me?"

Dacey did not give a verbal response right away. She must have seen that question coming. Even so, she appeared surprised by it. After an uncomfortable silence, she gently placed her hands on top of Gregor's and gave him her answer: "Truthfully, I… I can, Gregor. In fact… I can see myself better with you than just about any other man in Westeros."

A wide smile extended across the Mountain's face. He took Dacey's hands in his own and revealed "I feel much the same about you, Dacey. Most lords may be content with having a wife that will be faithful and give them heirs. But what I'd like to have is a wife that's capable of joining her husband on the battlefield and fighting alongside him. I would also like one who is not afraid to speak her mind."

"I always speak my mind," Dacey pointed out.

"I know you do," Gregor contended. "From what I gather, I am very close to your ideal preference for a husband. Meanwhile, you are very close to my ideal preference for a wife. You could say that you and I seem perfect for each other. So much so that I say we should do something about it."

Dacey cocked her head and asked attentively "Are you asking me to wed you, Gregor?"
"You could say that," Gregor alleged, "But I only want you to accept my offer if you truly desire to."

It only took Dacey a few seconds to make a decision. She looked Gregor in the eye and told him "When we return to Moat Cailin, I'm going to write to my mother. I'll ask her to give us her blessing."

Gregor grinned at her and stated "I shall count the days until I meet her."

He then leaned forward, gently took ahold of the back of Dacey's head, and softly pressed his lips against hers. In response, she closed her eyes, placed her hands on Gregor's shoulders, and returned the kiss with the true passion of the Northwoman she was.
Familial Diplomacy

Aside from that one kiss, Gregor and Dacey did nothing unusual. Nothing an unmarried highborn couple living by Westerosi standards would have done, at any rate. Had this been his first life, Gregor might have suggested going a little further. But he did not wish to ruin the moment. So after he parted his lips from Dacey’s, he bade her a good night and returned to his own tent. He fell asleep that night with a wide grin across his face.

It took the two platoons of Legionnaires a little more than a week to reach Moat Cailin.

Some of Victarion’s crew had remained behind on the Iron Victory. After their Captain and most of his Ironborn had escorted Littlefinger out of Gulltown, the rest of them began the long voyage back to the moat. They had sailed up the Cut and into the harbor of Moat Cailin just two days before its lord and his entourage rode up the Causeway.

Once the Legion had fully reassembled, Gregor retreated to his solar and summoned both Dacey and Maester Kennick to it. He informed the maester that he would be sending out two letters. The first one would be dispatched to King’s Landing; the other to Bear Island.

Gregor dictated what he wanted to say; Maester Kennick copied his speech thusly. In the letter to Bear Island, Dacey assisted heavily with the dictation. Both Gregor and Dacey could read and write very well. They could have composed the letters all on their own, but ever since Gregor achieved his lordship, he had found it was easier to have someone else handle his messages for him.

The letter to King’s Landing was addressed to Robert Baratheon. In it, Gregor notified the king of the Legion’s "failure" to safely chaperon Petry Baelish through the wild regions of the Vale. He included a full report of how they had been ambushed by the Milk Snakes. He mentioned that three of his own men had died in that raid alongside Littlefinger, and he emphasized that Ser Bertom Lynderly had fought courageously. He also included his deepest regrets and apologies (none of which were very truthful) about having let the King down. Gregor was not concerned that Robert or anyone else would be very displeased with the Legion's performance. This was not the first time that had been unable to carry out a task, after all. Aside from that, Baelish was only being considered for lordship of Harrenhal. It would have been another story entirely if he had already been granted the title.

The letter to Bear Island was shorter, but far more important to Gregor and Dacey for a variety of reasons. He addressed it to Maeg Mormont. He knew that in a discussion, Mormonts – like most Northerners – preferred to not beat around the bush and instead get straight to the point. His association with Dacey was proof of that. So rather than opening the letter with an awkward introduction and a description of what had motivated him to write in the first place, Gregor opened it with the extension of an invitation for Lady Maege to travel to Moat Cailin and stay as his honored guest. He directly admitted that he planned to take her daughter's hand. Dacey made sure to mention that she was already willing to marry him, and she was very happy about the prospect; she just wanted her mother’s approval before they went ahead.

During the dictation of the latter letter, Gregor noticed a light smirk spread across Maester Kennick’s face when the Mountain first declared that he intended to marry Dacey. Gregor could easily imagine why. Ever since he first arrived at Moat Cailin, the members of his council had been urging him to seek out possible candidates for a bride. As one might expect, the maester had been the most emphatic and persistent. Now that his lord was in the process of arranging a
marriage contract, it appeared as though his constant berating had finally pulled through.

After reading the letters over to ensure that they had been formatted exactly as he envisioned them, Gregor had them sent out to King's Landing and Bear Island. Then he eagerly (and somewhat impatiently) awaited a response to both.

The capital was the first to send a raven back. In his follow-up letter, the king expressed his disappointment over Littlefinger's untimely death. Luckily, Robert did not appear very cross or dissatisfied with the Legion's performance in the Vale. That implied that Gregor and his private army had not lost face with the crown. Since the supposed perpetrators of Baelish's murder (the Milk Snakes), had already been dealt with, Robert was not going to penalize any of the involved parties.

Ser Bertom Lynderly had already verified that the Milk Snakes were responsible for his master's death. His testimony as a non-member of the Legionnaire proved extremely useful in authenticating the story Gregor told to Robert.

Petyr Baelish was the last of his line, so his castle on the Fingers was left without a lord. Robert mentioned that his Hand was in the process remediying that issue. Lord Jon Arryn had already listed a number of ideal prospects for the new Lord of the Fingers. So far, the most promising contenders were Lord Yohn Royce's second son, Robar and Lady Anya Waynwood's second son, Donnel. Even Ser Lyn Corbray was being considered for the position.

There was no mention of Lord Jon's wife, but Gregor could imagine that she was devastated by the loss of her childhood "friend." Gregor was not heartless, but he was not feeling particularly sympathetic to Lysa Arryn's woes.

Gregor was hopeful that Lady Lysa would eventually get over Baelish's death. After all, he had only been manipulating her for a couple years, as compared to the couple decades in the original universe. There was a strong chance that she was not as damaged as she would have ultimately been. Perhaps she was even capable of being reasoned with.

If she did not recover from the shock of Petyr's murder, Gregor would not make it his trouble. Lysa's grief was strictly her problem. The mental and emotional well-being of Lord Hoster Tully's fanatical younger daughter was far from the top of Gregor's list of worries. As long as she did not poison her husband this time – and it was unlikely she would, given that there was no one around to persuade her now – Gregor would simply keep her out of his mind.

The letter from Robert arrived about ten days after Gregor dispatched a raven to King's Landing.

It took only four days for the raven sent to Bear Island to receive a response. This one was very brief; it only contained two sentences:

*I ride for the moat. Expect me within half a moon's turn.*

It was written in the hand of the maester at Bear Island, but it was not challenge for Gregor and Dacey to guess who had dictated that letter.

Gregor did not know precisely what to make of the message. All he knew for certain was that the mother of the woman he wished to marry was coming to Moat Cailin. Since there were no additional details (such as the nature of her visit), that could have been either good news or bad news. He found himself oddly perplexed.

As for Dacey, she was amused. It was just like her mother to be so forward, concise, and
ambiguous in something as important as this. Since she did not seem worried, Gregor decided not to fret over Maege Mormont's impending arrival.

Gregor knew that by this point in time, Lord Jeor Mormont had already joined the Night's Watch. So Jorah was currently serving as the Lord of Bear Island. Normally, the duty of arranging marriage contracts for the other members of his family would have fallen primarily on Jorah's shoulders. But House Mormont had always been something of an oddball in the North; it was similar to Dorne in that men and women were equal in everything. Lady Maege had taken it upon herself to organize betrothals for all of her daughters. Which, naturally, included her firstborn. She had not involved her nephew in any of the negotiations.

Eight days later, a small group of riders was spotted approaching from the north. The on-duty watchman was able to identify them by their banners. They were House Mormont retainers. At the front of the short column was Lady Maege herself.

As soon as he was notified of their approach, Gregor gave the order for the northern gate to be opened. The doors were fully parted and the portcullis fully raised by the time the company from Bear Island reached the moat. They all swiftly galloped into the holdfast. Once they were all in, they were guided over to the stables. After dismounting, they gave the stableboys charge of their horses.

By the time the party from Bear Island finished unloading their possessions, Gregor Clegane, Dacey Mormont, and a few top-ranking Legionnaires had entered the vicinity. They proceeded to approach the stables together.

As they got closer to the new arrivals, Gregor urged himself to remain calm, cool, and collected. First impressions meant everything in Westeros, especially in the North. And especially when dealing with a woman who would most likely become his goodmother soon.

This would not be the first time Gregor ever met one of the parents of a woman he was courting. Be that as it may, it would be the first time in this life.

Gregory Welch had had five girlfriends, three of which were among the six women he had slept with (the other three were just flings). The two he had not slept with were the ones he had been involved with during high school. He had only met the parents of two of his ex-girlfriends. Fortunately, both pairs had taken a liking to him almost straightaway.

That was one of Gregor's best qualities; he had an innate ability to get on the good side of just about everyone he met. He had never had much trouble getting people to like him in his first life; Gregory Welch had been a very charismatic person.

Gregor Clegane was certainly charismatic by Westerosi standards. Through his deeds, he had gained the love and respect of many people from all nine of the major regions of the country. He was still far from being universally adored, but he was well on his way to that objective. Even so, his popularity meant little and less if he could not win over Jeor Mormont's younger sister.

When Gregor and his companions reached the Bear Island retinue, the Mountain stepped in front of Maege Mormont. She gave him her full attention, but she did not say a word. He folded his hands behind his back, lightly bowed his head, and declared "On behalf of the Legion without Banners, I officially welcome you to Moat Cailin, my lady."

Lady Maege seemed pleased by the sincerity and cordiality in the introduction. She smirked and stated wryly "I'd have thought you'd welcome me on someone else's behalf, as well, Lord Gregor."
"Mother!" Dacey whispered sternly. She sounded a little aghast, but in actuality, she was trying not to snicker.

Maege Mormont was a gruff, strapping woman. She did not share Dacey's voluptuous curves, but her arms and chest were well bound with muscle. She was quite tall, too. She stood just an inch or two shorter than her daughter.

She was past her fortieth name day. Her hair was already beginning to turn a shade of light grey, there were bags under her eyes, and there were a couple wrinkles along her cheeks.

Despite the obvious signs of age, her countenance suggested that in her youth, she had been quite comely.

Like her daughter and her soldiers, Maege Mormont carried plenty of steel. She wore a sword at her hip, three daggers on her waist, and an axe on her back.

After a bit of relative quietness, Gregor offered "Would you care to see the moat, my lady?"

"I'm of the North, my lord," Lady Maege stated slyly, "I've seen Moat Cailin before. However, I have not seen it in this condition. So, yes; show me what you've done to it."

Gregor nodded in acknowledgment.

Quarters had already been arranged for Lady Maege's party. Gregor had Sylas Vikary show her soldiers to their rooms. While they went to get settled, Gregor and Dacey gave her mother a tour of Moat Cailin. She never made any comments about the various upgrades and renovations that had been made to the moat, but she definitely seemed impressed by them.

After the tour, Maege asked to make use of the training yard. She also asked Gregor if he would spar with her. Seeing no good reason to refuse her, he consented to her request.

Maege Mormont proved to be as adept a warrior as her daughter. She was twice Gregor's age and a foot shorter than him, but her slightly smaller stature made her much quicker and more agile. Nevertheless, Gregor's skills with weapons were superior, and while size and strength were not everything, he proved once more that they could indeed make a difference.

Gregor and Maege went nine rounds with each other. He won the first eight, and the last round ultimately came out as a draw. That was mostly because he was secretly getting bored. Other than Dacey, they had no audience to their dueling. Given the circumstances, Dacey was uncertain who to cheer for; so she remained silent throughout the bouts.

When they put up their blades, Maege disclosed "I thank you for the exercise, my lord. It's been a while since I faced a worthy opponent in the ring."

She had paid him a compliment. That alone gave Gregor a modicum of hope.

Gregor spent most of the rest of the day with Dacey and Maege. He kept looking for the right moment to address the possibility of a betrothal between him and Dacey. He expected Maege to be the first one to bring it up.

Strangely, the topic never came up that day. Maege appeared far more interested in the activities of the Legion without Banners, as well as Gregor's future plans for expanding and enhancing the Legion.

She never said a word about marriage or anything similar to it. It was as though the concept was
the absolute last thing on her mind. By the end of the day, Gregor was beginning to wonder if
Maege intended to speak on that issue at all.

The following morning, he discovered that she did.

Gregor broke his fast in the Top Hall with his council and his top officers like he always did.
Maege Mormont and her soldiers had joined them at Gregor's behest.

Right after breakfast ended, Lady Maege came to Gregor and requested a private audience with
him. He agreed, and she asked Dacey to accompany them. The massive knight led the two Bear
Islanders to his solar. There, Maege bade her daughter to wait outside whilst she spoke with the
Mountain inside. She claimed she needed to speak with Gregor separately beforehand. Dacey did
not protest.

Gregor held the door open to allow Maege to enter the room first. Once she was through the
threshold, he followed her in. He looked back at Dacey as he entered. She lightly smiled and
mouthed the words "take care of yourself" to him.

After closing the door to the solar, Gregor saw that Maege was already seated at one of the chairs
in front of his desk. As he approached his own chair behind the desk, he amiably proposed "Would
you care for wine, my lady?"

"Normally, I'd never turn down an after-breakfast drink," Maege replied, "But it would be better if
I'm sober for this."

"Very well," Gregor commented. In his experience, many Northmen were actually more agreeable
and pleasant when they were drunk. But they were also less subject to sense and rationale. This
situation would require using logic over courtesy.

Once he was settled in his chair, Gregor looked to Lady Maege. After five seconds of absolute
silence, she bluntly stated "So, Lord Gregor, you wish to marry my daughter?"

"Indeed, I do, my lady," the Mountain said in response.

Maege gave a nod and inquired "May I ask why?"

"Many reasons," Gregor professed, "Firstly, there's politics. I may be a vassal to the North now, but
no one will ever forget I was originally from the Westerlands. Despite my relocation, I will never
truly be recognized as a Northman until I take a Northern bride. Then there's the matter that I
actually need a bride anyway. Every lord needs heirs, after all. Your daughter is strong, resilient,
compassionate, intelligent, and she is as loyal to House Stark as you are. I believe she is my finest
prospect."

Maege rubbed her chin as she thought about those observations. Then she remarked "From a
political and social viewpoint, I would agree. The marriage would be advantageous to my house, as
well. Your titles as the Lord of Moat Cailin, King Robert's Master of Order, and the commander of
the Legion without Banners carry a lot of prestige. But you are not searching for a sword or a
horse, my lord. You are searching for a bride. I don't like the idea of you thinking of my daughter
as merely being a choice, even if she's your 'best choice.'"

"That is not how I view her, my lady," Gregor assured her, "I care very deeply for your daughter.
Ever since she enlisted in the Legion, I have developed a close bond with her. She's invaluable as a
warrior and as a leader. Before long, I came to regard her as one of my dearest friends. Recently, I
started seeing her as more than even that."
"So Dacey told me true when she claimed you and she have feelings for each other?" Maege asked rhetorically.

"She did," Gregor affirmed.

"Have you acted upon those feelings yet?" Maege enquired, narrowing her eyes, "Tell me truthfully. I'll know if you are being insincere."

Gregor straightforwardly admitted "A fortnight ago, we shared a kiss. One single kiss. Nothing more."

"I've no qualms on that," Maege muttered, "There is such thing as a chaste kiss, after all."

"It was just that, I promise you," Gregor stated.

Maege nodded again. Then she leaned back in her chair and queried "What kind of bride would you wish to have? More to the point, what kind of bride do you expect Dacey to be?"

"The only thing I truly desire from her is devotion," Gregor disclosed, "I only expect her to be faithful to me. Just as I would be faithful to her in turn. Some lords may cast aside their marriage vows in a moment of weakness, but I am stronger than that. When I make a vow, I honor to the end."

"So fidelity is all you want?" Maege assumed.

"No, I want our marriage to be illustrious and successful, too," Gregor contended, "I do not expect Dacey to obey my every command without question. I know that she is by no means submissive, and I do not expect her to be. In fact, it's her free-spirited nature that drew me to her."

Maege scoffed and mumbled "Yes, Dacey always was a bit wild. Even I could not control her at times. But make no mistake; she loves and respects me just as much as I do her."

"I know she does," Gregor murmured softly.

After another interval of uninterrupted silence, Maege stated "Alright, my lord. You've convinced me that you have compelling reasons, excellent reasons, and legitimate reasons for wanting to marry my daughter. Now say I gave my consent for the marriage to happen. Let us speculate on what you would do to make the union last.

"Speculate how, Lady Maege?" Gregor enquired.

"Suppose that the costs of the wedding are quite high," Maege hypothesized, "Or suppose other circumstances prevented it from taking place. Perhaps you would have to sacrifice a great deal of money or power in the process. Just how much would you be willing to give up so that the wedding could take place?"

"I cannot imagine how a single wedding could cause such extreme difficulties," Gregor remarked, "But I will go along with your theory. If we were faced with such hardships… we would simply delay the wedding until we either found a way to recover those losses or compensate for them. But I plan to limit how much I invest into the wedding. After all, if I sacrificed too much of my wealth or power for my own wedding, I would risk losing my credibility, as well. My integrity means much more to me than money or influence. By utilizing so much of all three in a wedding, I would risk damaging my reputation, too. That would not bode well for me or any house I married into."

Maege seemed pleased by that argument. She proclaimed "Very good answer, my lord. In the
North, weddings are casual affairs. Since you are not of the North, we could excuse a little extravagance for yours. But you would still do well to keep it simple.

"I plan to," Gregor told her.

"Good," Maege murmured, "Now, let us say the marriage comes with minimum expense, but afterwards, Dacey becomes deeply involved in managing your house's finances. She is generally responsible with money, but she may propose some questionable or seemingly selfish ventures. How much coin would you be willing to spend to make her happy?"

"You and I both know that marriages are not about keeping one's spouse content," Gregor cautiously responded, "Of course, I would want Dacey to be happy, but she does not strike me as the type of woman who relies greatly on material goods for pleasure. Besides, if I gave up too much for her, it would imply that Dacey is the true head of the house, and not everyone believes in gender equality as I do."

"Another prudent response, my lord," Maege stated approvingly, "After you are wed, will Dacey continue serving alongside you in the Legion? Or do you intend to have her stay in Moat Cailin for the rest of her life?"

"She will still be free to go where she likes," Gregor pronounced firmly, "Anytime she wishes to go riding, her horse will be available. I will never deny her the right to wield a sword, either. Except, perhaps, when she is heavily pregnant. I would be quite averse to her fighting if ever she is seven months with child or more. But even then, I would not demand of her to sheath her sword. I would simply suggest that she put it away until after the child's birth. Hopefully, she will not protest. Once she has regained her strength, I'll give her back her sword myself."

Maege was very satisfied with that response. It was just what she was hoping to hear, and Gregor meant every word of it. After a moment, she gazed off to the side and muttered "It appears you have accounted for everything, Lord Gregor. Obviously you know what you are doing. Your feelings for my daughter are true, as are your reasons for wanting to wed her. This union would indeed be beneficial to both my house and yours. The two of you have the capacity to make the marriage a joyful and successful one. With all that in mind, I have every reason to give you my blessing."

At that, Gregor leaned forward expectantly.

A few seconds later, Maege continued with "However… before I do, there is one last factor that must be acknowledged."

"What is that?" Gregor inquired.

"I need to know just how far you would go for my daughter," Maege declared, "All this talk about sacrifices has not been mere conjecture. It is directly related to the issue at hand."

"How so?" Gregor asked.

"In a married couple, both partners often have to give some things up," Maege contended, "That's the way it is with every union. Even if their marriage is happy and without difficulties, they have to compromise at times. Whenever they compromise, they have to make sacrifices of their own."

"I… cannot dispute that," Gregor uttered, shrugging a bit, "But how is this relevant? Is there a sacrifice you would have me make?"

Maege sternly nodded her head. She then drew one of her daggers, gripped it by the blade, and
held it out to Gregor. As he slowly took the weapon by the hilt, Maege instructed him "Take that dagger… and cut off one of your fingers."

Gregor felt himself overcome with shock and alarm. He gazed at her as though he was certain he had misheard her. He said uneasily "Come again?"

"The oldest bonds were formed with blood sacrifices," Maege enlightened him, "Typically, one would open up one's hand or face with a blade, and offer the spilt blood as a sign of one's compliance. But these days, you can hardly go three miles without someone else taking a slash at you. Cutting open yourself does not mean as much as it used to. As such, a more permanent sacrifice is often given instead."

Gregor was speechless. Up until now, he had spoken to and treated Lady Maege with nothing less than the utmost courtesy. Now, he felt much less amenable. He looked to the Bear Island woman and grumbled irately "What would this even prove?"

"It would prove how serious you are about this match," Maege uttered bluntly, "You wish to show me how much you wish to wed my daughter? Then do so. Give up a little piece of yourself so that you can have all of her."

"Dacey never mentioned anything like this," Gregor hastily pointed out.

"Probably because she was hoping to avoid it," Maege theorized, "Alas, I will not. This is a basic matter of principle, my lord. Now make your choice. Will you choose your hand or Dacey's?"

Gregor was already startled by the very concept of amputating his own finger. Now he was not even being allotted any time to think on this proposal. Maege was forcing him to make a choice right then.

The Mountain anxiously gazed at the dagger. It was very sharp, and it held a very fine edge. With one swift slash, it could slice clean through bone, skin, and muscle alike. Furthermore, Gregor was very handy with a knife. He could make a very clean and precise cut.

Still, that did not make the idea of losing an appendage any easier to bear.

He desperately thought of ways around this predicament. Maybe he would not have to sever an entire finger. Maybe Maege would be content with just one segment of his smallest digit. But he could not ask her that; it would be a sign of weakness.

He then recalled that there were such things as prosthetics in this world. Perhaps he could replace whichever finger he lost with a small rod of metal. Then again, even if the prosthetic was shaped like an actual finger and moved like one, it would just be a substitute for the real thing.

He even considered asking Maege to use the dagger for him. But he swiftly banished that thought from his mind. If he begged someone else to do a gruesome task that he himself was unwilling to do, it would be a huge blow to his honor and his decency.

From the look of things, there was no easy way around this dilemma. He only had two real options: sever one of his digits, or plead with Maege not to make him go through with the operation.

After a minute of tense silence, Gregor finally made his decision.

He slowly raised the dagger… and plunged its tip onto the surface of his desk. It landed nowhere near his other hand.
Gregor then looked up at Lady Maege Mormont and proclaimed unsteadily "I'm sorry, I… I can't do it. I can't… mutilate myself."

Maege seemed indifferent to that statement. She folded her arms and assumed "So you're refusing to make the sacrifice?"

"Yes, I'm refusing!" Gregor snapped heatedly, "But I'm not giving up on Dacey. I will do anything else – I mean, anything else – to appease you. I beg you to let me demonstrate the truth of that claim through some other means. Please do not doubt me when I say I love your daughter."

Maege did not respond to that proclamation straightaway. Over two minutes of unpleasant, intense silence elapsed before she finally opened her mouth. But when she did, speaking was not the first thing she did with it. Instead, she broke into a wide smile.

Then she declared "I know you do, Lord Gregor. I knew that ten minutes after I first met you. I also know that she loves you, as well. The way you two look at each other… there is genuine love there. And I would be a fool to come between you and her."

Gregor cocked his head and uttered "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"For that, I cannot fault you," Maege commented. She extracted her dagger from the desk and sheathed it. Then she revealed "This was all a trial. I was testing you to see if you could be driven to cut off your finger without any objections."

"It appears as though I failed," Gregor mumbled grimly.

"Oh, no," Maege asserted, still smiling, "You passed."

Now Gregor was very confused. "I did?"

Maege provided an explanation: "If you actually had cut off your finger, you would have singled yourself out as an obsessive who would do anything to get what he wants, even at the needless expense of his own well-being. Little good comes out of a person with such a mindset. For instance, some would argue Robert Baratheon's true motive for starting the Rebellion was a result of that type of fixation. That was how much he yearned for my liege lord's sister. Had the King not found happiness with Cersei Lannister, I would fear for the realm. Then again, having a Lannister Queen is not very ideal, either."

"That is a fair assessment," Gregor conceded, "In every aspect."

Maege nodded again, and she went on with "I believe you would do everything you could – within reason – to protect my daughter. If the situation called for it, I am certain you would lay your life down for her. But if you would voluntarily inflict damage onto yourself to win her over, you would have crossed the line between love and infatuation. It would only have been a finger now, but it could have been a hand or worse later on. Your physical well-being may not be all that was at stake. Your mental well-being would ultimately suffer, as well. Once that happened, you would soon be just as much a danger to Dacey as yourself. I would never allow her to be bound to such an individual."

Lady Maege would have made a great interrogator at the Agency.

Indeed, Gregor was impressed by how much thought and effort Maege Mormont had put in this test. She had applied a lesson in advanced psychology – or what would have been known as advanced psychology in his first life – to determine the nature of Gregor's relationship with Dacey. She meant a great deal to him, but he was not unhealthily besotted with her.
Evidently, Maege only wanted what was best for her daughter, and she would go to great length to ensure that Dacey had nothing less.

Gregor did feel a little annoyed at being misled, but he had to face facts; he could not stay ahead of everyone in Westeros. In any case, at least his encounter with Lady Maege produced a favorable outcome.

"I hope you hold no ill will towards me for deceiving you, my lord," Maege uttered, a little worriedly.

"Not at all," Gregor reassured her, "I wish I could say I saw right through this charade. Alas, I cannot. For the first time in ever, I've been caught totally off my guard. As such, I salute you, my lady."

Maege smirked again and pronounced "I know it must have been grueling; forcing you to choose between Dacey's hand and part of yours. Had you flat-out refused and claimed that no woman was worth losing a digit for, Dacey and I would have left within the hour. What matters is that you hesitated before you decided. Had you actually swung that dagger, I would have stopped your hand before the blade made contact with your skin. You would still have kept your hand, but you would have lost Dacey's. But now that rationale and instinct have triumphed over desire, you shall have both, instead."

That last remark piqued Gregor's interest. He leaned forward and said anxiously "So, does that mean you…?"

Before he could finish, Maege nodded once more and professed "There is no need for you to prove yourself anymore. I now know that Dacey could do no better than the man before me. For that, I give you my congratulations… as well as my blessing."

Gregor smiled brightly, rose to his feet, walked around his desk, and held his hand out to the Bear Island woman. She took it, and he shook her hand vigorously. He said elatedly yet in a somewhat professional tone "I thank you, Lady Maege. I swear to you, you will never come to regret this."

"I'll hold you to your word," the Bear Island woman remarked. She rose to her own feet, grinned back at the Mountain, and informed him "I look forward to calling you my son."

He chuckled at that, thought the concept of being Maege Mormont's son-by-law did sound appealing. Gregor then pointed out the door and commented "On that note…?"

"Go right ahead," Maege bade him, "If there's to be a wedding, the bride should definitely know of it."

Gregor promptly sauntered to the door and opened it. As he anticipated, Dacey had lingered in the hallway. If she had overheard any of the conversation between her mother and Gregor, she gave no indication of such. Gregor was fairly certain she had avoided the temptation to eavesdrop.

When the massive knight stepped out into the hallway, the Bear Island girl turned her attention to him. She seemed equal parts excited and apprehensive.

"Well?" she inquired in interest.

"Come on in," he urged her.

Gregor reentered the solar with Dacey right behind him. She went to Maege, held her right hand in both of hers, and asked eagerly "What have you decided, Mother?"
Lady Maege Mormont smiled gently at her daughter, caressed her cheek with her free hand, and told her "I deeply approve of Lord Gregor, my darling. You have my blessing to marry him."

Dacey was delighted. She turned back to Gregor, rushed over to him, and embraced him affectionately. As Gregor held her, he looked to his intended's mother and gestured for her to approach them. Maege grinned, walked over to the couple, and joined in the hug.

When they finally pulled apart, Maege questioned curiously "When do you intend to wed?"

"As soon as possible," Dacey answered.

Gregor had much the same in mind, but there were certain factors he had to account for first. He thought aloud "I'd like to have at least some of my family present for the ceremony. It'll take about a fortnight for them to travel from Clegane's Keep to Moat Cailin. We'll need even more time to plan the ceremony itself. I know Northmen prefer their nuptials modest, but, as you are no doubt aware, Moat Cailin is inhabited by more than just Northmen. The tastes and penchants of the other Westerosi should be acknowledged, as well."

"I agree," Dacey claimed, "Even if we wanted to keep everything simple, our fellow Legionnaires will probably make a far bigger issue of this affair than we shall."

"That can't be helped," Maege proclaimed. She rubbed her temple and suggested "With all that considered… do you suppose the wedding could occur within a moon's turn at the most?"

Gregor thought a moment, and then he nodded and professed "That is definitely doable."

"A moon's turn is fine by me," Dacey concurred.

Maege clapped her hands together and announced "So be it. The ceremony will be held thirty days from today. I'll remain here to help you prepare for it. Expect to see very much of me over the coming weeks."

*I don't know whether to be grateful or petrified by that.*

Either way, Gregor was overjoyed. Now that he had Lady Maege's blessing, there was nothing else keeping him and Dacey apart. In a single moon's turn, the Bear would climb the Mountain.
Naturally, Gregor and Dacey were both ecstatic about their upcoming nuptials. Be that as it might, they did not wish to overly sensationalize the matter. They would have preferred things to be simple. In fact, had it been their decision, they would have just held a small, private ceremony with only their families, their dearest friends, and their most trusted allies in attendance.

Alas, for a variety of reasons, a modest ceremony was quite impossible. It could only be done if they somehow withheld the knowledge of their engagement from everyone else in Moat Cailin. If only the two of them knew of it, that may have been possible. However, Lady Maege Mormont had no intention of keeping quiet about the affair, much to her daughter and soon-to-be goodson's dismay.

Fortunately, before long, Dacey and Gregor decided they could put up with a lavish wedding, and that such an event might actually be beneficial to all persons involved. They figured they may as well give their fellow Legionnaires a chance to share in their joy, as well as an opportunity to celebrate. Gods knew there were few enough of those already.

An hour after Lady Maege gave her blessing, Gregor had the staff of Moat Cailin and the top officers of the Legion without Banners assemble in the main courtyard of the moat. There he and Dacey stood on a platform overlooking the area, and they officially announced their engagement.

Unsurprisingly, this news was met with energetic cheering and applause. Once Gregor and Dacey came down from the platform, they took the time to shake the hands of everyone who wished to personally congratulate them. Once again, Oberyn Martell wanted to offer more than a simple handshake. He argued that if the two of them were going to be bound together and no other for life, they may as well have a little "enjoyment" beforehand. As politely yet directly as possible, Gregor and Dacey turned down the Dornishman's offer. "Tempting" though it was, they claimed.

Many times throughout that day, Gregor and Dacey were approached by soldiers of the Legion and people in the towns adjoining the moat who also wished to congratulate them. That involved plenty more handshakes. As well as some raising of flagons and claps on the back. Gregor was used to receiving this much attention, but Dacey was quite unaccustomed to it. To her, it was all a little overwhelming. Luckily, he was able to help her endure it.

In the early evening, Gregor had Maester Kennick compose three letters; one to Winterfell, one to King's Landing, and one to Clegane's Keep. He intended to notify Eddard Stark, Robert Baratheon, and Tarrence Clegane respectively of his wedding.

Eddard was now Gregor's liege lord, and Dacey's family had been a loyal vassal of the Starks for eons. Logically, the wolf lord should be aware of what marriage contracts his bannermen were involved in.

Robert needed to be informed for a similar reason. Not only was he the King, but Gregor also held a very prominent spot on the Small Council. By marrying into the North, Gregor would be strengthening the domain of the crown.

Most of all, Gregor's own family had to be told of the engagement. Dacey's family would know soon enough, as would every other Northern house. But unless Robert decided to tell the whole of the realm (which was unlikely), it was uncertain that any houses south of the Neck would be apprised of the wedding without Gregor's notice. Nevertheless, Gregor was determined to have some of his relations present at the ceremony. So he dispatched his fastest, most resilient raven to
his father's keep.

Within the next week, Gregor received a reply from all three parties. Eddard Stark and Robert Baratheon merely acknowledged the union of House Clegane of Moat Cailin with House Mormont of Bear Island. They also bade him congratulations, along with many years of happiness and good health.

The letter from Clegane's Keep was sent by Gregor's mother, Lady Dalish Clegane. She expressed her utmost delight on her son's engagement. Apparently, she could not properly convey on paper just how enthusiastic and proud she truly was.

That aside, Dalish told her son that his father was too preoccupied with other matters to appear at the wedding, but since she was available, she would make every effort to be there. She claimed that by the time he received her letter, she would already be riding north for Moat Cailin. She also mentioned that she would be bringing Sandor and Ellyn along.

Gregor was enraptured by that development. He had not seen any member of his family in almost three years. He had written to them at least thrice a month, and they had always written back, but other than that, they had kept very little correspondence. He found that he missed them dreadfully.

It soon occurred to Gregor that since his mother and siblings were travelling by land, they would have to cross the Green Fork at some point. He could not imagine why they might choose to ford the river as he and his company had done when he first relocated to Moat Cailin. With that in mind, the only way they would get across in time for the wedding was if they used a certain bridge. This particular bridge happened to be infested with weasels.

Gregor hoped Walder Frey would not hinder his mother and siblings. If the Late Lord knew what was good for him, he would let them pass without incident.

The Cleganes of Clegane's Keep were still relatively minor in terms of status. Thus, it was unlikely that Walder Frey would attempt to extort a marriage contract out of Lady Dalish. Despite the fact that her eldest son was one of the most influential people in Westeros, the Cleganes of Moat Cailin had no exclusive connections with the Westerlands outside of blood.

As much as Gregor hated Walder Frey and his overpopulated house, he did not wish to give the old weasel grounds to unduly harbor a grudge or resentment towards him. Lord Walder had always given the Legionnaires free passage whenever their services were required anywhere west of the Trident. But that was mostly just because the Legion were acting in the king’s interests, as well as the interests of the realm. Anyone outside of the Legion was usually still forced to pay a toll for access to the bridge.

Apart from that, Gregor Clegane had not been spared Walder's ongoing ambitions to expand the reach of his house. In the three years he had been Lord of Moat Cailin and Master of Order, Gregor had received offers for a number of potential marriage contracts from all over Westeros. Walder Frey had sent more than anyone else. Gregor had assured everyone else that he would give their offers some consideration. He had made that claim to Walder, too, but in actuality, he had burned all the messages from Lord Frey in his fireplace. Of course, Walder never knew that, but Gregor could imagine he was very displeased that the Mountain had chosen a Northern beauty over his homely daughters.

As luck would have it, when Lady Dalish arrived at the Twins, Walder Frey had decided (for maybe the first time in his overlong life) to be chivalrous, and he allowed her and her company to cross without tolling them. Gregor would find that out later, and afterwards, he made sure to write
a short message to Lord Walder, thanking him for being so "courteous" to his family. He did that mostly out of obligation instead of genuine gratitude.

A fortnight after the marriage pact was broadcasted, a small band of riders was spotted coming up the Kingsroad. Their banners bore the image of three hounds on a yellow field. The sigil of the Cleganes of Clegane's Keep. Gregor was promptly summoned to the southern gate, along with his intended and her mother. They observed the approaching company from afar.

Lady Daliah Clegane herself led them. She had never been very fond of horseback riding, but to properly portray the strength of her house, she opted to ride a horse all the way up the Causeway rather than sit in a carriage or a wagon. As it happened, she rode her courser with considerable grace.

Sandor and Ellyn rode on either side of her. Ellyn was mounted on an average-sized palfrey. She enjoyed horseback riding substantially more than her mother, but she still lacked the confidence to ride anything bigger or wilder than a palfrey.

Sandor, on the other hand, had already become an expert rider. He was astride a large, fierce-looking black destrier. That stallion must have been a young Stranger If not, he had to be either his father or brother. Gregor made a note to inform the stableboys to be mindful of that beast.

As the Clegane procession was granted entrance into the moat, Gregor, Dacey, and Maege made their way down to the courtyard. They met up with his family at the stables. Gregor was able to warn the stableboys in time. His timing was perfect; the stableboys were tasked with handling the unruly animal just a few seconds later.

Dacey and her mother were almost as eager to see Gregor's family as he was. They were hardly surprising, given that they would all soon be related by law. At any rate, Gregor was all too pleased to oblige them.

Gregor gave his family a warm greeting. He kissed his mother on the cheek, patted his brother on the back, and hugged his sister affectionately. A few words were exchanged, mostly along the lines of "I missed you so much."

After this reunion, he introduced the Mormonts and the other Cleganes to one another. The six of them spent the entire day together.

Gregor's fiancée took a quick liking to his younger brother and sister, and they to her. Interestingly, Sandor and Dacey were approximately the same age. They were roughly the same height, as well. Gregor wondered which of them would make the better warrior.

They must have wondered the same. Around midday, the two of them went a few rounds in the training yard with each other. Gregor knew what to expect from Dacey, but he had not seen Sandor fight in three years.

Evidently, the younger Clegane boy had not neglected his brother's teachings. He had practiced them and improved upon them greatly. It appeared Ser Wallis Peckledon had taught him a few more advanced techniques, as well.

It turned out Sandor and Dacey were equally proficient combatants, just as Gregor and Lady Maege were. That was an intriguing outcome. If either of them sparred with his future mother-by-law, Gregor would technically know if their skills were superior, inferior, or equal to his.

Sandor was not the only one who had changed. Ellyn had grown more than either of her brothers
had in the last three years. She had to be the tallest girl of ten Gregor had ever seen. Six more inches, and she would have towered over Lady Daliah. Her feminine features were starting to come in, as well. She still bore a child's face, but she would not have a child's body for much longer.

While he was happy for his sister's forthcoming transition into womanhood, Gregor was a little stunned that it was happening so early in her life. It could have just been a product of her Clegane genetics, but still…

*Why is everyone so damn precocious in this universe?*

He could not be blamed for thinking that. Ever since the first book, he had noticed that the children in the franchise grew up **very** quickly. Dany married at thirteen, pregnant at fourteen. Jon joining the Night's Watch at fourteen. Robb being crowned King of the North at fifteen. Sansa having her moon's blood at twelve. Arya killing a boy at nine. Bran able to climb a tower at seven.

Then again, in order to survive in a world like **this**, children would have to mature faster than they would in Gregor's first life. So maybe there was more realism in their early rise into adulthood than there initially appeared to be. As it happened, Dacey was not yet seventeen. But in every aspect other than age, she was a woman already.

In the fortnight before Gregor's family reached Moat Cailin, Lady Maege Mormont had been primarily responsible for making all the preparations for the wedding. In the fortnight after, Lady Daliah assisted her greatly. The two women shouldered the burden in equal amounts.

Food and drink were not major concerns. Moat Cailin was stocked well enough to feed an army on a regular basis (and did). Of course, they would need more than the Legion's standard rations to satisfy the wedding guests. Luckily, the moat was stored with enough provisions to last the current occupants an entire decade. Furthermore, many of the guests would be bringing dishes of their own to the feast.

Providing accommodations for all the guests was a little more challenging. By this point, eleven of the moat's towers had been rebuilt, bringing the total up to fourteen. Even so, most of the new rooms were currently occupied by the Legionnaires. Either some of would have to share lodgings, or the guests would have to take up residence in the towns or camp outside the walls. It was considered rude to force a guest to sleep outside, so Maege and Daliah were leaned towards the former option.

The decorations and entertainment were relatively modest. The banners of House Mormont and House Clegane (both of them) would be hung from many of the walls. A few elaborate tapestries would be put up, too. Additionally, a score of singers had offered to provide musical accompaniment for the feast. After interviewing them, Daliah and Maege selected the five most talented among the twenty and hired them for the occasion.

The hardest detail was the ceremony itself. Specifically, which faith it would be done in. Like all Northern families (except House Manderly of White Harbor), the Mormonts were devout followers of the Old Gods. Gregor Clegane, however, had been raised to believe in the New Gods. Despite the Mountain's relocation to the North, he still practiced his faith of the Seven. Publically, at least. Privately… he had never really followed them.

Although Gregor was a recognized practitioner of that faith, he had never really admitted any belief in it to himself. To him, the hardest thing to grasp about this world was all the different religions. Of course, he was aware that religion would always been a sensitive subject in every world.
In his previous life, Gregory Welch had been a Catholic, but he had still accepted and respected all other religions and those who practiced them, as well as atheists. All throughout elementary, middle, and high school, he had been a firm believer in his family's religion. After he left home to start college, his beliefs had begun to diminish. Being in a new environment certainly had that effect on people.

During the final years of his life, Gregory had considered himself more of an agnostic. He still liked to entertain the idea of a higher power, but he had put more conviction in science and discovery. Even so, in the back of his mind, he never lost his faith.

Gregor was unsure if he still believed in God in this life. In any case, some divine being must have been responsible for bringing him to this universe. Because if not that, who or what else could have been responsible?

Strictly speaking, if there was a god of this world, it would most likely be George R.R. Martin himself. With that in mind, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss may have been lesser gods.

Regardless of who the real god or gods may have been, Gregor was just glad they had allowed him to form a union with someone as marvelous as Dacey Mormont.

After discussing the issue with their mothers, Gregor and Dacey decided to have a ceremony that mixed both of their faiths. It would be conducted by a septon, but it would take place before a heart tree. That way, the marriage would be legitimate in the eyes of both the Old Gods and the New.

During the first year of his occupation of Moat Cailin, Gregor had planned to give the moat a godswood. Growing one naturally would have been impossible. So Gregor had a group of Northern Legionnaires go to the Isle of Faces and uproot a cluster of weirwood trees. The trees were then replanted in the eastern section of the moat. One of them was a fully grown heart tree.

In order to conduct the ceremony properly, Gregor would need a cloak bearing the sigil and colors of his House. Obviously, he could not use the cloak Ser Tarrence had draped over Lady Daliah's shoulders at their own wedding. That cloak belonged to the Cleganes of Clegane's Keep.

Daliah Clegane took the time to make a new cloak for her firstborn son. He could have commissioned a team of seamstresses for the job, but his mother insisted on doing it herself.

Lady Daliah started with a large piece of purple cloth (Purple was the color that represented prosperity. For that reason, Gregor had adapted it as the official color of his own house). After fashioning the material into a cloak, Daliah had sewn the image of a large mountain on the back of it. She reproduced the image exactly as it appeared on Gregor's banners, right down to the nine small figures at the base of the mountain.

The final product was absolutely stunning. He spent ten whole minutes praising his mother's handiwork. The sight of the cloak made Gregor long for the moment when he would wrap it around Dacey's shoulders.

At last, the much-awaited day arrived.

Five hundred guests had come for the wedding. The godswood of Moat Cailin was large enough to hold eighty of them. So the only ones who witnessed the actual ceremony were family members, close friends, and highest-ranking Legionnaires. Which was what Gregor and Dacey would have desired in the first place.

In the early evening, those eighty individuals were packed into the moat's godswood. There was no
room for chairs, so everyone had to remain standing. No one seemed bothered to do so, thankfully.

The guests stood in two groups composed of eight rows of five. All of them were facing the heart tree.

Gregor stood immediately before the heart tree. He looked very much the lord he was.

He was freshly-bathed and clean-shaven. His usual odor of sweat had been replaced by the scent of soap.

He was clad in a doublet of boiled leather, which he wore over a plain white tunic. They were complemented by a pair starched woolen breeches and his most formal pair of boots. All of his apparel was tinted slightly purple. Over his shoulders, he loosely wore the cloak his mother had made. The cloak of House Clegane of Moat Cailin.

Two other men were standing nearby Gregor. One of them was the septon of Moat Cailin, Septon Norvin. He was the minister of the ceremony. He stood in front and a little to the right of Gregor.

The other man stood opposite the Mountain. This man was almost as tall as Gregor and eleven years older than him. He was clad mainly in green, and he wore the sigil of his house on his own doublet. The sigil was a bear standing on its hind legs with its claws and fangs bared. He was Lord Jorah Mormont of Bear Island.

As the head of House Mormont, Jorah would be the one to give Dacey away.

He was not the only new Bear Islander in attendance. Lady Maege had brought her other daughters – Alysane, Lyra, and Jorelle – to the ceremony. They were all in the very first row on the left side. Likewise, Lady Daliah, Sandor, and Ellyn were in the first row on the right side.

Jorah's first wife, Lady Blinda of House Glover, was still living, but she had been too ill to travel. As such, she had remained behind at Bear Island. Gregor was very understanding. After all, he knew that Blinda Mormont's days were numbered.

Gregor stood in place, tapping his fingertips together anxiously. Anyone could plainly see that he was very eager for the ceremony to begin.

In his previous life, some of Gregor's married friends had gotten cold feet on the day of their weddings. He knew that men in this world could suffer the same apprehension. Some of them seemed pleased with the unity of marriage at first, but when they actually got to the altar, the magnitude of their commitment fully sank in.

Gregor had avoided experiencing any such qualms so far. Even so, he did feel the same worries every conscientious bridegroom felt. Would he make Dacey happy? Would he be happy? Would they raise a strong, healthy family together? Would their marriage survive the trials to come?

When he thought on that closely, Gregor could not help but scoff. Ever since he first came into this world, his foremost concern had been to preserve the realm and save as many people as possible. Now he was fretting on his ability to be a good husband. He really was a full-fledged resident of Westeros now.

Although there were eighty other people present, the groom felt strangely alone.

That feeling was expunged ten minutes later, when the bride finally arrived.

Dacey entered the godswood alongside her mother. When Gregor first set his eyes on her, he could
actually feel them widen. She was a vision of beauty.

The Bear Island girl rarely wore dresses. She made an exception for the wedding. And what an exception it was.

Dacey's gown had been designed by three of the best seamstresses in Westeros. It was made of exquisite Myrish lace and Lyseni silk. The hemline went all the way down to her ankles. A small pattern of brown bears was embroidered along the bodice. The dress's hue was a blend of many shades of green. Dacey wore the green cloak of House Mormont around her own shoulders.

Her long black hair was done up in the traditional Northern style. It was braided in some places; smooth in others. There was not a blemish to be seen anywhere on her normally pale face.

As she walked down the aisle, all eyes were on Dacey, particularly Gregor's.

*She looks just as amazing in a dress as she does in armor.*

Lady Maege Mormont accompanied her eldest daughter all the way to the heart tree. Then she lightly kissed Dacey on the forehead and went to join her other daughters in the congregation.

Gregor flashed a small smile at Dacey as she approached him. She smiled back as she moved to stand beside Jorah.

Once all heads were turned towards Norvin, the septon cleared his throat and pronounced "Who comes before the gods?"

Dacey took a step forward, folded her hands beneath her cloak, and responded with "I, Dacey of House Mormont, Lady of Bear Island."

Septon Norvin then glanced over at the tallest person there and stated "Who comes to claim her?"

Gregor gazed down at the older man and declared "I, Gregor of House Clegane, Lord of Moat Cailin and Master of Order."

The septon then looked back to the bride and questioned "Who gives her?"

Jorah firmly announced "I, Jorah of House Mormont, Lord of Bear Island."

Septon Norvin nodded and told Gregor "You may now cloak the Lady Dacey and take her under your protection."

Dacey looked over at Jorah. The bear lord grinned at his cousin and swiftly removed the House Mormont cloak from around her shoulders. That marked the moment she was officially released from the protection of her house.

With her back turned to Gregor, the Mountain approached his intended, slid the cloak of House Clegane off his shoulders, and carefully draped it over Dacey's. After that, he took her hand in his, and the two of them stepped up to Septon Norvin.

Norvin got out a long ribbon dyed green and purple. He wrapped it around the couple's interconnected hands. After that, he held their hands in his own, and he proclaimed "In the sight of the Old Gods and the New, I hereby seal these two souls, binding them as one. Now and for eternity."

After untying the ribbon, Septon Norvin backed away and instructed them "Look upon one another
and say the words."

Gregor and Dacey turned to face each other, and they took each other's hands softly. With the lightest trace of a smile on her lips, she solemnly swore "I am his and he is mine, from this day until the end of my days."

He grinned gently down at her, and he declared with every bit of confidence he could muster: "I am hers and she is mine, from this day until the end of my days."

At that, the Septon raised his arms and announced "Let it be known that Dacey of House Mormont and Gregor of House Clegane are one flesh, one heart, one soul, now and forever. Cursed be he who would seek to tear them asunder."

Norvin lowered his arms and wordlessly gestured for the couple to complete their vows. Neither of them needed any more encouragement.

"With this kiss, I pledge my love," Gregor avowed. He slowly leaned forward, closed his eyes, and pressed his lips against Dacey's. In that kiss he put every bit of love he had. She shut her own eyes and kissed him back with just as much love.

All around them, the congregation erupted into enthusiastic applause. The cheering in the godswood was so loud, it was almost deafening.

When Gregor and Dacey finally came apart, they turned to face the attendees and smiled down on them. Gregor held Dacey's left hand in his right, and together, they proceeded back up the aisle towards the entrance of the godswood. All the while, they kept their interconnected hands high in the air.

Straight after the ceremony came the wedding feast.

None of the moat's towers had any rooms large enough to hold all five hundred guests. The courtyard was insufficient in size, as well. So the feast was held just outside the northern gate of the fortress. There was no shortage of space there. Guards were posted on all sides of the camp, so there would be no threat of unwanted company or interruptions.

A dais had been erected in the center of the feasting grounds. Gregor and Dacey stood in the seats of honor. His family sat to the immediate right of them; hers to the immediate left. The other seats were occupied by their close friends and the top officers of the Legion without Banners, such as Gerion Lannister and Oberyn Martell.

Four courses were served at the feast. All of them were composed primarily of dishes that were Northern or Western in origin. However, each course included some smaller dishes from the other seven regions of Westeros. So there was food that everyone would find appealing.

Even so, a lot of the attendees were inclined to sample some cuisine from outside their homelands. There was a great deal of sharing of tastes that night. Lord Gregor was pleased by that; it was a sign that the unification of Westeros was underway. He was just changing the people's eating habits now, but it was still a step in the right direction.

Many toasts were raised, more of them to Gregor and Dacey than anyone or anything else.

Plenty of songs were sung, as well. Among them was The Bear and the Maiden Fair. When played at a wedding, the title characters were generally supposed to be the groom and the bride respectively. Ironically, the bride was both characters in this scenario.
That song and several other classics were played at the feast. There were a few original pieces, too. Hamish the Harper performed a work he entitled *The Flood That Never Was.*

From what Gregor could gather, this song was about the Sack of King's Landing, and how he had singlehandedly prevented it from becoming a slaughter. One could almost classify it as a follow-up to the *Rains of Castamere.* But whereas that song was based around dismay and fear, *The Flood That Never Was* had a much more uplifting theme. It was essentially a type of praise meant to cherish Gregor's deeds at the end of Robert's Rebellion.

Later on, Bethany Fair-Fingers and Aemon Costayne performed a duet they had composed together. It was called *The Bear That Roamed The Mountain.* It was a song about how Gregor had formed the most effective fighting force in recent Westerosi history, but he himself had been incomplete until Dacey enlisted in the Legion. At the same time, it implied that Dacey had gained a similar type of fulfillment from working alongside Gregor. In his mind (as well as hers), that was a fairly accurate assessment.

Some of the lyrics about certain events were exaggerated, but Gregor, Dacey, and all those present found them touching and enjoyable all the same. Bethany and Aemon had their personal thanks for writing that number, and they would ultimately leave Moat Cailin with a great deal more coin than when they arrived.

After the fourth and final course was served, Greatjon Umber rose from his chair, lifted his goblet into the air, and shouted boisterously "Shall we bed them?"

The grounds fell totally silent at that. Everyone collectively turned to the dais. Gregor and Dacey had been the center of attention all night, and up until now, it had been pleasant. Now they both felt some desire to vanish into thin air.

Bedding ceremonies were not a custom in the North. However, Gregor was from the south, and the wedding ceremony had been done in a way that it would honor the New Gods as much as the Old Gods. So the option of a bedding ceremony was not out of the question.

Gregor had not officially announced whether or not there would be a bedding ceremony before the feast. Now, he would have to make up his mind.

The Mountain turned to his new wife and whispered "If you want, we can forgo the bedding ceremony. I would hate to make you so uncomfortable."

Dacey sat thinking for a few seconds. Then she shrugged and muttered "Everyone's in a good mood. I find there're a lot more agreeable that way. So we may as well give them something to liven up their spirits."

"Are you sure?" Gregor enquired.

"Yes," Dacey responded. Then she grinned wickedly, reached behind her chair, and pulled out one of her daggers. She balanced it in her hand and proposed "But, just to be safe, we can 'manage' their actions."

Gregor smirked at that idea. He drew one of his own daggers, stood up, and proclaimed "I give my consent for the bedding ceremony to commence."

There came a round of applause and cheers from the assemblage. Several of the guests started rising from their seats.

"But…” Gregor hastily put in. That got everyone to halt in place. The Mountain then held up his
dagger and pronounced "If there is any groping, caressing, or grabbing of private areas, I can assure you that whoever does it will **not** do it again."

At that, a few of the guests sat back down. But only a few. The vast majority of the people who planned to be involved in the bedding ceremony continued making their way over to the dais.

At that moment, Lady Maege Mormont escorted her other daughters away from the scene, as did Lady Daliah Clegane with her daughter Ellyn. Sandor was permitted to linger, but he was only there to ensure that the male participants did not mishandle his new sister-by-law.

Gregor and Dacey were taller than just about everyone there. But by working together, a dozen of the guests were able to lift each of them off their feet. Once that happened, the newlyweds were carried back into the moat.

On the way to the Lord's Tower (one of the eleven that had been rebuilt), they were stripped out of their garments.

This experience was certainly a unique one. Being mobbed and undressed by friends and strangers in anticipation of him making love to his new wife… that never happened in his first life. Then again, he had never been married as Gregory Welch, either.

Gregor and Dacey kept their knives brandished to remind the participants what would happen if they got too frisky. That helped to lessen the awkwardness. It also made the experience less unpleasant. The ceremony was still far from enjoyable, and it still felt degrading, but at least it was not as licentious as Gregor had envisioned it would be.

Soon enough, the crowd arrived outside Gregor's bedchamber in the Lord's Tower. The door was pushed open and Dacey was deposited inside first. Gregor went in shortly after. Both of them were clad in only their smallclothes.

Dacey held her free arm over her exposed breasts. Her other hand was still clasped firmly around her dagger.

Gregor held on to his own dagger, as well. He turned back to the door, placed his hand on it, and told the people on the other side "Thank you. Your services are no longer needed. In other words, 'get the fuck out, if you please.'"

Then he slammed the door shut and locked it. He was certain at least some of them would stay behind to eavesdrop on what happened next, but that mattered not to Gregor.

The Mountain then turned to the Bear Islander. She was no longer trying to cover up her breasts. She shamelessly displayed them for her new husband. All the while, she retained a mischievous smirk.

For the first time, Gregor got to admire her whole body. He took full advantage of that opportunity. The longer he gazed at Dacey, the more he could feel his manhood rising beneath his smallclothes.

The sight of Dacey naked – complemented by the knowledge that she was now joined with him – was enough to purge any desire Gregor had to remain abstinent.

"Shall we, my lady?" Gregor suggested cheekily, gesturing to the bed.

"We shall, my lord," Dacey replied teasingly.

They tossed their daggers onto the adjoining nightstand. Then they approached the bed. Before
they laid down, Gregor took Dacey in his arms and kissed her passionately. She wrapped her own arms around him and kissed him back.

They both remaining standing at the foot of the bed for nearly five minutes. For the first two, all they did was kiss. In the third minute, they allowed their hands to begin exploring each other. Gregor caressed Dacey's cheek and neck at once, touching her as gently as he would a fragile object. At the same time, she squeezed his arms, allowing her hands to brush the length of his large biceps.

Before very long, Gregor allowed his hands to wander below the waist. He slipped one beneath Dacey's smallclothes, and he pressed it against her womanhood. She gasped softly, but her surprise turned to arousal right away.

Gregor continued rubbing her clitoris for twenty seconds; he rubbed very slowly, letting the pleasure gradually increase. Then, he extended one of his fingers and inserted it into her moist opening. Dacey moaned in even greater enjoyment.

Gregor slid his index finger back and forth inside of Dacey. He elicited a series of erratic moans from her.

Soon, he inserted another finger. Her moans became louder and more frequent.

A third finger quickly followed the first two. By then, Dacey was moaning so hard and so much that she almost could not catch her breath.

Gregor kept the pleasure going for seven whole minutes. He could have gone much longer than that, but he figured Dacey was getting tired of mere teasing. So he stuck his fingers into her as far as they could go. Seconds later, Dacey let out a yell of relief as she hit her climax. Gregor felt the three middle fingers of his already moist right hand get soaked by her juices.

Dacey's knees were buckling, as though she was going to collapse. Gregor held her close to ensure that she would not. As she struggled to catch her breath, he withdrew his hand from his wife's smallclothes and found it covered in her secretion. Out of deviousness and curiosity, he licked his fingers.

She tasted like honey. Rather appropriate for a Bear Islander.

Within a minute, Dacey regained her composure. It was then that she decided to return the favor. She lowered her hand below Gregor's smallclothes and grasped his manhood.

Now it was Gregor's turn to moan in arousal.

When Gregor entered the bedchamber, his cock had been about six inches long. But it had been growing ever since he saw his wife naked for the first time. Currently, it was ten inches in length, and it was steadily getting bigger.

Dacey continued stroking his member for two minutes. It was pressed firmly against his smallclothes, as though it was struggling to get free.

Very soon, Gregor decided that they had had enough foreplay.

He reached down, took ahold of Dacey's wrist, and told her sternly "No more playing."

She grinned and fondled his cock a little more. Then she removed her hand and said cheekily "Alright, time to get serious."
Gregor and Dacey hastily got out of their smallclothes and tossed them aside. Then they laid onto the bed together. First they were just cuddling and kissing. Then their activities became much less innocent.

Dacey crawled on top of her husband and embraced him tightly again. She gazed lovingly into his eyes and placed an elongated kiss on his lips.

After that, Dacey giggled a bit and observed "Now the Bear conquers the Mountain."

Gregor chuckled at the jape, and he made one of his own: "This bear is welcome to go anywhere she pleases on this mountain."

Dacey smirked at that. She peered down at her husband's lower body, and she noticed his erect cock. She looked back at his eyes, grinned wickedly, and proclaimed slyly "In that case, I think I'll settle on this summit."

*Oh, please do. I left my sword there. It needs a sheath.*

Dacey positioned her body so that her cunt was directly over Gregor's cock. She slowly lowered herself onto it. As he entered her, he could feel the tip of his manhood making contact with her intact maidenhead. In one swift movement, he broke through it. She groaned in pain, but only for a moment. Once he was all the way in, he began to thrust.

Dacey was no longer groaning or moaning. Now she was flat-out screeching in primal excitement. The pleasure she had experienced from Gregor's fingers was trivial in comparison to this new sensation. She started bucking her hips in response to her husband's thrusting. Soon enough, their hip movements were synchronized to each other's perfectly.

They continued this pace for over twenty minutes. Every minute felt more blissful and delightful than the one before it. In that interval, Dacey experienced no fewer than three more orgasms. Gregor still had yet to hit his peak, but it was coming up on him rapidly.

Finally, Gregor gripped Dacey by her backside and shoved the full weight of his lower body up against hers. That was when she had her last orgasm. This time, he came with her. When he did, he let out a roar of triumph; a roar that sounded eerily like a battle cry. Indeed, this was like a victory, only a different type of battleground had been used.

Gregor remained inside his wife for a minute longer. He could actually feel his seed being spilt inside of her. She must have too; when her husband pulled out, she snickered playfully and scratched her abdomen.

Despite all the energy they had expended, Gregor and Dacey were only a little fatigued. They were large people; they both had an immense libido to match their stature. So they were not even close to calling it a night.

It was well after midnight when they finally exhausted themselves. They managed to go five more rounds. Somehow, each one had ended more spectacularly than the one before it. That really said something about Gregor and Dacey's prowess. They were just as strong and resilient in the bedroom as they were on the battlefield.

Needless to say, the marriage had been consummated.

When they were spent, Gregor pulled some blankets over them. He held Dacey close to him. She nuzzled him affectionately and kept one arm around his body.
Gregor pecked her on the top of her head and commented "Now the Bear settles down on the Mountain."

Dacey smiled up at him again, and she remarked "Yes, and I'm sure the Bear can rely on the Mountain to keep her warm."

He smiled back and kissed her again.

*Yes, she can. He always will.*

Soon after that, Lord Gregor Clegane and Lady Dacey Clegane drifted off into a peaceful slumber.
Planning Ahead

Chapter Notes

Note: Some of you may find this chapter short or uneventful. If so, I apologize. This last week has been very hectic for me. I had a project report due in one of my graduate school classes, and I had to study for a quiz in another one. I assure you that the next chapter will be more engaging. This one will mostly be a "morning after" update.

Gregor and Dacey slept until well past daybreak. They could have remained asleep even longer. But around mid-morning, there was a heavy knock on the door to the bedchamber.

The Mountain and the Bear Islander gradually started to stir. They were still a little fatigued from the activities of the previous night. After taking a minute to gain their bearings, the newlyweds looked to the door. Gregor yelled tiredly "Yes?"

"Good morning, my lord," Erryk Ruttiger's voice came from the other side. "Am I disturbing you?"

"Yes, but we can forgive you that," Gregor responded. He propped himself up in the bed and stated "After all, you must've a reason for doing so."

"I do, my lord," Erryk proclaimed, "Your family and Lady Dacey's are about to break their fast together. They were wondering if you'd join them."

Gregor was in the mood for a meal, but he could not speak for Dacey. So he turned to his new wife and waited for her input. She sat thinking for a moment, and then she shrugged and said "I suppose I can be coaxed out of this room. For a short while, at least."

She had flashed a lusty smile at her husband when she made that last statement. Gregor was amused by that response. Truthfully, he was thinking much the same as his wife. He too would have been content to just stay in the bedchamber for that whole day. Alas, that was an impossibility.

*It's a shame there are no honeymoons in this universe. No conventional ones, at any rate. Oh, well. Dacey and I are already too busy to afford any time for a honeymoon, anyway.*

The Mountain called out to his castellan "Alright, we'll join them."

"Aye, ser," Erryk acknowledged, "Shall I send in the maids?"

"Give us a moment first," Gregor requested.

"As you wish," Erryk conceded.

Gregor slowly rose to his feet and strode naked to the closed window. He opened the shutters, and daylight poured in, momentarily blinding the new couple. When his eyesight returned, Gregor peered outside. He noticed that the Sun was well over the eastern horizon. Curious, he looked over his shoulder and inquired "Have you the time, Erryk?"

"It's shortly after nine o'clock, my lord," the castellan informed him.
Gregor was a little surprised. He typically broke his fast an hour earlier. On any other day, he would be conversing with his council and the Legion's top officers.

Then again, he normally did not have the luxury of oversleeping. Neither did Dacey. Erryk Ruttiger would have woken them sooner, but he figured that his lord and his new lady deserved a few more hours of rest.

That was a prudent decision on his part. Because of it, Gregor and Dacey had slept very soundly that night. At the end of it, they were both fully rested. As such, they would begin their first day as husband and wife at full energy.

From that height, Gregor could spy the feasting grounds. They had not yet been disassembled. Or vacated.

Apparently, many of the guests had had too much to drink at the feast, and a number of them had not even reached their rooms or their tents before passing out. Several of them were lying unconscious around, on top of, or underneath the tables. They would be waking up before too long. They would all have a very unpleasant hangover, though.

Gregor and Dacey had avoided consuming too much wine, so they were spared the hangover. But they did have a number of aches and bruises, all of which could be attributed to the consummation of their marriage. Gregor discovered that the bear girl really had claws and fangs of her own after all.

Dacey slowly got to her feet. She was just as naked as Gregor, so she picked up one of the blankets and tied it around her waist. After that, she made her way across the room. She tried to walk steadily, but she moved with a pronounced limp. That limp would subside after a couple days, but until then, it would be a telltale sign of what she and her husband had done last night. Or rather, "who" they had done.

Dacey stood next to her husband and gazed out the window with him. She spent a minute admiring the sight of the surrounding structures and landscapes with him. It was a spectacular vantage point.

"What a view," Dacey commented.

"Indeed," Gregor conceded, wrapping his arm around his wife's waist, "Everything you see has been mine alone from the past three years. Now it's mine and yours."

Dacey smiled at that and placed a hand on Gregor's chest. He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss against his wife's lips.

When he pulled apart, he noticed that Dacey's breasts were uncovered. He deftly untied the blanket around her hips and lifted it to a position directly below her shoulders.

Dacey did not protest, but she was a little bewildered. "What are you doing?"

"Being cautious," Gregor replied as he began to retie the blanket around his wife's breasts, "If anyone down there has a far-eyes, they'll be getting an even better view than us."

Dacey snickered at that. She placed her hands over Gregor's to stop him, and she observed "From what I see, everyone down there is either unconscious or preoccupied with a task. I doubt any of them will be tilting their heads up."

Gregor took another look, and it appeared as though Dacey was correct. No one on the ground seemed to possess any interest in anything taking place above them.
Upon realizing that, Gregor scoffed and admitted Dacey had a point. As such, he let the blanket drop to the ground. Now he and Dacey were totally exposed.

Gregor pulled her close and traced her left breast with his hand. The movement was slight, but he produced the intended reaction out of her; she giggled in more than one type of pleasure.

As her husband fondled her bosom, Dacey casually allowed her own hand to drift down to his groin. She slid her fingers along the shaft of his manhood. Gregor's morning wood had passed, but Dacey's mere touch was enough to incite a hefty twitch from his member. Gregor smirked at the risqué action, and he caressed his wife's breasts a little more firmly in response.

At that, Dacey looked up at the Mountain and deviously suggested "Maybe we've time for one more round?"

As tempting as that offer was, Gregor had not forgotten that certain people were waiting on them. Reluctantly, he ceased his stroking of his wife's breasts and told her "Later, my love. Our families are expecting us to arrive soon."

"Very well, my lord," Dacey coincided, somewhat grudgingly. Despite her tense tone of voice, she understood that family affairs came before... family affairs.

The Mountain and the Bear Islander proceeded to get dressed. He slipped into a fresh tunic and a leather jerkin, along with a pair of riding boots and a pair of breeches. She dressed much the same. The only difference was she tied a green cloak around her neck. That was the only article of clothing she wore that indicated her birth house.

Dacey's wedding dress had not gotten too badly damaged in the bedding ceremony, but she chose to put it away for the time being. Gregor was hardly surprised. After all, Dacey generally preferred the typical attire of men over the customary attire of her own gender.

As they got dressed, the newlyweds surveyed the bedchamber. It honestly looked as though a tornado or an earthquake had struck it. Many objects had fallen over or gotten misplaced.

Gregor and Dacey had not confined their activities to the bed. The desk, the table, and even part of a wall were in poor condition. Even so, the bed was easily in the sorriest state. It was essentially a ruin. The sheets were covered in sweat, blood, and... other particular fluids. The supports had given out, as well. The slightest nudge could have caused the foundation to collapse. The mattress was in danger of splitting open.

"We'll be needing a new bed," Dacey noted cheekily.

"Quite so," Gregor concurred, smirking, "We'll worry on that later."

"Right," she said bluntly.

Once they were dressed, Gregor walked to the door and unlocked it. He opened the door to allow the maids entrance to the chamber. Other than the occasional murmuring of "milord," they said nothing. But their facial expressions spoke plenty. When they saw what their lord and his wife had done, they blushed furiously.

Gregor and Dacey were somewhat mortified to have the results of their intimate deeds on display. But they tried not to let their discomfort show; it would not have been "professional." So as their servants worked on cleaning the room up, the Lord and Lady of Moat Cailin headed down the stairs of the Lord's Tower.
They made their way to the Banquet Tower (another of the eleven that had been reconstructed). On their way there, every person they encountered bowed their heads to them and muttered "milord" and "milady." They also received many more congratulations on their marriage.

When they arrived in the Great Hall, they saw that the Cleganes and the Mormonts were all there. They were seated on the dais. The seats of honor were empty. Lord Jorah, Lady Maege, and her three youngest daughter sat to the left of them; Lady Daliah and her two youngest children to the right.

"Look who finally woke up," Sandor commented drily when his brother and sister-by-law approached the dais.

Gregor and Dacey chuckled and took their places at the center of the dais.

As breakfast was served, Ellyn let out a loud yawn. Even after that, she seemed very fatigued. Gregor looked over to his sister and noted "You look tired, Ell."

"Well, I didn't get a lot of sleep last night, Greg," Ellyn wearily revealed.

"Why not?" Dacey inquired.

"Probably because somebody was making a lot of noise," Ellyn mumbled irately.

Gregor and Dacey flushed at that and looked away. Daliah tapped her daughter on the shoulder and murmured crossly "Ellie!"

"She's got a point, my lady," Alysane Mormont stated, looking to her elder sister and her brother-by-law. She said jokingly "Have either of you heard of volume control by any chance?"

"We have, Aly," Dacey insisted, "It's just… well, from higher ground, it's easier for sound to carry in this fortress."

"Yes, and the bedchamber of the Lord's Tower is the highest point in all the moat," Gregor claimed, going along with his wife's argument.

"Whatever you say," Sandor murmured. Clearly, he was not buying that story. "I envy the drunk guests, though. They're the only ones who found sleep easily last night."

"Okay, enough!" Gregor shouted, starting to become impatient, "We're about to break our fast. This is hardly an appropriate topic to discuss at the table."

"Indeed," Jorah Mormont agreed.

No more was spoken on anyone's sex life. Everyone opted to focus more on eating instead. But they did not break their fast in silence. They spoke on family affairs and similar matters.

Jorah Mormont, his aunt, and his cousins would return to Bear Island in a few days. Daliah Clegane and her children would be travelling back to Clegane's Keep in about a week. Lady Daliah privately mentioned to her son that she expected to be informed within the next three months that she would soon be a grandmother. Gregor assured her that he would "endeavor" to fulfill her "wish."

Gregor's mother had been so preoccupied with wedding preparations that she hardly had any time to speak to her son of what had gone on back home. Luckily, this meal provided an opportunity for them to converse on the subject.
Gregor was aware of recent events in the Westerlands, but apart from the letters he exchanged with them, his knowledge of his family's activities was very limited. The only Legionnaires who had once been retainers of Clegane's Keep were the ones that had accompanied Gregor north.

Ever since Gregor left, House Clegane of Clegane's Keep had thrived. Ser Tarrence had not wasted those seven thousand golden dragons. Through them, the Keep had been refurbished, the household had been expanded, and their knights had multiplied in number.

They had also succeeded in gaining favor with Lord Tywin Lannister. Apparently, Sandor had been taken on as a squire by the liege lord of the Westerlands. Lord Tywin had plans to knight Sandor soon. Furthermore, during his time at Casterly Rock, Sandor got along very well with Tyrion Lannister. That was what really caught Gregor's interest.

Sandor claimed that recently, he and Ser Jaime had helped Tyrion save a young girl from a group of rapists. That must have been Tysha.

Sandor recounted how he had prevented Lord Tywin or Ser Jaime from discovering Tyrion's relationship with Tysha. He had also talked Tyrion out of his idea to marry Tysha. He had argued to the dwarf that if the marriage was discovered, not only would Lord Tywin have it annulled, but he would have his own men treat Tysha like a common whore just to teach his younger son a lesson.

Gregor was impressed that his brother had given such superb advice. However, Sandor admitted that it was mostly Gregor's advice that he had given to Tyrion. Thanks to his brother's guidance, Sandor had developed a more practical and realistic view of the world. So indirectly, Gregor had spared Tyrion a dreadful instance of his father's cruelty.

There was even talk of raising House Clegane of Clegane's Keep to lordly status.

Gregor was surprised that he had not heard any of this yet. He also found himself more than a little concerned. Before he moved to Moat Cailin, Lord Tywin had forced the Mountain to sever all his familial connections to the Westerlands. Tywin was infamous for judging an entire family on the actions of each member. Gregor had lost Lord Tywin's trust, and maybe his respect, too. As such, his sudden interest in Gregor's family was as startling as it was unsettling.

Perhaps Tywin was merely using them as insurance against Gregor in case the Mountain became too powerful. Maybe if the Legion without Banners clashed with Casterly Rock for whatever reason, Tywin would order Sandor to be killed. The lion lord certainly had the means to execute his brother. He also had the means to wipe out the occupants of Clegane's Keep if he wished. He had brought about the downfall of House Reyne and House Tarbeck without any hesitation or remorse, and both of those houses had been much larger than House Clegane.

In any case, Gregor decided to push all his qualms about Tywin Lannister's motivations to the back of his mind. Instead of preaching worries, he expressed his happiness for his family's endurance and prosperity.

Gregor also learned that his parents were trying to forge marriage contracts for Sandor and Ellyn. Currently, Lady Daliah was considering making a match between her daughter and Raynald Westerling. Gregor was very displeased by that idea, and he let his mother know it. He pointed out that House Westerling was one of the smallest houses in the Westerlands, and its power and influence was lesser than House Clegane's had ever been. Gregor contended that his parents could do much better for his sister than the heir of the Crag.
When Gregor asked Sandor if he was involved in any potential betrothals, all the younger Clegane boy told his brother was "Not as of now." He actually seemed unwilling to speak on the subject. That made Gregor suspicious. The way he saw it, there could only be one of two reasons for his brother's avoidance of the topic. Either Sandor did not wish to talk about marriage in general, or he was secretly considering a match for himself but did not wish to talk about it for fear of rejection.

Whatever his motive, Gregor agreed to drop the issue.

Sandor was the first one to finish his meal. Once his plate was clean and his goblet empty, he rose from his chair, climbed down from the dais, and remarked "If you'll excuse me."

"Where you off to?" Gregor queried.

"The training yard," Sandor answered him.

Gregor nodded at that and offered "I can join you, if you need a partner."

"Thanks, Greg," Sandor said appreciatively, "But I already have one. Two, actually."

The younger Clegane boy then left the Great Hall without another word spoken. There was a smirk on Sandor's face which did not go unnoticed by Gregor. Dacey had worn a similar expression last night, just before the bedding.

Gregor watched his brother leave, and then he asked no one in particular "What did he mean?"

"Not long after the bedding ceremony, I saw Sandor with a couple of girls," Ellyn explained, "I think they were Dornishwomen."

"Is that right?" Gregor asked his mother.

Lady Daliah nodded and apprised her firstborn "He talked with them for the better part of an hour. When he finally rejoined us, he said that he and those girls would be meeting in the training yard after breakfast today. Evidently, they share a fondness for combat. Isn't that quaint?"

"Well, in Dorne, men and women are equals in everything," Dacey disclosed, "Including the ways of war. That's one thing the North has in common with the Dornish."

"I already knew the Legion accepted women," Daliah stated, "But these Dornishwomen must be quite proficient if they're willing to spar with Sandor."

"Did he say who they were?" Dacey inquired.

"No, but they looked like sisters," Ellyn recounted, "Half-sisters, at least. They were a little younger than Sandor, but a few years older than me."

That information was enough for Dacey and Gregor to figure out who Ellyn had seen with Sandor. The Mountain pronounced "I know them both. Their names are Obara and Nymeria Sand."

Ellyn simply nodded at that, but Daliah frowned. She assumed "You mean they're baseborn?"

"Yes," Gregor professed, "But as it happens, they're the two eldest daughters of Prince Oberyn Martell."

"His two eldest bastard daughters," Daliah remarked with a grimace.

While Daliah Clegane was normally a very tolerant person, she held the typical Westerosi disdain
for children born out of wedlock. Especially when such individuals interacted with her unwed teenage son. Gregor could forgive her that bias; everyone had at least one flaw.

Still, he did not need that form of prejudice in Moat Cailin. Gregor sighed and stated quietly "Mother, a person's birth may denote their place in this world, but it should not influence how they are judged or treated. It certainly does not matter in the Legion without Banners. Bastards are just as valuable and useful here as people of legitimate birth. Besides, Sandor is just clashing steel with Obara and Nymeria. Just because he's exchanging blows with them, that doesn't mean he'll want to exchange vows, too."

Daliah reflected on her son's words. After a few seconds of silence, she murmured "I suppose you're right, Gregor. If I offended anyone, please know I am sorry."

"You needn't apologize, Mother," Gregor asserted, "I cannot fault you for your speaking your mind, or for believing what you were raised to believe. All I ask is that you respect what I believe. And I believe everyone – baseborn and trueborn – should be given a chance to prove themselves."

Daliah smiled at her elder son. Even if she did not share his ideals on the issue of one's birth, she was proud of Gregor for having them.

When breakfast was finished, the Cleganes and the Mormonts headed downstairs as a single group. By this time, all the drunken guests had regained consciousness. Many could be seen clutching their foreheads or retching on bare patches of grass. The Mountain, his wife, and their families made sure to avoid any such individuals.

Ser Jorah went to check up on those of his men that had accompanied him to the wedding. Lady Maege led Alysane, Lyra, and Jorelle back to their quarters. Lady Daliah and Ellyn got the idea to explore the fortress. Gregor offered them a guide, but they assured him that they could find their own way around the moat.

So Gregor and Dacey were on their own once more. Or alone as they could have been whilst outside and surrounded by scores of guests and fellow Legionnaires.

They had nothing on their immediate agenda. They decided to go on a short walk around the moat. They passed a number of different areas, including the kitchens, the arsenal, the barracks, and the harbor.

About twenty minutes in, they stopped by the training yard. Gregor expected to find his brother there.

Sure enough, Sandor was still in the training yard. He was armed with a longsword. Obara Sand and Nymeria Sand were there with him. They carried their trademark spear and whip respectively.

Obara and Nymeria were too young to be fully inducted into the Legion without Banners. Obara was fourteen; Nymeria thirteen. In a sense, they were mostly Legionnaires-in-training. So for the time-being, Gregor had them serve as squires to the other top officers of the Legion. Sometimes they even squired under their father.

Despite their youth, both girls were very adept in combat situations. Gregor and Dacey said nothing as they entered the training yard. They merely stood by and observed the skirmish between the heir to Clegane's Keep and the two eldest Sand Snakes.

Sandor was more dexterous with his bastard sword than either of the Sand Snakes were with her weapon. He dueled each of them separately. He was able to defeat Obara in five minutes. Nymeria,
he defeated in three. Alone, neither girl stood a chance. Then he dueled both of them at once. That was when they made a comeback.

After parrying Obara and Nymeria's simultaneous attacks for four minutes, Sandor rammed his weight against Obara. She fell to the ground and laid still. He appeared to have subdued her.

Sandor focused his attention exclusively on Nymeria for the next two minutes. Just when he was about to best her, Obara reentered the fray. She thrust her spear underneath Sandor's legs. He stumbled over it and nearly tripped. Before he could regain his balance, Nymeria coiled her whip around the wrist of his free hand and yanked with all her might.

As a result, Sandor ended up flat on his back. When he attempted to get back up, Obara stood over him. She held the tip of her spear directly above his chin, as though she meant to plunge it into his throat. Nymeria slowly went over to her half-sister and stood beside her. The two of them gazed down at their opponent, expecting some form of response from him.

Sandor remained on the ground for about fifteen seconds. Then he let out a deep sigh and muttered adversely "I yield."

Obara smirked and withdrew her spear. Then she and Nymeria helped Sandor back to his feet.

Gregor was impressed. Working together, the two Sand Snakes had managed to bring down the boy who would be the Hound. Whereas alone, they would not have stood a chance.

Although he was annoyed about having lost, Sandor's grimace was quickly replaced with an amiable grin. He eagerly proposed "Again?"

"Anytime you wish," Obara declared happily

"Yeah, we could kick your ass all day," Nymeria stated slyly.

"Kick it or kiss it?" Sandor cheekily countered.

"Whichever you'd prefer," Obara leered.

"Either one's fine with us," Nymeria claimed jokingly.

"It'd be fine with me, too," Sandor disclosed.

Gregor was amused by this exchange of dialogue. He was also a little intrigued. There was clearly some type of chemistry between Sandor and the two Sand Snakes.

Of course, he was used to seeing that type of benign interaction between the Legionnaires. However, Sandor was not a member of the Legion, and Obara and Nymeria were still pending members.

In other words, Gregor was witnessing firsthand proof that even total strangers from outside the Legion could find some way to coexist with each other. They could have seemingly little in common, but whatever facets they did share could be used to unite them.

In the case of Sandor, Obara, and Nymeria, it was their fondness for armed combat and their competitive nature that brought them together. That was the most fascinating aspects. Those were two subjects that normally drove people apart. But not here.

That made Gregor wonder…
He turned to his wife and proposed "Dacey, what say we have another meeting?"

The Bear Islander looked up at her husband and asked "What about?"

"Well…” Gregor did not really wish to discuss what was on his mind until the other eight members of his secret council were present. Instead, he pointed out the three people in the training yard and stated "This, I suppose."

Dacey raised an eyebrow and presumed "You want to tell the others how your brother got his ass handed to him by Obara and Nymeria?"

"No, no, no," Gregor bluntly disclosed, shaking his head and scoffing, "I want to tell them that in spite of how they beat him, the three of them are getting along famously."

"Alright…” Dacey was still a little perplexed, "If you do not mind my asking, Gregor, how is that noteworthy?"

"I don't intend for this relationship between Sandor and the Sand Snakes to be the sole talking point," Gregor enlightened her, "It'll just be buildup to the true topic of discussion. You see, there's a certain issue I've been planning to address for a while now. I figure today would be as good a time as any."

"Why today?" Dacey inquired.

He smiled down at her and stated "Because it also has to do with our relationship."

Dacey assumed that remark was meant to be flattering. While she did find it so, she was hoping for a little more clarity.

She did not even have to ask for any before Gregor elaborated with: "Specifically, the political advantages of our marriage. There won't be any discussion on the personal or intimate aspects of our relationship, if you were wondering."

"That's a relief," Dacey commented. After a bit of silence, she scoffed and observed "Of course, I doubt we'd have to tell anyone about our personal or intimate life, anyway. Given the number of people who heard us last night…"

Gregor chuckled and said wryly "The whole damn moat probably knows that by now."

Dacey gave a nod of agreement. Then she gazed back up at the Mountain and told him "Very well, Gregor. Let's see if we can find the others."

"Yes, let's," Gregor conceded. At that, he and his wife went to locate the eight men who had assisted them in the assassination of Petyr Baelish.

As they exited the training yard, Gregor heard Obara make some sly remark about Sandor's sword, and how she was "drawn" to it. Based on the context of her statement, the sword she was referring to was not the blade in his hand.
It took around an hour for Gregor and Dacey to assemble the secret council. However, only half of that time was spent searching for the other members. The other half was spent adding a new one.

Before they went to gather the others, Dacey pointed out how Gregor intended for the secret council to be represented by the nine regions of Westeros equally. Gregor was the only one of the ten who could be totally impartial; the other nine spoke exclusively for his or her homeland.

Although Dacey was a Northerner through and through, she argued that her new relationship with Gregor might cause her to develop a bias in his favor. That would certainly complicate the integrity of the council's decision-making process.

Truthfully, Gregor had thought much the same. Thankfully, he already had plans to rectify that problem. The solution to the dilemma was quite simple; he elected to bring another Northerner into the fold.

Dacey would remain on the secret council. From then on, she would speak for both the Legion without Banners and the North. However, she would not be the official spokesperson for the North. That duty would go to the new recruit.

Gregor had already chosen who that person would be. The individual in question was Smalljon Umber, eldest son of Greatjon Umber, Lord of Last Hearth.

Smalljon had joined the Legion a few months beforehand. When first he came, he implied that he would only be there for a short time. His original motive was that he just wanted to experience the lifestyle of a Legionnaire. Overtime, however, he found the lifestyle to be very rewarding and honorable. So he elected to stay on. He even claimed that he would be content to serve in the Legion until his father died. Which, he added, would hopefully not be for a long time.

Gregor and Dacey found Smalljon out in the camps that adjoined the feasting grounds. He was breaking his fast with his father and their retainers. Most of the men seemed very hungover. However, neither the Greatjon nor his son were. To some, that may have been strange. Both of them had drunk plenty at the feast, yet they were as sober as a septon.

Gregor was not surprised. As he recalled, Umbers were infamous for holding their alcohol. That was fortunate; he needed Smalljon to have a clear head right then.

When Gregor and Dacey approached the table, Greatjon stood up and greeted them exuberantly. Smalljon also greeted them, though not as boisterously. Words of congratulations were given to the new couple, and the words were accepted by the new couple graciously.

Before the pleasantries evolved into an actual conversation, Gregor singled out Smalljon and asked if he would accompany him and Dacey someplace. They were very vague in their request, but luckily for them, the heir to Last Hearth did not seem particularly curious as to their reasons for wanting to speak with him. He did not ask them any questions or for any specifics.

He simply needed a minute to clean his plate and drain his flagon of ale. Then he rose from his chair and followed the newlyweds back into Moat Cailin.

Once back inside the moat, Gregor and Dacey took Smalljon to a private room. There they apprised him of what was going on. They explained to him that Gregor had formed a clandestine task force. The task force's primary goal was the same as that of the Legion without Banners: to ensure the
survival and ultimate unification of all Westeros. The difference was that the task force would accomplish this objective through more extreme methods.

When he asked for an example of the "methods," they filled Smalljon in on their recent business in the Vale.

They informed him that Lord Petyr Baelish's death had not been an accident. They confessed to Smalljon that their whole reason for going to the Vale was to assassinate Littlefinger. In fact, with the aid of Lord Varys, the task force had orchestrated the events leading up to the mockingbird's demise.

When they finished with their recollection, Smalljon appeared a little alarmed. But if he was, it was because he was intrigued, not because he was repulsed. He actually admired all the effort and care that was put into the operation to kill Baelish.

From a moral standpoint, Smalljon was relatively unfazed. He had heard the tale of how Baelish had fought a duel with Brandon Stark and lost badly. He felt the Wild Wolf had been too merciful. Smalljon was also aware of the false claims Littlefinger had made about taking the maidenheads of both of Hoster Tully's girls. That was enough to make him dislike Baelish. When he learned that the mockingbird had exploited Lysa Arryn and intended to seize power at the expense of those around him, that gave Smalljon assurances that Littlefinger had gotten what he deserved.

Gregor and Dacey were pleased by Smalljon's conviction. He seemed to share their ideals. That convinced them that he was the right person for the job.

It was there that Gregor and Dacey told Smalljon of a spot that had opened up on the secret council. With Dacey's marriage to Gregor, they argued that the North needed another representative. As such, they wished for Smalljon to occupy that position. Almost immediately, he accepted the proposition.

The trio subsequently travelled around the moat and located Lyn Corbray, Victarion Greyjoy, Garth Hightower, Osmund Kettleback, Gerion Lannister, Oberyn Martell, Allard Seaworth, and Brynden Tully. At the end of the hour, all eleven of them were assembled in the council chambers.

Gregor waited for his companions to sit down at the circular table. Once they were all seated, he took his place in the largest chair.

Victarion started the dialogue with a question: "So, who dies next?"

"That's not the subject of this meeting," Gregor replied candidly.

Allard Seaworth cocked his head and muttered "It's not?"

"No," Gregor disclosed, "Littlefinger was the only immediate threat to the security of Westeros. But I promise you; there will be others. In time, we will conspire to eliminate all of the most callous people in this country. Today, however, we will devote to unifying the country through a more passive method."

Gerion Lannister leaned forward and stated "What method would that be, my lord?"

Gregor did not reply right away. Instead, he slowly looked around at his colleagues. He studied each of their faces closely. All of them shared Gerion's curiosity and interest. That was a clear indication that he had their full attention.

Gregor folded his arms and declared "I believe that family is the strongest form of unity. It should
be, in any case. I know there are some who would disagree. They'd be the ones who have persistent
domestic problems. But they're a minority. The majority of the people in this country would agree
that family should always come first. For that reason, the best alliances are those that are formed
through marriage."

He paused for a moment, and then he drily commented "Of course, you already know that.
Throughout the Seven Kingdoms, it's common knowledge that marriage is the start of many an
alliance. But the scope and longevity of the alliance can vary, depending on the origins of the bride
and groom."

At that, Gregor turned to Dacey and reached his hand out to her. Even she was uncertain what
Gregor was doing, but she went along with her husband's act. So she tentatively took his hand in
hers. As she did this, she smiled at him amorously. He smiled back, and then he looked around at
the others nine men. As unprofessional as this display of affection may have been, they said
nothing about it.

Gregor continued holding Dacey's hand, and he announced "For centuries, marriage has been used
to strengthen all the houses in all nine regions of the realm. The majority of the marriages typically
occur within each region; between the Great Houses and their vassals. There have been exceptions,
though. Several of which were quite recent. Robert Baratheon wed Cersei Lannister. Eddard Stark
and Jon Arryn wed Catelyn and Lysa Tully respectively. Stannis Baratheon wed Selyse Florent.
Gregor Forrester wed Elissa Branfield. Doran Martell even wed Mellario of Norvos. And I, a
Westerlander by birth, wed Dacey Mormont just last night."

Prince Rhaegar Targaryen also wed both Princess Elia Martell and Lady Lyanna Stark. But it's best
not to mention that for… a multitude of reasons.

Dacey beamed with pride when Gregor made that last point. No one could blame her for looking
so smug. After all, her marriage to the Mountain had solidified his status as a Northman, and it
emphasized the range of House Mormont.

"Pardon my forwardness, my lord," Osmund Kettleback remarked, "But where are you going with
this?"

Gregor gave a smug smirk and elucidated "Consider this: between the eleven of us, we have
connections to all nine of the Great Families. All of those connections exist through blood, through
marriage, or through both. I propose that we endeavor to establish similar connections between the
Great Houses."

Dacey and the men seemed intrigued by that idea. Lyn Corbray stated assumingly "I believe I
know where you are heading with this, my lord. You plan to use our connections to convince the
Great Houses to join together. Ideally, this will be done by marrying their children to each other."

"Correct," Gregor affirmed. He then let go of Dacey's hand and pronounced "House Arryn and
House Baratheon of Storm's End currently have no heirs to speak of. Not by their current lords, at
any rate. Until recently, the same detriment applied to the Royal House Baratheon. Although King
Robert now has a son, it is not our place to decide whom the crown prince will marry. That is the
king's prerogative. So we shall disregard those three houses for now."

Half the people in the room gave a mere nod of acknowledgment to that point. The other half just
sat still and listened.

Gregor continued with "Meanwhile, House Greyjoy, House Lannister, House Martell, House Stark,
House Tully, and House Tyrell all have heirs of their own. Most of the heirs are relatively young. It
is likely that their parents have yet to consider any marriage contracts for them. We should take advantage of that."

"What would you suggest?" Smalljon Umber inquired.

"Could we have an example?" Oberyn Martell questioned.

At that, Gregor turned to the Reachman in the room and called out to him "Garth."

"Yes, my lord?" Garth Hightower queried, leaning forward.

"How close are you to your second eldest sister?" Gregor asked.

Garth was a little stunned that such a personal question had been presented to him. Even so, he shrugged, smiled softly, and proclaimed "Truthfully, Alerie is probably my favorite sibling. Which says something; I have nine."

"That's fortunate," Gregor commented, also smiling, "As it happens, your favorite sibling is wed to your liege lord."

"That's true," Garth admitted, a note of perplexity in his tone.

Gregor then pointed out "As you're well-aware, Lord Mace and Lady Alerie have four children together."

"Indeed," Garth avowed, "Willas is ten, Garlan is nine, Loras is four, and Margaery is three."

Gregor gave another nod of acknowledgment and declared "Meanwhile, Lord Eddard Stark and his wife Lady Catelyn have a son and a daughter. Robb is three and Sansa was born just this year. Notice that Lord Robb is roughly the same age as Lady Margaery."

Immediately, Garth – and most of the others – knew where this was going. The Reachman presumed "So you suggest forging a betrothal between them?"

Gregor solemnly nodded in confirmation. He debated "Apart from the Legion without Banners, what do the North and the Reach have in common? The answer is almost nothing. All the same, they have much to offer each other. The North is easily the largest and hardiest of the Seven Kingdoms, but much of it is empty and desolate. At the same time, the Reach is the most productive – and probably most affluent – of the Seven Kingdoms, but outside its borders, it has very little standing or domain. A union between Winterfell and Highgarden could remedy both of their problems."

Garth sat thinking on those points for a minute. After that, he thought aloud "There is still some tension between the North and the Reach from Robert's Rebellion. The joining of House Stark and House Tyrell could extinguish that tension. Apart from that… I can see the rewards of such a union. It would be quite practical for a betrothal to be formed between Robb and Margaery."

"Would your sister consent to the match?" Gregor queried.

"If I suggested it to her, she would be open to it," Garth asserted, "However, I cannot guarantee she will agree to it."

"But you can convince her to at least consider it?" Gregor assumed.

"Certainly," Garth stated, "Alerie is not the one you should worry about, my lord. That would be
Lord Mace Tyrell. My sister's husband is quite ambitious."

"I know," Gregor remarked, "It is no secret that Lord Mace would lunge at the chance to wed his
daughter to the crown prince, just so his grandson would be king. Luckily, there is a factor that is
outside of his control."

"What would that be?" Smalljon Umber asked.

"I've heard tell Alerie Tyrell's goodmother is just as ambitious as her husband," Gregor disclosed,
"But unlike Lord Mace, Lady Olenna Tyrell has a better understanding of what is realistically
within her grasp. And if what I've heard is true, she is the actual head of her house. So if we
approach her instead of her son, there is a much greater likelihood that the betrothal will be taken
seriously."

Garth thought on that, and then he rubbed his temple, saying "I cannot deny Lady Olenna's hold
over Lord Mace. Even when her husband Lord Luthor was alive, she was the primary voice of
authority in Highgarden. It is not without just cause that she is called the Queen of Thorns."

"A prickly woman," Oberyn Martell noted.

That earned a few scoffs from the others. Gregor paid the jibe no mind. He simply kept his gaze on
the Reachman and proposed "As politically ruthless as Olenna Tyrell is, do you believe she can be
swayed to consider the match between her granddaughter and Lord Stark's firstborn son?"

"Definitely," Garth Hightower pronounced, "My word may not carry much weight with her, but my
experiences in the Legion would give credence to the matter. During my time at Moat Cailin, I
have come to greatly respect the North and its inhabitants. Lord Eddard is an honorable man; a
much better liege lord than the one I have. His son and my niece would make an excellent couple."

"Then what say we try to make the betrothal happen?" Gregor suggested.

Garth nodded once more, and he declared "After this meeting, I'll send a raven to Highgarden,
detailing everything we discussed. Lord Mace may wish to refuse the proposal, but his mother and
my sister are reasonable people. Again, I cannot promise the betrothal will be made, but it will be
heavily considered."

"That is all I ask," Gregor asserted.

"Just a moment," Brynden Tully interjected, "Even if Highgarden agrees to the match, what
assurance do you have Winterfell will, too?"

Gregor smirked and dryly responded "For that, I look to you, Ser Brynden."

The Blackfish raised an eyebrow and said "I'm afraid I do not understand."

Gregor leaned closer to the oldest man at the table and told him "I believe you are the most
influential person in this room. You are the only one here who has a direct relation to three of the
Great Houses."

"I am?" Brynden murmured, clearly bewildered.

Gregor elaborated with "Your nieces married into House Stark and House Arryn; your nephew is
the heir of House Tully. Your brother's children tie you to the North, the Vale, and the Riverlands.
Furthermore, you are on fair terms with all three of them. That implies you may have some amount
of sway over them. So long as you do not abuse that sway, you have a voice in Winterfell, the
Eyrie, and Riverrun. So there; you have three connections. No one else here can claim that."

That was a very accurate statement. As it turned out, Allard Seaworth, Osmund Kettleback, Lyn Corbray, Smalljon Umber, Dacey Mormont, and Gregor Clegane had no blood or marital ties to any of the Great Houses. Oberyn Martell, Garth Hightower, and Victarion Greyjoy each had ties to one Great House (House Martell, House Tyrell, and House Greyjoy respectively).

Technically, Ser Gerion Lannister had some degree of relation to three Great Houses, but only two of them – House Lannister and the Royal House Baratheon – were by blood. His connection to House Baratheon of Storm's End only existed because of his niece's marriage to the King. The connection was a very weak one, and not just because of how distant it was. Stannis Baratheon was not known for being very fond of his own family, so it was unlikely that he would bother listening to or negotiating with his family-by-law, either. Especially when said family-by-law were Lannisters.

If anything, of all the people in the council chambers, Allard Seaworth had the closest connection to the Lord Paramount of the Stormlands, as his father Ser Davos Seaworth was one of Stannis Baratheon's most trusted vassals. All the same, Gregor knew it would be unwise to ask Stannis for too many favors, even if done through the Onion Knight's second son.

So Brynden Tully was the only one who had direct ties to three Great Houses. Additionally, his nieces and nephew had idolized him in their youth; they continued to adore and respect him in their adulthood.

Brynden rested his chin on his hand and remarked "I suppose I could be of assistance to you, Lord Gregor. Catelyn will listen to any wise counsel I give her. While Lord Eddard only wed her out of obligation, they have come to care for each other deeply. He even had a sept built in Winterfell for her. If I passed along the idea of a betrothal between my great nephew and Mace Tyrell's daughter to Catelyn, she can convince her husband to consider it, too. After all, Eddard married outside of the North. No reason his son cannot do the same."

"Would you mind sending a raven to Winterfell after we adjourn?" Gregor asked hopefully.

"I will do so," Brynden proclaimed, "But like Ser Garth, I cannot promise you that Lord or Lady Stark will agree to the match."

"I understand," Gregor asserted, "Worry not; all I ask if that you present the idea of the match to them. That by itself is acceptable."

At that moment, Gregor stood up and sternly announced "With that said, I must be clear on one point. There will be no forcing of betrothals upon the Great Families. None whatsoever. All we can do is give them recommendations and hope that they will agree to them. Other than bits of neighborly advice, we have no say in the contracts they actually make for their children."

"I very much agree with the notion," Gerion Lannister remarked.

"As do I," Garth Hightower declared, "It would do us no good to overstep our authority."

"Or our family bonds," Dacey Mormont added in.

Gregor was pleased that everyone understood the boundaries of their activities. What they were essentially doing was playing at matchmaker for the realm. They would contemplate ideal matches between the heirs of the Great Families based on political, economic, and social benefits to all involved parties, and then they would deliver those suggestions to the heads of the respective Great
Houses. Once the suggestions were given, they would just wait for the Great Lords to make their decision.

The rest of the meeting was spent discussing various possible marriage contracts between the highborn children of the current generation in Westeros.

Gregor made the majority of the recommendations. Among the matches he proposed were ones between Quentyn Martell and Sansa Stark, between Garlan Tyrell and Arianne Martell, between Edmure Tully and Cerenna Lannister, and between Tyrion Lannister and Asha Greyjoy.

The match he had the most hope for was still the one between Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell. In his mind, they were perhaps the couple best-suited to govern the realm when neither the man nor the woman was Targaryen. All the same, he was certain that by the time the Long Night arrived, the Targaryens would be back on the throne. As long as Robb and Margaery could unite the North and the Reach, Gregor was content with that.

There were a couple matches Gregor thought to be appealing, but due to certain circumstances, he chose not to mention them. For instance, he contemplated a marriage contract between Willas Tyrell and Rhaenys Targaryen. Of course, other than Prince Oberyn, no one there knew that Princess Rhaenys was still alive. She and Lyanna Stark were still being hosted at Greywater Watch, and they would remain there until it was deemed safe to emerge from the Neck.

Unlike her brother and half-brother, Rhaenys was not being raised to believe she was someone else. While Aegon and Jon would be brought up thinking they were bastards, Lyanna would feed no such lies to Rhaegar Targaryen's eldest child.

Because of that, when Rhaenys was of age, Gregor could risk sending a messenger to Greywater Watch. Since her father was dead and her mother had no more part in her upbringing, Rhaenys had full say over whom she would wed. Even so, she would never forget her duty to her family and the realm. So she would be more than willing to consider wedding the heir to Highgarden.

Of course, Willas would have to wait a great deal longer to learn of this possible contract. Gregor believed he would be a good man. Still, there would be no safe way to present it to him without tipping off his father, his mother, or his grandmother. Although the Tyrells had supported the Targaryens during Robert's Rebellion, Gregor could not yet ascertain that they would support the dragons' return to Westeros. Until he knew where the Reach stood on that issue, he would keep the concept of a betrothal between Willas and Rhaenys to himself.

Near the end of the meeting, Lyn Corbray brought up a point that probably should have been addressed early on. When all eyes were on him, he contended "There is one severe limitation to all this scheming. Between all the Great Houses, there are at least two males to every female."

That captured everyone's interest. Smalljon Umber appeared baffled. He inquired "What does that mean?"

"What I mean is there are not enough female heirs to go around," Lyn clarified, "Even if you account for first and second cousins of the immediate heirs, there are still far more males."

"I'm not surprised that you were the one to notice that," Victarion Greyjoy scathingly murmured.

That incited a number of scoffs from the others. Lyn did not mind the slight. He just smirked and wryly retorted "An advantage of my 'preference.'"

"Actually, Ser Lyn is correct," Brynden Tully pointed out, "House Greyjoy and House Tyrell both
have three male heirs and one female. House Stark and House Martell both currently have one apiece. House Tully's only available heir is male. House Lannister has more heirs than I care to count, most of them male. No offense, Ser Gerion."

"None taken, Ser Brynden," Gerion Lannister assured the older knight, grinning.

"This could be a problem," Osmund Kettleback muttered, "It may be the sons who inherit. But without the daughters, the sons are stuck with the inheritance."

"I'm assuming these 'sons' and 'daughters' you speak of are from different families," Oberyn Martell cockily remarked.

That drew a short round of laughter from around the table.

"Unless they're Targaryen," Smalljon Umber cheekily added in.

More laughter. After the last snicker faded away, Gregor declared "Luckily, there is still a potential solution to this dilemma."

He turned to the Dornishman and told him "A solution which you have the capacity to provide, Prince Oberyn."

"How might I do that?" Oberyn enquired curiously.

"You have five female bastards and counting," Gregor explicated, "If need be, we could petition the king to legitimize a few of your daughters. Then they would be just as suitable for marriage contracts as any trueborn children. It would not even out the ratio of free male to female heirs in the Great Houses straightaway, but it would go a long way to improving it."

"Yes, this a feasible approach," Oberyn admitted. He then grew a wicked grin and wittily claimed "However... there's a chance that only three of my daughters will be available for certain. It would appear your brother is already quite taken with my two eldest."

Most everyone there seemed either stunned or bewildered by that revelation. Gregor himself was a little surprised, but only because he did not entirely expect Oberyn to be aware of Sandor's interaction with Obara and Nymeria. As far as Gregor knew, only Ellyn and Lady Daliah had seen them together.

After a little silence, Gregor scoffed and muttered assumingly "So, you saw them together last night, too?"

"Oh, it did not start last night," Oberyn disclosed. When he saw the look of bafflement on the Mountain's face, the prince's grin lengthened and he proclaimed "You've been so preoccupied with arranging your wedding that you were blind to what other people have been up to, my lord. In the fortnight since your family arrived at Moat Cailin, Sandor has spent most of his waking hours with Obara and Nymeria, as have they with him."

"Is that right?" Gregor asked rhetorically.

Oberyn nodded his head, and Gregor rubbed his temple, evidently intrigued. He thought aloud "Peculiar. The first time I saw them all together was this morning in the training yard. They were having a friendly bout. Or what could pass as a friendly bout."

"Who was winning?" Oberyn queried eagerly.
"Hard to say," Gregor recounted, "He beat each of them separately, but when they teamed up, they managed to knock him on his ass. In any case, the fighting never became too heated between them. You may be interested to learn that that's the reason I called this meeting."

"You called this meeting because your brother and Prince Oberyn's daughters were having a swordfight?" Osmund Kettleback supposed.

"No, I called it because even in the midst of combat, my brother and the Sand Snakes clearly admired and respected each other," Gregor clarified, "Outside of the North and Dorne, women are not generally permitted to brandish weapons or adorn armor. Nor are they taken seriously as soldiers. The Westerlands in particular clings to that outdated view of women. Yet my brother Sandor has overcome that prejudice. Furthermore, Sandor is very competitive by nature, as are Obara and Nymeria Sand. One would think that facet would drive them apart. Instead, it has brought them together. That led me to think… if three quick-tempered non-Legionnaire strangers can find common ground through sparring, it is reasonable to assume that the rest of the realm can come together through more peaceable means."

"There is logic in that observation, my lord," Allard Seaworth admitted.

"Quite so," Garth Hightower concurred.

Victarion Greyjoy appeared somewhat dubious. He furrowed his brow and presumed skeptically "Do you mean to tell us that all the probable marriage contracts that were discussed at this meeting were conceived by you today?"

"No, I actually thought them up a long while ago," Gregor expounded, "I was simply waiting for the most opportune moment to share them with the rest of you. The sight of my brother Sandor dueling with Obara and Nymeria merely convinced me that now was the proper time to proceed."

"I can see how you would be led to believe that, my lord," Brynden Tully pronounced, "But dueling is one thing. Marriage contracts are another entirely. Are you certain you should take the skirmish between your brother and the Sand Snakes as a sign that betrothals between houses belonging to different regions are liable to happen?"

"Well, I would interpret it as such," Oberyn Martell debated, brandishing his trademark devious smirk, "In Dorne, boys and girls fighting each other is a common occurrence. Outside my homeland, Dornishmen are willing to fight anyone they encounter. Dornishwomen are just as willing, but it is more difficult for them to find willing opponents. Sandor is not only willing to fight with my girls; he is visibly delighted to do so."

"Maybe it's just the thrill of battle that draws him to them," Lyn Corbray conjectured, "It could be he's not really interested in Obara or Nymeria; he's just interested in triumphing over them."

"Oh, what would you know of bonding with the fair sex?" Gerion Lannister refuted. Lyn shot Gerion a hostile glare, to which the blonde man sniggered in response.

"Taking Ser Lyn's… unique perspective into account, I do not believe Sandor only sees Obara and Nymeria as a pair of challenges," Oberyn Martell proclaimed, "I believe there is some type of attraction between him and them."

"Gregor and I arrived at the same conclusion," Dacey disclosed.

"And we only saw the three of them together once," Gregor reminded the others, "Obara in particular seems to have taken an interest in something other than Sandor's combat prowess."
Oberyn was intrigued by that last statement. He rubbed his chin and murmured "That's quite remarkable. Maybe we can use that to our advantage, too. While we're still on the subject of betrothals and such…"

Gregor had not considered the likelihood of a marriage contract between Sandor and one of the Sand Snakes. That was not just because the Mountain had no real voice in whom his brother's bride would be. It was also because of the circumstances of Obara's birth. Still, he would be a fool not to recognize the advantages in such a union.

"I appreciate the idea," Gregor disclosed, "But unfortunately, my mother is not as tolerant of bastards as you or I, my prince. She would spit at the very concept of my brother wedding a baseborn girl."

Oberyn did not seem surprised by that statement. Nor did he seem bothered. He contended "Just minutes ago, you suggested that I legitimize my daughters. Let us say King Robert agrees to make them Martells. Would your mother be so adverse then?"

"No," Gregor replied, "Neither would my father. But if that was to happen, wouldn't Obara be marrying too far below her station?"

"In Dorne, there is no such thing as marrying above or below one's station," Oberyn argued, "Besides, from what I've heard, your house in the south has flourished these past three years. Clegane's Keep would be as good a place for my daughter as it would be for your family."

Gregor sat reflecting on those points. After a minute of contemplative quietness, he coincided with "Very well, Oberyn. I am willing to indulge the possibility of a marriage contract between Sandor and Obara. But before we tell them, my mother, or anyone else about a betrothal, we should write a letter to King's Landing. If the request to legitimize your daughters comes from both of us, that should be enough to persuade the king to grant it. Once your firstborn is recognized as a Martell, we can broach the subject of betrothal to her and my brother. If both of them agree to it and my parents give them their blessing, we can make it official."

Oberyn nodded his head, folded his arms, and stated "That is more than acceptable."

The meeting ended ten minutes later. Immediately after leaving the council chambers, Gregor Clegane, Oberyn Martell, Brynden Tully, and Garth Hightower went straight to the rookery. There the Mountain and the Red Viper composed a letter to King's Landing. At the same time, the Blackfish wrote a letter to Winterfell and the second son of Lord Leyton Hightower wrote a letter to Highgarden.

As soon as each letter was complete, a raven was dispatched to its intended destination.

Although over three dozen potential marriage contracts had been proposed at the meeting, the one between Robb and Margaery was the only one Gregor wished to follow up on right away. The sooner the idea reached Winterfell and Highgarden, the more chances it had to happen.

After the ravens were sent out, there was nothing more Gregor or his ten companions could do but wait for answers.

Three days later, Lord Jorah Mormont, Lady Maege Mormont, and her three youngest daughters left for Bear Island. Four more days later, Sandor Clegane, Ellyn Clegane, and Daliah Clegane set out for Clegane's Keep.

Just before he left, Sandor shared a rather affectionate good-bye with the two eldest Sand Snakes.
He embraced Nymeria warmly and kissed her on either cheek. He embraced Obara, as well, but when he tried to peck her on the cheeks, she went one step further and kissed him full on the mouth. After a single instant of shock, Sandor eased down and kissed her back. For a burly young man with aggressive tendencies, he was a very tender kisser.

Now that was what Gregor called a sign.

The next month was relatively uneventful. Apart from quelling a few groups of bandits and tracking down the occasional runaway criminal, nothing especially noteworthy happened for the Legion without Banners. Gregor still had yet to hear back from King Robert, Lord Eddard, or Lord Mace. But he was holding out hope that they (and the people around them) would come through for him.

Halfway through the first month of the 287th year after Aegon's Conquest, something very significant took place.

One day, in the late morning, Lord Gregor Clegane was alone in his solar. He was seated at his desk, reviewing a number of reports from his officers (The closest thing they have to paperwork here). He had a tankard of cranberry juice by his side. Most other lords would have preferred a mug of ale or beer, but Gregor had never been much of a drinker in either of his lives. He allowed himself a goblet or two of wine at feasts, but other than that, he tried to stay sober as often as possible.

He was in the middle of examining the roster of the Legion's newest recruits when he heard a loud thumping outside the door.

He promptly looked up and called out "Come in."

It was Dunsen who stepped inside the room. He entered very hastily, and he was breathing very rapidly, as though he was struggling to catch his breath. In fact, he was; he had sprinted all the way up to the solar from somewhere on the ground.

Concerned, Gregor rose from his chair and asked "Dunsen, is something wrong?"

"It's… it's Milady, Ser," Dunsen spoke through uneven breaths.

Although Dacey was not the only highborn woman at Moat Cailin, Gregor knew that whenever his men-at-arms mentioned "Milady," they were referring to his wife.

"What is it?" Gregor queried worriedly.

"Well, Ser, she…" Dunsen haltingly began. This time when he paused, it was not because of fatigue. Instead, it was due to apprehension. Then he took a deep breath and finished with "She fainted."

Gregor suddenly felt himself a little short of breath, too. He rose to his feet, walked around his desk and said demandingly "When? Where? Why?"

"Just now, in the training yard, and I don't know," Dunsen answered correspondingly, "The Smalljon and Prince Oberyn are taking her to Maester Kennick as we speak. They sent me to fetch you, if you're not too busy."

"Of course I'm not," Gregor solemnly declared. He retrieved his cloak from a hook on the wall and draped it around his shoulders. After tying it securely around his throat, he descended the Lord's Tower with Dunsen.
As they made their way back down to the ground, Gregor asked his man-at-arms "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Afraid not, Ser," Dunsen said apologetically, "I only arrived on the scene after Milady collapsed. By the time I found out what all the fuss was about, they were already moving her."

"Well, I'm grateful that you came straight to me," Gregor asserted.

"Glad to know, Ser," Dunsen muttered sincerely.

Ten minutes later, the Mountain and his retainer reached the maester's office. Oberyn Martell, Smalljon Umber, Rodrik Cassel, and quite a few others were standing outside the door. But only Gregor was allowed entrance to the room.

Inside the chamber, Maester Kennick was tending to Dacey. She had already regained consciousness, but she did not look well.

Her face glistened with perspiration, and many of her black locks were drenched in sweat. Her breathing was as unsteady as Dunsen's had been when he reached Gregor's solar.

One may have attributed that to the fact that Dacey had been in the training yard when she collapsed. She had been sparring with Ser Rodrik for twenty whole minutes beforehand. But Ser Rodrik – as well as everyone else who had been present – had noted that even before their duel began, Dacey had seemed fatigued or distracted. Every additional minute the duel lasted, her condition had worsened.

Despite how hot Dacey looked, her upper body was wrapped in a blanket.

At a glance, Gregor would have guessed she had a fever. But as the weather indicated, Westeros was in the process of switching from summer to winter. As far as Gregor knew, autumn fever was not a thing in any part of the country, including the North.

Gregor went to his wife's side, knelt beside her, and took her hands in his. He asked worriedly "Are you alright?"

She slowly turned to face her husband. She did not look alright. All the same, she managed to nod her head a bit, and she insisted "Yeah, I'm just... just a little dizzy."

Then she balked and clasped her hand over her mouth, which suggested she was about to vomit.

Gregor spotted a chamber pot across the room. He hurriedly went over to it, picked it up, and brought it over to his wife. He held it near her, just in case.

Fortunately for Dacey, she managed to avoid throwing up. Unfortunately for Gregor, he had not realized that the chamber pot was not empty. Either Maester Kennick had used it that morning or the servants had not yet cleaned it out. Gregor smelt the contents of the chamber pot before he saw them, and when he saw them, he gagged. He quickly returned the chamber pot to its original spot, but his disgust lingered.

Dacey was amused by her husband's actions. She commented drily "I wonder who's more likely to retch now: you or me."

Gregor was not as entertained. He murmured sardonically "Is now really the best time for jokes?"

"It might actually be, my lord," Maester Kennick perceived, "We'll probably laughing about this
before long."

"I'd rather you wait until you finish examining my wife to make that declaration," Gregor muttered sternly.

"As you wish, my lord," Kennick conceded, "I'll be done soon. I just need to ask her a question. A personal one. So, if you would not mind…?"

At that, Gregor nodded and took a few steps back so that Kennick could talk to Dacey in relative privacy. He whispered something into her ear. In response, her eyes widened and she looked at him in astonishment. A few seconds later, she stared at her feet and uttered softly "Well… six weeks ago, I suppose."

Six weeks ago? The hells does that mean? What happened six weeks ago?

Before he could ask anyone that question, Kennick turned to the Mountain and gestured for him to come back over. Gregor gradually walked back over to the maester and his wife. Both of them were grinning now.

"Lord Gregor, I'm pleased to tell you there is nothing wrong with Lady Dacey," Maester Kennick informed him.

Gregor let out a sigh of relief and knelt by Dacey's side again. As he held her hands in his right one again, he assumed "So she's perfectly healthy?"

"Yes," Kennick affirmed. He knelt on Dacey's other side and slyly added in "Both of them are, in fact."

Before, Gregor had simply been confused. Now he was dumbfounded. "Both?"

"Yes, Lady Dacey and…" Maester Kennick took Gregor's free hand and brought it to Dacey's abdomen. He had the Mountain rest his hand there for a few seconds.

The truth dawned on Gregor very suddenly. He stared at his hand on his wife's lower body for a few more seconds, and then he gradually looked up at her and the maester. He said very quietly "You mean…?"

Maester Kennick nodded his head and announced "Lady Dacey is with child, my lord."

Upon hearing the confirmation to what he had already begun to suspect, Gregor seemed to freeze in his position. He gave no immediate reaction to that statement. Dacey and Maester Kennick watched him closely, eager for his response.

Then Kennick's theory came true; Gregor did laugh. Dacey and the maester soon joined in. They laughed in relief for how they had been needlessly worried, they laughed in amusement for how worked up they had been over this matter, and they laughed in joy for how a child would be born at Moat Cailin later that year.
Dacey required about five minutes to compose herself. After that, she and her husband left the maester's chambers.

Word spread quickly through the moat that its lady was with child. Luckily, Gregor and Dacey were able to partly control how the news travelled. The ten members of the secret council were told first. Then the top officers of the Legion without Banners. After that, the common soldiers, the retainers of House Clegane, and the residents of the adjoining towns were informed.

The overall response to the news was one of ecstasy. Gregor and Dacey wrote to their families, apprising them of the news. Lady Maege Mormont and Lady Daliah Clegane were both delighted that they would soon be grandmothers. Ser Tarrence Clegane was proud of his son for starting his line of succession so soon after his marriage. Sandor was happy that he would be an uncle, as were Ellyn, Alysane, Lyra, and Jorelle happy that they would become aunts.

At the behest of his fellow Legionnaires, a small feast was held to celebrate the looming arrival of Gregor's heir.

Gregor made sure to keep it a small feast. He had no desire to needlessly waste food, even on a joyous occasion such as this one. Proper management of provisions was critical to maintaining the integrity of the Legion. Aside from that, Westeros would soon face another winter, and no one could afford to have insufficient stores then.

This last summer had been a short one. Hopefully, the subsequent winter would be no longer.

Gregor had seen about six or seven winters throughout his childhood in the Westerlands. All of those had been relatively mild, and House Clegane of Clegane's Keep had gotten through them without any substantial loss.

But these last two winters in the North… they had been something else entirely.

Although he had never entered the southern half of the United States until he started college, Gregory Welch's childhood had not been confined to the northern half of the country. He had an aunt and an uncle who lived in Canada. On several occasions, Gregory, his parents, and his siblings had paid them a visit. As it happened, his aunt and uncle liked to travel. Every time Gregory's family visited them, they met up in a different city. Among the cities they had seen were Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Montreal, and Toronto.

Whichever town he went to, Gregory had always enjoyed his vacations in Canada.

With one minor exception.

When he was thirteen, he and his family had travelled to Winnipeg. There had been no wrong with the city itself or its occupants. The true problem was the climate, as they had gone there in the middle of January.

During winter, Winnipeg was supposedly the coldest perpetually inhabitable point on Earth in the Western Hemisphere. Gregory had discovered firsthand that that allegation was quite true.

His family had stayed there for a week, but they spent a total of eleven hours of that interval outside. The temperature rarely rose above zero, and there was always at least eighteen inches of snow on the ground. Often the roads were too icy for vehicular transportation, so they were usually
forced to walk whenever they went somewhere.

That had to be the roughest winter of Gregory's first life.

But in spite of how lousy that experience had been, Gregor felt that winter in Winnipeg was still preferable to winter in the North. At least in Winnipeg, snowstorms generally only lasted a few hours, and there were days when no fresh snow fell at all.

This reprieve was not to be found anywhere in the North. There seemed to be a blizzard every day. On a merciful day, there was two feet of snow on the ground. On a harsh day (and those outnumbered merciful ones three times over), there was four feet. The average temperature was usually five to fifteen degrees colder than that of what the average had been in Winnipeg.

Gregor had already survived two winters in the North, but that did not make the prospect of facing a third one any more appealing.

There was also the painful reminder that the Legion had not emerged unscathed from either of the first two winters.

During the first winter, the renovations to Moat Cailin were still underway. There was too little room in the towers that had been built to house all of the Legion's members. Even when every inch of free indoor space was allocated, many of them were forced to sleep outside. To keep warm, they camped around large bonfires which were refueled with ironwood every hour. Despite these efforts, fifty-eight Legionnaires had perished in the snows.

The second winter had been even more catastrophic. Although Moat Cailin was by then large enough for the entire Legion, it was not large enough to include the smallfolk in the newly-built adjoining towns. The houses in those villages were strong and firm in the summer, but against the full fury of Northern snows in wintertime, they provided inadequate shelter. Only eleven Legionnaires had died, but nearly a hundred smallfolk had been lost, as well. In Gregor's mind, civilian casualties were always far worse than martial casualties.

Naturally, he would not allow the people of Moat Cailin to suffer these hardships a third time. He would take measures to ensure they did not.

Nearly all of the losses on both occasions were attributed to poor or insufficient housing. Gregor had noticed that, and he had taken steps to rectify that predicament. The houses in the villages were reinforced, and more towers had been erected in the moat.

Now, every house in the villages could withstand even the fiercest of blizzards. And even if they could not, the fourteen towers of the provided enough rooms so that the Legionnaires and the townspeople could live together comfortably. Interestingly, they would still have enough space that the living conditions would not be overcrowded.

Gregor was pleased by these breakthroughs. Not only would he guarantee the well-being of all the people staying at Moat Cailin, but there would also be no need to seek a safer haven elsewhere. Gregor would not have forced his people to brave another brutal winter at Moat Cailin unprepared. If he had been unable to give his people suitable living quarters when the winter snows came, the only option would have been for the Legion and the smallfolk to relocate south until summer returned.

Gregor was determined to keep the Legion without Banners in the North as much as possible. That was one of the main reasons why the Mountain had chosen Moat Cailin as its base of operations: its location.
Actually, the location of the moat accounted for two of the reasons for picking Moat Cailin as his new stronghold and the headquarters for the Legion without Banners.

The first reason was because of its surroundings. From the south, it was protected by miles of marshland and bog. They formed a natural barrier from anything that came up the Kingsroad.

Of course, the true threats would come from the north. However, from that direction, the moat had no barricades, natural or otherwise.

To be precise, it had nothing of the sort before Gregor came along. That was another of the amendments he had imposed upon the moat.

After the villages and the new towers had been raised, Gregor had seen to the construction of a wall that bordered the lands immediately north of Moat Cailin.

The wall was not made of stone, wood, metal, or any traditional type of foundation. It was made of something that had not even existed in the world before Gregor came along.

When the Essosi architects first arrived at Moat Cailin, Gregor had presented them with a compound he had put together himself. The compound was a batch of homemade concrete.

The architects were greatly impressed by the concrete and its uses. They asked to know how this compound had been created, and Gregor obliged them with a summary of the smelting process.

In order to make concrete, Gregor needed cement, which also had yet to be invented. Luckily, he had the means to create that, as well. He had put together large amounts of clay and calcite-rich limestone, and he combined them with equal portions of water and sand. His blacksmiths heated the ingredients together in the forges of Moat Cailin.

The resulting mixture was a little crude, but it was sturdy and malleable enough to accomplish its intended use.

Gregor and the architects had a steady arrangement. The Mountain's blacksmiths smelted the concrete; the architects used it to build a thirty-foot wall along the northern border of Moat Cailin. They also used it to reinforce the houses in the villages and the moat's towers.

Although Gregor had told the architects how concrete was created, he had not given them a demonstration of the process. So while they knew how the compound was made, they did not know how to make it themselves.

During their stay at Moat Cailin, the architects proposed that Gregor give them the recipe for smelting concrete. That way, they argued, they could make the compound themselves without relying on his blacksmiths or overworking them.

Gregor was tempted to share the recipe. However, his blacksmiths assured him that smelting concrete was no chore for them.

Moreover, Gregor saw a business opportunity. While there was no such thing as copyright in this world, so long as Moat Cailin alone held the recipe for concrete, the ability to manufacture and sell it would be exclusively Gregor's.

So he declined to share the recipe with the architects. They were disappointed, but they accepted his choice.

Concrete and cement were the first objects from his first life that Gregor had introduced to the
Known World. Through his connections, he had sold massive quantities of both of those substances on the markets of the Seven Kingdoms, the Nine Free Cities, and Slaver's Bay. They had brought in a tremendous amount of income for House Clegane of Clegane's Keep.

Gregor still owned the patents to cement and concrete. As long as they remained his, the treasury at Moat Cailin would continue to grow fuller. All he had to do was ensure that the required materials were always in abundance.

Water could be provided by the Cut or the moat's aqueduct, sand could be imported from Dorne, and clay could be dug up from the lands surrounding the moat.

The only material that proved a bit of a challenge to locate was the calcite-rich limestone. Fortunately, Gregor had ways of acquiring that mineral.

If there was one thing the Westerlands were known for (other than having the vainest and proudest Great House), it was that they produced the greatest miners in all the realm. Many of the Westerlander Legionnaires had at least some experience with mining. Gregor opted to put those skills to use.

After getting special permission from Lord Eddard Stark, Gregor had tasked those Legionnaires with locating and digging up any valuable caches of limestone or other precious metals in the southern half of the North. This past year had yielded very fruitful results. So far, they had found veins of limestone, moonstone, zinc, iron, ebony, silver, malachite, quicksilver, and even an occasional gold one.

The mining operations were even more lucrative than the concrete and cement marketing. The profits generated from these operations were around ten times greater than the expenses incurred.

If this enterprise became successful enough, Gregor would probably push to continue their mining operations throughout the rest of the North, all the way to the wall.

At any rate, now that a wall of solid concrete had been erected along the northern border of Moat Cailin, the fortress was protected from both directions now. There were only three gates in the wall, and each of them could be sealed off with concrete doors if need be.

Once the Long Night occurred, the concrete wall would provide a formidable obstacle against the Others. Gregor knew it would not hold them off forever, but it would greatly delay their advance south. The Legion without Banners would even be given some time to push the Others back or evacuate the moat.

Furthermore, once the Others were past the concrete wall, their hardships would not stop at Moat Cailin. Even if they managed to obliterate the Legion, they would still have to face the hazards of the Neck. Gregor did not know how deep the swamps were, but he believed they would be able to swallow up a huge proportion of the White Walkers before they reached the Riverlands.

That was one of the two reasons why Moat Cailin's location made it the optimal choice for the Legion without Banners.

The other reason was due to the moat's position relative to the rest of Westeros. It was just barely in the North. It could actually be rather humid at times. Even so, it shared the same climate of the rest of the region.

As Gregor knew well, the landscape of the North was frigid and inhospitable year-round. The temperature never rose about seventy degrees, and there were snows even in the summer.
Only the Northmen were accustomed to such everlasting cold. Gregor hoped to familiarize everyone else in the Legion without Banners with that climate, too.

That was why Gregor had selected a northern holdfast as the Legion's base of operations. It would be as a precautionary measure.

After the Ironborn Rebellion, the Great Summer would come, and it would last about a decade. While the rest of the realm would bask in sunlight and heat, the North would stay somewhat chilly.

In Gregor's mind, by indefinitely stationing a significant percentage of Westeros' fighting force in the North, every member of that company would become well-acquainted with the chill during the Great Summer. Therefore, once the Long Night came about, the Legionsaires would not be strangers to winter. That would give them a greater chance of surviving the extreme weather.

It would do the Legionsaires no good if they forgot how hazardous winter could be. They would have enough burdens to contend with without having to adapt to a steep drop in climate.

Even before he first went north, Gregor knew that life at Moat Cailin would be difficult. But in the long run, the extra difficulty would be worth it.

A few weeks after Gregor learned that his wife was in the process of making their first heir, Westeros was touched by winter again.

This winter was no more pleasant than the two before it. But at the very least, Moat Cailin was better equipped to endure this one. The Legionsaires and the smallfolk all found ample shelter from the blizzards within the confines of the moat.

Remaining indoors did not block out the cold completely, but everyone was able to find a way to stay warm.

For instance, at night, Gregor and Dacey were able to keep each other warm. Very effectively, one might say.

Although she was with child, Dacey was not opposed to engaging in intimate activities with her husband. In fact, her pregnancy seemed to exacerbate her libido. Gregor was all too happy to feed her appetites. Every night for the first two months following Maester Kennick's diagnosis, the Bear Islander and the Mountain made love at least three times.

That had been a rather exhilarating experience. It actually made Gregor think of a joke he had heard in his first life:

*What do you get when you combine the Lord of the Rings with porn? You get A Song of Ice and Fire.*

While not especially clever, he always thought that joke was hilarious. Partly because it was undeniably true. He and Dacey could attest to its authenticity. Apart from that, the Legion without Banners now had enough female members that the Legionsaires could establish a city of their own. Gregor had not been the only one to notice that. Some were taking advantage of it, as a matter of fact. It was not hard to determine which ones. At Moat Cailin, there were hardly any secrets about who was fucking who.

Whenever they were in bed, Gregor made sure his wife was always on top. That was how they usually did it even before she became pregnant. Before, they had done it primarily so that he would not smother her. Now he did it so that he would not put too much pressure on her abdomen. He would risk no hurt to his unborn child, especially not whilst doing the act in which he or she had
been conceived.

Gregor had sworn to himself and to Lady Maege that he would not treat Dacey like an invalid or a weakling when she was with child. While he stayed true to that promise, he did become a little more protective of his wife.

Once a week, Dacey stopped by Maester Kennick's chambers for a checkup on her condition. Without fail, Gregor accompanied her to each of these appointments. He wished to know everything: the growth of the fetus, the details of what Dacey could expect, the recommended alterations to her diet and exercise routine, and everything else.

One would thing that Gregor was absorbed with his wife. Of course, even a fool could plainly see that Gregor loved and cared for Dacey deeply. Be that as it may, his true enthusiasm was driven by the bear girl's slightly protruding lower belly.

That fixation was simple enough to comprehend. Gregor was not obsessed; he was merely undergoing the sensation of euphoria, just as any eager young man soon to be a father did.

Dacey did not mind Gregor's newfound captivation with her lower torso. By extension, it was a newfound captivation with the rest of her, too. In other words, it was just one more thing about her that her husband adored. Plus, since the baby was his, he had a right to be so concerned. Additionally, she enjoyed all the attention he gave her.

Gregor and Maester Kennick were not the only ones who spent a lot more time around Dacey after her pregnancy was announced. Oberyn Martell and Ellaria Sand tended to be there for her quite often. In fact, they seemed to make Dacey's well-being one of their foremost concerns. For what reason, neither Dacey nor her husband could fathom at first.

When asked, Oberyn explained that he and Ellaria had several reasons for their sudden interest in Dacey. Firstly, they respected the Bear Islander and everything she stood for. She had been the very first female Legionnaire, and she had inspired many women across the realm to follow her example. In addition to that, Ellaria had been pregnant once, as well. As such, he was one of the very few highborn ladies in Moat Cailin who were in a position to help Dacey cope with her own pregnancy and prepare for her impending transition into motherhood.

There was also the fact that Oberyn and Ellaria held her husband in equally high regard. Oberyn had not forgotten how Gregor had saved his sister, and by all accounts, he never would (just as he would never have forgotten if the Mountain had been the one who murdered her). Additionally, Oberyn was grateful that Gregor counted him among his greatest friends and his most trusted allies.

Oddly enough, Ellaria fell with child again a couple months after Dacey. From what Gregor recalled of the Sand Snakes, since Elia had already been born, Obella had to be the next one on the way. Dacey congratulated the older woman on her own bundle, and Ellaria, while grateful and thrilled, insisted that Dacey's pregnancy was still the truly momentous event at Moat Cailin.

The most prominent reason of all was due to something even Gregor himself had not yet considered. Oberyn pointed out to him that the Legion without Banners had begun as a company of men and women from all over the realm who were fighting alongside each other. Now, it was becoming more than that. The degree of tolerance and understanding between the members of the Legion without Banners was almost unheard of, even in the Night's Watch. Because of that factor and many others, the Legion was starting to become like a family.

When he thought on this, Gregor realized the prince was indeed correct. He was quite pleased to
confirm this discovery. He could scarcely recall the last time any form of bias had caused an issue at Moat Cailin. Even those individuals who had come to the moat with the most extreme of prejudices had cast them aside in favor of respect and broadmindedness. That could only mean one thing: the Legionnaires were not just comrades anymore. They were now brothers and sisters in arms.

Oberyn was also keen to mention the possibility that the Cleganes and Martells would be related as more than even that. If all went well, they would be family through marriage, and eventually blood, too.

Gregor was still very open to the prospect of a marriage contract between Sandor and Obara. But he was curious as to what the exact nature of his relationship with the Oberyn would be. He thought on that for a while.

If Sandor and Obara ended up together, then Gregor's brother would be wed to Oberyn's firstborn daughter.

So what would that make the Mountain and the Red Viper? Gregor would be the brother of Oberyn's son-by-law, and Oberyn would be the father-by-law of Gregor's brother. What they would be to each other, Gregor was not entirely certain.

In any case, they would be family in both the physical sense and the spiritual then. That would mean a plethora of benefits to all parties involved. Chief among them was the fact that the Cleganes would be the very first house from the Westerlands to marry into Dorne. Quite an accomplishment, particularly for a house as young as theirs.

Of course, with Gregor's marriage to Dacey, the Cleganes had already been the very first family from the Westerlands to marry into the North. They had already set one precedent; why not another?

Some japed that with the joining of House Clegane and House Mormont, giants would soon return to the world.

It was not hard to imagine how that rumor had taken root.

Gregor was twenty-two years old in 287 A.C. He was now fully grown. His ultimate height came out as seven feet, nine inches. During her first pregnancy, Dacey saw her seventeenth nameday. She was a little over a foot shorter than her husband at six feet, seven inches. But she was still growing, albeit gradually.

With all that in mind, it was reasonable to assume that all of Gregor and Dacey's children would be a little taller than average. They would probably even be the tallest members of their generation. Gregor certainly could not think of anyone who would come close.

Sandor and Dacey were approximately the same height, but given the accelerated growth rate of men, that would probably change.

As far as Gregor knew, there were only three people in Westeros who stood taller than Dacey, and all of them were native to the North. They were Greatjon Umber at seven feet, three inches, Smalljon Umber at six feet, ten inches, and… a certain single-minded stableboy in Winterfell at six feet, eleven inches.

In any case, the Mountain was the tallest man in the Seven Kingdoms, and his wife was the tallest woman. Logically, they would have taller children than any other couple in the realm. Just how
tall, they could not say for certain. But they would find out soon enough.

Nine weeks after Gregor and Dacey were married (and five after they found out about the latter's pregnancy), a raven flew in from the south. It brought with it a letter which Maester Kennick promptly brought to his lord. The wax held the form of a crowned stag, which indicated that it had been sent from King's Landing.

The letter brought glad tidings.

Robert Baratheon and the rest of the Small Council had gone over Gregor and Oberyn's case to legitimize the latter's daughters, and after much debate, the King had chosen to give them his approval.

The letter contained a royal decree signed by Robert himself, formally legitimizing Obara Sand and Nymeria Sand as trueborn daughters of Prince Oberyn Nymeros Martell. It declared that from that day forward, the girls were to be recognized as Obara Martell and Nymeria Martell.

According to the letter, only Obara and Nymeria had been legitimized. That was primarily because they were the only two of Oberyn's daughters whom he had specifically referred to by name in the petition he and Gregor had sent to the King. Robert had not legitimized the other Sand Snakes merely because he did not know their names. Varys could have told him, of course. But the Spider was hoping to avoid saying anything about Oberyn's "bastard son." Aside from that, the King had not asked.

Robert said in his letter that if Oberyn wished to legitimize the rest of his daughters, all he had to do was write the Small Council again, and they would make Martells of the other Sand Snakes, as well as any other baseborn children the Red Viper might have had in the future.

Robert even offered to legitimize Oberyn's paramour. Everyone who heard that proposal was greatly surprised by it, Ellaria herself most of all.

Ellaria Sand was the only child of Lord Harmen Uller. If she was given his name, she would become the rightful heir to Hellholt.

That concept might have seemed very appealing to most baseborn children. However, Ellaria actually preferred the lifestyle of a bastard. With no name of her own, she had freedom to do whatever she pleased in the world. She had no responsibilities, duties, or obligations. Other than Oberyn and the Sand Snakes, she was not bound to anyone or anything.

Some may have thought it selfish of Ellaria to choose the indulgent lifestyle of a bastard over the privilege to continue the legacy of her father's family. Luckily, Lord Harmen had a younger brother, Ser Ulwyck Uller. From what Gregor heard, Ser Ulwyck was still unmarried, but he was much less opposed to commitment than his elder brother, so the line of succession of House Uller was guaranteed in any case.

Even with all that said, Ellaria would not simply disregard King Robert's proposal. Perhaps there would come a day when it would be more ideal for her to be trueborn. She could not suppose a reason as to why that would be. Nonetheless, she would keep the King's offer in mind, and she would wait until such a day came. Perhaps she actually would be Lady Ellaria Uller of Hellholt sometime in the future.

What really mattered was that Obara and Nymeria now had their father's name. When this winter ended, Oberyn would discuss the idea of betrothal with his eldest, and Gregor would send a raven to Clegane's Keep to proposition his brother. Then they would finally know whether or not a
marriage contract between Obara and Sandor was truly on the table.

Robert Baratheon was not the only highborn who wrote to Moat Cailin during that winter.

Two weeks after the king's letter arrived, two more ravens arrived from Winterfell and Highgarden. Lady Catelyn Stark and Lady Alerie Tyrell had finally answered the missives sent to them by her uncle and her brother respectively.

The reason they had taken so long to respond was not due to lack of interest. Quite the contrary; the idea of uniting the North and the Reach through marriage had caught their fancy. They had spent the last eleven weeks going over that concept with their husbands (and goodmother in Alerie's case).

After discussing this topic amongst themselves, the two Great Families decided to exchange some correspondence with each other, as well. Recently, a number of ravens had flown back and forth from Winterfell and Highgarden. More letters had been sent between those two fortresses in the last three months than they ever had in history.

Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell were still too young to speak for themselves, but their parents were raising them to be dutiful children. When they were old enough, they would consent to whatever matches their parents chose for them, and they would fulfill their obligations without protest.

After a great deal of deliberation, Lord Eddard Stark and Lord Mace Tyrell agreed to entertain the notion of a betrothal between the former's son and the latter's daughter. No marriage contracts had been drawn up just yet, but one was being heavily considered.

So for the present, it appeared as though the wolf and the rose just might be joined together in the near future.

Now that the issues of Obara's legitimation and Robb and Margaery's betrothal had been resolved, Gregor was able to better focus on problems closer to home. Mainly getting his people through winter and caring for Dacey for the duration of her pregnancy.

Incredibly, not one person at Moat Cailin died during this winter. The improved housing arrangements ensured that everyone stayed warm and comfortable.

In spite of the unfriendly weather conditions, many of the moat's residents could often be found frolicking out in the snow. That crowd was not limited to the children at the moat. There were grown men and women who partook in activities typically reserved by a younger group. These activities included snowball fights, making impressions in the snow, and snowmen building.

When he had a bit of leisure time, Gregor would join his fellow Legionnaires out in the courtyard for a bit of amusement in the snow. He packed a decent snowball and designed a fair snow angel, but his snowmen were larger than anyone else's.

Whenever he built one, Gregor liked to whistle the melody to "Let's Build a Snowman" from *Cannibal: The Musical*.

Every now and then, one of his men would look at him in astonishment. That was not too surprising; they had never heard that tune or anything like it before. Even so, Gregor never told anyone the lyrics to that song. That was mostly because of how goofy and ridiculous the song was (just like the musical it was from). All the same, he rather liked that song (and the musical itself).

Dacey was able to accompany her husband in the snow for the first half of her pregnancy. She even
joined in some of the activities.

The Bear Islander proved to be much better at snowball fights than the Mountain. Whenever two teams were designated, Dacey often commanded one of them, and her team was usually the one that won.

Then again, many of the people on the opposing team were reluctant to chuck snowballs at her. Not only was she the lady of Moat Cailin, but she also carried the heir to the moat inside her.

Dacey was quick to notice this, and she adamantly asserted that neither she nor her babe was a weakling, and that she could take a few blows. Not wishing to displease their lady, the other combatants agreed not to treat her any differently in a snowball fight.

This went on until the fifth month of Dacey's pregnancy. At that time, in the midst of a particularly heated battle, Dacey took a snowball to her lower chest. It had not struck anyplace close to her abdomen, but the force had been enough to knock the wind out of her. After she collapsed, Gregor promptly came to his wife's aid and carried her inside. Maester Kennick confirmed that she was merely short of breath. Gregor suspected that the other team had been hiding rocks in their snowballs, but he never found any evidence substantiating that theory.

At any rate, after much insistence (and begging) on the part of her husband, Dacey agreed to withdraw from the snowball wars until after their child was born.

One thing Gregor really admired about Dacey was how gracefully she handled her pregnancy.

Gregor could vividly recall his first mother's last two pregnancies. Gregory Welch's mother had been a very kind and compassionate woman by nature, but whenever she was expecting, she could become very impatient, irritable, and sometimes unpleasant to be around.

Dacey was nothing like that. She was susceptible to mood swings, but those never lasted long. They actually seemed to be under her control. She had impressive discipline over her mind and emotions. Gregor wondered how she came to possess that feat. Maybe it was because the residents of Bear Island were accustomed to hardship, even more so than most of the other Northern houses.

Dacey still experienced many of the other symptoms that traditionally complemented pregnancy. The first three months were plagued morning sickness. She was more susceptible to changes in temperature, and she rose from bed at least once a night to use the privy.

She tried not to allow the symptoms to impact her everyday life. Still, in the seventh month, she voluntarily agreed to stop sparring in the training yard. By then, her reflexes and her range of motion had been severely reduced by the swell in her abdomen. Even so, she did not relinquish her duties as the Lady of Moat Cailin.

Finally, the day came.

In the early morning near the start of the ninth month of 287 A.C., Gregor was awoken very abruptly by his wife. As the Mountain regained his senses, Dacey complained about a sharp pain in her lower body. She appeared to be having contractions. They quickly discovered that her water had broken.

Gregor jumped out of bed and got dressed as quickly as he could. Dacey could not be bothered to dress. That was a bit of a problem; she was clad only in her smallclothes. So Gregor wrapped her in a thick robe of wolfskin, and he placed soft sheepskin slippers on her feet.

After that, Gregor carried Dacey down the stairs of the Lord's Tower, and he brought her all the
way to Maester Kennick's chambers. To their good fortune, the maester was an early riser. He had already eaten his breakfast and he was preparing for the day.

When his lord arrived with his wife in arms, Kennick snapped to attention. One glance at Dacey was enough for Kennick to understand what was going on. He had already assembled a birthing chamber in the adjoining room. He had Gregor bring Dacey to that room. The Mountain took Dacey over to the bed and set her down gently.

As the maester tended to Dacey, Gregor went to fetch the midwife. He found her in one of the villages north of the moat. It took a few minutes to get her out of bed, but once she was apprised of the situation, she hastily and compliantly followed her lord back to the moat.

The midwife was a middle-aged woman named Vera. She and her family had been among the first of the smallfolk to move into the towns north of Moat Cailin. Vera had three children of her own, and she had assisted dozens of other women with the delivery of their babes.

Shortly after Dacey's pregnancy became known, Vera had offered her services in the birthing chamber. Since she had ample qualifications for the part, Gregor was quick to grant her that request.

When they returned to the birthing chamber, they found that Dacey and Maester Kennick were not alone. Oberyn Martell and Ellaria Sand had joined them. Somehow, the Red Viper and his paramour had caught word of what was happening. They must have seen Gregor carrying Dacey to the maester's quarters. That was the only reasonable explanation.

How they knew mattered little to Gregor. What was important was that they were there to help. Ellaria wished to assist Vera with the delivery, and Oberyn planned to provide moral support for Gregor.

Once Dacey was comfortably settled, Gregor and Oberyn were shooed out of the room by Vera and Ellaria. They claimed that other than maesters, men had no place in the birthing chamber. Gregor tried to protest, but Vera was deaf to his pleas and demands. For his wife's sake, he did not make a scene. Reluctantly, he joined Oberyn out in the corridor.

Dacey was already dilated ten centimeters, so the birthing process began straightaway. Even so, the process itself lasted a grueling four hours.

That was more than enough time for the magnitude of what was taking place to sink in mentally. Gregor sat outside the door to the chamber with Oberyn, and he lamented on the situation.

For these past eight months, Gregor had been greatly looking forward to this moment. Now that it had finally arrived, he found himself very apprehensive.

Every now and then, his wife let out a shriek of agony. Every one of those screams was like a knife in his heart. The worst part was that he could do nothing to relieve Dacey's pain.

Gregor prayed to the gods – the Old, the New, and the God he had worshipped in his first life – that Dacey and their child would survive the ordeal. Dacey was a strong woman; any child with their genes would be equally tough and resilient.

What really troubled Gregor was what would happen after his first child arrived. Publically, Gregor was supposed to hope for a male child. Secretly, Gregor did not care if his child was a boy or a girl. Whatever it was, he would love and care for his child just the same.

He just hoped he would be a good father. In both his lives, he had looked after his younger siblings
quite often, but he had not actually raised them. His parents had raised them alongside him.

Gregor tried to assure himself that he could handle fatherhood. After all, he was the commanding officer of over three thousand men and women. If he could see to the well-being of that many individuals, surely he could do the same for an infant.

Of course, every one of the Legionnaires had come to Moat Cailin grown or mostly grown. They had all been sired and raised by someone else. This child, however, had been conceived by him, and he would be responsible for its upbringing until it came of age.

Gregor voiced none of his qualms, but one look at his face was enough to tell Oberyn that the Mountain was inwardly freaking out. Fortunately, the Red Viper was able to reassure his massive friend that his worries were unfounded.

Oberyn stated that he knew Gregor would be a great parent. He debated that if Gregor was half as good a father as he was a battle commander, his child would have one of the best fathers in the realm. In the little time he had known them, Rhaenys and Aegon had taken a liking to Gregor. Oberyn was convinced that that was a surefire sign of how good Gregor really was with children.

By the end of the fourth hour, Oberyn had succeeded in comforting Gregor and assuaging his doubts about fatherhood. Gregor admitted that his fretting was needless.

Less than five minutes later, Dacey's screams finally ceased. They were replaced by the wailing of a newborn child.

Gregor slowly turned to the door and stared at it intently.

A minute later, Maester Kennick gradually pushed open the door, smiled down at the younger man, and announced "You have a son, my lord."

Gregor and Oberyn swiftly got up off the ground and stepped inside.

Ellaria was taking small sips from a glass of wine. Vera was helping Dacey sit up in bed. Dacey herself was obviously exhausted. But she was smiling wider than Gregor had ever seen her smile. When she saw her husband, her smile grew even bigger.

In her arms was a bundle. A very large bundle. Gregor tentatively approached the bed. Despite how tired she was, Dacey managed to scoot over enough to make room for her husband. He sat down beside her and gazed at the contents of her arms.

Their infant son was indeed quite big. Two whole blankets were needed to swaddle him. His wails had subsided to light coos, and he had yet to open his eyes.

Dacey carefully passed the newborn over to Gregor, and the Mountain gently took their boy in his arms. He held him against his chest and delicately stroked his soft cheek.

A few seconds later, the boy gradually opened his eyes. He stared upward at his father, babbling incoherently.

Gregor broke into an even bigger grin than his wife. He turned to Dacey and placed a soft kiss against her lips. After that, he told her "You did beautifully."

"I'd like to think so," Dacey remarked with a note of smugness, "How many other women catch a prize this grand in the birthing chamber?"
"Just how big is he?" Gregor queried, curious.

"He weighed about seventeen pounds at birth, m'lord," Vera informed the Mountain.

Oberyn whistled and commented "Even a pair of regular-sized twins does not normally weigh that much."

Ellaria scoffed at her lover's blunt statement. She then looked to the Mountain and asked him "What will you call him, Gregor?"

Gregor and Dacey had discussed many possible names beforehand, but they had never settled on any one. Ultimately, they simply decided that if they had a boy, Gregor would chose the name, and Dacey would chose the name if they had a girl.

"I thought about naming the boy after my father or grandfather," Gregor disclosed, "I also thought of naming him after one of my old friends in the Westerlands. But he's a Northern child. He should have a Northern name."

"What name have you in mind, my lord?" Maester Kennick enquired.

Gregor looked back down at his newborn son and proudly declared "Rickard."

Dacey contemplated that name for a few seconds, and she nodded in approval. "Rickard Clegane. It seems quaintly fitting."

By then, Ellaria had emptied her glass of wine. She was quick to refill it. She also filled up four other glasses and gave them to Gregor, Kennick, Oberyn, and Vera. Then she filled a sixth glass with water, topped it with a bit of wine, and gave it to Dacey.

Once everyone had a goblet, Ellaria Sand held hers in the air and pronounced "To Rickard Clegane, firstborn son of the Bear and the Mountain, heir to Moat Cailin."

The others raised their glasses and repeated "To Rickard!"

They drained their cups in one long gulp.

Soon after that, the room was emptied of everyone except Gregor, Dacey, and little Rickard. The two new parents wished to have some private, personal time with their son before they resumed their responsibilities to Moat Cailin and the Legion without Banners. Vera and Maester Kennick would remain in the latter's office in case Dacey or her son needed attention. Oberyn and Ellaria would stay close-by, but they would not tell anyone of Rickard's birth. That privilege belonged to Gregor and Dacey.

For a whole hour, the three Cleganes were left all on their own without any interruptions or anxieties. To Gregor and Dacey, that had to be the most blissful sixty minutes of any winter they had ever seen.
Mixed Feelings

Chapter Notes

Note: I'd like to thank TheWumpus (an author on Fanfiction) for giving me the idea for this chapter. As you have undoubtedly noticed, nearly all of the previous chapters have taken place exclusively from Gregor's perspective. This chapter will hardly even include him (as an active character, I mean). This is where news of Rickard Clegane's birth reaches the rest of Westeros, particularly how the news effects four of the most prominent characters in this story, all of which have a son of their own. So the chapter will be a collection of five short vignettes, each one chronicling the reactions of one of those four individuals. This will essentially be my way of showing what is going on in the minds of other people throughout the rest of Westeros, as well as how they each feel about the changes Gregor is instilling.

From this point on, many of the chapters will be told through the third-person point of view of someone other than Gregor. For instance, the chapter after this one will go back to Moat Cailin and Gregor, but it will take place entirely from Dacey's point of view. Oh, and yes; we'll be getting to the Ironborn Rebellion very soon.

One last point. Originally, I was going to have a fifth vignette from Robert's point of view, but I decided to omit it, as I did not wish to make this chapter overlong. This will still be the longest chapter to date, but I'm going to try not to make any future chapters this long. Also, you'll be seeing a Robert chapter sometime during or immediately after the Ironborn Rebellion; rest assured.

After that previous hour ended, Gregor let Dacey and Rickard alone so they could rest. He left his wife and their child in the trusted care of Vera and Maester Kennick.

Gregor then went out, gathered his people, and announced the arrival of his son. The proclamation was met with much delight and enthusiastic cheers.

For the remainder of the day, the residents of Moat Cailin – Legionnaires, servants, and villagers alike – celebrated the birth of their lord's heir. Toasts were raised, congratulations were given, and good luck was bidden.

As excited and anxious as he was about the future, Gregor still had work aplenty to do.

Mainly, there were a number of people who had to be informed of his son's birth. So in the early afternoon, he made his way to the rookery and set his mind to composing seven letters.

Two of them were rather casual in nature. They were meant for his family and Dacey's. After they were finished, they were dispatched by raven to Clegane's Keep and Bear Island. No doubt they would be received with great zeal.

The other five letters were composed in a much more formal rhetoric.

Each of those messages contained the exact same words as the other four, but Gregor predicted that each of the recipients would react very differently to reading them.
He was quite correct.

... 

Whenever a child was born into a house, it was customary for the liege lord of that respective house to be notified very soon after. Especially if that child was the house's intended heir. As such, the first message was sent to Winterfell.

The raven reached the fortress in the early evening. At the time, Lord Eddard Stark had just supped with his family. He was making his way to the godswood to say an evening prayer when Maester Luwin intercepted him outside.

After he was given the piece of parchment, Ned Stark continued on to the godswood. There he sat against the trunk of the heart tree, opened the letter, and read it.

Dacey's pregnancy had been common knowledge throughout the North for the past several months. Naturally, the news of her delivery came as no surprise to Lord Eddard; he had already expected to hear of it sometime that month. Even so, he was pleased that the birth had been performed successfully and without any complications.

He was also intrigued by how Gregor Clegane had given his son the name of Rickard. Not only was it a Northern name; it was the name of Eddard's late lord father. He supposed he should be flattered by the Mountain's decision. Lord Karstark would certainly be.

Although it was not required of him, Ned planned to send a follow-up raven to congratulate Lord Gregor on the birth of his heir. He did this routine with all of his bannermen, but it was more than just obligation that motivated him to write the lord of Moat Cailin. For a number of personal reasons, he wished to maintain a level of regular correspondence with Gregor Clegane.

Secretly, the Mountain fascinated him. He who was generally very difficult to fascinate.

Years ago, when Eddard had merely been the second son of a great lord, he had heard tales of the Mountain That Rides.

Ned had been fostered in the Eyrie, so he had been as far away from Gregor as possible during the years of the latter's rise to prominence in the Westerlands.

Back then, Eddard found it remarkable how the son of the youngest and probably most insignificant house in the Westerlands had become one of the most beloved warriors in his region. With his size and his strength, he could have done whatever he wished and gotten away with it.

Eddard knew that just because one had opportunity to gain at the expense of others, one would not necessarily go through with it, even if one was very selfish. However, even in the North and the Vale, it was no secret that Tywin Lannister cared less for civilian loss of life than the other Lords Paramount of Westeros. With that in mind, Gregor would have had freedom to do as he liked, so long as his actions did not displease Lord Tywin.

Instead, he had gone out of his way to protect the innocent and uphold the law at the same time.

Eddard felt there was an interesting contrast to Gregor.

To the guilty, he was harsh, callous, pitiless, and even somewhat terrifying. To the innocent, he was gentle, empathetic, compassionate, and understanding.

During Robert's Rebellion, Gregor had demonstrated those qualities outside of his homeland.
Firstly, he had minimized the casualties during the Sacking of King's Landing, and he had severely punished those who had done deliberate harm to the smallfolk of the city. He himself had personally slain his own ally, Ser Amory Lorch, for the (supposed) murder of Rhaegar's children.

Then there were the events that had transpired in Dorne.

Eddard would never forget Dorne.

He had ridden to the Red Mountains, planning to find his sister and bring her home or die in the attempt. When he and his six companions encountered the Kingsguard at the Tower of Joy, he had expected a fight to the death.

But there was no skirmish. Neither he nor his friends nor the Kingsguard had perished that day. His sister had lived, as well. Thus, a great deal of loss had been averted.

Lord Willam Dustin was now a father. A year earlier, his wife, Lady Barbrey of House Ryswell, had birthed a hale baby girl, whom they had named Klara. Recently, Eddard had heard that Lady Barbrey was with child again. Had Willam died at the Tower of Joy, his house would have faded into oblivion. Now, due largely to Gregor Clegane's intercession, House Dustin would endure. For that same reason, Martyn Cassel now served as Winterfell's master-at-arms, and he had been around to watch as his son Jory finished growing up.

Of course, as far as the rest of the country knew, everyone else who had been at the Tower of Joy (save Howland Reed) was dead. Furthermore, Eddard was now involved in a dangerous conspiracy that – if exposed – could cost him his life. And the lives of everyone involved, including his nephew. What annoyed him was that he had been insinuated in this conspiracy partly against his will.

Gregor had assured him that the risk would be worth taking. The Mountain had contended that as long as everyone who knew the identities of Rhaegar's children did and said nothing that would compromise their safety, they would all get by without suffering any further tragedy.

It had been four years since then. The dragons were still living as exiles and the stag still laid claim to their throne.

The day would come when the wolf would have to choose between the two factions. Eddard had no doubt of that.

He would have to make a decision, no matter how much he dreaded it.

Either he would break the oath of fealty he had sworn to Robert, or he would break the promise he had sworn to Lyanna to keep her son safe.

He prayed often for a solution to this predicament that would allow him to remain true to both his friend and his family.

Such a solution may have seemed impossible. Even so, part of Eddard Stark honestly believed that such a solution was indeed possible, and if there was one person who could find one, it would be his newest vassal.

Eddard Stark had only known Gregor Clegane for four years, but the wolf lord believed he could trust the Mountain.

*The man was not even born a Northman. Yet he has done more for the North and the rest of the realm than any of my bannermen have in recent history.*
"Ned?" a soft voice interrupted his broodings.

Eddard turned to the entrance of the godswood. His lady wife Catelyn was standing before him, a bundle in her arms and a gentle smile on her face.

Ned Stark returned the smile and gestured for Catelyn to approach. She swiftly made her way over to her husband and sat down beside him.

The bundle turned out to be their one-year-old daughter, Sansa. She was soundly asleep.

Ned's smile remained as he reached his arm out and stroked the tuft of auburn hair on his daughter's forehead. She cooed quietly, but did not wake up.

Catelyn asked "Are you well?"

"Yes," Eddard replied, looking to his wife, "I've news from Moat Cailin."

"Has Lady Dacey given birth?" Catelyn presumed.

Eddard nodded and stated "To a son. Named Rickard."

Catelyn's smile became a smirk and she commented "Perhaps Lord Gregor is trying to carry favor with you."

"I think not," Eddard countered, "My father's name is fairly common in the North."

Catelyn then frowned a bit and murmured "Do you suppose…?"

At that, she slowly gazed down at Sansa. No other words were added to that sentence, but Eddard understood what his wife was implying.

He scoffed and assured her "Lord Gregor is not the kind of man to seek a contract between his child and the child of his liege lord, Cat. Particularly so soon after their births."

"Perhaps not," Catelyn conceded, "But he is the type to seek contracts between the children of others."

"No contracts have been created yet," Eddard reminded his wife, "The match between Robb and Lord Tyrell's daughter was merely suggested. Apart from that, your own uncle advocates the match."

"I know," Catelyn claimed, "I approve of it, as well. What truly gives me pause is why Lord Gregor recommended the match in the first place."

"His reason was that it would bring the North and the Reach together," Eddard recounted.

"Why should he care for the relationship between them?" Catelyn queried.

That is a question I'd like an answer to myself.

So far, Varys was the only person who knew that Gregor's ultimate goal was to unify all of Westeros. He had not shared it without anyone else to maintain the integrity of his plans.

Everyone else believed he was just trying to establish lasting peace throughout the Seven Kingdoms. That theory explained the actions of the Legion without Banners. But it did not explain why he had touched on the subject of betrothals between the children of the Great Houses.
Whatever his motive, Eddard had elected to put his faith in Gregor's counsel. So long as the Mountain acted honorably and in the interests of the realm, Eddard would support and listen to him.

"I cannot say," Eddard answered his wife's question, "But we can guarantee that a match between Robb and Lady Margaery would be beneficial for the North?"

"How can you be certain?" Catelyn inquired.

"Well, I married outside the North," Eddard debated happily, "Look at all the good it has done me thus far."

Catelyn's grin quickly returned, and she placed an affectionate kiss on her husband's bearded cheek. That lone remark was enough to both pacify her qualms and conclude the discussion.

Catelyn then rose back to her feet and declared "I'm going to put Sansa to bed. After that, I'll be in library. Robb and Jon wish to show me something there."

"Show you what?" Eddard asked in interest.

"They did not say," Catelyn candidly responded, "They claimed it was a surprise."

Eddard merely nodded in acknowledgement and muttered wryly "Very well. Enjoy your surprise."

"I'm certain I will," Catelyn contended, smiling again, "Those boys are always a joy to be around."

After that, she departed from the godswood.

Eddard lingered by the heart tree for another half-hour. He stayed to pray and to reflect on the letter from Moat Cailin.

Gregor Clegane was now a father. That was something he and Lord Eddard Stark had in common. Soon enough, the Mountain would know what having a child truly meant to a man.

Eddard believe fatherhood would suit Gregor well. He had already done an excellent job of ensuring the survival of other people's children. He had also ensured the happiness of those same children.

When Lyanna had entrusted him with her son, Eddard had thought to claim Jon as his own bastard. It had been Gregor Clegane who had proposed that Eddard present Jon as the product of a free union between Brandon Stark and Ashara Dayne instead.

Eddard had been hesitant to use that story at first, but he had ultimately chosen to go with it.

Now, he was certain that had been the right decision. Catelyn Stark absolutely adored her nephew. She treated him no differently than Robb or Sansa. The fact that he was a bastard did not matter to her. What mattered was that he was family. For that alone, she loved and accepted Jon. She would never have loved or accepted him if he had been passed off as the stepson who resulted from an adulterous fling on her husband's part.

…

A couple days later, another of Gregor's messages reached Sunspear. Maester Caleotte brought it to Prince Doran and Princess Elia immediately. They went over the contents of the letter together in Doran's council chambers. As always, Areo Hotah stood guard over his liege lord, but said and
heard nothing.

"Seventeen pounds?" Doran noted, raising an eyebrow.

"That could very well be a record," Caleotte hypothesized, "In Westeros, at least."

"Rhaenys and Aegon weighed half that," Elia recalled.

And even **that** was almost too much for me.

"Do you really think Oberyn was there for moral support?" Elia inquired.

"It does not sound like Prince Oberyn," Caleotte perceived.

"Oh, I disagree," Doran refuted, "Oberyn does as he likes. Based on the letters he's sent us from the moat, he and Lord Gregor have become very well-acquainted."

"That, I cannot contest," Maester Caleotte remarked, "On that note, Lady Ellaria is certainly the type to aid another woman in the birthing chamber. Seeing as she's had that experience herself."

"How fortunate for Lady Dacey that she and Oberyn were there," Doran commented.

*Yes, and lucky them. They're up there protecting the country and befriending the Mountain. And we're down here... waiting. All this pointless waiting...*

"Indeed; Lady Dacey appears to be doing quite well," Maester Caleotte observed, "According to this, she actually tried to get back up on her feet just hours after birthing her son."

"She must be quite robust," Elia conjectured.

"She'd have to be," Doran contended, "I imagine Lord Gregor would need and want a woman as hardy and stout as her to be his wife. And to bear his children."

*Yes, he would.* Elia grimaced slightly.

Ever since the Sack of King's Landing, the Mountain's name had been a highly esteemed one all throughout Dorne. Many of the Dornishmen had actually come to admire Gregor Clegane. Elia Martell in particular revered him.

At first, she thought that was merely because he had saved her and her children from Amory Lorch. What she felt was probably just a heightened sense of gratitude.

She soon discovered it was more than that. On the voyage back to Sunspear, she had bonded with Gregor. He had looked after her, Rhaenys, and Aegon as though they were family.

They had talked for much of the trip. They had shared intimate secrets. They had spoken casually on serious matters. They had reminisced on memorable events from their youth.

He had called her beautiful. Even Rhaegar had not called her that.

By the time she was back in her homeland, Elia had begun to wonder if she was developing romantic feelings for Gregor. Or if he was for her.

At the time, she hoped not. There were too many extenuating circumstances that would have obfuscated that type of relationship.
For one thing, Gregor was nine years younger than Elia, as well as two feet taller. Back then, he was only the heir to a knightly house in the Westerlands. His countrymen had just laid siege to the city which had been her late husband's home. Most of all, her children had been proclaimed deceased, so she was supposed to be in mourning. If she looked for comfort in the arms of a man so soon after losing her husband, her son, and her daughter, she would draw a tremendous amount of suspicion and unwelcomed attention. Even if that man was the one who avenged her children's murders. In addition to that, Elia was not forbidden to leave Dorne, but in the eyes of the public, she had no legitimate reason to ever want to leave it again. Plus, there was no way she would have ever abandoned Aegon, and Sunspear was the only place in Westeros where she believed her son would be out of danger.

So Elia did not act on her new feelings for the Mountain. She kept them to herself, and she parted from him as nothing more than a friend. When they went their own ways, she assumed her feelings would subside eventually.

Things had changed quite a bit since then.

The age difference did not matter as much as it had. Gregor was now a high lord in the North. Because of the Legion without Banners, tensions between the Westerlands and Dorne and the Crownlands were starting to lessen. Gregor had gone out of his way to ensure that Elia and her children were protected from those who wished harm upon them. Because of the Legion, Westeros was starting to become a better place. Elia honestly felt as though she could go almost anywhere in the Seven Kingdoms without fear of being attacked.

This made her wonder on what could have been.

Perhaps under a different set of circumstances, a match between Elia and Gregor could have been devised.

Alas, that could never happen. This was not only because Gregor was now married. There was also the matter of Elia's womb. Rhaenys had wrecked it, and Aegon had all but destroyed it. Now she would never carry another child. No matter how many assets she had to offer, a barren woman was useless in the world of political marriages.

Elia had long ago accepted the truth that there would never have been any chance that she and Gregor would be a couple in this life. She was not one to mope on lost opportunities. She embraced that knowledge without undergoing any form of denial or disbelief.

All the same, she found herself somewhat jealous of Dacey Mormont. From what she heard, the Bear Island girl had claimed the Mountain without even trying. The marriage contract between them had originally been Gregor's idea, not hers. Furthermore, this marriage had not been created simply for political advantages. Gregor Clegane and his wife were deeply enamored with each other. Now that they had a child, their union was both secure and official.

Luckily, Princess Elia had been raised better than to allow her envy to fester. She would not sulk or pout like some rejected one-time lover. She would move on.

Even if she had the opportunity to meddle in the Mountain's marriage, she would never dare to come between him and Dacey. The thought of doing such an atrocious thing disgusted her. She owed Gregor so much; the least she could do to repay him was let him have his happiness with the woman he loved.

Aside from that… Elia knew what it was like to have a husband who was more drawn to another woman than his actual wife. That was precisely what happened with her, Rhaegar, and Lyanna.
Although Elia loved Lyanna just as much as Rhaegar had, she had felt somewhat ignored and unwanted by her husband after the Tourney at Harrenhal. Elia would not wish that on Dacey or any other woman.

After sitting in silence for a few seconds, Elia let out a long sigh, got up from her chair, and uttered "If there's nothing else, I'm going to check on Egg."

Doran nodded his consent, and his sister swiftly exited the chamber. Areo Hotah bowed to her as she left.

Princess Elia Martell calmly made her way to the building's nursery, where most of her nieces and nephews were supposedly gathered.

While Obara and Nymeria were in the North, the rest of the Sand Snakes were currently in that room.

Ever since she returned to Sunspear, Elia had taken a great interest in her brothers' children, particularly Oberyn's. This was for two reasons: she adored all children (especially those in her immediate family), and one of them was actually hers (but not actually his, thankfully).

When she got to the nursery, there were two guards posted at the door. They allowed their princess entrance to the room.

Inside the room, another guard was standing by the door. Like the two without, he wore the standard armor of the soldiers of House Martell. The only difference was that he wore a half-helm which covered most of his face. His mouth and nose were totally concealed, and there were only two small holes in the middle so that his eyes would see.

This man was known by many at Sunspear as Ihtos, a freerider from the western province of Dorne who had sworn his services to House Martell a few years earlier. To most, he was a very mysterious figure.

He spoke only to Prince Doran and those closest to the prince, and he never took off his half-helm; not even to sleep. The sword that hung at his side had seen years of use, and the hand that wielded it was just as deadly.

Elia was one of the few who knew Ihtos' actual identity.

"Good morrow, my princess," came the voice of Ser Arthur Dayne from behind the half-helm.

"Thank you, Ihtos," she returned the greeting.

She then turned her focus on the other occupants in the room. Her sister-by-law Mellario was sitting in a chair, nursing her youngest child, Trystane. Ever since her other son Quentyn had been sent to be fostered at Yronwood, Mellario had been quite protective of her other children. A few meters away, her daughter Arianne was dressing up her cousins Tyene and Sarella. Their game of dress-up was a rather unconventional one. Instead of elegant or elaborate gowns, Tyene wore the garments of a septa, and Sarella was clad in the robes of a maester. That may have been symbolic for the roads the two girls would take later in their lives.

In the corner of the room, a young four-year old boy was building a tower out of blocks of ironwood.

Elia slowly made her way over to the boy and waited until she had his attention. When he noticed her, he put down his blocks, toddled over to her, and hugged her, saying excitedly "Auntie!"
I'm not your aunt. I'm your mother.

How she longed to say those words. But she did not. Instead she picked up the boy and said "Hi, Egg."

This boy was known as Edgar Sand, the only male of Oberyn Martell's bastards. No one knew who his mother had been, but no one seemed to care, either. What Oberyn did in his spare time was his business.

Elia could imagine that Oberyn had gotten that from the late Lord Edgar Yronwood. That was a little surprising, considering that Oberyn had killed him in a duel. With poison, nonetheless. Hence his moniker "The Red Viper."

That infamous episode had strained relations between House Martell and House Yronwood. That was why Elia's nephew Quentyn was now being fostered by Lord Anders Yronwood. Unfortunately, Doran's decision to send his son off had also generated some friction between himself and Lady Mellario.

On the positive end of the spectrum, no one seemed interested about Edgar Sand's origins. As long as no one's curiosity got the better of them, Elia could ascertain that her boy would be safe. She could still call him "Egg" in public. But she could not tell him who his mother was.

Elia remembered a letter that had come from King's Landing several months earlier. It contained a proclamation saying that Obara and Nymeria were to be recognized as Martells. Furthermore, the rest of the Sand Snakes had the option to be legitimized as well.

So far, Tyene and Sarella showed no desire to become legitimized. Elia was glad for that. Because if all of Oberyn's daughters were legitimized, people would expect Edgar Sand to become legitimized as well.

While Elia had no disdain for bastards, she was disgusted by the idea of him being legitimized. He had no real reason to be given a name. He already had a name of his own. He was a trueborn son. He was a prince. He was the rightful heir to the Seven Kingdoms.

And he did not even know that. Not yet. Until then, she would continue to nurture and raise him as she would have in King's Landing.

Elia held Aegon close to her chest and kissed him on the top of his head.

"Someday, sweetling, you will be king," she whispered. She spoke so quietly that only she could make out her words. "Then you'll be able to protect the realm."

Just as Lord Gregor and the Legion protect it now.

... 

Hundreds of miles north of Dorne, Rhaegar Targaryen's other wife was looking after some children, as well.

These three children were a seven-year-old girl, a four-year-old girl, and a one-year-old boy.

None of them was hers. But she wished her own boy could have been among them.

There were two other women in the room. One of them was the mother of the younger girl and the boy. The other was a native of Dorne who had come north with the elder girl.
There was also a man standing against the wall. He was clad all in white armor, his helm under his left arm, his sword in its sheath attached to his belt.

They were all in the lounge of Greywater Watch.

This migratory castle had been a safe haven for Lyanna Stark for the past few years, and the people in this room had been a sort of comfort for her. Especially the older of the girls.

In the absence of her son, Lyanna had personally charged herself with the upbringing of Princess Rhaenys Targaryen. Before they parted ways, she had promised Elia she would raise the Dornishwoman's daughter properly, and she would never go back on her word.

Lyanna had come to love Rhaenys as her own daughter, and the wolf woman was like a second mother to the young princess. Sometimes she called her "Lya" or "Lyanna," but more often than not, she called her "Mother."

Lyanna was young enough to be Rhaenys' sister, but she enjoyed being addressed as that. She found there was definitely some form of closeness between them.

Right now, the castle was on the move. The floating island it was built on was gradually cruising throughout the bogs.

Anyone inside the castle would not have realized that they were moving. But anyone who looked or stood outside would be well-aware, as they would see that their surroundings were constantly changing.

*Yet another "glamorous" voyage. Oh, well. At least it's not humid.*

Greywater Watch frequently glided through the swamps of the Neck in effort to maintain the confidentiality of its whereabouts. It never stayed in any one location for more than a week at a time. In the time since Lyanna had first come to the castle, Greywater Watch had changed its position no less than 250 times.

Lyanna had become accustomed to being constantly on the move. Despite being in a vast marshland, the Neck had many exotic sights to offer, and it helped to appease her sense of adventure.

But no matter where she went, she still felt an empty place in her heart. There was a void that could only be filled by one person, but that person was always more than a hundred miles away.

Just then, there was a heavy knock at the door. Lyanna Stark looked over at it and called out "Enter!"

The door opened and Lord Howland Reed, Ser Mark Ryswell, Ethan Glover, and Theo Wull stepped inside.

Lady Jyanna Reed smiled at her husband and uttered "Hello, my love."

Howland stopped to kiss his wife's lips and the heads of his daughter Meera and his son Jojen. He also gave a nod of acknowledgment to Lady Ashara Dayne, who returned the kind gesture thusly. Howland then approached Lyanna, bowed his head, and said "My princess."

_Princess._

Even after five years, she had not become accustomed to that title. In spite of the fact that all the
people around her addressed her as such every single day. But, of course, she had married a prince, so her official status in the world had risen accordingly. All the same, it sounded queer to her.

"I've news to share," Lord Howland pronounced, holding a rolled up piece of parchment in his right hand. It was marked with the seal of the Northern branch of House Clegane.

None of the crannogmen had joined the Legion without Banners. But some of the other Northmen – primarily the Flints of Flint’s Fingers – knew how to track down Greywater Watch throughout the Neck. As it happened, Robin Flint and some of his knights were Legionnaires. A few of them were expert horseback riders, as well. This was fortunate; riders were the only means one could use to communicate with Greywater Watch.

"Just before we got underway, we encountered a rider," Ethan Glover announced, pointing out the parchment in Lord Howland's hand, "It's a message from Moat Cailin."

Howland Reed stepped up to Lyanna and held out the letter, saying "We believe you are its intended recipient, Princess."

Lyanna raised an eyebrow and tentatively took the letter. She enquired "Why do you think that, my lord?"

"Intuition, I suppose," Theo Wull conjectured.

"That, and the letter is addressed to 'The lodger at Greywater Watch,'" Mark Ryswell slyly remarked.

Lyanna chuckled at that blunt statement and broke the seal on the letter. Then she unrolled it and began to examine its contents.

"What does it say, my princess?" Ser Oswell Whent inquired from his place against the wall.

"I'll read it aloud," Lyanna declared.

So she did. Every person present listened on in great interest. Except Meera and Jojen. They were too young to understand, and they were still engrossed with their toys. Everyone else was quite interested in learning of the contents of the letter, though.

When Lyanna was finished divulging the information in the letter, Rhaenys was the first to speak. Balerion was sitting in her lap. He had grown into a strong tomcat in four years. His mistress scratched him behind the ears, giggled, and said "So Uncle Gregor's a papa now?"

Rhaenys had only been three when she first met Gregor Clegane, but she vividly remembered every moment of that event. She could still recall the sensation of Amory Lorch pulling her out from under her father's bed, the sheer terror she had felt when Ser Amory rose his blade over his head, and the immense relief that had come afterwards when Gregor had gutted Amory like the pig he was.

On the trip back to Dorne, she had even taken to calling him "Uncle Greg" (Or "Gweg"). She continued to refer to him as that to this day.

Rhaenys was old and wise enough to know that Gregor Clegane was not really a sibling to either of her parents. Even so, she still called him "Uncle" out of habit.

To justify that, she had once pointed out that Gregor and her real uncle Oberyn were good friends (if the infrequent messages Greywater Watch received from Moat Cailin were any indication). In a
way, they were almost like brothers. So, by that same logic, Gregor technically was a kind of uncle to Rhaenys. If not by blood, then he was in spirit.

Lyanna had been impressed by her stepdaughter's argument. It was a very prudent observation for Rhaenys to make at such a young age. Then again, in Greywater Watch, many people seemed wise beyond their years.

"Lady Dacey produced a seventeen-pound babe and wanted to leave the birthing chamber straight after?" Ashara Dayne asked rhetorically, clearly dumbfounded, "I'm amazed she even had the strength to remain conscious."

"The Mormonts are a tenacious lot, my lady," Ethan Glover disclosed, "Their strength and height give them great resilience, as well."

"Still, this is the first time one of them has had a child with a Clegane," Mark Ryswell remarked, "I'm not surprised the child was born so large. Nor am I surprised that Lady Dacey and her boy survived the ordeal. Only a Northwoman could carry such a child to terms."

"And one has," Theo Wull murmured, "Now the giants are returning to Westeros."

Had anyone else made that remark, it would have been viewed as a jape or a jest. But Theo Wull was from one of the mountain clans of the North. While his people were not nearly as barbaric and uncivilized as the clans from the Vale, they were more open to believing in the unnatural than the lords and ladies of Westeros.

Theo Wull had always been a firm believer in the unnatural. When Lyanna had told him and the others about the prophecy of the Three-Headed Dragon, he had been the first one to trust the validity of the prophecy. Howland Reed, Jyanna Reed, and Ashara Dayne had gradually decided to put their faith in it, as well. Mark Ryswell, Ethan Glover, and Oswell Whent were still quite skeptical, but regardless of how true the prophecy turned out to be, they were determined to remain with Lyanna and protect her for as long as she would have them.

"Pray tell, Buckets," Ethan Glover commented drily, "What else is returning? The Others?"

Mark Ryswell was the only one to laugh. Lyanna glared at Brandon Stark's former squire and mumbled "That could very well be the case. Should I repeat the prophecy to you, Ethan?"

"You needn't bother, Princess," Ethan assured her. He clearly did not wish to bring the Long Night into discussion again.

Mark Ryswell found this an ideal moment to return to the original subject of the conversation. He stated jokingly "It's rather fortunate that the Mountain did not name his son Rodrik. Otherwise he and Lord Forrester would have had more in common than their own first names."

"Yes, two Northern lords named Gregor having two heirs named Rodrik would have made a mess," Jyanna Reed concurred with a smirk.

"I must admire his actual choice of name," Howland Reed thought aloud.

Lyanna and a few others nodded in agreement.

"Wasn't your lord father a Rickard, Princess?" Ashara queried.

"He was, Ash," the wolf woman affirmed.
"Could that be why Lord Gregor named his son so?" the Dornishwoman supposed.

"I don't think that would be the only reason," Lyanna debated, "I believe there's much more to it than that."

"How so, Your Grace?" Oswell Whent questioned.

Lyanna explained "That name is one of the few that is entirely indigenous to the North. By giving his heir that name, I believe Gregor Clegane aims to prove that he officially regards himself and those of his bloodline as Northmen. He is publically declaring the North as his new place in the world. I think it's commendable of him."

"If that is indeed his reason, then I quite agree," Howland Reed stated.

"Well, how about that?" Mark Ryswell cockily uttered, "Gregor Clegane is a Westerlander by birth. Now he's living in the North as a Northman with a Northern wife and a Northern child."

"Must be little of the Westerlands left in him," Ethan Glover commented.

"Well, I'm partly inclined to think of him as a Northerner through and through," Howland Reed remarked, "But we cannot make any presumptions. We'll have to wait and see if he can raise his child in the fashion of the North."

At least he has the opportunity to raise his own child.

For every day since Lyanna Stark and her company left the Tower of Joy, her son had been the primary focus of her thoughts.

Eddard wrote to her as often as he deemed safe to. From her brother's missives, Lyanna learned that Jon was doing very well in Winterfell.

Lyanna never doubted that Ned would be a good father figure to Jon. What really troubled her was how her sister-by-law would treat him.

To her vast relief, her worries were unwarranted. Catelyn Stark was very loving and caring towards her nephew. She was every bit the mother figure Lyanna would have hoped to have been.

Like Eddard, Lyanna knew Gregor Clegane was to thank for that. He had been the one to propose the false account of how Jon had come into the world. It was their good fortune that the story that he was Brandon Stark and Ashara Dayne's bastard son was both believable and consistent.

Neither Lyanna nor Eddard enjoyed tarnishing their late elder brother's memory so, but if it meant ensuring Jon's survivial, they could live with that lie.

They were lucky that Ashara had been so willing to go along with that story, as well.

At first, Lyanna wondered why it was necessary for Ashara's "suicide" to be part of it. Then Ashara had given her a simple but logical reason: Jon would not be compelled to seek his alleged birth mother out if she was presumed dead. Even if she travelled across the Narrow Sea to Essos, he might still go after her when he came of age.

So it actually had been necessary for Ashara to fake her death. In addition to that, anything other than a suicide would have drawn unwelcome attention.

Even though Jon would have excellent parenting, she still worried for his safety.
Ser Gerold Hightower had come to the North with Eddard and his bannermen after the Rebellion. He had new clothes, a new haircut, and a new name: Ser Marvyn of the Reach. As for his background, he was a travelling knight who had chosen to come north in the aftermath of Robert's Rebellion. He had elected to serve the Stars of Winterfell as a symbol of goodwill between his homeland and the North. Such a benign gesture was very much needed after Lord Eddard had defeated Lord Mace at Storm's End. So it was easy enough to buy.

In any case, Ser Gerold would be able to guard Jon without compromising himself or the boy. Lyanna knew the Reachman would be capable of protecting her son. He had been the Lord Commander of Aerys' Kingsguard, and he had kept her safe in Dorne for weeks.

But even with all her anxieties put to rest, Lyanna was not content with the knowledge that her son was loved and sheltered. She would have given anything just to hold her son in her own arms.

She never expressed that desire to any other person vocally, as she did not wish to make anyone else share in her misery.

Unbeknownst to her, though, Ashara Dayne had caught on to Lyanna's unhappiness. As someone who had lost her own child at birth, she knew the look of a grieving mother all too well.

Lyanna had that very look right then.

"Are you alright, Princess?" Ashara asked in concern.

Lyanna softly nodded her head, but her countenance suggested she wished to shake it instead.

"Can we have a moment?" Ashara requested of the others.

The lounge was promptly cleared of everyone except the Dornishwoman and the wolf woman. Once they were alone, Ashara sat down next to the younger woman and assumed "Jon?"

Lyanna merely nodded her head and confirmed "Always Jon."

A tear had begun to form at the corner of her eye.

Ashara swiftly reached out to Lyanna and pulled her into an embrace, which the other female openly accepted. That was one thing the Northwoman loved about the Dornishwoman; she was always so sympathetic to the anguish of others. That must have been one of the things that attracted Brandon to her in the first place.

This was one instance where her sympathetic nature would really come through.

She told Lyanna hopefully "I have been doing some thinking about your situation. Some very deep thinking. I believe there may be a way to bring you and your son together."

That immediately grabbed the wolf woman's attention. She looked the older woman in the eye and asked eagerly "What?"

Ashara revealed "Well, I have an idea. It is a risky one, but if executed properly, it could work. It could reunite you with Jon without posing any threat to either of you."

"I'm listening," Lyanna Stark proclaimed, leaning in closer.
One of the last two messages was sent by raven to King's Landing.

As king of Westeros, Robert Baratheon had a right to know that the Master of Order on the Small Council now had an heir.

Of the five people Gregor had written, Robert had the most positive reaction to the message. He had sent a follow-up letter back almost immediately, expressing his joy for the arrival of Gregor and Dacey's firstborn child. He had also given Rickard Clegane his royal blessing.

By contrast, the receiver of the final message had the most negative reaction. But considering who it was, that was hardly shocking.

The last letter had been delivered by raven to Casterly Rock.

Even though Gregor had been cut off from the Westerlands, Tywin Lannister seemed to have developed a keen interest in the Mountain's affairs. As such, Lord Tywin would have taken it as a slight if he was not given the news of Rickard's birth (or any similar type of news) straightaway. Gregor was well-aware of that.

While he personally cared little for the lion lord's feelings (if he actually had any), he knew that any wrong he had done Tywin would reflect badly on his family in the Westerlands. Plus, he needed to maintain good relations with the Westerlands so that its residents would continue to serve in the Leigon without Banners. So for the time being, Gregor strove to avoid giving Tywin any more reasons to dislike him or suspect him of foul play.

Even with all that said, Tywin Lannister was still not pleased by the news of how Gregor Clegane had fathered a son.

The raven carrying the message had arrived in the middle of the afternoon. After the letter was brought to Lord Tywin, he and his brother Kevan reviewed it together in the lord's solar.

In those days, Kevan was the only person Tywin could fully trust. Their brother Tygett had already died, their brother Gerion was serving in the Legion without Banners, and their sister Genna had a Frey husband. For those reasons, Kevan was the only one of Tywin's siblings that he could turn to for reliable advice.

After they thoroughly read the letter, the two men sat in awkward silence for a couple minutes

Kevan was the one who broke it. "I suppose we should write to Lord Gregor and congratulate him for siring his first son."

"The man should be congratulated for far more than just that," Tywin debated, "But I will not be the one to congratulate him."

"Nor shall I ever be."

"I wouldn't expect you to be, Tywin," Kevan bluntly remarked.

"And why is that?" Tywin asked, genuinely interested.

"Clearly, this news doesn't please you," Kevan observed, "Nothing the Mountain has done in the last four years has pleased you."

"Perhaps not," Tywin admitted, "If so, the fault is his own."
"I will agree some of the fault is his," Kevan countered, "But you should share some of it. You're the one who allowed this… grudge to endure."

How quickly he rises to defend the Mountain. Against his own brother.

"Kevan, are arguing for Gregor Clegane over me?" Tywin mumbled, accusation evident in his voice.

"No, I'd never do that," Kevan reassured his elder brother, "I'm merely making a point. Amory Lorch was just one knight. He was easily replaceable. He has been replaced. Why can you not forgive the Mountain for killing him?"

"This is not about Amory Lorch," Tywin apprised his younger brother, "I cared nothing for him. He would have been executed or sent to the Wall for what he did in any case. It was also fortunate that Clegane stopped him before he could slay Princess Elia. He spared us a great amount of political turmoil with Dorne."

"Then why does the fact that he killed Ser Amory continue to upset you?" Kevan said inquisitively.

Tywin looked his brother in the eye and responded with "Because he should not have been anywhere near Amory Lorch during the Sack of King's Landing."

Now Kevan was baffled. "What do you mean?"

"I never told Clegane or anyone else about Lorch's assignment," Tywin revealed, "Lorch alone knew that I had sent him after Prince Rhaegar's wife and children. I know that because he was not the type to share his special orders with others, and I gave him the assignment when he and I were alone in the lords' tent."

Kevan thought on that for a moment, and he theorized "Could it be possible Gregor overheard your conversation with Lorch?"

"Unless he had the hearing of an actual lion, I'm certain he did not eavesdrop on us," Tywin refuted, "No, he must have known of Lorch's task through some other means. If he did not know, he would have stayed out in the city until we had taken it. I had arranged beforehand for a number of our units to infiltrate and seize the Red Keep, but the Mountain was not one of the intended units."

Kevan lightly nodded his head in acknowledgment of those statements, and he muttered quietly "So what could he have been doing in there? Have you any theory as to why?"

"I have considered many," Tywin disclosed, "Most of them, I have rejected. But there is one that I believe is both conceivable and feasible."

"What might that be?" Kevan questioned curiously.

Tywin paused for a few seconds. He gazed around the room, as though he was checking for holes or openings in the walls or doors. After he was wholly certain no one was listening, Tywin shared his hypothesis with his brother.

He told him: "Gregor Clegane must possess a secret knowledge."

Kevan was still bewildered. "A secret knowledge of what?"

"The world at large," Kevan clarified, "Think on all he has done. He stopped Amory Lorch just in
time to save Princess Elia, but too late to save her children. He encountered Lord Eddard Stark at
the Tower of Joy right when Stark and his men engaged Aerys' Kingsguard in battle. Through
simple words, he convinced Robert Baratheon to set aside his feelings for Lady Lyanna Stark;
something the King's brothers and closest friends could never do. He formed the largest and most
diverse fighting force in the Seven Kingdoms, and he knew how to appeal to all of his potential
recruits. He has created and produced two new compounds which could revolutionize modern
architecture. He married a woman from one of House Stark's most loyal vassals; he wed her after
only knowing her a few months. Most of all... he and that woman now have a son together."

Kevan reflected carefully on everything Tywin just told him. He was being to comprehend the
argument his brother was making.

"So you see, Kevan; my scorn for the Mountain is not the result of a simple grudge," Tywin
illuminated. "Nor is it due to anything the Mountain has done wrong. Instead, it is the result of
everything he has done right."

_He has done too much right. Under certain circumstances, that can be just as undesirable as too
much wrong._

Once more, the two eldest sons of Tytos Lannister sat together in quietness. Finally, Kevan "I
cannot blame you for being wary, Tywin. But you should give the Mountain some credit. He has
brought some measure of unity to Westeros. Never in the history of the Seven Kingdoms have
Westerlords, Northmen, Valemen, Dornishmen, Riverlords, Reachmen, Crownlords, Stormlords,
and Ironborn fought together for the good of the realm."


Kevan smirked and claimed "That is a different scenario entirely. Most who take the black do so
because their only alternative is to lose their freedom, their hands, their cocks, or their heads. Every
member of the Legion without Banners joined that organization by their own volition.
Furthermore, men _and_ women are allowed entrance, and trueborn children and baseborn children
are treated the same. It's only unappealing aspect is its location in the North. But winter has
touched all of Westeros, so I very much doubt the Legionnaires feel much colder than we do just
now."

Tywin raised an eyebrow and mumbled scathingly "If you are so impressed by the Legion without
Banners, Kevan, why do you not enlist?"

"I will not lie to you; I have been tempted to do so," Kevan revealed, "But I am certain Dorna and
Lancel would not be comfortable in the North. I will not force them to go there, and I cannot leave
them behind, either. It is for their sakes that I remain here."

_As well as mine, I'm sure._

Kevan then grinned lightly and muttered "While we're on this topic, Tyrion mentioned to me the
other day that he was thinking of joining the Legion when he is older."

Tywin was a little stunned at first, but then he rolled his eyes and murmured "Of course he would
thought that. He'll think anything, even that which goes beyond the borders of sanity."

Kevan frowned and remarked "Tywin, you've told me yourself that you have no intention of letting
Tyrion inherit the Rock."

"Indeed, I do not," Tywin confirmed flatly.
"Then why does the concept of him joining the Legion disagree with you?" Kevan inquired.

"The Legion has already absorbed our little brother," Tywin pointed out, "From the letters Gerion has sent us, he has become one of the company's top officers. Worse yet, he and the Mountain have become fast friends. And Gerion possesses little more than average intelligence. Tyrion, for all his flaws, is very intelligent and cunning. Think of what he could do for the Legion without Banners. It could mean good things for a great many people. But not good things for everyone. Particularly those that have had quarrels with both Tyrion and the Mountain."

Once more, Kevan seemed stunned by his brother's words. "You sound as though Lord Gregor is out to get us."

"I assure you I do not believe he is," Tywin pronounced, "But I'm concerned."

"Concerned about what?" Kevan asked.

Tywin elucidated "The Cleganes in the North are becoming too powerful. Thousands of people from all over Westeros follow Gregor Clegane. They never question his orders or his competence. The fact that he was just the son of a landed knight five years ago matters nothing to them. As long as he maintains his values, he'll never lose the loyalty of his soldiers. Moreover, he's respected throughout the Seven Kingdoms. They praise his name and his deeds everywhere, especially in the North. He has all but become a Northman himself, now that he has taken a Northern bride and fathered a Northern child."

"Your concern is not unfounded," Kevan declared, "But in a way, it is still the result of your own hasty actions, Tywin. Do you ever wonder if perhaps you should not have released Gregor Clegane from his right to Clegane's Keep?"

"I wonder that often," Tywin expounded, "But it is no use lamenting on what is done and cannot be undone. Even though he forfeited his claim to his father's lands, the Mountain still cares very deeply for the family here in the Westerlands."

"If you're so anxious about the possibility that he will one day move against us, you could always use them to ensure his passivity," Kevan proposed.

"Oh, I intend to," Tywin asserted, "Why do you think I took Sandor Clegane on as my squire? The boy is very qualified and capable, but his main function is to serve as leverage against his brother."

"That does not surprise me," Kevan murmured frankly, "But as I'm sure you know, Sandor cannot remain your squire forever."

"Of course I know that," Tywin avowed, "To our good fortune, plenty more can be done to guarantee House Clegane's cooperation."

"Is that why you've entertained the idea of raising the Clegane's Keep Cleganes to lordly status?" Kevan presumed.

"It is," Tywin replied, "I have not decided whether or not to go through with that arrangement. I do know that Ser Tarrence and Lady Daliah will be extremely grateful for the honor, and that kind of gratitude is not easily earned or lost."

"True, but it would still not be enough to bind the Cleganes to House Lannister," Kevan noted. He rubbed his chin and contended "Perhaps you could arrange a marriage between Sandor and a member of one of the chief noble houses in the Westerlands."
"That might not be an option," Tywin debated, "I have heard rumors that there could soon be a marriage contract between Sandor Clegane and Oberyn Martell's eldest daughter."

"I thought Prince Oberyn only had bastards," Kevan recalled.

"Until recently, he did," Tywin disclosed, "A number of months ago, the King issued a decree, legitimizing Obara and Nymeria Sand. Now, both of them are as suitable for marriage as any other highborn lady in Westeros."

"Intriguing," Kevan commented, "But since no betrothals have been announced just yet, we still have time to intervene and propose a contract of our own design to Sandor's family."

"No," Tywin refuted, "A marriage between Sandor Clegane and Obara Martell would mean excellent things for relations between the Westerlands and Dorne. Even I would not dare to meddle in that affair."

"Fair enough," Kevan conceded, "So Sandor Clegane's days as a hostage are limited."

"Quite so," Tywin stated, "But Ellyn Clegane might still be useful in that respect."

Kevan did not appear to find that proposal a favorable one. He shrugged somewhat dismissively and muttered "We might find some work for her here at Casterly Rock. She could serve as a handmaiden to Genna or Dorna for a few years. But once she flowers, her parents will wish to marry her off."

"I do not believe her parents have any prospective matches for her just yet," Tywin supposed, "We have time to present them with a few of our own."

"Whom do you have in mind?" Kevan asked in interest.

Tywin did not reply right away. He would have to think on this matter for a while.

No matter who he recommended for Ellyn Clegane, this man would not be a resident of Casterly Rock. That could be a problem. In his mind, the closer Ellyn was to Casterly Rock (and the longer she was there), the more valuable she would be as a political hostage. If he could somehow get her to remain at Casterly Rock indefinitely, his control over the Cleganes would be reasonably failsafe.

But how could he accomplish that?

They were interrupted by a light tapping sound against the door to the solar.

Tywin turned towards the door and shouted "Come in!"

The door swung open and in came a short boy with short blond hair, stunted legs, and a pair of mismatched eyes. In his hand he held a rolled-up piece of parchment. He waved the parchment in the air and walked towards the desk quickly. He called out gleefully "Father! Uncle Kevan!"

"What is it, Tyrion?" Kevan questioned his nephew patiently. Tywin just grimaced, as he always did when his youngest child was nearby.

"A letter just arrived from Moat Cailin," the short boy announced excitedly, "It's from Uncle Gerion."

Kevan smiled at that and pulled up another chair. He gestured for Tyrion to sit down. The dwarf climbed onto the chair. He did not move gracefully, but at least he sat in a dignified manner.
Normally, Tywin Lannister would have been appalled by anything Tyrion did, regardless of his intentions. On any other day, he would have been annoyed and cross for interrupting their conversation.

This time, however, when he observed his son's actions, a thought passed through the lion lord's mind. A shrewd but conniving thought.

*Could it be? Could this actually be what could…?*

For the first time ever, Tywin Lannister smiled at his youngest child. Tyrion was taken aback when he saw his father grin at him, and he tentatively returned the smile back.

But the smile was not out of love or affection. It was a rather wicked smile, if truths be told.

Tywin had this smile because when he saw Tyrion, he knew precisely what he could do to bring Ellyn Clegane to Casterly Rock. And keep her there.

*I may have found the perfect match…*
Changes And Control

Chapter Notes

Note: Hey, guys; sorry for taking a little longer than usual to update. I've been extraordinarily busy this past week. In the last few days, I had two graduate school finals (one of which was just this morning), and I had to make studying for them my top priority. Fortunately, those are out of the way, and all I have left of my third class is a presentation on Wednesday. After that, I'm free for the rest of the semester.

By the way, some people found Tywin's conclusion about Gregor's "secret knowledge" of Westeros to be a little far-fetched. I'd like to clarify: Tywin isn't beginning to suspect that Gregor's from another world. NO ONE is ever going to wonder that about him, I assure you. By "secret knowledge," I really meant for Tywin to insinuate that he believed Gregor may have had his own network of spies, or some other unconventional means of acquiring information from all over the country. In other words, he DOES suspect Gregor of knowing much more than he lets on, but he is at a loss as to how Gregor knows so much in the first place.

Throughout Westeros' lengthy history, a babe of seventeen pounds being born alive was unheard of. The Citadel had records of babes who weighed slightly less than that who had lived, but they had weakened, crippled, or killed their mothers when they emerged from the womb. Most women in the modern Seven Kingdoms still would not have survived birthing one as large as Rickard Clegane.

As she had already proven many times over, Dacey Mormont was not "most women." Her son's birth had greatly fatigued her, but it had not rendered her helpless, comatose, or on the verge of death. Quite the contrary, she recovered at an alarmingly fast rate. By midafternoon, she had all but regained her strength.

Gregor's letters had told true. Mere hours after bringing Rickard into the world, Dacey had attempted to get up and move about. Vera and Maester Kennick both vehemently protested, as expected.

That was not enough to sway Dacey. Then, to her dismay, Gregor took their side. She did not have the option to ignore or disregard his advice.

Her husband beseeched (or "requested," as he called it) her to get some rest. She claimed that she had already been quite inactive for the last four months, and she had no intention of "slacking off" any longer.

Stubborn as Dacey was, Gregor ultimately won the argument. She agreed to remain abed for the rest of the day so that Maester Kennick could do some tests to ensure that she and Rickard were doing well. After that, she could do as she pleased. Gregor assured her that once the next daybreak was upon them, he would not even object if she wished to go riding.

While Dacey agreed to that arrangement, she was somewhat annoyed that her husband had confined her to her bed, even if it was only temporary.
Oh, well. I should count myself lucky that Gregor can listen to reason.

Dacey never voiced that thought, and if she had, few would have agreed with her. From the point of view of most others, Dacey had been the unreasonable one. Even so, in the long run, she was no deaf to reason than her husband.

Dacey spent the rest of the day tending to Rickard.

When he got hungry, Vera had offered to find a wet nurse for him. Dacey had firmly declined. She insisted on feeding her son from her own breast. When Vera mentioned that it was highly irregular for highborn ladies to feed their children that way, Dacey shamelessly informed the midwife that her own mother had done so. Indeed, Lady Maege had nursed Dacey and all her sisters.

Vera agreed to that logic. Subsequently, she showed Dacey the proper "technique" to nurse Rickard. That proved to be awkward and uncomfortable.

Learning the proper technique to wield a blade was almost easier.

Be that as it may, Dacey found that breastfeeding was much more relaxing than swordplay. It was also a wonderful bonding experience between her and her son. She noted that Rickard had a large appetite to match his size, but she had more than enough milk to quell his hunger at each meal.

Gregor stopped by the birthing chamber half a dozen times that day to check up on the two of them. Twice he walked in whilst Dacey was nursing Rickard. She did not mind; nothing he had not already seen was exposed. Gregor actually seemed somewhat intrigued by the nursing process. Dacey suspected it was because her breasts had doubled in size throughout the duration of her pregnancy. Given how often his gaze drifted to her chest, she believed that was indeed the case.

The next morning at first light, Maester Kennick released Dacey from his care. Gregor was there when she exited the birthing chamber with their son.

Big as Rickard was, she was able to cradle him in one arm, so her other arm was left free. That was fortunate; Gregor had brought her sword. He meant to return it to her right there, just as he promised he would. Dacey was quite pleased by the gesture, and she happily took her sword in her free hand.

Less than an hour later, Rickard Clegane was publically presented to the residents of Moat Cailin. The smallfolk, the servants, and the soldiers alike cheered for the debut appearance of their lord's heir. Dacey made sure to keep the presentation brief, as she did not wish to make an exhibit of her son. Shortly after, she reassumed her duties as Lady of Moat Cailin and a senior officer of the Legion without Banners.

Later that day, Dacey paid a visit to the training yard. It had been a long while since she had last brandished a weapon, but she was quick to make up for lost time. Ser Rodrik Cassel, Prince Oberyn Martell, and some of the other expert swordsmen were able to help her get back into shape. After four days of vigorous exercises, one would never have guessed that Dacey had been absent from the training yard for the last four months.

Ironically, when Dacey returned to the optimal condition she had been in immediately before her pregnancy, the country did, as well.

As it happened, Rickard Clegane's birth coincided with the changing of the seasons. Three days after he came into the world, the blizzards stopped everywhere, including the North. Four days later, the white raven arrived from the Citadel. That marked the ending of winter and the beginning
of spring.

Some people at Moat Cailin speculated that the concurrent arrival of both Lord Gregor's heir and spring was a sign of good things to come. Dacey was willing to entertain such a notion. Although she was not one to believe in superstitions, she knew that Rickard would certainly bring about plenty of good things for her and Gregor. Primarily the guarantee that their house's line would continue, as well as their happiness.

Within the next fortnight, the snows of Westeros had almost completely melted. A few inches remained in the North, but compared to the intense whiteouts of the past year, those inches seemed little more than the dew of a brisk morning.

The different climate was quite welcomed by the occupants of Moat Cailin. Many of the smallfolk had chosen to take up residence in the moat's towers, but now they were able to return to their homes in the villages. Furthermore, no one had to struggle to keep warm anymore.

Even so, Gregor and Dacey were content to continue doing what they had done to stay warm.

For the first three weeks following Rickard's birth, Dacey was still too sore to have intercourse. Luckily, she and Gregor had ways of satisfying each other's... urges.

For instance, whenever they got intimate, Gregor frequently kissed Dacey on her lips. Both pairs of her lips. He tended to pay more attention to the lower pair. Not that Dacey could complain. She enjoyed the traditional form of kissing as much as any woman, but every time her husband inserted his tongue into her pussy, he always brought her waves of overwhelming pleasure. Even when she hit her release, Gregor did not withdraw. Instead, he opted to lick her clean.

Dacey thought about the scenario, and she noticed something amusing. Rickard was nourished many times a day by her milk. But at night, Gregor was the one who got a taste of her "honey."

In addition to that, she would never share either of those with anyone other than her son and her husband respectively.

I'd better be sure never to confuse the two, she had thought jokingly. Then she reflected on that jape, and she realized just how depraved the concept behind it truly was.

Oh, gods; wouldn't THAT be disgusting? Even the Targaryens would be appalled.

Gregor had seen to the construction of a nursery in the room immediately below his and Dacey's bedchamber. However, for the first couple months, they had Rickard sleep with them. Most nights, they tucked him safely between them, and they slept a few feet apart so that there would be no risk of overcrowding him. On nights when they got intimate, they placed him in a cradle, and they waited until he was sound asleep before they engaged in any sexual acts.

Their son turned out to be a very heavy sleeper. Once they put him down for the night, nothing could wake him up. Other than himself, of course.

Half the time, Rickard did not wake up until one or both of his parents did. The other half, his sleeping schedule greatly deviated from theirs. Sometimes Rickard woke in the middle of the night for various reasons, all of which were traditional infant needs. Even if he was not sleeping in between his parents or five feet away from them, his wails were loud enough to rouse everyone in the Lord's Tower.

Fortunately, his parents were very light sleepers by contrast. Whenever he started crying, they would be up and out of bed almost straightaway.
Before long, Dacey and Gregor devised a system where they took turns tending to their infant boy. Normally, she handled the feedings, and he handled everything else. Gregor argued that since Dacey had done most of the work to bring Rickard into the world, he should do more of the work that had to be done after. Dacey had no quarrel with that. It meant more rest for her, after all.

Sometimes Gregor would sing Rickard to sleep. To Dacey's astonishment (and delight), her husband had a rather pleasant singing voice. His vocal range was very broad; he could sing in a high, middle, or low tone, depending on the mood of the song. However, some of the songs Gregor sang… Dacey had never heard them or their like before. She enjoyed them, but she was curious as to where they had originated. She could have asked Gregor, but for various reasons, she decided not to. She ultimately concluded that either he had written the songs himself, or he had heard them from somewhere outside the North.

Throughout the day, Gregor and Dacey were usually preoccupied with their duties as lord and lady of Moat Cailin, as well as their high-ranking positions in the Legion without Banners. So for most of the hours of sunlight, Rickard was left in the care of Vera and some of the moat's servants. At night, his parents reassumed full responsibility of him. Regardless of the time of day, Dacey insisted on being the only one who fed her son. Normally, whenever he was hungry, she would stop whatever she was doing and tend to him. Even if she was drilling in the training yard or discussing strategies with the other officers of the Legion, her first priority was Rickard's well-being.

Dacey and Gregor had suspected that parenthood would be a challenge. In that, they were correct; it was probably the biggest of any challenge they had encountered so far. That included their experience with the mountain clans of the Vale and the winters in the North.

All the same, the challenge was totally worth it. It was a life-altering experience for both Dacey and Gregor. It taught them more about patience, compassion, empathy, and, most importantly, love. Both of them had already been very capable of love; they loved their families, friends, allies, and neighbors greatly, but neither of them had ever loved anyone the way they loved Rickard. He seemed to bring out the greatest aspects in them. In a way, he made both of his parents even better people than they had been before. Most of all, before he came into the world, the Cleganes in the North had only been a married couple. Now, with the addition of Rickard, House Clegane of Moat Cailin had become a full-fledged family. That realization brought Gregor and Dacey into a state of bliss.

This state of bliss lasted a couple months. Then Moat Cailin received a raven from Bear Island. It carried a letter addressed to Dacey. Maester Kennick brought it to her, and she took it from him. She seemed a little reluctant to accept it. For some reason, she could not help but think that the raven had brought her sad news. Usually, her family only wrote when they had news of that sort to share.

As they say: dark wings, dark words.

And dark words they were.

Lady Blinda Mormont had died earlier that week. The cause of death had been attributed to illness. That was hardly surprising; Blinda Glover had always been a sickly woman. Even so, her ailments had never before been fatal.

In any case, Dacey was saddened to learn that her cousin's wife had perished.

Lord Jorah Mormont was now a widower. A childless widower, at that. While he mourned his wife, it was his responsibility to find another one. Ideally, he would need someone young who was
capable of giving him heirs. Since he was already a grown man and the head of his house, the task of finding a new bride fell solely on his shoulders.

Dacey wished she could have provided some form of comfort to her cousin. But she did not know what she could say that might improve his demeanor. Gregor noticed his wife's concern, and he ensured her that Jorah would overcome this tragedy. He seemed queerly confident that Jorah would be able to move on and find another wife soon enough. He claimed that what they really needed to be worried about was what happened after he found her. Dacey did not know how her husband could have been so certain of that, but she chose to trust in his prediction.

In the meantime, Gregor focused on another marriage contract; one that involved a member of his own family.

Not long after the white raven appeared, Gregor wrote a letter to Clegane's Keep. He informed his parents that he and Oberyn Martell had gotten the idea to forge a betrothal between Sandor and the Red Viper's oldest daughter. Truthfully, the idea was more Oberyn's in origin, but Gregor had agreed to it, and he had the influence to make it happen.

Gregor made certain to mention that Obara was no longer a bastard. That was a critical part, as his parents had no way of knowing that she had been legitimized by the King. Had he left it out, his mother would have burned the letter immediately after reading it.

After sending off the raven, Gregor and Oberyn approached Obara and told her of their plans. The Red Viper assured his daughter that they would not force her to partake in the pact. She had the option to accept or refuse. As before, nothing would be predetermined for her without her consent.

Obara actually seemed quite open to the concept of entering a marriage contract with Sandor Clegane. With the exception of the Legionnaires, she claimed had never seen a man who respected her as an equal. Sandor had treated her as such, both in and out the training yard. She did not love him, and she was certain he did not love her. But she believed that they could come to love each other in time.

Plus, Obara knew that since she now had her father's name, she had all the privileges that came with it. She was required to accept all the responsibilities of it, as well. That included the obligation to spread the reach of her family through marriage. She debated that she may as well do that with someone she liked. That was an outlook that Gregor, Dacey, and Oberyn could all understand and relate to.

A few weeks later, a letter arrived from Clegane's Keep. It was a follow-up to the one Gregor had sent to his parents.

Ser Tarrence and Lady Daliah had spent some time seriously contemplating the marriage contract. Since Obara was now trueborn, they were quite open to the match; they found it rather appealing, in fact. They had gone over the matter with their younger son, too. After all, it was his future they had been discussing. As luck would have it, Sandor was just as open to the match as they were. He had made much the same argument as Obara, only his was a little less centered on duty and inspired more by affection.

Dacey had read the follow-up letter with Gregor, and both of them had been entertained by the description of Sandor's reasons for fancying the match.

_Who would have thought my brother-by-law was a bit of a romantic? I suppose he's like his brother in more than just stature._
What mattered was that a marriage contract between Obara Martell and Sandor Clegane was definitely possible. At this point, Obara and Sandor were both willing to go along with the match. Oberyn Martell and Tarrence and Daliah Clegane had no direct opposition to the betrothal, either.

However, while Oberyn and Daliah had become acquainted with Sandor and Obara respectively at Gregor and Dacey's wedding, Tarrence had not been present at that event. So he and Obara had never been in the same place.

Near the end of the missive, Ser Tarrence expressed a desire to meet Obara before he agreed to wed his heir to her. That request was a reasonable one, as every father had a right to know his future daughter-by-law before she became so. Nonetheless, in order to grant that request, one of them would have to travel to where the other was.

Tarrence was still unwilling to come north to Moat Cailin. After the last winter, he wished to have a long respite from cold weather. Aside from that, as the master of Clegane's Keep, he had other matters to attend to apart from seeking out a bride for his son. After all, the ride to Moat Cailin and back was roughly a two-month-round trip, and being away from the keep for even a week would have complicated his affairs.

Three years ago, he could have afforded such a trek. Now that House Clegane of Clegane's Keep had grown so greatly in status, Ser Tarrence was a busier man. He was constantly working tirelessly to maintain and further his house's growth.

In any case, the more practical course of action was for Obara to go to Clegane's Keep instead. That was never explicitly stated anywhere in Tarrence Clegane's letter, but it had been heavily implied, and Dacey, Gregor, and Oberyn had arrived at that conclusion all on their own.

Right after they finished reading the letter, the three of them sought out Obara. They apprised her of everything that had been discussed in the letter, including the subtle proposal that she visit Clegane's Keep.

Obara appeared only mildly stunned by that proposition. Truthfully, she had expected that Ser Tarrence would desire to make her acquaintance before she and Sandor decided to swear any vows.

Fortunately, she had no issue with relocating to the Westerlands for a while. If anything, she felt she would enjoy a change of scenery. Even if said scenery was located in the domain of Lord Tywin Lannister. Plus, she would get to see the holdfast whose lady she might one day be. That was just as important to Obara as meeting her was to Ser Tarrence. She did not think she would be appalled by the holdfast or anything of the sort; she merely wished to see it before she bound herself to it.

For the sake of efficiency and haste, it was decided that Obara should meet Tarrence as soon as humanly possible. So immediately after she agreed to the meeting, preparations were made to arrange her transportation to Clegane's Keep.

To ensure that his daughter passed through the Westerlands safely, Oberyn assigned half a dozen Legionnaires – all of them Dornish – to escort Obara to Clegane's Keep. All six of them had been longtime friends and trusted allies of the prince. They swore to him that they would protect and guard Obara with their lives.

Dacey was there when Obara departed from the moat. She had opted to see the former Sand Snake off. Obara was very appreciative of that. She embraced Dacey affectionately and told her that she looked forward to having her as her sister-by-law. Dacey claimed much the same.
Both of us already have plenty of sisters. But there's no wrong in having one more.

Obara also shared a tender moment with Nymeria, Oberyn, and Ellaria at the southern gates of Moat Cailin. They bade her the best of luck (not that she had any need of it), and she promised them she would be careful and that she would wait until they were available to get wed.

After the good-byes were given, Obara and her six Dornish companions exited Moat Cailin through the southern gate. They solemnly made their way down the Causeway, riding in silence. Dacey was certain Obara was ready; she did not look back even once.

Straight after she left, Gregor dispatched another raven to Clegane's Keep, notifying his parents that they could expect Obara Martell to arrive within a moon's turn.

Whatever happened next was left in the hands of the gods.

Over the next few months, Dacey developed a type of daily routine.

In the early morning, she woke up, readied herself, and fed Rickard. After entrusting her son to the servants, she broke her fast with her husband and his council in the Banquet Tower. Then she spent an hour sparring in the training yard. Sometimes she helped Ser Rodrik Cassel break in the new recruits or test the more experienced combatants in the Legion.

In the late morning and early afternoon, she executed her role as Lady of Moat Cailin. She oversaw the affairs of the moat alongside Erryk Ruttiger and Sylas Vikary. She fed Rickard again, and then she went to feed herself. After lunching with the top memembers of the Legion without Banners, she and Gregor reviewed all the materials they had which pertained to the Legion. Most of those materials were status updates on the Legion's growth and the spread of its influence or missives from all over the country requesting the Legion's services. Whenever the latter came up, she, Gregor, and the other officers assigned a carefully-assembled team of Legionnaires to seek out the problem and settle it. The goal was to settle the conflict peacefully and with minimum bloodshed. That was almost always how things turned out.

In the later afternoon and early evening, Dacey fed Rickard once more. Then she and Gregor took some time to mingle with their colleagues and retainers. That was the one time of the day when she was actually able to relax and interact with peers. After supper, she and Gregor briefly went around the moat one last time to ensure that everything was in order. Then they retired to their chambers at the top of the Lord's Tower and stopped by their son's room.

In the late evening, Dacey fed Rickard one last time. After that, she and Gregor usually spent at least another hour with him before they turned for the night.

Although Rickard had now been moved to the nursery below his parents' bedroom, Dacey and Gregor had given the servants explicit instructions to come to them if their son woke up in the middle of the night. Since they were so busy during the day, they felt they could at least see to his needs at night.

So that was generally Dacey Clegane's everyday agenda. On the whole, it was very productive and rewarding.

Occasionally, there were some discrepancies in it.

Four months after Obara left for Clegane's Keep, Ellaria gave birth to her second child (and Oberyn's sixth). They had another girl; this one they named Obella. Since the Dornishwoman had been there during Rickard's birth, Dacey was with Ellaria when she bore her second daughter.
Ellaria was very grateful for the Bear Islander's concern.

Dacey had come to enter a type of close friendship with Ellaria; very similar to the friendship that had blossomed between her husband and the Dornishwoman's lover. Some people whispered that perhaps there was more than just friendship that connected the four of them. She had been outraged at first, but Ellaria and Oberyn convinced her that she should not let rumors bother her. So she agreed to simply ignore that form of gossip.

Sometimes, the Legion received what Gregor called a "priority-one" assignment. Every time that happened, the Mountain had to go out and resolve the dilemma himself. Dacey would have liked to go with him (just as he would have liked to have had her come along), but it was irresponsible to deprive Moat Cailin of both its lord and lady in times of peace. So whenever Gregor was needed elsewhere, Dacey was left in charge of Moat Cailin.

Gregor was never gone for more than a few days at a time, and Dacey ruled the moat well in his absence, but she missed him and yearned to have him back all the same. Thankfully, Rickard was always around to keep her company. She took comfort in the lack of her husband's company by spending more time in her son's. Those precious experiences were what prevented Dacey from ever thinking that her husband might not come back from one of his "priority-one" assignments. Her son was strong; his father was the strongest man she knew.

*Such strength cannot be defeated easily.*

In the seventh month of that year, there was a minor change in Gregor's behavior. The change was slight, but not so slight that Dacey did not notice it.

The change was in the way Gregor acted around the Legionnaires from the Iron Islands. He continued treating them with the same courtesies and respect he treated all the other Legionnaires. But now he gazed at the Ironborn with prying eyes, as though he was scrutinizing them or wondering intently on what they were thinking.

Dacey speculated that her husband was probably beginning to suspect the Ironmen Legionnaires of planning some wicked deed. If that was the case, she could not fault him for believing so. Despite having served with them for nearly two years, she was still somewhat mistrustful of the Ironborn.

Bear Island had often been a frequent site for plundering by the Ironborn raiders. House Mormont usually managed to repel the raiders when they came, but victory tended to come at a price. The iron price, was what they called it.

As far as Dacey was aware, Bear Island had never been raided in her lifetime. During the days when Lord Quellon Greyjoy ruled the Iron Islands, the Ironborn had made an honest effort to mend relations with the rest of Westeros. Under Lord Quellon's direction, the taking of thralls had been outlawed, maesters had been introduced to the Islands, and reaving had been all but forbidden. For a while, it actually appeared as though the Iron Islands would be fully incorporated into the Seven Kingdoms.

There were many who doubted that such a thing could come to pass. One of those nonbelievers was Dacey's lady mother, Maege Mormont.

Lady Maege vividly remembered the days before Lord Quellon was in power. Back then, the entire western coast of the country lived in fear of being attacked by Ironborn raiders. Bear Island was one of their favorite places to reap.

Maege had been younger than Dacey when she first helped her family fight off the Ironborn
invaders. She once told Dacey of an occasion when one of the raiders had attempted to take her as a salt wife. She had responded by hacking off his manhood and feeding the rest of him to a bear that lived on the island. She even claimed that that same bear became Dacey's father.

Dacey never knew if her mother was joking about that last part. There was a myth on Bear Island that sometimes, the women lay with bears to produce trueborn children. Dacey had never really known her father, but she decided she would rather not know who (or what) he was.

Lord Quellon Greyjoy had succeeded in initiating a ceasefire between the Ironborn and the rest of Westeros. After he died at the Battle of the Mander, near the end of Robert's Rebellion, his son Balon had become the lord of the Iron Islands.

There had been little to no contact with Pyke since then. In fact, other than the Ironborn that had joined the Legion without Banners, the peoples of the Iron Islands had practically cut themselves off from the rest of the world. Although the seas were considerably safer to traverse in modern times, no one dared to feel too secure. The last thing they needed was to be caught unaware by pirates, especially pirates native to the Iron Islands.

*The Ironborn have nothing to gain by living as hermits on those rocks. Maybe they really are planning something.*

Ten days later, Dacey discovered that they were. In the early afternoon, Gregor assembled the secret council. He gathered them discreetly, as he always did. But he was even more cautious than usual this time. He almost seemed under the impression that if he made the slightest misstep, someone would immediately catch on to what the secret council was doing. No one wanted that; it would ruin all their covert operations.

Dacey and the others had all gone into the meeting with no inkling of what it would be about. They had congregated several times since Rickard's birth. Most of those meetings had merely involved discussions. They had not launched any more conspiracies to kill anyone else, but Gregor had mentioned the names of a few people they should keep close tabs on. Chief among them were Roose Bolton and Walder Frey. Many more potential marriage contracts between the Great Families and their chief vassals had been addressed, but the one between Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell was still the only one that was currently in the making.

At this council meeting, they did not converse on people who should be monitored or eliminated. Nor did they discuss any betrothals. Instead, the topic was far grimmer and much more unsettling: the impending threat of war.

"I'm sorry; please, forgive me," Allard Seaworth said anxiously, shaking his head a bit. The meeting was already well underway at this point. The Stormlander gazed at the largest person in the room and queried "What did you just say, my lord?"

"You heard me, Allard," Gregor Clegane told the younger man, "In less than a year, the Iron Islands will be at war with the rest of Westeros."

Allard and everyone else there who thought they had misheard the Mountain were now convinced that they had not. Even so, that verification did not make his words any easier to absorb or swallow.

Victarion Greyjoy did not try to avoid making eye contact with any of the others, but he was in no rush to look any of them in the eye, either.

"How can you be so certain, my lord?" Lyn Corbray enquired.
"Other than those of them that are here, we've hardly seen any trace of the Ironborn in five years," Garth Hightower pointed out.

"Because they've been biding their time," Gregor proclaimed, "They do not plan to stay on the islands indefinitely. To prove it, I ask you to consider how productive they've been these past five years."

"Productive in what manner?" asked Osmund Kettleback.

"They've vastly increased their supply of ships and weapons," Gregor elaborated, "In addition to that, they've been training children as young as twelve to fight and sail. Now they have the most soldiers they've ever had since the days before Lord Quellon Greyjoy reigned. The majority of those soldiers are equally capable as raiders. So put all that together."

The ten other Legionnaires thought on those points for a minute. After that, Smalljon Umber queried "What outcome are you drawing from this, my lord?"

"It should be obvious," Gregor disclosed, "The Ironborn have spent the last five years preparing an invasion force."

A wave of silence passed over the room. A very tense, uncomfortable silence.

Victarion Greyjoy broke it with a sigh. He pronounced "You could be right, Lord Gregor. I have not set foot on Pyke in over a year, but while I was there, Balon was constantly at work. Every day, he was constructing more ships, forging more weapons, and training more soldiers. There's no reason to think he has halted his operations since then. But even with all that said… I never suspected he was planning an invasion."

"Are you saying you never asked him his intentions?" Oberyn Martell presumed, clearly skeptical.

"It is not my place to question my brother's actions," Victarion debated firmly, "I simply assumed he was striving to make the Islands stronger."

"He was," Gregor contended, "And he still is. It's how he means to make them stronger that should perturb us."

Most of the others were still struggling to grasp the concept of a forthcoming Ironborn invasion, but Dacey, Smalljon, and Brynden Tully were starting to admit the likelihood of its credibility.

"What does Balon Greyjoy hope to accomplish, my lord?" Brynden Tully queried.

"He plans to launch a rebellion similar to King Robert's," Gregor elucidated, "He'll start by burning the fleet at Lannisport. Then he'll progress along the western shores of the North, the Riverlands, the Westerlands, and the Reach, reaping and raping as he pleases. He plans to have raided a great many of the coastal holdfasts before we are even able to launch a counterattack."

"He must be mad if he believes he can challenge the Seven Kingdoms by himself," Allard Seaworth debated.

"My brother was never the sanest of men," Victarion professed, "Whereas our father sought to build rich and lasting connections with those who live on the mainland of Westeros, Balon deems himself above the idea of establishing an alliance with greenlanders."

"And people say my family is too proud," Gerion Lannister mumbled heatedly, "Just who does he think he is?"
"He thinks himself a king," Gregor declared.

Dacey Mormont raised an eyebrow and commented "Really?"

Gregor nodded at his wife and stated "That's his true goal. Once Balon Greyjoy begins his rebellion, he'll crown himself the King of the Iron Islands."

"How could you possibly know **that**, my lord?" queried Osmund Kettleback.

"Not just **that,**" Allard Seaworth interjected, "How did you know about any of Lord Balon's objectives?"

"I have my resources," was all Gregor said at first.

Normally, that would have been a sufficient response. Alas, this time, it was not.

"Lord Gregor, there has been almost no communication with the Iron Islands since the end of Robert's Rebellion," Lyn Corbray pointed out, "Other than the ravens you sent out when you founded the Legion without Banners, there has been no word to or from Pyke."

"Ser Lyn is correct," Garth Hightower corrected, "Even the Master of Whisperers' birds don't fly that far. The only way anyone in the Seven Kingdoms could have acquired this information was if they heard it from the Ironborn themselves."

"And the only Ironborn we've encountered recently are those of them who are serving in the Legion," Oberyn Martell added in.

"My men and I don't know of any rebellion, I promise you," Victarion Greyjoy insisted, "If my brother was planning to revolt, I would have known of it. I'd like to think he would have tried to stop me from coming here."

"Maybe he didn't care," Osmund Kettleback hypothesized with a smirk, "Maybe he thought you had gone soft."

Victarion scowled and mumbled irately "Do the finger dance with me, Kettleback, and **then** we'll see if I've gone soft."

Dacey quickly gestured for quietness, and when it came, she turned to her husband and told him "I think what they mean to say, my lord, is that you seem to be very well-aware of an affair that no one here should be well-aware of."

"Lady Dacey speaks it true," Brynden Tully conceded, looking to the Mountain, "I would normally heed your counsel without questioning where it came from, but this is one occasion where I must make an exception."

"I must, as well," Oberyn Martell remarked, "It is one thing to claim that a minor lord will conspire to seize power for his own selfish purposes. But this is the possible emergence of war we are talking about now. We cannot act upon it without being absolutely certain."

"Well, **I** am absolutely certain," Gregor avowed.

"But we're not," Smalljon Umber countered, "I'd like to know how you **can** be, my lord. Just **what** aren't you telling us?"

For three minutes, Gregor Clegane did not answer that question. He just sat in his chair, gazing
around the room at the other ten seated people. He appeared almost speechless.

Dacey knew her husband to be a very calm and organized man. Regardless of how desperate the scenario, he never lost his composure. Now… he actually appeared apprehensive, as though he had been backed into a corner by his enemies. But even his true enemies had never sparked that sort of reaction from him. Instead, his closest allies had been the ones to do so.

Ultimately, Gregor took a deep breath, let it out gradually, and announced "I have… a source."

"What kind of source?" Dacey inquired.

"I cannot say," Gregor declared, "All you need to know is this: this source is what gives me the opportunity to effect positive changes in Westeros. I have been using it since before I founded the Legion without Banners. This source was what enabled me to save Princess Elia Martell from Ser Amory Lorch. It was also how I knew that Lord Petyr Baelish would exploit Lady Lysa Arryn for his own gain. Now, thanks entirely to the source, I have learned of Lord Balon Greyjoy's ambitious plans to have his people embrace the Old Way."

Now Dacey and the other nine men had their turn to be speechless. None of them had known what to expect as Gregor's explanation for how he knew the Ironborn would rebel, but none of them could have foreseen this explanation. Even so, it seemed bizarrely plausible.

"Why can you not share this source with us, my lord?" Allard Seaworth inquired.

"If I name my source, it could compromise all of the Legion's activities." Gregor proclaimed, "In the wrong hands, the source can be used to effect negative changes, as well. But as long as it remains solely in my possession, it will only be used with pure intentions."

"That sounds like a great deal of power for one man," Smalljon Umber noted.

"I know what you mean, Jon," Gregor asserted, "But the right man can wield this power responsibly."

"You fancy yourself the right man, my lord?" Oberyn Martell asked rhetorically.

"Yes, I do," Gregor solemnly declared, "If I could, I'd share it with the rest of you. But I cannot. I do not believe you to be unworthy or anything of the sort. I am merely withholding the source for your own protection."

"Our protection?" Gerion Lannister repeated in perplexity.

"That's right," the Mountain confirmed, "This source is dangerous. It took me years to bring it under my control. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't share it with you. All I can do is tell you what I know, and beseech you to trust in me and have faith in me, just as you've been doing."

Lyn Corbray, Victarion Greyjoy, Garth Hightower, Osmund Kettleback, Gerion Lannister, Oberyn Martell, Dacey Mormont, Allard Seaworth, Brynden Tully, and Smalljon Umber gazed around the room at each other, as though they were having a conversation with their eyes. No actual words were exchanged; only glances. They were trying to decide for themselves whether Gregor's vague yet dramatic account was enough information to go by, or if it was still inadequate to appease their curiosities.

Eventually, each of them gave in and accepted Gregor's reasoning. For the time present at least, Dacey and the other nine men would continue to put their faith in the Mountain.
"You've gotten us this far, my lord," Brynden Tully declared, "We can trust you are not misleading or deceiving us. But I hope to know more about this 'source' of yours someday."

"So do I," Allard Seaworth put in. There came strong murmurs of agreement from around the room.

"Perhaps I will," Gregor contended, "But until then, I would ask you not mention the source to anyone. Like everything we've discussed at this table, my source only exists in this room."

"We understand, Gregor," Dacey assured her husband. The other nine men gave their word, as well.

The rest of the meeting was spent discussing the future rebellion by the Ironborn.

Gregor revealed that it would be at least five months before the rebellion began, but no more than seven. They had that long to prepare themselves against it.

Gerion Lannister proposed that they notify the throne of the upcoming rebellion. Gregor quickly struck that proposal down. He claimed that bringing this matter before the King would do them no good. Even if he exposed his source, he would have no concrete evidence to support his claim. It would seem little more than an elaborate rumor. Essentially, he would be making an accusation without proof. Such an action was profusely unadvisable, especially for someone in Gregor's position. All Gregor would have to back him was his word, and even his word had limits on the Small Council.

So telling the crown was out of the question. All the same, there was plenty they could do to prepare the Seven Kingdoms against Balon's raiders.

It was decided that they would write an urgent missive to every holdfast located on the shores of Westeros (both the west and the east costs, to be safe). They would alert the inhabitants of those fortresses that the Legion had learned of the strong possibility of an impending Ironborn incursion. They knew that most of the lords of those holdfasts would not curious as to how the Legion became aware of this information. They would simply chose to follow up on that information and build up their defenses against anything that could emerge from the sea.

Osmund Kettleback, Lyn Corbray, and Brynden Tully were somewhat skeptical about what Victarion Greyjoy and the other Ironborn Legionnaires would do once the rebellion began. Lyn even suggested that perhaps joining the Legion had not been Victarion's idea after all. Perhaps Balon had sent him to spy on the true members.

Victarion was quick to answer that accusation. He adamantly asserted that he was no man's errand boy, not even his brother's. Enlisting in the Legion had been his decision and his alone. Furthermore, he still believed far more in his father's ideals for what was best for the Iron Islands than he did in Balon's.

The Iron Captain vowed that if war broke out between his people and the rest of Westeros, he and his men would stand with the Mountain. He claimed that he would not allow his brother to undo everything their lord father had done to ensure the prosperity of the Ironborn.

It was fortunate that Victarion had looked up to and admired his father as much as he did. Otherwise, he would almost certainly have chosen to side with Balon instead.

When Gregor asked him if he could speak for all the Legionnaires from the Iron Islands, Victarion admitted he could not. Gregor instructed him to go around the moat later and ask each of their
Ironborn colleagues if his or her first duty was to the Iron Islands or to the Legion. He wished to be informed which of them picked the former and which the latter. Victarion agreed to do just that.

Despite how loyal Victarion seemed to be to the Legion, he was very clear on one point: if and when the rebellion happened, he would be willing to fight and kill other Ironborn, but he would not engage his brother or any other member of his family in battle. He firmly declared that he would never become a kinslayer, not for Gregor or anyone.

Gregor found that fair. He assured Victarion (and everyone else there) that he would never ask any of them to kill a member of their own families. If need be, he would have them bring them to justice, but he would never order them to commit the most dreadful crime of kinslaying.

By midafternoon, the meeting ending. But Dacey and the ten men stayed together for a little while after. They headed as a group to the rookery, and as soon as they got there, they set to writing letters. These were the aforementioned warnings meant for the seaside holdfasts and fortresses in Westeros. It turned out more highborn families lived along the shores of the country than they had originally thought.

Around half of all Westerosi houses were found within ten miles of the sea or a river that led out to the sea. Not wishing to take chances, a notice was dispatched to each of them. The notice was brief but explicit; it mentioned the very probable likelihood of a maritime incursion in the near future, and the recipient was cautioned to prepare themselves against that threat.

Since the warning came from the Legion without Banners, nearly everyone who received it chose to heed its counsel. The only ones who did not were those who were confident that the Ironborn would not dare to attack them or even dare to attack anyone at all. Those were individuals such as Stannis Baratheon of Dragonstone and Walder Frey of the Twins.

After that meeting where her husband first mentioned his "source," Dacey resumed her typical day-to-day routine from before. Her routine more or less remained the same over the course of the next six months. She took care of Rickard, honed her skills in the training yard, carried out her role as Lady of Moat Cailin, served as an officer of the Legion without Banners, and spent much of her leisure time with her friends and her husband. That was the bulk of her everyday schedule for the second half of that year. Some might find it monotonous after a while, but Dacey did not. It was a very enjoyable way of living to her; she had nothing to complain about. Nor would she have changed anything about it.

Then the new year arrived. With it came change.

One night in the first week of the 289th year after Aegon's Conquest, Dacey was in bed with Gregor. They had just finished a particularly vigorous love-making session and were about to drift off to sleep. But just before they could fall into a slumber, there was a knock on the door to their bedchamber.

Gregor lifted himself up and barked impatiently "What?!!"

"I apologize for disturbing you, my lord," Erryk Ruttiger called out. He sounded distressed. "But a raven just arrived from King's Landing. Its marked with the King's seal."

Gregor promptly jumped out of bed, pulled on a pair of woolen breeches, and rushed to the door. Dacey had just enough time to grab a robe, throw it around her naked body and tie it in the front. Not two seconds after she fastened the knot, her husband opened the door to reveal the moat's castellan.
Erryk Ruttiger stepped inside with a piece of parchment in his hand, which he held out to Gregor straight away. The Mountain took it, opened it, and proceeded to read it. Dacey eyed him anxiously. She made note of how his face changed as he read. When he began, he was curious and nervous. By the end, he seemed extremely troubled.

*Something's amiss, no question.*

When Gregor finally gazed up from the paper, Dacey inquired "What is it, my love?"

"The Iron Fleet has set sail," Gregor announced, "They've just attacked Lannisport."

He paused for a moment to let that knowledge sink in. Erryk Ruttiger was the only one who was genuinely shocked by that news. Dacey and Gregor had somewhat expected to receive it sooner or later. That did not make hearing the news any easier for them, though.

"Anything else, my lord?" Erryk Ruttiger queried.

Gregor nodded and pronounced "King Robert is determined not to let this go unanswered. He's calling the banners."

"As it happens, we have none," Erryk pointed out.

"Makes no matter," Gregor said solemnly, "A threat has been made against Westeros. We will respond thusly."

"So we will answer the King's summons, my lord?" Erryk asked rhetorically.

"Yes," Gregor confirmed, "Gather the top Legionnaires in the courtyard, Erryk. Tell them… we're at war."

The castellan bowed and exited the bedchamber, leaving Gregor and Dacey along once more. The Mountain and the Bear Islander just gazed at each other silently. They were still trying to come to terms with this latest development on the balance of Westeros. But they both knew what they were going to do to help rectify it.

*War. I wasn't even old enough to fight in the last war. And if Gregor thinks I'll sit out this one, he is mistaken. I'm going to show those Ironborn scumbags that this bear has claws.*

So she would.
Bonds

Chapter Notes

Note: You may find that nothing of precedence occurs in this chapter; that it's nothing more than buildup. But trust me; everything in this chapter will be just as critical to the storyline and plot as everything in the previous chapters. So for those of you who are thirsty for action, bear with me just a little longer. Oh, and from now on, there will be about two or three alternating POV sections per chapter. I'm going to try to use as many different characters as possible. If there's anyone in particular whose perspective you'd like to see, feel free to mention it, and I'll see if I can write a section from his or her point of view.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Prince Oberyn Martell had resided in the North for over two years. In that time, he had noted many similarities the Northmen shared with the Dornish. One was how quick they both were to respond to any threats to their homelands.

There was little of the Westerlands left in Lord Gregor Clegane. The only way he could have been any more a Northerner was if he had been born in the North. Indeed; he demonstrated their typical hastiness when he replied to Robert Baratheon's summons immediately after he received it.

Gregor Clegane had the entire Legion without Banners assembled within a day after the King's raven arrived. He informed them of the King's declaration of war against the Ironborn, and how he intended to answer it thusly.

He announced that he would be splitting the Legion's numbers. Half the Legionnaires would join the King's army in the south. The other half would remain garrisoned at Moat Cailin and continue executing the usual duties of the Legion.

They would not march south just yet. It would take Lord Eddard Stark at least a fortnight to amass the strength of the North. They would wait to receive Lord Stark and his bannermen before they headed down the Causeway.

Gregor and his top officers spent that time deliberating on who among them would go and who would stay.

Brynden Tully had been Gregor's second-in-command ever since he enlisted in the Legion. As such, the Mountain decided that he would be left in command of the company that remained at the moat. The Blackfish accepted the appointment gladly.

Under normal circumstances, Ser Brynden would have demanded to join the forces that went to war, and he would have accompanied them even without permission. Furthermore, one could argue it to be foolish to leave him behind, as he was a better swordsman than any other Legionnaire (including Oberyn and Gregor).

Even so, Gregor debated that he would need someone he could trust to direct the other half of the Legion. After all, that half would be no more inactive than the half that joined the King's forces. Many of Westeros' lords and their soldiers would be off at war. As such, much of the country's
law-enforcement entities would be absent for a while.

There were some people in Westeros who would probably see that as an opportunity to engage in criminal activities without fear of being caught. Ser Brynden Blackfish's Legionnaires would ascertain that these deviants were kept under control.

Additionally, the Ironborn had ways of traversing the swamps of the Neck. If they wished to, they could besiege Moat Cailin and seize it. The integrity of the Legion and the defense of the North were both critical to maintaining the defense of Moat Cailin. As a Riverlord, Brynden Tully knew how to prepare against maritime attacks.

With all that said, his experience, his skills, and his expertise made the Blackfish the ideal person to lead the Legion without Banners in Gregor's absence.

Lyn Corbray and Osmund Kettleback were the only other members of Gregor Clegane's inner circle that would stay at Moat Cailin.

Oberyn Martell, Dacey Mormont, Smalljon Umber, Victarion Greyjoy, Allard Seaworth, Gerion Lannister, and Garth Hightower would all join the Mountain. In fact, Gregor had appointed Oberyn as his top general and right hand man.

Oberyn was not at all surprised that Gregor had agreed to bring his wife along. Although Lady Dacey had insisted that she partake in the fighting, her husband would have included her in their ranks anyway. The Ironborn had never attacked Bear Island in her lifetime, but she was well-versed in fighting off wilding attacks. Furthermore, she was as much a figure of authority and respect as her lord husband. It was she that had brought about the inclusion of women in the Legion without Banners.

If Dacey rode by her husband's side to war in the other parts of Westeros, she might inspire more strong-willed females to take up arms, as well.

There was also the simple truth that Dacey wanted to be with her husband, just as he wished to remain with her.

*Nothing like mixing business with pleasure.*

Gregor and Dacey had opted to bring Rickard with them, too. Oberyn could understand their wish to have their son nearby. For similar reasons, he had chosen to bring Ellaria, Nymeria, Elia, and Obella south, as well. They would provide the prince some company on the march.

*Different forms of company, of course.*

The Northern army arrived at Moat Cailin about a week after Gregor Clegane finished dividing up the Legion's numbers. Lord Eddard and his generals spent a night conferring with Lord Gregor and his officers. At first light the following morning, the two men and their combined forces proceeded down the kingsroad.

The long march down the Neck was rather quiet and uneventful. That was very unusual; normally the swamps were rife with sounds and movement of the indigenous fauna.

Either crannogmen had hunted everything in that region, or the wildlife had gone into hiding. The latter was more likely. But they would only hide from something they were afraid of. Given the hazardous conditions of the bogs, whatever was fueling their fear must have been truly horrible.

*The Ironborn may be closer than we thought.*
The non-Legionnaire Northmen seemed skeptical of the presence of the Ironborn Legionnaires. Fortunately, the Northern members of the Legion convinced their countrymen that all the assembled Ironmen could be trusted. Indeed, months ago, Victarion Greyjoy had sorted out which of his men were loyal to him and Gregor Clegane and which were loyal to Balon Greyjoy. Less than a quarter had selected his brother, and those who had had been left behind at Moat Cailin. Ser Brynden would keep them under tight scrutiny until the rebellion ended. If need be, he would have them all confined to the dungeons at the first sign of mutiny.

Progress down the Neck was very slow and gradual. Only so many soldiers could walk or ride abreast at any one time. When the units made the most of their space, they had to be very careful with their feet. One step off the path could land them in a pit of quicksand or a pool of murky water.

On a dozen occasions, a man slipped and fell into the marshes. Three of them had been consumed by the bogs before their allies could rescue them. After the third man was lost, the length of the column was decreased.

The entire journey was really a struggle of choosing between speed and safety.

After three days of moving at a plodding pace, the Northern army and the Legion without Banners were finally clear of the Neck. Once they emerged from the marshlands, they were able to quicken their stride.

A few days later, they arrived at the Crossing.

Oberyn was riding alongside Gregor and Dacey when they did. He noted that Gregor seemed to bristle when the Twins came within their field of vision. It was as though the mere sight of the Frey holdfast was enough to disgust the Mountain.

Not that Oberyn could blame him. The Red Viper was less than fond of House Frey, as well.

When he first came north, Oberyn and his entourage were unfamiliar with the Riverlands. They had been told by the locals that the quickest way through the region was along the Trident. Unfortunately, in order to ford the river, a toll had to be paid. As such, they had to make use of Lord Walder Frey's bridge.

Luckily, Oberyn had plenty of coin on him. He was able to use that to pay for passage. That was fortunate, as the only other option would have been to forge a marriage contract between a member of his family and one of Lord Walder's. In that field, Oberyn had had nothing of interest for the Late Lord Frey.

Lord Walder did not try to push for any betrothals between one of his descendants and the prince. The Red Viper was known for fucking any man and woman who was willing, and he would likely continue doing so even after he married (assuming he ever would). While Lord Walder had never been the most faithful husband to any of his own wives, he would not have any of his daughters or granddaughters disgraced in that way.

So instead, he had accepted the Dornishman's gold. Lord Walder had allowed Oberyn and his company to rest in his fortress for a night.

He had not been a gracious host, as Oberyn could recall very well. The prince had been treated fairly enough, but the Freys had been very cold to his companions, especially Ellaria, Obara, and Nymeria. The women's status as bastards was the primary reason for that. The Freys barely even tolerated their own baseborn kin. So naturally, they looked down on all other bastards as
degenerate lowlifes.

Ellaria was spared the worst of the Freys' mistreatment, seeing as she was sharing a bed with Prince Oberyn at the time. Obara and Nymeria were not so fortunate. Their appreciation and knowledge of combat was another target of ridicule for many of Lord Walder's brood. Nearly every one of them thought the idea of a woman carrying and training with weapons ludicrous. A few of the less tactful Freys had even suggested that the girls try out one of their "swords." In response, Obara and Nymeria declared that if the first man who tried anything of the sort would lose his sword.

Although the Freys had been the worst hosts they had ever had, Obara and Nymeria did not let their crude treatment bother them. They had been raised to embrace their position in the world and accept themselves as they were. So they did not allow the Freys to provoke or hurt them in any way. Even so, Oberyn was not as tolerant or forgiving of slights made toward his family. But at his daughters' insistence, he had done and said nothing to aggravate Lord Walder or his relations.

As they approached the Crossing, Oberyn inwardly hoped that the Freys would be a little more courteous to Nymeria this time. There was a fair chance that they would be, now that she had been legitimized and that fighting women were more commonplace in Westeros.

Whenever the Legion's services were required in the western half of Westeros, they often had to make use of the bridge at the Crossing, as well. Lord Walder had grudgingly allowed them to pass without a toll, as the Legion's activities were regarded as "king's business," and even he dared not interfere with the affairs of the crown.

For that reason, Gregor Clegane was holding out hope that Lord Walder would let his and Lord Eddard's forces use his bridge free of charge, too. Otherwise, they would probably reach the Westerlands well behind schedule.

When they were a hundred meters from the Twins, they spotted a small group of riders coming their way. When the group was within earshot, Oberyn called out "Who approaches?"

The riders remained silent until they were ten feet from Gregor, Eddard, Oberyn, and Dacey. Then the man at the very front of the group separated from the others. His horse trotted forward a few paces, and he announced "Ser Stevron Frey, heir to the Twins."

"Ser Stevron," Gregor said in acknowledgment with a slight nod, "Please convey our respects to your lord father, and inform him we have need of his bridge."

Most Freys would have demanded an explanation or something more than that. Luckily for the Mountain and his colleagues, Ser Stevron was content with that much. He bowed his head slightly and declared "I shall do so, my lord. Follow us back, if you please."

Ten minutes later, the group of Frey retainers, the Legionnaires, and the Northern Army were at the eastern gate of the Twins. Ser Stevron and his men escorted Gregor Clegane, Oberyn Martell, and Eddard Stark inside the building. They brought them straight to the main hall.

Walder Frey was already seated in the lord's chair. His sons, grandsons, and bastards were assembled all around him.

The weasel lord adapted his trademark conniving sneer and muttered "Well, my lords… what business have you in these parts?"

"None in these parts, my lord," Gregor clarified, "West of these parts."
"Oh?" Walder Frey remarked, cocking his head.

"You may have heard," Oberyn remarked cheekily, "The Ironborn have rebelled. We're on our way to put down their insurrection."

"Ah, yes," Walder murmured drily, "Of this, I am aware. Earlier this week, the King's forces crossed the Trident at a place south of here. Why did you not do the same?"

"The Crownlords and the Stormlords were already closer to the Trident than to here," Eddard Stark pronounced, "If we had the time, we would have followed them. Alas, we don't have that luxury."

"So you chose to come to me instead," Walder Frey remarked.

"That is correct, my lord," Gregor Clegane affirmed. He stepped forward and said patiently "We… request the privilege to cross your bridge."

"Request or demand?" Walder countered.

"We are not in a position to demand anything of you," Gregor pointed out.

"You have numbers ten times that of mine," Walder noted.

"But this is your home," Oberyn stated, "No man knows better how to defend his house than he himself does."

"That does not mean you will not attempt to seize my home through force," Walder debated.

**Why would we? There's nothing here that's even worth seizing.**

"You have the option to simply deny us passage," Eddard Stark proclaimed, "But if you do so, you will be preventing us from carrying out our duty to the King. You will also be refusing to do your own duty to him."

"Ah, that is where you are mistaken, Lord Stark," Walder Frey refuted, "I assure you that I shall do my duty. I am sending a host of my own to complement the king's."

"Then why not have our forces march with yours?" Oberyn proposed.

"Because there is no need," Walder murmured, "The combined forces of the Stormlands, the Crownlands, the Riverlands, the Westerlands, and the Reach are more than sufficient to defeat the Ironborn. They can manage without your forces."

**Then they can definitely do without YOURS.**

Gregor stepped forward, folded his arms, and decreed "We all swore an oath to go to the King whenever he summoned us. If we are unable to fulfill that oath, he will be gravely displeased. He will demand an explanation, and when we give him one, we will be certain to mention who was responsible for our detainment."

Walder sat up in his chair and snapped "Is that a threat?"

"It's a promise," Gregor sternly declared.

The next hour was comprised of similar dialogue. Arguments and counterarguments were given out by both parties. The discussion became very heated at certain points, but they never resulted to switching blows instead of words.
Ultimately, Gregor, Oberyn, and Eddard won the discussion. Walder Frey agreed to let the Legionnaires and the Northern army cross. The following day, his own host would ride with them all the way to the Westerlands.

Walder Frey insisted that the Northern lords and the top officers of the Legion dine with him that night. He claimed it was to solidify their temporary alliance. But he was fooling nobody. Oberyn knew that the true reason for the meal was Walder's ambitious nature. Obviously, the Late Lord Frey was seeking to further the influence of his house.

Indeed, at dinner, the Freys were much friendlier than they had been when Oberyn first supped beneath their roof. Their father's sway over them was evident; they had tried to create some marriage contracts of their own. Most of them knew how to approach the topic from a subtle angle.

Many of them were still far from chivalrous, but at least they behaved themselves. Most of them, at any rate.

Now that Nymeria was a Martell, the Freys seemed to have a newfound interest in her. Some of them came to her and asked her (for their curiosity, they claimed) if she had any plans for the future. She casually informed them that she planned to serve in the Legion for several years. When they questioned if she had plans to ever settle down, all she told them was "perhaps."

Whenever they propositioned themselves for her, Nymeria got out her whip and sharply cracked it against the ground once. The smart ones took that as their cue to end the conversation and leave the former Sand Snake alone. The foolish ones… they needed a more direct answer.

At one point that night, an inebriated Ryman Frey stumbled by Nymera's table. She hoped he was just passing by. Then he halted in front of her, and she realized he was not.

"Ser Ryman," Nymeria mumbled bluntly.

"My lady," Ryman rejoined. The scent of alcohol was heavy on his breath. The odor emanating from the rest of his body was even more unpleasant.

From the next table, Oberyn observed this exchange. He would only intervene if the situation got ugly. He was confident it would not; he knew Nymeria could handle herself. Especially against a half-wit like Walder Frey's eldest grandson.

"Is there something I can do for you?" Nymeria inquired disinterestedly.

"Yes, matter of fact," Ryman Frey stammered, "My son Edwyn is looking to get married. After my father and myself, he will inherit the Twins. He will need an heir of his own."

"Well, I bid him luck in his search," Nymeria said impartially.

"He needn't luck," Ryman contended, leaning forward a little, "I may have found a bride for him."

At that, Nymeria reached for her whip and brought it out. That gesture would have convinced most other men to move along. In his drunken stupor, Ryman Frey hardly even recognized the warning.

Evidently, Nymeria would have to be more direct with him.

"I appreciate the offer," Nymeria claimed, though her voice indicated she did not, "But I cannot accept it."

"Why not?" Ryman queried, apparently bewildered.
"I am needed in the North," Nymeria told him, "I intend to serve in the Legion without Banners alongside my father and Lord Gregor Clegane. I cannot do that if I am the lady of a noble house."

Oberyn smiled at that. Although Nymeria was as appalled by Ser Ryman's behavior as he was, she had not lost her composure or forgotten her courtesies.

Even so, Ryman proved to be quite stubborn.

"I would urge you to rethink your plans," he suggested, "The North is no place for someone as lovely as you."

Nymeria feigned a blush and uttered in a slightly sardonic tone "Thank you, ser. But tell me; have you ever been in the North?"

"No," Ryman professed, "But what could the North possibly have to offer that's better than what's here?"

*It could take all night to give the full answer to that question.*

"Plenty," Nymeria debated, "The Northmen believe in a sense of community and obligation. I have yet to see either of those qualities here. And I am fairly certain that if I ever do take a husband outside of Dorne, he will be of the North. At least there, women are not mocked and scorned."

Had he been sober, Ryman would have detected the slight meant by those words. Instead, he dimly countered it with "The only thing they know how to do is freeze their arses off. Go ahead and stay in the North… if you want to be cold for the rest of your life."

*He would know much about being cold. So would his family, for that matter.*

Nymeria swiftly returned her attention to the food on her plate. She avoided making eye contact with Ser Ryman. Maybe she thought that if she ignored him, he would let her be. But evading him was not so easy.

Ryman placed his hand on the table, leaned closer, and said softly "I'll let you in on a secret, my lady. There is one thing Rivermen can do that Northmen cannot."

He waited for her to ask what that was. When she did not, he told her anyway: "We can swim."

As little as she cared for this talk, Nymeria raised an eyebrow at that. "What makes you think a Northman cannot?"

"Oh, I've seen Northmen swim," Ryman disclosed, "Or try to. They're not very good at it. I say, what good is a man who cannot conquer water?"

Paying no mind to that last statement, Nymeria queried "When have you ever seen a Northman swim?"

"I'd say six or seven years ago," Ryman revealed, "Shortly before we rebelled against the Targaryens."

Although Oberyn had been listening in on that conversation, he did not become genuinely interested in it until that moment.

Ryman continued with "A month or two before the war began, there was this one fool that came from the North. He wasn't a knight, a lord, or anyone important. Anyway, he got the idea to ford
the river on his own. He was not even halfway across before he and his horse fell beneath the surface. His body washed up on the shore a few days later."

Nymeria grimaced and muttered "That's horrible. Why didn't you help him?"

"It would have been pointless to do so," Ryman pronounced, "Besides, he got himself into trouble. There was no reason for us to get him out of it."

It was then that Oberyn decided to intercede. He sauntered over to the table and said in a deceptively cordial voice "Ser Ryman, may I have a word?"

The drunken Frey turned his attention to the Red Viper and nodded his head shakily. Oberyn coolly led him off to the side. Once they were out of sight from most of the others, Oberyn delivered a solid punch to Ryman Frey's head. Ser Ryman was knocked unconscious almost immediately.

Oberyn carefully placed Ryman against the wall as if he had passed out whilst sitting against it. After that, the prince returned to the celebration.

"Thank you, Papa," Nymeria said gratefully.

"Of course, dearest," Oberyn assured her, placing a hand on her shoulder, "Now you must excuse me. I have another matter to attend to."

Nymeria nodded and went back to eating her meal. Her father went off to find the father of the man he had just rendered unconscious.

Despite being the oldest of Walder Frey's many sons and his heir, Stevron was less like his father than most of his other descendants. He was actually a thoughtful and reasonable man.

*It's a shame HE is not the Lord of the Twins.*

Stevron Frey was mingling with his youngest son, a lackwit called Aegon. He was known better as Jingebell, due to the motley hat of bells he always wore on his head.

Oberyn came to Stevron Frey and Jingebell Frey and bade the former "I would speak with you, Ser Stevron."

The older man looked to the Red Viper and said "Certainly, my prince."

There was no one else around, and it was very unlikely that Jingebell would develop a legitimate interest in anything that was said there. For that reason, Oberyn deemed it safe to talk with Ser Stevron then and there.

He apprised the middle-aged knight of the conversation that had just transpired between Nymeria and Ryman. Twice, Stevron apologized for his son's crass behavior. Oberyn assured the knight that he did not blame him for Ryman's drunkenness or rudeness. He was past the age when the parent can be blamed for the child's upbringing. So he was old enough to know better.

Stevron privately admitted that at times, even he could not abide his eldest son. Oberyn did not blame him for that, either. Stevron mentioned that if he could place Edwyn ahead of Ryman in the line of succession, he would do it. Edwyn was young, but unlike his father and great-grandfather, he had the capacity to be a good man.

When Oberyn got to the part about the Northman that had drowned south of the Crossing right before Robert's Rebellion, Stevron became a little tense. That led Oberyn to believing that Ryman
really had been speaking truly on that affair.

Ser Stevron did not try to deny the episode. In fact, he remembered it well.

He recounted that a few months before Lord Jon Arryn called his banners, a man on a gelding had come from the North. The rider had been alone. He carried nothing but his weapons, the armor on his back, and a little baggage. He did not give his name, but he appeared to be a Stark man.

The rider had asked Lord Walder to allow him to cross his bridge. Since the rider had nothing of substance to use as a toll, he was initially turned away. The rider was persistent, though; he had tried incessantly to change Walder Frey's mind. At one point, the rider mentioned that he had an important message to deliver. Lord Walder actually seemed interested in that. However, when he requested to know who the message was for and what it was about, the rider claimed he was not permitted to divulge that information.

Stevron and some of his more rational half-brothers had tried to convince their father to simply let the rider pass without taxing him. Lord Walder was adamant in his refusal. All he did was repeat their house words: *We Take Our Tolls*.

Eventually, the rider realized that he was wasting his time at the Twins. So he left on his gelding and rode off to the south. He found a narrow part of the Green Fork a hundred feet away from the Crossing. Stevron and some of his kin had watched the rider as he boldly attempted to get himself and his horse across the river.

Just when it appeared he would succeed, the horse lost its balance. It and its master struggled to get to either of the Green Fork's shores. But the current was too strong for them. They ended up drifting all the way downstream.

Against his father's wishes, Stevron had sent out a search party to locate the horse and the rider. They found both at the mouth of the Trident. The gelding had been entangled in a bed of reeds. The rider was lying face down on the western shore. His helmet had fallen off; his baggage was lost. All signs of life had disappeared from him.

The horse was left for the wolves. The search party brought the man's body and equipment back. Stevron wished to send his bones back north, but Walder persuaded him not to bother. He claimed that no one would miss a nameless rider who had been no more talkative when alive than when dead.

Ultimately, the Northman was simply buried a thousand yards east of the Twins. His grave was unmarked, and his weapons and armor had been appropriated by the Frey household.

When he finished recalling that event, Stevron let out a sigh and muttered "If you tell Lord Eddard of this, please let him know that had it been my decision, the rider would have been allowed to cross as soon as he came."

"I believe you, ser," Oberyn asserted.

*I also believe that if you had been Lord of the Twins, the message would have gotten delivered. Things would be much different then.*

Later that night, after nearly everyone had settled down for bed, Oberyn sought out Gregor Clegane and Eddard Stark. He enlightened them on everything he had learnt during the evening meal. They were stunned to say the least.

"So that's why the rider Lyanna sent to Riverrun never reached its destination," Eddard thought.
"I cannot say I'm surprised," Gregor mumbled, "Walder Frey has never been very compliant or mindful of other people's worries. In fact, we probably should have expected something like this."

"It's certainly characteristic of him," Oberyn conceded.

Eddard placed his hand against his forehead and remarked uneasily "Why did he have to turn that rider away? I mean… if he let the rider cross, Brandon would have gotten the letter in time. He would have known the truth, and he would not have rushed to King’s Landing when he heard the rumor that Rhaegar had abducted Lyanna."

Gregor placed a hand on the wolf lord's back and told him "The only one at fault here is Lord Walder, my lord. We will see that he answers for this."

"How?" Eddard snapped irately, "There is no way for you to confront him without making the true reason for Lyanna's disappearance known."

"That is true," Gregor admitted, "But there are other ways we can achieve justice for the wrong that Lord Walder has done."

"What ways?" Ned Stark queried in interest.

The Mountain did not reply right away. He just stood where he was and gazed off to the side, as though deep in thought. After a short while, he released a sigh and proposed "We can rid this country of him."

Eddard Stark's eyes widened at that. Oberyn Martell stayed quiet, but he watched the larger man closely.

What is he doing?

"Lord Gregor, are you suggesting that we kill the head of a noble house?" Eddard Stark presumed, shocked.

"I never said that," Gregor countered, "I merely said we need to be rid of him. For that, he does not have to die. All we have to do is remove Lord Walder from power."

"Can that be done without his death?" Eddard enquired.

"Of course it can be done," Oberyn debated, "The father does not have to die for the son to succeed him."

"Precisely," Gregor concurred, "In the final years of his life, Prince Rhaegar schemed to dethrone his father. His insurrection may have worked, had he and Lady Lyanna not run off together."

"That may be," Eddard pronounced, "But what guarantee do you have that his heir will be any better?"

"The guarantee of my word," Oberyn responded, "I have spoken with Ser Stevron Frey. He is a good man. He is as different from his father as Balon Greyjoy was from his. Under his direction, House Frey can regain its honor."

Assuming it ever had any.

Eddard thought on this for a few minutes. At the end of his pondering, he looked around at the
other two men and stated "Perhaps this idea does deserve some consideration. But let us speak no more on it for now. It is ignoble to speak of overthrowing a lord beneath his own roof. Especially when that lord has already given us guest right."

"I mean no offense, Lord Eddard," Gregor uttered slyly, "But I urge you not to be so complacent. I know for a fact that the Freys do not care much for guest right, either."

*And just how does he know that?*

"And just how do you know that?" Eddard asked suspiciously.

**Wow. Lord Eddard and I really do think alike.**

"I've… heard things," Gregor claimed meekly. Then he stated in assurance "We and our men are safe right now, I promise you. But under different circumstances… we would need more than bread and salt to protect us here."

"Thankfully, I always sleep with a spear in my reach," Oberyn commented wryly.

"Perhaps we should do the same," Gregor suggested, only half-joking.

"Perhaps," Eddard bluntly muttered. After a bit of silence, he stood up and told the other two men "I'll be turning in for the night. I'd advise you to do the same. We will continue the march at break of day."

Gregor and Oberyn nodded in agreement. After Ned Stark left the room, Gregor looked to the Red Viper and told him "When we return to Moat Cailin, we're going to have another meeting."

Oberyn smirked wickedly and asked rhetorically "Have you determined our next target, my lord?"

"Yes, I have," Gregor firmly proclaimed.

*…*

Tarrence Clegane had been the son of a kennelmaster, Alyver Clegane. The first decade of his life had been spent helping his father tend to the dogs of Casterly Rock. It was not glamorous, but he always believed he could do much worse.

All the same, he never thought he would do much better.

Then Alyver Clegane had saved Lord Tytos Lannister from a lion on the outskirts of Casterly Rock. He lost a leg and three of his best dogs in the process, but he gained a knighthood and the right to form his own house, as well. In addition to that, Tarrence had been taken on as Lord Tytos' squire.

Ser Alyver had died only a few years after Lord Tytos. All he left to his son was an impoverished keep on an unproductive patch of land and a small handful of incapable servants. For a time, Tarrence believed that life had been much more preferable as a kennelmaster's son, and he would have traded that lifestyle back for anything.

Tarrence Clegane had come a long way since then. The gods had given him a knighthood, a wife of high birth, and three strong children.

His firstborn was a member of King Robert Baratheon's Small Council and the head of a house of his own. His elder son had also helped extend the influence of the Cleganes to the North, and he was one of the most respected and beloved men in Westeros.
One might suppose that Tarrence Clegane was jealous of his son's widespread popularity and success. As it happened, he was not even marginally envious. Tarrence Clegane had never yearned for fame or fortune. He was proud just to have been the father of the Mountain That Rides.

Be that as it may, Tarrence would never turn down an opportunity to spread his family's domain. That was just what he had been doing for the past five years.

Just before Gregor went north, he had given his father a gift of seven thousand gold dragons. The Mountain said that he wished for them to be used for the betterment of the Cleganes of Clegane's Keep. They had served that very purpose. Clegane's Keep had been rebuilt and augmented tremendously. It was now three times larger than it had first been, and ten times as grand. Villages has been constructed on the adjoining lands, which were now capable of growing crops, as well.

Before long, the Cleganes were able to mine the land and harvest its natural resources just as their fellow Westerlords did. That was what truly heightened their prosperity and gained them recognition amongst the highborn houses of the west.

After five years, Tarrence Clegane had taken those seven thousand golden dragons and turned them into seventy thousand. House Clegane was now just a step below the main noble houses of the Westerlands. All that was missing was the title of lord for its master. Based on what his younger son told him, there was indeed a possibility that Tarrence Clegane would receive a lordship sometime in the near future.

But that would have to wait. Right now, there were more pressing issues that needed to be handled first. Mainly, there was the threat of invasion.

Near the start of the year, the Iron Islands had launched the full strength of their fleet. Most of their ships had sailed to Lannisport. There they attempted to ambush and burn the Westerlander fleet. They had assumed that the element of surprise was on their side. It was not.

Unbeknownst to Balon Greyjoy, all of Westeros had been alerted to the probability of an impending attack by sea. Thanks to a warning from Moat Cailin, Lannisport had been prepared for this assault months in advance.

The Ironborn only managed to set fire to a third of the Westerlords' ships. Of those, only half were destroyed or damaged beyond hope of repair. The surviving vessels managed to sink several of the Iron Fleet's vessels in retaliation. Before very long, the Ironmen turned their masts around and sailed away.

Despite the proximity to water, it took hours to put out the fires of that battle. For a while, the flames could be seen all the way from Clegane's Keep. It was dusk at the time; Tarrence could vividly recall seeing an immense blinding light in the horizon. The sight had been quite unnerving.

*The Sun goes down in the west. Our fleet almost went with it.*

Before the Sun reappeared in the east the following day, Lord Tywin Lannister had sent out a raven to each of his vassals. Ser Tarrence did not even have to open the letter to deduce that the lion lord was calling his banners.

Although Clegane's Keep was very close in proximity to Lannisport and Casterly Rock, Tarrence Clegane had wasted no time in assembling his soldiers. However, he would not march just yet.

A few days later, Tarrence found out that King Robert Baratheon had been informed of the Ironborn's violent uprising, and he had subsequently declared war on them. Needless to say, he
would be on the side of the Westerlords.

Within a week, the other Westerlords had arrived with their forces. They set up camp in the vast empty space of land between Casterly Rock and Clegane's Keep.

Soon, it became known that the King was coming to the Westerlands. With him, he was bringing reinforcements from the North, the Riverlands, the Reach, the Crownlands, and the Stormlands. They would all be gathering at Casterly Rock in preparation for war.

The Reachmen were the first to come. Half came by ship; the other half by horse. Lord Paxter Redwyne headed the former half. He brought a significant portion of the Reach's fleet to strength the Westerlands' depleted numbers. The other half came by land, led by Lord Mace Tyrell himself.

The Riverlords arrived next. Lord Hoster Tully and his forces rode down from the Golden Tooth and came from the northeast. The Freys were notably absent from this procession.

The Stormlords and Crownlords appeared soon after. Lord Stannis Baratheon of Dragonstone supplied another formidable company of ships, and King Robert Baratheon rode at the head of a large column of gallant knights and hardened soldiers.

Terrance saw the King when his forces came from the east. Robert did not stop by Clegane's Keep, but he came very close when he passed it by. Tarrence managed to catch a glimpse of him. He thought the King looked both regal and magnificent. He had been clad in a full suit of armor with his warhammer in hand.

The Northmen and the Legion without Banners were the last to show. The Freys finally appeared, as well. They came from the same direction, but there was a notable amount of space between them and the Northmen and Legionnaires.

Whereas the other armies had merely gone around Clegane's Keep as though it was an obstacle, the Legionnaires had ridden directly towards the keep.

When Ser Tarrence Clegane was informed by the on-duty guard that the Legion was approaching, he had his household assemble in the courtyard. His lady wife Daliah was by his side, as always. On his other side was his second son and heir Sandor and his intended, Obara Martell. His daughter and youngest child Ellyn stood beside his wife.

Maester Velix, Ser Wallis Peckledon, and the rest of House Clegane's retainers stood in a straight line behind the landed knight and his family. In the distance, they could see a host of about fifteen hundred men coming towards them. Ser Tarrence and his company stood in relative silence as they waited for the host to reach them. There were no banners that anyone could see, so there was no question as to which company those units belonged to.

Indeed, at the very front of the column was a very tall man astride a huge black destrier. By his size, he could only be Lord Gregor Clegane himself.

Tarrence had not seen Gregor since he was Sandor's current age. He was even bigger than he remembered him to be. Of course, all three of his children had grown in that time. He now had to gaze slightly upward to look Sandor in the eye, and Ellyn stood an inch taller than her mother.

*Maybe someday, all of Westeros will look up to my children.*
That was very well possible. In more than one way.

Soon the Legionnaires reached Clegane's Keep. The majority of them remained outside. Only their commander and his officers trotted through the gates.

The commander was fully dressed in a suit of plate-and-mail. It covered him from head to heel. The only visible opening was a thin slit in the visor of his helm. He wore a bastard sword on his left side and a longsword on his right. Attached to his back was a shield of solid metal. Ser Tarrence would have quivered in uneasiness, had he not known who was beneath all that steel.

Gregor Clegane dismounted his destrier and landed on his feet with a loud *Thump*. The ground seemed to shake when he touched it. He gradually turned to face the household of Clegane's Keep, and slowly, he began to walk towards them.

After a minute of unbroken silence, Gregor stood directly before Ser Tarrence Clegane. At a glance, he appeared to be staring the older man down.

Finally, he reached his arms up, took ahold of his helm, and pulled it off his head. Once the helm was off, Gregor grinned kindly at his father.

Despite the friendly gesture, Tarrence was oddly inclined to be professional towards his son.

*He's changed. He's now a person to be both feared and admired. I cannot greet him as my own blood. I must greet him as someone deserving of his station.*

Ser Tarrence promptly returned the grin. He dipped his head slightly and declared "Welcome, my lord, to Clegane's Keep."

Gregor Clegane chuckled, placed his hands on his father's biceps, and stood him up straight. He remarked informally "Come now, Father. None of that."

Tarrence was a little taken aback. He hastily muttered "Forgive me; I simply assumed it was required of me. After all, you are a noble lord and a member of the King's Small Council."

Gregor lightly shook his head and proclaimed "You are still the master of the keep, and even the King must show proper respect to a man in his own home."

Tarrence just nodded, scoffed, and stated "If you insist, Gregor."

Suddenly, he felt very relieved.

*In spite of everything else that is new about him, he is still every bit my son.*

Gregor looked back at his officers and waved at them once. All at once, they proceeded to climb down from their horses. Most of them tended to their horses, but there were two that instead walked over to where their commander was.

One of them was short but thickset. And rather handsome, Tarrence had to admit. Over his shoulder he balanced a long spear. By his façade and his leather armor, he had to be a Dornishman. One look at Obara Martell, and Tarrence could already tell who he was.

The other… was a woman. She was as tall as Sandor, but as beautiful as a gold mine. Most women would appear odd in boiled leather and chainmail, but in the case of this woman, the armor she wore suited her well. Almost straightaway, Tarrence deduced her identity, as well.
When the two individuals were upon them, Gregor announced "Father, may I present my captains: Prince Oberyn of House Nymeros Martell, younger brother to Prince Doran and the father of Obara, and Lady Dacey of House Mormont, eldest daughter of Lady Maege… and my lady wife."

This was the very first time when Tarrence Clegane came face-to-face with his gooddaughter. He had been somewhat frustrated that he could not meet her before the wedding. But he had not protested, as his elder son had been free to wed whomever he pleased.

At least now, he finally got to see Dacey Mormont in person. He smiled and extended his hand to her. She smiled back and shook it firmly. Tarrence shook hands with Oberyn, too, and he stated cordially "My lady, my prince, I bide you welcome."

"Thank you, Ser Tarrence," Oberyn affably told him in response.

"I am honored to finally meet you, goodfather," Dacey proclaimed gleefully.

Ser Tarrence took a step back, and then he looked around the vicinity and asked eagerly "So… where is my first grandchild?"

"Further back in the caravan," Gregor informed him, "We thought it best if he was kept with the civilian part of the convoy."

"Only when we were on the move, though," Dacey added in, "He's typically with us whenever we halt."

"You needn't worry, ser," Oberyn assured Ser Tarrence, "My paramour is watching over your grandson. I'm about to ride out and find her."

"Well, tell your paramour I am grateful," Tarrence told the prince, "And tell her she is invited to enter the keep, as well."

"As you wish, my good ser," Oberyn avowed. He swiftly returned to his garron, mounted it again, and rode back out the gate.

While the prince was gone, Ser Tarrence and his retainers escorted Gregor, his wife, and his officers inside the keep. Quarters had already been arranged for Gregor and his lieutenants. After they were shown to their rooms, the Legionnaires took some time to rest and recover from their journey.

Gregor and his officers joined Ser Tarrence and his household for the midday meal in the Main Hall. Gregor, Dacey, Rickard, Oberyn, Ellaria, and Nymeria sat on the dais with the Cleganes of Clegane's Keep. Elia and Obella were being tended to by Oberyn and Ellaria's personal servants.

After luncheon was served and eaten, Ser Tarrence Clegane was formally introduced to his grandson. When he had the chance to hold Rickard Clegane in his arms, he broke into a wide smile, and the feeling of pride was almost inexpressible.

Rickard was about eighteen months old, but he was the size of a child that has seen three or four name days. He had a full head of dark hair (which he obviously got from his mother), he could walk straight without stumbling, and he could talk in complete sentences.

As he cradled his grandson in his arms, Ser Tarrence looked over at Gregor and Dacey, and he inquired "Did he truly weigh seventeen pounds at birth?"

"He did," Dacey revealed with a proud smile, "I can attest to that."
Gregor then asked his parents "Do you recall how much I weighed?"

"About thirteen and one-half pounds," Daliah recounted, "However, Rickard is not quite as large as you were at this age."

"Really?" Gregor said in interest.

Daliah nodded and observed "So there's no reason to assume he'll be even taller than you."

"He'll still be a giant, no question of that," Gregor contended.

"Quite so," Tarrence conceded. He carefully handed his grandson back to his son, and then he said inquiringly "How long will you be in the Westerlands?"

"Just until the Ironborn rebellion is put down," Oberyn Martell

"And for the duration of the ensuing celebration of their defeat," Gregor commented. He quickly added in "Provided that there is one, that is."

"I'm fairly certain there will be," Daliah debated, "The King is said to love tourneys. He threw one for his brother's wedding, one for his heir's birth, and for one his first anniversary."

"Then he'll definitely throw one to celebrate his victory against the Ironborn," Gregor pronounced.

"First he has to beat them, Gregor," Sandor muttered, as if the Mountain needed reminding that the war had only just begun.

"Oh, he will," Gregor confidently pronounced.

*With your assistance, no doubt.*

Daliah Clegane hastily brought everyone's attention back to the subject her husband had addressed a minute earlier. She announced "We're hoping that after the Ironborn are defeated and after the resulting merriment, you might stay here a little while longer."

Gregor rubbed his chin and muttered "While I am here, Ser Brynden Tully is overseeing the affairs of Moat Cailin and the other half of the Legion without Banners. I believe he is the most qualified person to lead in my stead. Because of that, we are not in any rush to return to the moat. As such, there is no reason we cannot lengthen our visit."

Tarrence smiled once more and declared "You do not know how delighted we are to hear that."

"Well, I can imagine," Gregor cockily remarked, "Believe me, I share your glee, Father. I hope we can make up for lost time, too."

Tarrence chuckled and professed gladly "Oh, I do not want you to stay just to make up for lost time, Gregor."

"We have something much greater planned," Daliah Clegane revealed.

"What would that be, my lady?" Dacey queried.

Tarrence grinned and answered her with "A certain upcoming ceremony."

At that, he directed everyone to look towards the end of the dais. There Sandor and Obara were seated by each other. They rose from their seats so that they were now standing at each other's side,
and he took her right hand in his left. They held their interlocked fingers in the air, and they both smiled widely.

It did not take Gregor, Dace, Oberyn, and the others very long to catch on.

The Mountain looked to his father and presumed excitedly "Does this mean…?"

Tarrence nodded his head and proclaimed "After much deliberation, I have given Sandor and Obara my blessing. They will wed soon after the war ends."

Obara Martell has been at Clegane's Keep for nearly a year, and Ser Tarrence Clegane have come to know her very well. She cared not for wealth or power, and she cared greatly for family and security. She was strong in both mind and body, and she was as good a leader as she was a fighter. In his opinion, Sandor could not hope to find a better bride.

Gregor turned back to his younger brother and raised his tankard, saying "Then I hope to be the first to congratulate you, Sandor. You, too, Obara."

"I'll drink to that, my lord," Obara declared, raising her own goblet, "I suppose I should call you 'brother' now."

"Call me whatever you like," Gregor proposed, sipping his ale, "As long as it's appropriate for our family's ears, of course."

"Of course," Obara knowingly conceded, smiling a bit, "You needn't worry on that, Gregor. I know better than to say spiteful things about my allies and relatives."

Sandor gave a nod and stated humorously "We can be certain of that, Princess,"

At that, Obara's grin shifted to a grimace. She glared at her betrothed and groaned "Sandor…"

Sandor smirked and murmured cheekily "What's the matter, Princess?"

"You know I hate that," Obara mumbled in annoyance.

"But it's true, is it not?" Sandor contended, "Your father's a prince, and you're now his trueborn daughter. That makes you a princess in every sense."

"He makes a point, sweetling," Oberyn told his eldest daughter.

Obara opened her mouth, but nothing came out at first.

Nymeria was the one who spoke first instead. She rose from her seat and interjected "Hold on. Papa, if that's the case, then does that mean that I too…?"

Oberyn merely smirked and nodded his head.

Nymeria grumbled and sank back into her chair.

"I wish to be disowned," she muttered, her voice laden with sarcasm.

"Wish declined," Oberyn drolly said in response.

It was here that Obara found her voice again. She also found a comeback. She grinned deviously and told her fiancée "Well, think on this, Sandor: whenever someone highborn marries someone of lesser rank, the latter rises in rank, as well. So after you and I are wed, going by your logic, you'll
be a prince."
Sandor looked to be at a loss for words when he heard that statement. He stared down at his hands and muttered "I hadn't thought of that…"

"Now I've **made** you think of it," Obara slyly rejoined, "So tell me, how does it sound?"
Sandor slowly let out a sigh and remarked sardonically "Fine. If it bothers you so greatly, I won't call you 'princess' without your permission."

*If he's wise, he won't call her that even with her permission.*

"Thank you," Obara said appreciatively. She lightly pecked Sandor on the cheek, and his grin swiftly returned.

Shortly after the meal ended, Tarrence asked to speak with Gregor in private. The Mountain decided he could afford his father a few minutes. While Dacey went to their chambers with Rickard, Gregor headed to his father's solar.

"What is this about, Father?" Gregor asked in interest.
Ser Tarrence opened his mouth to speak, but he hesitated for a moment. He tapped the fingers of his right hand against the surface of his desk.

Ever since Gregor arrived, Tarrence Clegane had been careful to keep his left hand out of sight as much as possible. He wondered if his son had noticed that.

*Even if he hasn't, he'll have to know eventually.*

Finally, Tarrence looked up at Gregor and stated inquiringly "Do you know when your forces will be going off to battle?"

Gregor shrugged and commented "We're the last to arrive, so the King must plan to get underway soon."

Tarrence nodded his head in acknowledgment, and he muttered "In any case, I want to wish you the best of luck."

Gregor raised an eyebrow and presumed "You won't be going with us?"

His father solemnly shook his head. *He needs to see.*

It was here that Ser Tarrence brought out his left arm and held it in the air. His hand was shaking uncontrollably.

"What…?" Gregor began uneasily.

"Maester Velix believes it is the early stages of palsy," Tarrence grimly informed his son.

"Palsy?" Gregor whispered in shock.

Tarrence merely nodded.

"He could be wrong," Gregor suggested hopefully.

"He could," Tarrence admitted, "But whatever it is, one thing is certain. I am unfit to fight or sail."
Our units must not be seen being led by a man who cannot even keep his own hand steady. What would the other lords say?"

"You shouldn't care what they'd say," Gregor debated.

"It happens that I do care," Tarrence Clegane proclaimed, "I will not be a liability to my house or my men. I beseech you not to try to change my mind; it is already made up."

Tarrence knew that normally, Gregor would have made a persistent effort to convince his father that he had too little faith in himself. But since he had pleaded with him, Gregor agreed not to argue this point any further.

"Very well, Father," Gregor coincided, a little diffidently.

Tarrence was notably relieved that his son had chosen not to resist his decision. He sat back in his chair and commented "Now because I cannot go, Sandor will lead our soldiers in my place."

"Wasn't Sandor already going as Lord Tywin's squire?" Gregor recollected.

"Yes," Tarrence verified, "But now he must go as the leader of House Clegane's units, too. I assume you know what that entails."

"It means that he and his forces will be entering the fray alongside Lord Tywin," Gregor conjectured.

"Precisely," Tarrence affirmed, "Lord Tywin will witness firsthand what our men are capable of. If he likes what he sees… it could mean great things for us. This could be what finally convinces Lord Tywin to raise this house to lordly status."

Gregor raised an eyebrow and remarked "If they serve and fight well, that could certainly happen."

"That's the other reason I wished to speak with you," Tarrence revealed, "I have a favor to ask."

"Anything," Gregor consented.

Tarrence looked him in the eye and said "If possible, try to keep a close eye on Sandor. I'd like you to ensure that he fulfills his duties to both his house and his liege lord. At the same time, I need you to ensure his safety. Do you understand?"

Straightaway, Gregor nodded his head and pronounced "Yes, Father. I won't let any harm come to him."

_ I know you want. But it is comforting just to hear those words from your mouth. _

Chapter End Notes

Note: There's one thing I'd like to clarify. Eddard is NOT on board with the plan to overthrow Walder Frey and install Stevron as the head of House Frey. If I gave you the impression that he was, I beseech your pardon.
Chapter Notes

Note: I intend for the Ironborn Rebellion and the subsequent tourney at Lannisport to last about five chapters; maybe six. This will be the first one, but it will mostly depict the Royalist army's preparation for war. The next chapter will involve the battles at Segard and Faircastle, and the chapter after, the siege of Pyke.

By the way, my mother, father, sister, and I will be going to Rome for New Year's, and I'll be really busy with work this week. That said, I may not have time to work on my writing. I'll try to have the next update by Christmas Eve. If not, the day after Christmas.

The Legion without Banners were hosted by Ser Tarrence Clegane that night. The infantrymen camped outside the walls of Clegane's Keep. Gregor and his lieutenants slept in the guest chambers of the keep.

Everyone who resided in or near the keep managed to catch a fairly peaceful rest. They all awoke quite early the following morning. The top officers of the Legion broke their fast with the Cleganes and their retainers in the Main Hall.

After breakfast, a rider arrived in the keep's courtyard. He had come from Robert Baratheon's forces. He claimed the King had called for a meeting between the leaders of the Royal Army. That included the foremost members of the Legion without Banners.

The meeting was to take place at high noon in Casterly Rock that day. So there was no time for the Legionnaires to waste. As soon as they heard the message, they prepared to head out straightaway.

Lord Gregor and Sandor bade a fond farewell to Ser Tarrence, Lady Daliah, and Lady Ellyn. Their parents and sister were reluctant to say good-bye, but they did, all the same. They were confident that both of them would overcome the encroaching struggles.

Dacey Mormont would be joining her lord husband in the field, so she and Gregor left their son Rickard in the care of Lady Daliah Clegane. She did not wish to part from her son, but the only way she could avoid doing so was if she parted from her husband. Either way, the separation was supposed to be temporary. Still, at least if she separated from Rickard, she could ascertain that he would be safe.

Dacey was not the only woman who intended to fight in the Greyjoy Rebellion.

Obara Martell insisted on travelling with the units of House Clegane of Clegane's Keep. Sandor put up no opposition to his intended's request, and his soldiers seemed to respect both of them for that. They all believed she would make an excellent lady for their future master. Furthermore, Nymeria Martell would remain with her father Prince Oberyn as his squire. Ellaria Sand, however, had chosen to remain behind.

While the baseborn daughter of Lord Uller could handle herself well in a combat situation, she had no taste for direct warfare. Instead, she would take care of Elia and Obella whilst their father was
She also planned to assist Lady Daliah in any way she could. Namely, she would help her tend to Rickard and the other children at Clegane's Keep. These specific children were not just Elia and Obella. They included all the children that had come south in the Legion's convoy. They were the children of the Legionnaires who had come to the Westerlands.

Ser Gerion Lannister's natural daughter, Joy Hill, was among that group of children. She had lived at Moat Cailin almost as long as her father. Gerion had sent for her when he officially decided to join the Legion.

Gerion recalled when King Robert had legitimized Prince Oberyn Martell's two eldest bastard daughters. At the time, that had been done primarily as a measure to ensure that the total number of female heirs in the Great Houses would be closer in number to the total number of male heirs. Yet now, one of his former baseborn girls would be marrying into a knightly house in the Westerlands, instead.

Gerion had often considered doing the same for Joy. He felt she deserved to have a name of her own. Ideally, he could use the same excuse as Oberyn; she would be a prospect for marriage for the other Great Houses.

In actuality, he cared little for the concept of using his own daughter as one-half of a marriage contract. Aside from that, Joy was already perfectly happy at Moat Cailin. Bastards were treated kindly there, just as they were in Dorne. Plus, Joy had made plenty of friends, baseborn and trueborn alike. The fact that she was a bastard did not seem to perturb her in the slightest.

She may not even want a name of her own. She's certainly never shown any interest in one.

All the same, Gerion would keep the idea of legitimizing Joy in mind. For all he knew, there could come a day when it would be advantageous, practical, and idyllic to make her a Lannister. Her mother Briony had been a common woman, so Lord Tywin Lannister would probably not approve of the concept. But Gerion had never bothered very much with pleasing his brother. What truly mattered to him was his capacity to please himself and his daughter.

And his commander.

Growing up the youngest of five, Gerion had never been a stranger to authority. Despite that, he did not blindly follow any order his siblings or anyone else gave him. As a self-imposed rule, he only accepted commands from people he could understand, admire, and relate to. Gregor Clegane was the first and only person he had encountered who met all three of those criteria.

Gerion had been the very first person to enlist in the Legion without Banners. As such, he had been fighting alongside Gregor Clegane longer than anyone else in their ranks. That included Dacey Mormont and Prince Oberyn. Additionally, Gerion had known the Mountain when he had still been his elder brother's vassal. He had both feared and respected him back then. He did not fear him as much in modern times, but he respected him a fair deal more.

Some of Gregor's commands had been vague and questionable, but they had all been honorable in purpose so far. As long as they continued to be (and there was no reason to suggest they would not), Gerion would stay by the Mountain's side.

I may remain the Legion's longest-serving member for many years to come. Imagine what Tywin will think of that.
The thought amused him somewhat. While Gerion would never intentionally aggravate his eldest brother, he looked forward to seeing the expression on Tywin's face when the latter discovered just how close he and Lord Gregor Clegane had become.

Gerion was one of the Legionnaires who rode with Gregor to Casterly Rock that morning. As before, Oberyn Martell and Dacey Mormont rode on either side of the Mountain.

Gerion had been asked to ride on the other side of Oberyn. It was arranged in that fashion so that the other Lannisters would see that one of their own was viewed and treated as the Mountain's equal. That would at least do the Legionnaires some good in the eyes of the Rock.

For a very similar reason, Victarion Greyjoy had been assigned to ride on the other side of Dacey. It would be imperative that everyone (not just the Lannisters) notice that the Iron Captain was at the very front of the Legionnaire column. That would signify that he was one of Gregor Clegane's most esteemed and trusted allies. It would also be an indication that not all Ironborn were dishonorable.

The Riverlords, Northmen, Crownlords, Stormlords, Reachmen, and Westerlords were still spread out in the vast space between Clegane's Keep and Casterly Rock. Going around that massive host would have taken too long; so the Legionnaires and the units from Clegane's Keep galloped through it. Throughout that trek, they gained a number of stares, many of which were of wonder and awe.

Evidently, they were amazed to see such a varied company travelling through their ranks. Most of them had only heard of the Legion without Banners and its universal understanding. This was the very first time the majority of those soldiers saw the extent of the Legion's cultural and regional diversity firsthand. Gerion noted their dumbfounded expressions, and he resisted the urge to smirk.

They may gape at us, but it's our tolerance that confuses them. They can't grasp the idea of all nine types of Westerosi working together. Oh, well; maybe one day, we will cure them of their ignorance.

From the time they entered the Royal Army's camp to the time they exited it, the Legionnaires never paused or halted for even a second. Neither did Sandor and his company. Soon enough, both troops reached the base of Casterly Rock.

Although they had arrived their destination, they still had a very long way to go to get to it.

At its highest point, Casterly Rock was around three times taller than the Wall or the Hightower of Oldtown. Thankfully, they would not have to climb all the way to the top. But they would have to go most of the way.

Fortunately, height and distance were their only challenges. The main entry to the Rock came in the form of a cavern known as the Lion's Mouth. Despite being a natural landmark, the Lion's Mouth had been amended several times ever since the Casterlys had been expelled by King Lann the Clever. Now it was large enough for twenty riders to trot abreast. So the Legionnaires were able to maintain their formation as they made their way up the wide passageway. Once they were through the Lion's Mouth, they had to traverse a network of steep manmade roads.

The ascent took the rest of the morning to accomplish. It was due to Gerion's familiarity with the Rock that they did not get lost or misdirected. Sandor was somewhat acquainted with the layout, as well, given the time he had spent there as Lord Tywin's squire. Still, even with his guidance and Gerion's, it was a wonder the Legionnaires and the Clegane retainers did not exhaust their horses by the end of it.
During the ride, Gerion could have sworn he heard Gregor talk to himself. The Mountain did not speak above a whisper, but Gerion clearly heard him say something along the lines of "This is just like climbing the steps to High Hrothgar."

That perplexed him. **Whoever heard of such a place?**

Whatever this High Hrothgar was, Gerion supposed that it was located at a very high altitude above the ground. If so, the analogy Gregor made was fitting. Even natives of the Rock were not fond of the arduous journey from top to bottom and vice versa.

What mattered was that Gregor, Sandor, and their parties were not late to the meeting.

Shortly before noon, they reached the summit of the Rock. There they were swiftly dismounted, and their horses were attended to by the stableboys. As all the garrons, coursers, palfreys, destriers, and geldings were led away, their owners were escorted to the council chambers by the Rock’s master-at-arms, Ser Benedict Broom.

The most prominent leaders of the Royal Army had already gathered there. Among them were Eddard Stark, Mace Tyrell, Paxter Redwyne, Stannis Baratheon, Davos Seaworth, Hoster Tully, Tywin Lannister, Kevan Lannister, and Robert Baratheon. They were all assembled around a large table. Two knights of the Kingsguard – Ser Barristan Selmy and Ser Boros Blount – stood vigil against the walls.

Gregor Clegane stepped inside with Dacey Mormont, Oberyn Martell, Gerion Lannister, Victarion Greyjoy, Allard Seaworth, Garth Hightower, and Smalljon Umber. Sandor Clegane stepped inside alone. Ser Wallis Peckledon, Obara Martell, and the other Clegane’s Keep units stayed outside the room, as did Nymeria Martell.

When the Clegane brothers and the Legionnaires entered the chamber, the other men gazed towards them. None of them moved from where he stood, except the one closest to the entrance. This man turned out to be the King himself.

It had been five years since anyone in the Legion without Banners had seen Robert Baratheon. Apparently, the years had been good to him. Although he sat the Iron Throne, he clearly spent plenty of time on his feet, too. His physique was as durable and formidable as ever. He had gained a little weight, but the majority of it was muscle. Most notably, Robert was said to be fond of drink, but Gerion had never seen a man more sober.

As the King approached, Gregor, Sandor, and the other Legionnaires – with the notable exception of Victarion – lightly bowed their heads toward him.

"Your Grace," Gregor Clegane muttered as he returned to his full height.

"Welcome, Lord Gregor," the stag king said in response, grinning, "It is a pleasure to have you here."

He then looked around at the other individuals who had just entered the room. He stopped when his eyes landed on Victarion. He frowned, and his gaze lingered on the Ironborn warrior. He mumbled "I cannot say the same for the entirety of your present company, though."

Victarion Greyjoy grunted at that, but said nothing. Beforehand, he had assured his colleagues that he would not let any derogatory remarks made by the King or the King's generals to provoke him. He would let Gregor do all the talking.

"I do not blame you for having suspicions, Your Grace," Gregor stated candidly.
"Suspicions you'd be wise to share," Robert professed, "Not ten leagues from here, the Iron Fleet attempted to burn the Westerlands Fleet last month. Yet even after that, you have come to this meeting with an Ironborn."

"An Ironborn who happens to be the brother of the very man who started this war, no less," Tywin Lannister pointed out.

Count on Tywin to state the obvious. Especially when the obvious is very unhelpful.

"Lord Victarion is on our side," Gregor uttered firmly.

"And you can be sure of that?" Mace Tyrell asked dubiously.

"Yes," Gregor replied simply.

"Would you care to tell us how?" Tywin queried.

"Because I have served with him," Gregor debated, "Neither you nor anyone at that table can claim that, Lord Tywin. I alone have the right to speak for him, and speak for him, I shall. So hear this: Lord Captain Victarion is a decent and honorable man. He joined the Legion without Banners by his own volition. He is the only one of Quellon Greyjoy's surviving sons who shares his father's ideals. He strongly believes in my cause. Above all... I trust him."

Robert and the leaders of the Royal Army were stunned by all those points. Truth be told, the other Legionnaires were quite stunned, as well. Victarion was the most stunned of all.

"With your life?" Tywin presumed.

Gregor hesitated, but only for a moment. After that, he slowly peered over his shoulder to look at the Iron Captain, and then he turned back to his front and pronounced sternly "Yes, with my life."

At that, Kevan Lannister moved away from the table and started walking towards the Mountain. In one of his hands, he clutched an unfolded piece of paper. When he was within reach of the tallest man in the room, he held the paper out to Gregor and proposed "Say that once more after you read this, Lord Gregor."

Gerion raised an eyebrow as his commander took the parchment from his second oldest brother.

"What is this?" Gregor inquired, looking down at the paper.

"It arrived just this morning," Tywin informed him, "The raven was sent from Moat Cailin."

Gerion and his companions watched Gregor as he read the contents of the letter. The more he read, his eyes appeared to gradually widen.

"My lord?" Gerion queried in concern, placing a hand on Gregor's back.

"There was an insurrection in the Legion," Gregor grimly announced.

"What?" Dacey Mormont asked quietly.

Gregor revealed "According to this, a number of the Ironborn Legionnaires attempted to seize Moat Cailin in Lord Balon's name."

"When did this happen?" Oberyn Martell enquired.
Kevan Lannister illuminated "This letter is dated very recently. Assuming it was written immediately after the conflict was resolved, the rebels must have waited until after you crossed Lord Frey's bridge."

Less than a week ago.

"How bad is it?" Smalljon Umber anxiously asked the Mountain, "What's the damage?"

"To our good fortune, the Blackfish put the rebellion down quickly," Gregor disclosed, "Under his direction, the rest of the Legionnaires managed to overwhelm the dissidents within an hour. They've all been killed or imprisoned."

"What of the losses on our side?" Gerion queried apprehensively.

"None of the smallfolk perished," Gregor proclaimed, "However, around a score of loyal Legionnaires were lost. Ser Brynden provided a list of casualties."

Gregor proceeded to pass the letter around to his fellow Legionnaires. They each took a minute to review it, and then they passed it along.

When Gerion received the letter, he only skimmed the casualty list briefly. Most of the names, he did not recognize or he was only slightly acquainted with. Unfortunately, there were also some fine knights on that list. Ser Osmund Kettleblack was one of them.

Gerion was stunned when he discovered this. He had seen Osmund in action. While he was not one of the best swordsmen Gerion had ever seen, he was still a very capable and formidable warrior. He had also been a member of Gregor Clegane's inner circle. Gerion may not have been as close to Osmund as he had been to the other members, but he still thought of Kettleblack as a reliable ally.

"Oswell Kettleblack needs to be informed that his heir has perished," Gerion recommended as he handed the letter back to Gregor.

"He shall be notified," the Mountain asserted, "Worry not, Gerion. Ser Oswell has two other sons, and he will know that his eldest died in the line of duty. That should give him some amount of comfort."

"Indeed," Paxter Redwyne coincided, "There is no better way to go,"

"I concur," Tywin Lannister declared, "But be that as it may, this issue poses a serious problem. One Ironborn insurrection has already occurred on dry land. Who's to say another will not?"

"I can ensure it will not," Gregor insisted, "And allow me to explain my confidence. Months ago, I received some dependable information of the possibility that Balon Greyjoy would incite an uprising. As a precaution, I had Lord Victarion cross-examine the Ironborn Legionnaires. After reviewing each of them thoroughly, he determined which were loyal to us, and which were loyal to his brother. Anyone who fell into the latter category was left behind at Moat Cailin. When I gave command of the moat to Ser Brynden Tully, he assured me he would be heedful of the Ironborn. That was how he was able to put the rebellion down so quickly."

"Well, my brother is a competent man," Hoster Tully admitted, "Even so, this fiasco could have been avoided altogether if the treacherous Ironborn were confined to quarters as soon as the King declared war."

"That would have set an impossible precedent in the Legion without Banners," Gregor contended.
Yes, it would have. The strong bonds of trust and companionship we’ve worked so hard to develop would have been in danger of collapsing.

"Sometimes a precedent must be set," Robert Baratheon professed.

"Moreover, what guarantee do you have that Lord Victarion's word can be believed?" Tywin Lannister pointed out, "You asked an Ironborn captain to render judgment on his compatriots. His heritage makes him biased. A far more practical solution would have been to remove all the Ironborn from your ranks."

Gregor sighed and mumbled angrily "I thought we were past the days when a man's entire family was judged on his actions."

"Perhaps you are," Stannis Baratheon supposed, "The rest of us are not so imprudent."

It was here that Victarion Greyjoy finally entered the discussion. He stepped forward and uttered softly yet forcefully "My lords."

Every head turned to the Iron Captain. As he maintained his normal grimace, he declared "You cannot be faulted for assuming all Ironborn are scheming, conniving liars. There was once a time when I myself believed all greenlanders were weak, pitiful, and powerless. After serving in the Legion without Banners, I have overcome my prejudice. Allow me to help you overcome yours."

Gerion noticed a smirk break out across Gregor's face. It was laden with pride and satisfaction.

By this point, most of the leaders of the Royal Army were starting to believe the Mountain was right about Victarion's integrity. Even the King himself was having second thoughts.

"You wish a chance to prove your loyalty?" Robert Baratheon assumed.

Victarion lightly nodded his head.

Robert folded his arms and commanded him "Kneel."

Victarion was a little alarmed by the abruptness of that order. Gerion knew that he had never knelt to any man in his life. Not even to Gregor or his elder brothers. Gerion prayed he would make the right decision.

Don't be stubborn. This situation could get unpleasant.

To his good fortune, it did not. Slowly, Victarion dropped to one knee in front of the stag king, and he bowed his head to him. From that position, he proclaimed "I, Victarion of House Greyjoy, swear my oath of fealty to you, Robert of House Baratheon. I swear it by salt, I swear it by the sea, I swear it by the Drowned God."

Robert was pleased by that. He smiled and placed a hand on the Iron Captain's shoulder, saying "You may rise."

Victarion was quick to obey that command. When he was back up on his feet, Robert looked him in the eye and stated "I appreciate your oath, and I believe you mean well, but saying those words is not enough. First, you must prove to me that you can be trusted, too."

He led Victarion over to the table. Kevan gestured for Gregor and the others to approach, as well. Gerion followed his brother eagerly.
A detailed map of Westeros had been spread out across the surface of the table. A number of tiny figurines were spread along the western half of the map. These figurines represented the current known whereabouts of the Iron Fleet and the Royal Army.

Robert placed a finger on the Sunset Sea and pronounced "As you know, the Ironborn attempted to launch a sneak attack on Lannisport. Their goal, obviously, was to burn the Westerlands' fleet. Luckily, before too many ships were lost, we managed to push the Iron Fleet back."

"Thanks in large part to the information Lord Gregor supplied us," Davos Seaworth added in.

"Quite so," Robert Baratheon acknowledged, "Alas, this defeat will not be enough to discourage Balon Greyjoy. Am I correct?"

"You are, Your Grace," Victorion affirmed, "My brother attacked Lannisport because he saw their fleet as the Westerlands' greatest line of defense. Burning those vessels would have given him absolute freedom to raid the western half of this country's coast. Since he only partially succeeded, he will have to adapt a more cautious approach. But this rebellion is far from over. For now, we have only managed to delay his movements."

"I believe that," Eddard Stark murmured, "You say 'we.' Does that mean you will indeed help us stop your brother?"

"It does, my lord," Victorion responded.

Robert Baratheon nodded and stated "Then, tell us, Lord Victorion; what will be his next move?"

Victorion gazed down at the map and studied it intently. After a minute of uninterrupted silence, he pointed to two spots along the west coast. As he did this, he declared "His forces will make for Seagard and Faircastle. The first is all that stands between them and the rest of the Riverlands. The second is a fortified stronghold surrounded by water. Both are prime targets for the Iron Fleet to assault."

The other lords made a note of everything they just heard. Paxter Redwyne looked to the Iron Captain and inquired "Can we be certain of this?"

"Very certain," Gregor Clegane declared, "I can confirm everything Lord Victorion just said."

"And why is that, Lord Gregor?" Kevan asked in interest.

Gregor looked around the room and explicated "Long ago, I picked up some information about Lord Balon's schedule. After burning the fleet at Lannisport, he planned to attack Seagard and Faircastle right after. Although we saved most of the fleet, I can assure you that he still intends to carry out this campaign."

"I would not be surprised," Hoster Tully contended, "Seagard and Fair Isle are practically within spitting distance of the Iron Islands."

Eddard rubbed his chin, and then he queried "Where did this information come from?"

"I cannot say," Gregor bluntly replied, "Nor can I explain why I cannot say. All I can tell you is this: I've acquired this information through a very reliable source of my own."

Ah, yes. The "source" again.
It had been almost seven months since Gregor had first informed his inner circle of his secret source. In the time since then, he had not mentioned it again even once. But Gerion had often wondered on what this source actually was. It was only by Gregor's request that he and his colleagues had not asked for any clarity.

Nonetheless, the King and his affiliates were not content with this vague description.

"How can we trust in this 'source' if we do not know what it is?" Robert Baratheon asked rhetorically.

"Do you question Lord Varys about how his little birds sing their songs?" Gregor astutely countered.

"No, but at least we know of his birds," Tywin Lannister disputed, "Have you birds of your own, Lord Gregor?"

"I use no birds," Gregor claimed frankly, "Incidentally, you may be interested to know that this source was what saved your fleet, my lord."

Gerion tried not to scoff at the expression across his oldest brother's countenance.

It appears even the great Tywin Lannister can be puzzled.

Gregor continued with "A man of your intellect must realize that it was not mere happy coincidence that you were prepared for the attack on Lannisport months in advance. You already know that my word of caution was what prevented a greater tragedy. The intelligence which led to that warning was provided by my source. Think on that. Because of my source, hundreds of Westerlander sailors are still alive."

"That… that is true," Tywin Lannistered grudgingly admitted, "But if you were aware – or even suspected – that the Iron Islands would rebel, why did you not inform the crown directly?"

"At the time, I had no hard evidence," Gregor disclosed, "My word was all I had then."

"It seems to be all you have now, as well," Stannis Baratheon noted.

"That may be," Gregor alleged, "But given the circumstances that brought us here, I'd like to think that my word carries a little more merit today."

"We shall see if it does," Robert Baratheon muttered. He looked back down at the map, and he thought aloud "Since we have no conclusive way of predicting Balon's actual movements, we shall assume Lord Gregor and Lord Victarion's claims are correct. With that said, we must also assume that the Iron Fleet will sail for Seagard and Faircastle in the very near future."

"What shall we do to stop them, Your Grace?" Eddard Stark asked the question that was on everyone else's mind.

"Ordinarily, I would propose we eliminate the problem at the source," King Robert announced, placing his finger on Pyke, "But by the time our ships reach the Iron Islands, Balon's could already be over halfway to their destinations. As such, we need to concentrate on the defense of Seagard and Faircastle for now."

"How shall we proceed?" Paxter Redwyne questioned.

"We have two options: to reinforce the strongholds, or to prevent the siege altogether," Robert
Baratheon pronounced, "Again, because Balon's exact timetable is unknown, we may not have time to set up reinforcements at Seagard and Fairycastle, or even get them there on time. Therefore, our only alternative is to intercept the Ironborn before they get there."

That last statement brought a wave of disquiet over the room.

*Just when things were starting to look up…*

"Are you suggesting we face the Ironborn on the open sea?" Stannis Baratheon incredulously asked his brother.

"Yes," Robert uttered in a somewhat mocking tone, "In war, one generally encounters his foe on the field of battle."

"In war, one generally fights those battles on actual fields," Eddard Stark debated, "Robert, while the mainland of Westeros is ours, the Ironborn all but live on the sea. Engaging them there would be folly."

"I must agree with Lord Eddard," Mace Tyrell remarked, "On the deck of a ship, the Ironborn are unmatched. They've been known to vanquish forces three times theirs. And even when Lord Paxter, Lord Stannis, and Lord Tywin combine their fleets, the Iron Fleet still greatly outnumbers ours."

"Our only choice is to meet them at sea," Robert maintained, "If we do not, Seagard and Fairycastle will be lost. And with them, the safety of the Riverlands and the Westerlands."

"Then we shall all reside in a watery grave," Davos Seaworth murmured quietly.

Nearly everyone there was thinking much the same, but the Onion Knight was the only one who dared to voice that thought. Robert seemed disappointed or irate that his associates were so displeased with his proposition. That was not a good sign.

*When the leader starts to have doubts, that's when the followers should begin to panic.*

Luckily, there was no panicking. Just then, Gregor Clegane placed his hands on the table, leaned forward, and mumbled crossly "Have you no faith in yourselves?"

"This is not a matter of faith, Lord Gregor," Kevan Lannister debated, "The Iron Fleet is capable of wreaking havoc along the coasts of Westeros. They can do worse – far worse – on open water. Any sane man would not wish to face them at sea."

Gregor thought on that for a moment, and he meekly nodded his head. Then he broke into a smile and slyly proposed "What if I told you we may have the means to even the odds in our favor?"

That drew everyone's attention.

"What means?" Robert Baratheon inquired keenly.

"I've something to show you all," Gregor Clegane ambiguously proclaimed, "But first, we must go somewhere else."

"Where?" inquired Mace Tyrell.

"Somewhere outside," Gregor muttered plainly, "Preferably somewhere open."

"This time of day, the training yard should be clear," Gerion Lannister disclosed. That was the first
time he had spoken since the meeting began. He was used to speaking last. But it was not often that he had the last word.

"That will do," Gregor said in approval. He made his way over to the door of the chamber and bade the others, "Follow me, if you would. We shall continue the meeting in the training yard."

That was more a request than a command. All the same, every person in that chamber voluntarily chose to accompany Lord Gregor outside. That just had to know what he had that could possibly give them an advantage over the Ironborn in maritime warfare.

…

As everyone left the room, Allard Seaworth caught up with his father, Ser Davos. They had only exchanged a glance and a smile during the meeting; no actual words were spoken. When they were both out of the council chamber, they finally had a chance to talk. The Onion Knight was elated to see his second son.

That's to be expected.

Other than the occasional letter, they had not corresponded with each other in over three years. The walk to the courtyard would only take a few minutes, but that was enough time for them to mingle.

Their liege lord, Lord Stannis Baratheon, observed this interaction between father and son. Strangely, he found himself somewhat envious of them. He had never bonded with his own father that way, and he had no sons of his own. While Stannis had never been a sentimental man, he had always appreciated the sacredness of family unity.

It is a pity there are not more who appreciate that sacredness these days.

His wife, Lady Selyse of House Florent, was carrying his first child. She was scheduled to give birth very soon. According to Maester Cressen, Stannis' firstborn would almost certainly be a girl. Stannis was not pleased, but he was accustomed to disappointment. Even so, he never voiced his displeasure. He was never one to complain about what he did not have. He was keener to focus on what could be his.

Selyse and I will have more children. One is bound to be male.

As the Legionnaires and the leaders of the Royal Army exited the council chamber, they were joined up by the soldiers from Clegane's Keep and a number of the Lannister household guard.

The group was composed of over fifty people by this point. Davos and Allard were the only ones in that entire company who uttered a single word on the walk to the courtyard. The others followed Lord Gregor Clegane in silence.

When they reached the courtyard, they found it empty, just as Gerion Lannister had forecasted. Gregor requested for a sturdy wicker basket, a wooden pallet, and a slab of solid stone to be brought out. Lord Tywin sent for those items, and the Rock's servants were quick to go in search of them.

Five minutes later, those three items were sitting in the courtyard. The stone slab was standing in the very center of the clearing. The wicker basket was set atop the slab. The wooden pallet was leaned against the slab at a steep angle.

Gregor had everyone stand in the courtyard so that the stone slab and the wicker basket were totally concealed by the wooden pallet. He also made certain that they kept a certain amount of
distance between themselves and those three objects.

*This should prove most... intriguing.*

Once the Mountain was content with where everyone was standing, he reached into his doublet and pulled out a small leather pouch. After untying and widening the mouth of the pouch, he outstretched his left hand. Then he upended the pouch over his left hand, and its contents poured out.

The contents turned out to be a coarse powder. The powder gave off a strange odor, like the ash left over in a hearth after the fire has gone out. The hue of the powder was predominantly black, but there were spots of grey here and there.

Gregor looked around at the assembled crowd and announced "What I hold here is a mixture of three minerals: coal, sulfur, and a creation of my own which I call saltpeter. Alone, each of these ingredients serves plenty of useful purposes, such as a type of fuel or oxidizer. Together… they form a very dangerous compound. I call this compound 'black powder.'"

Stannis noted the curious expression on his elder brother's face.

*He was always easily fascinated.*

However, Robert was not the only one who was taken in by the Mountain's sermon. Most of the leaders of the Royal Army, Sandor's men-at-arms, and even Gregor's fellow Legionnaires were deeply interested, as well. Apparently, even those closest to the Lord of Moat Cailin had been wholly unaware of the existence of this black powder.

*If he took the effort to create this mixture in total secrecy, it must be remarkable, indeed. Then again, if he created it without anyone noticing, it may turn out to be underwhelming.*

"What does this 'black powder' do, my lord?" Eddard Stark enquired.

"It would be difficult to describe in words," Gregor disclosed, "So I shall provide a demonstration."

Gregor returned the black powder to the pouch. Then he took out a short piece of thick twine which had been soaked in oil. He stuffed half of the piece of twine into the pouch, and then he pulled on the pouch's strings until the mouth of it was almost totally closed. There was just enough room for the other half of the twine to poke out.

He then gave the pouch a few good shakes so that the hidden half of the twine would be buried in the pile of black powder. As he did this, he asked no one in particular "Could I have a candle that's been lit?"

Again, his request was rather perplexing.

*He wants a lit candle right now? It's broad daylight.*

Lord Tywin had another of his servants fetch a candle and light it. When the servant returned with the candle, he gave it to Gregor straightaway.

Gregor took a moment to guarantee that everyone was at least ten meters away from the center of the courtyard. After making sure of that, he held the flame of the candle against the oil-soaked twine. It took less than a second for the twine to catch fire. As the flame slowly began to spread along the twine, Gregor looked around at his company and instructed them "Watch very closely. And I'd advise you to cover your ears."
Sandor Clegane and the seven Legionnaires chose to heed that second statement, and they brought their hands close to the sides of their heads. Everyone else kept their hands at their sides. Even so, Gregor went ahead with the demonstration.

When the flame on the twine reached the mouth of the pouch, Gregor turned around and flung it at wooden pallet. Immediately after he threw the pouch, he ducked down and pressed his hands against his ears. His brother and colleagues did the same. Stannis and everyone else merely watched on, hardly ever moving a muscle.

The instant the pouch landed against the pallet, there was a deafening explosion.

The explosion was so loud and so powerful that those standing closest to it were nearly thrown off their feet. It was thanks to the people standing directly behind them that they did not.

In the five seconds immediately following the explosion, bits of gravel, slivers of wood, and chunks of stone flew all over the courtyard. They were all tiny in size but abundant in number.

Sandor noticed that the smell of ash had returned. Not only that; it had increased exponentially. By the potency of the odor, it was as though there really was a pile of ash nearby.

In addition to that, a huge cloud of smoke had been left by the explosion. It covered much of the courtyard, and it gradually spread out until the entire vicinity was covered in it. King Robert and many of the others looked away to avoid getting it in their eyes. Some of them developed a bit of a cough. Luckily, the cough only lasted as long as the smoke did.

A couple minutes later, the smoke subsided, and the results of the explosion were on full display.

There was nothing left of the wicker basket, the wooden pallet, or the stone slab. They had all been reduced to rubble.

Gregor smiled at the sight, and he turned back to everyone else. He folded his arms and proudly announced "As you can see, black powder is as deadly and destructive as wildfire. However, it also works much more quickly, and it is far easier to control."

"So it would seem," Robert Baratheon murmured drily. He broke into a small grin and remarked "That was… quite impressive, my lord."

Gregor nodded lightly in acknowledgment and stated "Thank you, Your Grace. Shall we see if it will impress the Iron Fleet, as well?"

"Perhaps we shall," Robert conceded, "Tell me; how did you make this compound?"

"The same way anything is made: constant trial and error," Gregor answered simply.

Oberyn Martell stepped forward and professed "I'm certain we would have noticed if you were experimenting with this substance. The noise alone would have been a giveaway. Yet we never caught on. Just when did you find the opportunity to test your creation, Gregor?"

"I never did, Oberyn," Gregor revealed, "In fact, I myself did not know it would actually work until this very moment. For all I knew, the black powder might have done nothing at all."

The Red Viper chuckled at that. Dacey Mormont, Robert Baratheon, Sandor Clegane, and a number of the other individuals present snickered a bit, as well.

Unsurprisingly, Stannis was not one to laugh. There were some who claimed he had never even
learned to smile.

*Does Lord Gregor not realize he just ran the risk of making himself look like an ass? In front of his KING?*

Robert clearly did not share his younger brother's mindset. He kept his focus on the residue in the center of the courtyard, and he queried "How much black powder do you have?"

"Another hundred pouches of equal strength to this one are currently in my camp," Gregor enlightened him, "I also have enough coal, sulfur, and saltpeter to make a thousand more. They just need to be mixed."

Stannis Baratheon moved beside his brother and asked "If you were to guess, Lord Gregor, how many pouches would be required to sink a single Ironborn ship?"

The Mountain thought on that for about a minute, and then he conjectured "That would depend on the size of the vessel and the responsiveness of the crew. But if you'd prefer a rough estimate… I'd say nine or ten pouches."

"That sounds fairly accurate," Victarion Greyjoy coincided.

"If that's the case, we should have enough black powder to destroy over half of the Iron Fleet," Paxter Redwyne noted.

"It would seem that way, Lord Paxter," Gregor stated in agreement, "However, before we use the black powder in a combat situation, I will need some assurances."

"What assurances, my lord?" Davos Seaworth inquired.

Gregor firmly declared: "Firstly, I and I alone will determine how the black powder is distributed, as well as who it is distributed to. It is paramount that everyone who is charged with handling black powder is able to do so properly and responsibly. The slightest misstep could yield devastating repercussions to our own forces. Furthermore, having too much black powder on any of our vessels could be quite hazardous, so I must limit how much is stored on each ship. If, after the war, any of our current supply of black powder is still left over, whatever remains will be turned over to me and the Legion without Banners. Lastly… the knowledge of how to make black powder shall not be passed on to anyone."

Everyone had paid close attention to Gregor's short sermon, and they had no issue with the majority of his points. The last one, however, struck many of them as rather demanding.

"That is a very strict condition, Lord Gregor," Kevan Lannister remarked.

"I realize that," Gregor Clegane mumbled, "But it is nonnegotiable. I will not have black powder created by anyone other than myself."

"Why?" Tywin muttered dubiously, "So you can own the exclusive rights to manufacture it, just as you do with those construction materials of yours?"

The Mountain slowly shook his head and proclaimed, "Oh, no, Lord Tywin. Unlike concrete and cement, I am not going to sell black powder. It is an extremely volatile and unsafe substance. In wrong or incapable hands, it could cause untold damage. I will not be a party to such reckless destruction."

*Now he is starting to contradict himself. Does he even realize that?*
"If black powder is so unstable, why would you have us use it in the first place?" Stannis Baratheon said inquisitively.

"I never said it was unstable; I said it needed proper handling," Gregor contended, "Keep in mind, Lord Stannis; it is essentially the dry equivalent of wildfire. As such, it needs to be managed like wildfire, too. The pyromancers of King’s Landing do not share their formula for wildfire with anyone outside their order. In that same fashion, I intend to monitor the crafting and circulation of all black powder just as thoroughly. For the duration of this war, I will allow the Royal Army to use it. But once the war ends, I expect any remaining black powder to be returned to me."

"What shall be done with the leftover black powder?" Garth Hightower queried.

_I'd like to know that myself._

"It will be placed in storage at Moat Cailin until the next war," Gregor solemnly decreed.

_Acceptable solution. In any case, it is unlikely that the "next war" will happen for many years. After all, once it becomes known that Robert's Master of Order has a weapon as catastrophic as wildfire, anyone with the sanity of Patchface will know better than to rebel against the crown again._

"Very well, Lord Gregor," Robert Baratheon claimed, "I will ensure that our forces understand that the black powder is handled with care, and that none of them try to keep any for themselves."

"I am grateful for that, Your Grace," Gregor Clegane stated appreciatively.

"You needn't worry about any of my men taking some without your consent," Eddard Stark bluntly muttered.

"Or any of mine," Mace Tyrell conceded.

Tywin Lannister and Hoster Tully swore the same vow, and Stannis Baratheon was the last to agree.

Once all the great lords agreed to Gregor's conditions, Robert Baratheon turned to face the crowd and announced "Now that it is established that we have this edge over the Ironborn, I submit that we go ahead with my proposal to intercept the Iron Fleet before they reach Seagard and Fair Isle."

This time, Robert's suggestion received no resistance or rejections from anyone else.

"So be it," the stag king murmured after a period of quietness, "Now we must decide how these countermeasures will be devised and executed."

"Shall we return to the council chamber, Your Grace?" Eddard Stark presumed.

Robert answered his best friend's question with a nod.

Everyone in the group departed from the courtyard and began to head back the way they came. On the way there, Stannis heard what sounded like a low-pitched groan.

It turned out to be his brother's stomach. Soon, others noticed the groan, and they gazed in the king's direction.

When he noticed the stares, Robert flushed and commented "Excuse me. I have not eaten since sunrise."
"None of us have, Your Grace," Eddard humorously informed his best friend.

"It might do us some good to have a bite of luncheon," Robert suggested.

"I will have meat and mead brought to the council chamber, Your Grace," Tywin Lannister offered.

"Very well, Lord Tywin," Robert gladly acknowledged his father-by-law's proposal.

Soon enough, the large group arrived back at the council chamber. Once the Legionnaires and the leaders of the Royal Army were reassembled, Tywin sent for food and drink. Robert proposed that they wait until the meal arrived to resume their battle plans, and no one protested.

While they waited for luncheon, everyone in the room passed the time by conversing with someone else. Garth Hightower talked with Mace Tyrell and Paxter Redwyne, Allard Seaworth talked with Davos Seaworth, Eddard Stark talked with Robert Baratheon, and so on.

Stannis was pretty much the only person who was uninvolved in any of those conversations. He simply stood off to the side and observed the others as they mingled.

Then, at one point, Gregor Clegane walked over to him and requested "May I have a word, Lord Stannis?"

"That would depend on the subject of your word," Stannis Baratheon stoically replied.

"It has to do with the security of your family," Gregor informed him.

That succeeded in earning the stag lord's attention. He looked the Mountain in the eye and told him "I'm listening."

Gregor first checked to ensure that they were not being overhead, and then he stated "I have heard tell Lady Selyse is with child."

"You've heard correctly," Stannis affirmed, "Of course, the rest of the country has heard that, as well. My wife's pregnancy is common knowledge."

"Yes, my lord," Gregor conceded, "But what I have to tell you is not."

"Go on," Stannis beckoned him.

Gregor illuminated him with "Early last year, the Legion uncovered the existence of a group of fanatic Targaryen loyalists somewhere in the country. We are actively working to snuff these traitors out, but until, we are treating them as a genuine threat to the crown."

"Are they a confirmed threat to Robert and his family?" Stannis asked.

"Yes," Gregor claimed, "However, they are an even greater threat to you and yours."

"How so?" Stannis questioned uneasily.

"According to our intelligence reports, once your heir is born, they will try to kill her soon after," Gregor apprised him.

*How does he know I am having a daughter?*

While that was an excellent question, it was not the one Stannis put into words. Instead, he asked
"Do you know how they will attempt this?"

"Before she is even a year old, she will be given an anonymous gift," Gregor revealed, "The gift will be a doll. The loyalists are hoping that the doll will be placed in your daughter's cradle."

"What harm could a simple doll do to her?" Stannis wondered aloud.

"It will be tainted with greyscale," Gregor responded.

Stannis was flabbergasted by that. "Greyscale?"

"Yes," Gregor validated, "Fortunately, the loyalists are unaware that I know of this scheme of theirs. So it is completely avoidable."

"What would you have me do?" Stannis inquired attentively.

Gregor urged him "Any time your daughter receives a doll from an unknown party, do not bring it anywhere near her. You must burn it right away."

"I will do so," Stannis asserted.

Normally, Stannis Baratheon questioned the authenticity of anything he heard, even if it was from someone he respected and trusted. But when his family's security was at stake, he took the news very seriously.

"A question, my lord," Stannis enquiringly commented, "If you learnt about this plot a year ago, why are you only telling me of it now?"

"I was waiting for the right opportunity," Gregor insisted, "I could not risk sending a raven. It may have gotten lost on the way to Dragonstone, or worse yet, intercepted by the Targaryen loyalists. I ultimately realized that the only safe option was to tell you in person. I've been trying to arrange a meeting between you and myself for months. It was simply our good fortunate that your brother the King called this meeting."

"What if the Ironborn not rebelled?" Stannis hypothesized.

"Then I would have found some other way to meet with you," Gregor claimed.

Stannis nodded his head, seeing the logic in that argument.

Now I am finally beginning to understand him.

"In any case, I am indebted to you, Lord Gregor," Stannis debated, "Know that you have my most profound appreciation."

"You have no need to thank me, my lord," Gregor assured the older man, "I am merely carrying out my duties to the throne and the country."

Yes, you are. Now I see why Robert charged you with maintaining the integrity of Westeros. Evidently, you overlook nothing.
Chapter Notes

Note: What's up, guys? Hope you enjoyed the holidays. I know I said this chapter would have both the assault on Seagard and the sea-battle off Fair Isle in it, but the content detailing both skirmishes turned out to be longer than I planned. Plus, I started writing this chapter later than I planned to. As such, I was unable to write everything before my vacation to Rome began. So this chapter will just have the Seagard account. I have not yet completed the Fair Isle segment.

Right now I'm with my family in England (we had a layover flight in London), and we'll be arriving in Rome in a few hours. I'll be in Italy for the next week, but I'm going to try to have the Fair Isle account posted before New Year's.

Now, some people expressed concern over the introduction of gunpowder in the last chapter. Allow me to put your qualms to rest; I have no intention of making black powder a recurring item in this story. In fact, after the Greyjoy Rebellion, I plan to put it away for good. Some of you will probably be keen to point out that Gregor told the leaders of the Royal Army what black powder is made of, so it might be possible that one of them will attempt to manufacture it on his own. However, while coal and sulfur are abundant in Westeros, Gregor is the only person in the Known World who knows how to create saltpeter, and he will be controlling the output of that mineral. So, no; no one else will have the opportunity to craft black powder. Oh, and some readers are becoming a little irate or impatient that Gregor only gives a "source" as his explanation for knowing the possible future. Shortly after the Greyjoy Rebellion, Gregor will explain his source in detail to certain individuals. He will also explain why he only gave a vague description (i.e. just called it a "source") at first.

BOOM! BOOM!

The explosions were loud. Uncomfortably loud to those who heard them for the first time.

Lord Jorah Mormont had heard enough of them that the noise did not bother him as they once had. In any case, he was more interested in what the source of the explosion accomplished than the sound it made.

A small handful of three certain minerals, mixed together and stored in a pouch. With a single flame, they are capable of demolishing wood and stone alike. When he first heard of black powder and its capabilities, Jorah had doubted it. Then he witnessed a demonstration, and his doubt vanished.

Only the leaders of the Royal Army had been aware of the existence of black powder before the King announced that the Army would be divided into three companies. The first would sail for Seagard to defend House Mallister's seat from an impending Ironborn assault. The second would sail for Fair Isle and protect House Farman in the same fashion. The third would sail for Pyke immediately after the first two triumphed.

Jorah had been assigned to the first company. That one would be led by Lord Stannis Baratheon of
Dragonstone. Jorah would have preferred to be in the third company. That wish was fueled by a personal yearning for retribution.

Jorah was old enough to remember the days before Quellon Greyjoy's rule. As a lad, he had fended off Bear Island from Ironborn raiders on more than a few occasions. Loyal retainers of House Mormont had died pushing back the invaders. Now he would have a chance to bring the fight to them. But only a chance.

He took some comfort in the knowledge that the first and second company were supposed to rendezvous with the third once their preliminary tasks were accomplished.

*If the gods are good, the King will not land his units on the shores of Pyke until after they are joined with his brother's.*

Of course, that would depend on how quickly the Ironborn were repelled at Seagard and Fair Isle. Jorah had some control over that, at the very least. That he knew for a fact, due to a new tactic of warfare that had been introduced by Gregor Clegane.

The King and the leaders of the Royal Army had spent a whole day determining which units would compose each of the three companies. The day after, each unit of the Army was informed where he or she would be going.

After the soldiers received their assignments, King Robert had ordered their leaders to determine who among them were both strong of arm and sharp of eye. Over a quarter of their forces — including Jorah — met that description. Nevertheless, every one of them was ordered to report to the camp of the Legion without Banners.

At the head of that camp, Lord Gregor Clegane – The Mountain That Rides, Robert's Master of Order, Lord of Moat Cailin, Commanding Officer of the Legion without Banners, and the husband of Jorah's first cousin – had addressed those units. Once he secured their attention, he claimed to have created a weapon that would all but ensure their victory against the Ironborn.

Jorah – and many, many others – had been intrigued by that declaration. Lord Gregor had then proceeded to tell them of his black powder and its destructive uses. Some had been unsettled by the analogy he made of it to wildfire, but their anxiety had been alleviated when he assured them that black powder was far easier to manage than wildfire.

The Mountain then took a pouch with a piece of string hanging out of the opening. After lighting the piece of string and waiting for the flame to slink into the pouch, Lord Gregor had chucked it at a block of marble that had been placed in an empty clearing. There was a powerful noise and a cloud of smoke. When the smoke evaporated, Jorah saw that the block had been reduced to rubble.

What sorcery is this?

He soon learned that no sorcery was at work; only science.

Gregor Clegane revealed that he intended for the Royal Army to use more of these black powder pouches against the Ironborn fleet. He explained that he would select certain individuals to brandish the pouches in the upcoming battles. Whoever wielded the pouches would need to possess superb aim and a great throwing arm. That was why he called for all those in the Royal Army who were both strong of arm and sharp of eye.

Before anyone there was given authorization to carry black powder, Lord Gregor Clegane had insisted that each of them go through a "screening process," whatever that was.
The screening process was designed to test how well they handled black powder.

For the test, the candidates were given small pouches that weighed the same as a pouch of black powder. In actuality, these pouches were filled with dirt, but they still had makeshift wicks sticking out of them. Gregor had the candidates practice lighting the wicks and throwing the pouches as certain targets in a wide-open field. He judged and eliminated the contenders on a variety of factors.

Anyone who dropped a pouch or failed to throw it soon enough after lighting its wick was disqualified. All those who threw too far or too close were dismissed, as well. So was anyone who did not wait until the flame went beneath the mouth of the pouch. Gregor explained that that was especially critical. If the flame was still visible when it was thrown, it was likely to go out whilst in midair. And even if it did not, when the pouch landed on the deck of an Ironborn ship, one of the crew might have had time enough to scoop the pouch up off the ground and toss it back at its point of origin.

After hours upon hours of systematic tryouts, Lord Gregor had finally narrowed down thousands of hopeful prospects to a choice fifty. To his satisfaction, Lord Jorah was among those fifty.

_I will show those Ironmen rapists that when they play with the bear, they also play with fire._

A number of his compatriots would be making a similar point, except theirs would involve the animal or object that represented their own houses. Regardless of who made that point, a great percentage of the Iron Fleet would soon sink or burn.

Apart from the leaders of the Royal Army, those fifty people were the only ones to whom Gregor disclosed what black powder was made of. However, all he told them was that it was composed of coal, sulfur, and saltpeter. He did not reveal the powder's chemical composition. In other words, the ratio of coal to sulfur to saltpeter was still a mystery. Only Lord Gregor himself knew that.

The Mountain claimed to have brought enough black powder for eleven hundred pouches. That claim turned out to be true; he supplied just that many to the fifty throwers. He had actually taken the time to mix and prepare each and every one of them alone.

Each of the fifty was given twenty-two pouches. Gregor gave them thorough instructions on how to properly transport the pouches. The throwers were advised not to keep the pouches in damp or open areas. Moreover, the pouches should not be kept in any room with a lit torch or brazier, or any other open flame. Furthermore, in the event that any of the pouches did come in contact with fire, to minimize the fallout, Gregor recommended that each of the pouches be stored in a separate compartment. Otherwise, they would start a chain reaction that could severely damage their surroundings.

Seventeen of the throwers had been assigned to the company that would sail for Seagard, and another seventeen were among those who would make for Fair Isle. The remaining sixteen would remain in the king's reserve forces.

Gregor told the throwers that if any of the pouches remained unused after the war, he would need all the leftover ones returned to him. To ensure that that happened, he had arranged for each of the throwers to be accompanied by one of his Legionnaires at all times. That way, they could consistently monitor how many pouches of black powder were in their collective inventory.

_The Mountain trusts us to give the powder to the Ironborn… yet he does not trust us to give it back to him. How queer._
Jorah might have felt insulted for this notable lack of trust, but he could not fault Lord Gregor for being wary. The bear lord was actually inclined to believe that Gregor had only given him and the other throwers those Legionnaire escorts as a precaution. Some of the throwers had been longtime allies of the Mountain. A few were even Legionnaires themselves. All the same, no one was exempt from having a "chaperone." At least with that arrangement, no one would wonder if Gregor favored any of the throwers in particular. Additionally, the escorts would not be there simply to watch the throwers. They would also be there to protect and guard them, just in case anyone (Ironborn or otherwise) attempted to forcibly seize any of the black powder.

Be that as it may, Jorah noticed something peculiar. The status of each Legionnaire supervisor appeared to coincide with that of the thrower he or she was assigned to. Most of the throwers were men-at-arms or soldiers; their watchers held such ranks. There were some knights and heirs of highborn lords; their respective guides had been anointed and entitled to inherit their father's lands, too.

Jorah was the highest-ranking out of all fifty of the throwers. As such, he was given the highest-ranking supervisor, as well. That turned out to be the Mountain's foremost lieutenant, Prince Oberyn Martell.

Jorah had spoken with the prince at his cousin Dacey's wedding, but their meeting had not lasted for more than a few minutes. That had hardly been enough time to get to know the Red Viper on any personal level. He supposed Oberyn had thought him dull or uninteresting. If so, he was not the first.

From what Jorah could surmise, Oberyn had no intention of ignoring or disregarding the bear lord during this encounter. From the moment the Mountain had tasked his Dornish captain with shadowing Jorah, Oberyn seemed to develop a keen interest in him. At first, Jorah assumed the Red Viper was merely carrying out his orders. In actuality, it was more than that. He quickly realized that Oberyn Martell was genuinely interested in becoming better acquainted with the Lord of Bear Island.

Jorah was at a loss as to what could have triggered the prince's newfound fascination with him. He had not changed much since their first meeting. The biggest difference was that he was a widower now. Still, that meant little and less in the grand scheme of things. In his mind, at any rate. He had heard of Oberyn's… eccentricities. But he was certain that was not why Oberyn wished for them to become more familiar with each other.

On the voyage to Seagard, Jorah learned of Oberyn's true motivations.

The two of them had been posted on the war galley Lord Steffon, named in honor of the King's late lord father. The vessel had disembarked at the same moment as Lord Stannis Baratheon's flagship Fury, and it continued to sail directly alongside the flagship. The two vessels were at the very front of the small armada destined for the western shore of the Riverlands.

Jorah spent much of that maritime journey on the bridge. Oberyn did, as well. Often as not, his daughter Nymeria was in his company. Jorah was fairly certain they were not there merely because he happened to be there, as well. They simply seemed to prefer being on deck, just as he did. Nevertheless, their constantly close proximity to his position was hard to overlook. Strangely enough, Jorah did not even have any black powder with him.

Finally, on the third night of their voyage, Oberyn confessed his reasons for spending so much time with or near Lord Jorah. His elucidation was concise yet comprehensible: "You and I will soon be family."
"How so, my prince?" a perplexed Jorah Mormont queried.

"My eldest daughter is to wed the heir to Clegane's Keep," Oberyn pointed out, "As it happens, her betrothed is the younger brother of your first cousin's husband. Through House Clegane, you and I will be related."

"Distantly, but yes," Jorah noted, "I believe you and I would be… second cousins twice-removed."

"Or first, depending on how one examines the family tree," the Red Viper contended, "No matter how remote the relation may be, there will be some connection between my house and yours."

In some way or other, all of Westeros may be related eventually. I would not be surprised if that becomes the case.

"And that's why you are so engrossed in my affairs?" Jorah presumed, "You wish to know more of me and my house before we become part of your family?"

"Yes, my lord," Oberyn affirmed, "Let me assure you; it is not that I am wary of you or any other Mormont. It is more for my curiosity's sake that I wish to learn about you and yours. Dacey is the only member of your family that I can sincerely call my friend, and in these days, she is as much a Clegane as she is a Bear Islander."

"You met my aunt, Lady Maege, did you not?" Jorah recounted.

"Yes, I did…" Oberyn muttered bluntly, "I mean no offense when I tell you this, but I hope she is not a definitive indication of what all Bear Islanders are like."

Jorah Mormont chuckled at that and stated "She is not, I promise you. I understand what you are entailing, however. On occasion, my aunt can be a difficult woman. My father once japed that his sister was the true reason he left Bear Island to join the Night's Watch. But I know he loves her."

"Of course he does," Oberyn conceded with a smirk, "Siblings are expected to tease each other all their lives, even when they're well into adulthood. As it happens, my sister and I still make friendly quips about each other."

That must be amusing.

Jorah had no brothers or sisters of his own. He had never minded growing up an only child, but he had often wondered what it would be like to have a younger (or older) sibling.

"I can appreciate and respect a man who holds family in such high regard," Jorah proclaimed, folding his arms, "If there is anything in particular you'd wish to know, you can ask of me, my prince."

Lord Jorah and Prince Oberyn spent much of the evening talking about various matters. Some of their topics were private in nature; others were more casual or more professional.

For instance, both men knew how to read a map. Oberyn suggested that they get one to determine the exact distance between Bear Island and Sunspear, and Jorah decided to humor him.

They made an interesting discovery. House Mormont was located at the most northwestern point of the Seven Kingdoms, and House Martell was located at the most southeastern point. Because of that, they were literally farther apart than any two other houses in all of Westeros. There was the possible exceptions of House Redwyne of the Arbor and Houses Crowl, Magnar, and Stane on the isle of Skagos, which were found at the most southwestern and most northeastern points.
respectively. But there were some who debated that the Skagosi did not count, given how seldom they came to the mainland.

Despite the vast distance between their ancestral homes, Jorah Mormont and Oberyn Martell got along very well. They passed several hours in pleasant conversation. At several points, Nymeria participated in their discussion. By the end of it, they felt as though they had known each other for years.

Around midnight, Oberyn decided to get some rest. He bade the bear lord a good night and retired below deck to his cabin.

Jorah stayed up a while longer. So did Nymeria. Other than the on-duty sentries and the ship's navigator, the bridge was deserted. But the sentries were preoccupied with guard duty, and the navigator was stationed at the wheel. So in every other sense, Jorah Mormont and Nymeria Martell were alone.

They passed a few minutes standing at the bough of the ship in total silence. Finally, Jorah broke the quiet atmosphere with "Lovely night, is it not?"

"Depends on what you call 'lovely,' my lord," Nymeria commented bluntly.

"It is quite calm and peaceful," Jorah clarified, "And all this water… some may find it immense and empty. I find it a wondrous sight. There is just something about seafaring that has always struck my fancy."

"Well, your home is on an island," Nymeria pointed out, "You would be no stranger to seafaring."

"Are you, my princess?" Jorah asked curiously.

Nymeria glared at him in mild annoyance, and she mumbled "Please do not call me that, my lord."

Jorah was stunned at her reaction to being addressed that way.

_Most women would embrace that title. She rejects it…_

"Your father is a prince," Jorah remarked, not unkindly.

"And I'm his daughter; I know," Nymeria stated, "That does not mean I have to equal him in status. I find the whole concept a little demeaning."

Jorah could understand her sentiment. He offered "If you insist, I shall only call you 'my lady.'"

"Thank you, my lord," Nymeria said gratefully, "Now, to answer your earlier question… this is my first time on a ship."

Jorah was somewhat intrigued. "Really?"

"Yes, indeed," she affirmed, "You see, Dorne has no fleet of its own to speak of."

"Neither does the North," he added in, "Brandon the Burner put his fleet to the torch after his father, Brandon the Shipwright, was lost at sea."

"I see," Nymeria avowed, "My ancestor, Nymeria Martell, burnt her fleet to ensure that it would never be used against her people."

Jorah nodded in acknowledgment and asked "Which of them would you say had the truer reason?"
"Neither," Nymeria debated, "I believe both had just cause."

"I am not certain of that," Jorah professed, "Brandon Stark's actions were fueled by grief; Nymeria Martell's by the desire to uphold the security of her land."

"Is grief any less a legitimate justification than security?" Nymeria contended.

"Perhaps not… in certain conditions," Jorah murmured, "But they are two very different facets. The wish for security is present in all of us. It preserves us, even in extreme cases. Whereas grief… grief can incite us to behave selfishly or irrationally. In extreme cases… it can undo us."

"I did not take you for a philosopher, my lord," Nymeria Martell said wryly with a small grin.

"I do not think myself one," Jorah proclaimed, "I am merely saying what I personally believe."

"If I may ask, what experiences with grief have you had?" Nymeria enquired curiously.

Where do I begin?

Jorah apprised her "In my youth, I lost friends and retainers to Ironborn raiders. When I was a man grown, I lost more to the wildlings. My mother died when I was in the midst of boyhood. My father left to join the Night's Watch before my thirtieth name day. Most recently… sickness claimed my wife."

At that, Nymeria placed a soft hand on the bear lord's shoulder and commented softly "Yes, I remember hearing word of that. I do not believe I had the chance to offer my condolences. So please know I am very sorry for your loss."

"I appreciate your words, my lady," Jorah asserted, "Seventeen turns of the moon have elapsed since my wife died. I do miss her, but my period of mourning for her has passed. I should not be wallowing in sorrow."

"I admire your strength," Nymeria claimed, "And I agree; your foremost concern should be finding a new bride."

"I have been searching for one," Jorah apprised her, "I have corresponded with several ladies from the other Northern houses. Alas, my endeavors have proven most unsuccessful."

"Was no one you found appealing to you?" Nymeria conjectured.

"No, I am not that particular," Jorah confessed, "It was they who were disinterested."

Nymeria appeared flabbergasted. "I find that very difficult to believe, my lord. My father and I have been speaking with you for hours, and we've both come to enjoy your company. How could your own countrywomen not?"

"They did not know me as you do now," Jorah explained, "I believe they think of Bear Island as nothing more than a huge rock in the center of the Bay of Ice. For that reason, they think little of the man who serves as its lord."

"I'd have thought Northwomen were less shallow than that," Nymeria uttered.

"Some are; some are not," Jorah revealed, "I have not given up my search yet. I am determined to find a new bride before the year's end."

"Maybe you should consider looking outside the North," Nymeria advised him, "There are plenty
of open-minded women south of the Neck. And after this rebellion… you will be one of the most eligible bachelors in Westeros."

Jorah could not help but smile at the young Dornishwoman. "I thank you for your vote of confidence, my lady. I shall reflect on your counsel."

Nymeria smiled back and muttered "Please do. I am certain you will find a bride who can accept you for who and what you are. However she is, I hope she makes you happy."

Jorah continued grinning and lightly nodded at that. Then he murmured "Tell me, my lady; all this talk of marriage, yet we've spoken only of me. I'd like to know your thoughts on the matter."

Nymeria looked a little bewildered. "Why do you ask, my lord?"

"I am simply curious," Jorah declared, "I imagine marriage was far from one of your worries during your childhood. But not as much today."

"You are correct," Nymeria confirmed, "After the King legitimized me, I suddenly became a fair deal more interesting to the men of Westeros. In fact, at the Twins, Ser Ryman Frey tried to proposition his son to me. He was not even sober when he presented that option."

Jorah scowled at that and mumbled crossly "That sounds just like the Freys. Discretion and courtesy are foreign to them, they care little for kinship and loyalty, they have no bravery, integrity, or compassion to speak of… and they still wonder why the whole world hates them."

"Not all Freys are like that, my lord," Nymeria contended, "Lord Walder's heir, Ser Stevron, is at least a decent man. But I would have to agree with you that most Freys are not very different from Ser Ryman, who happens to be Stevron Frey's eldest son."

"I assume you refused him?" Jorah theorized.

"No, my father did that for me," Nymeria humorously recounted.

Jorah scoffed. Then he queried "Is there any man you actually have considered swearing your life to?"

"Not yet," Nymeria revealed, "I am still young, my lord. My father says I am still a girl. Then again, I'll always be a girl to him. So far, I have no given much thought to marriage itself. It could be possible that I may never wed."

"Well, if you ever do, I hope you find a man who will treat you kindly fairly," Jorah muttered.

Nymeria grinned and said appreciatively "Thank you, Lord Jorah."

She then raised herself up and kissed the bear lord on his cheek. At that, he smiled back at her friendly. Before long, the two of them turned in for the night.

A couple days later, the armada came within sight of Seagard. Lord Jason Mallister used a beacon to signal the royalist ships. He informed them that he was prepared to defend his holdfast. He also notified them that he would send them reinforcements (if they were needed).

When the royalist fleet was two hundred meters from Seagard, Lord Stannis had the ships for a blockade along the length of Ironman's Bay. The ships were far enough from each other that they could veer hard to left and right without fear of collision, but close enough that the Ironborn would be unable to break through their ranks.
Then they waited. That was the worst part, the waiting. They all knew that the Ironborn were coming.

_They must not be in a hurry to get here._

But they were coming. There was no question of that. Seagard was the Riverlands' sole line of defense along the west coast. If it fell, the whole of the Riverlands would be at the Ironborn's mercy. After their failure to burn the Westerlands' fleet, they would focus their attention on either the North or the Riverlands next, and the Riverlands were closer.

_Not that close, apparently. Where could the Ironborn be?_

Finally, after half a day of inactivity, a warhorn was blown. Everyone snapped to full attention then.

In the distance, a silhouette of a single vessel. Then another appeared. Then two more. Then three, five, eight, eleven, fifteen, twenty… fifty more.

When the whole of the invasion force was visible, Jorah realized the Ironborn outnumbered them by at least two-to-one. Every one of those vessels was headed directly towards the blockade.

But he was not afraid. He would not let fear take ahold of him.

Slowly, very slowly, the Ironmen came further closer. They were headed due east. They did not deviate from their course in the slightest amount. Before too long, Jorah could see the crew on the bridges of the lead ships.

"Steady," Oberyn muttered softly, "Hold it steady."

He was speaking to the tense crew, not to Jorah or his daughter. Jorah knew why; the prince knew that neither he nor Nymeria would buckle or panic.

A small table had been moved onto the bridge. Jorah was standing next to it. His twenty-two pouches of black powder had been placed on the surface of the table.

When the Ironborn were five hundred feet away, he heard Lord Stannis announce "Throwers, at the ready!"

Along the length of the blockade, callers repeated his command: "Throwers, at the ready!"

At that, Nymeria brought Jorah a torch. He took it from her, but he did not light any of the pouches yet. The Ironborn were still too far away. He and the other throwers remained on standby.

Soon the Ironborn were four hundred feet away. Then three hundred, two hundred, one hundred…

Finally, when they were fifty feet away, Lord Stannis shouted "Pouches!"

Jorah and the other sixteen throwers each picked up one pouch of black powder.

A few seconds later, Stannis yelled "Ignite!"

Jorah promptly moved the wick of his first pouch to the flame of his torch. The oil-soaked string caught fire almost straightaway.

Very soon after, Stannis bellowed "Unleash!"
It took a moment for the flame to spread to the pouch's interior. Once it did that, Jorah focused on the nearest Ironman ship, drew back his arm, and flung the pouch at it.

The pouch landed on the port side of the bridge of the ship he had aimed at. Upon impact, the pouch detonated.

The damage it inflicted was minor, but lasting. One crewman had a leg blown off. Three more were thrown off their feet. A large hole was blasted into the ship's upper hull.

Sixteen more explosions were heard from all along the Iron Fleet's ranks. All of them were followed by the sounds of men screaming and wood splitting. Those sounds livened Jorah's spirits.

*There is plenty more where that came from.*

Stannis then announced "Release at your own will!"

Jorah picked up a second pouch, lit it, and tossed it at the same ship. This one landed near the mast, causing serious damage to the bough of the ship and setting it afire. Because of that, the vessel was unable to continue sailing in a straight line.

Jorah's third pouch landed at the base of the main sail. He managed to hit the rigging, which was demolished in the next explosion. As a result, the huge pole was in danger of collapsing, and the vessel was thrown off course.

Three more pouches, and the ship was scuttled. Jorah watched as the surviving crew struggled to abandon ship before it sank. He smiled in immense satisfaction.

Jorah and the other throwers managed to hinder the Ironborn's advance. However, they were unable to prevent it altogether. After each of the thrower had dispatched an average of nine pouches apiece, a number of enemy vessels finally reached Lord Stannis'.

Several of those vessels already had boarding parties assembled on deck. When they were close enough, they leapt aboard the ships of the royal army. Swords were drawn, and hostiles were engaged.

Soon, the air was filled with the clash of steel on steel and the battlecries of hundreds of soldiers. The black powder explosions became progressively more infrequent and fewer in number. Most of the throwers decided to abandon scientific warfare in favor of traditional combat tactics.

For a while, no Ironborn boarded the *Lord Steffon*. Jorah was free to continue using his pouches of black powder. He selected a target, took a pouch, set fire to the wick, chucked it at his target, and repeated the process many times.

Thirty minutes into the battle, Jorah noticed a certain warship twenty-five yards away. It was going awfully fast, nearly at ramming speed. He studied his surroundings, and he discovered that the warship was on a collision course with the *Fury*.

Jorah felt a surge of nervousness run through him. At this moment, the *Fury* had already been boarded by three other Ironborn vessels. So far, Lord Stannis, Ser Davos Seaworth, and the rest of the crew had successfully avoided being overwhelmed by the invading parties. However, they were all too preoccupied with the foe to notice the warship coming right towards them.

Jorah decided he had to intervene somehow. Unfortunately, his supply of black powder was nearly depleted. He did not have enough to sink the warship, or even cripple it. He could have attempted to call out to Lord Stannis, but the excess ambience drowned out his shouts.
Soon, Jorah concluded that the only way to save the Fury was if another vessel cut the warship off. Since no other Royal Army vessels appeared to have noticed the accelerating warship, Jorah surmised that the Lord Steffon would have to be the interceder.

Jorah hastily sought out the captain of the Lord Steffon and pointed out the warship to him. He explained his idea to save the Fury, and to his good fortune, the captain did not seem averse to it. Other than the ships around the Fury and the ones that were half-sunk, there were no other Ironborn vessels in the immediate area. So even if the Lord Steffon broke its position, there would be no risk of the Ironborn slipping through the blockade.

When the Lord Steffon started to move, Jorah focused his attention on the warship. When it was close enough, he was able to read the name printed on its side: Iron Fist.

His eyes widened when they saw those words. That was the name of the ship captained by Rodrik Greyjoy, Lord Balon's firstborn son and heir. Jorah and everyone else in Stannis' forces had heard that Rodrik would be leading the assault on Seagard. They had been given orders to capture him alive, if possible.

When the Iron Fist was ten meters from the Fury, the Lord Steffon lurched in front of the Royal Army's flagship. The Iron Fist attempted to alter course, but it only managed to turn five degrees port before it collided with the war galley. Both ships shook uncomfortably, but the hulls of both managed to withstand the force of the impact.

It took very little time for either crew to recover from the shock. Although the crew of the Iron Fist was furious that they had slammed into the wrong vessel, they were determined to make the most of this error. Rodrik Greyjoy could be heard shouting "Let's drown these greenlanders!"

Jorah promptly drew his sword Longclaw. His family's ancestral sword, made of Valyrian steel. It produced a shrill whistle when pulled from its scabbard.

Nearby, the rest of the crew was arming themselves, as well. Almost all wielded a sword. Oberyn Martell was twirling his spear in his hands. It moved so fast and so speedily that he almost appears to be waving a large black wheel around his body.

Nymeria Martell carried her whip in her right hand, and a long knife with a thin edge and a very tall point in her left.

Soon came the first boarding party. A wave of fierce, angry Ironborn climbed aboard the bridge of the Lord Steffon on the starboard side.

One of them immediately went for Jorah. He was yelling maniacally, swinging a Morningstar in the air. Jorah hastily dodged the spiked ball, maneuvered around the Iron warrior, and slashed him along the neck. He succeeded in opening the flesh between his opponent's throat and shoulder blade. The Ironborn shrieked as his life's blood leaked out of him. He was dead before he hit the deck.

Not ten feet away, another Ironborn had just engaged Nymeria Martell in battle. He was armed with a battle-axe, which he held in both hands. He sneered and spat "You'd make a fine salt wife."

Nymeria seemed amused by his overconfidence. She cheekily rejoined with "Maybe. Not for you, though."

She cracked her whip forward. It coiled around her adversary's left forearm. She gave the whip a tug, forcing him forward. When he was close enough, she raised her dagger and plunged it into his
upper chest. Within moments, he dead on the deck, too.

Oberyn Martell proved to be the deadliest person currently aboard the Lord Steffon. Moving with exceptional speed and gracefulness, he took on three Ironborn at once, and all three were dead before ten seconds had passed.

Several of the Ironborn chose to stay clear of the prince, deciding to pursue less dangerous rivals. Many of them thought of Jorah and Nymeria as such. They soon discovered they had made a serious error in judgment.

Jorah and Nymeria stood back-to-back, offering any Iron warrior who dared approach to do so. Working together, they were able to dispatch any opponent who hoped to best them. The sounds of Longclaw hacking and Nymeria's whip cracking joined the many sounds that emanated all over Ironman's Bay.

When the first boarding party from the Iron Fist was almost obliterated, the second one came. A young man led this one. He could not have been older than twenty, but he had a beard that covered his cheeks, his chin, and his neck. The image of a kraken was imprinted on the front of his breastplate.

Jorah knew the instant he saw the lad; he was Rodrik Greyjoy.

Rodrik saw him just one moment later. When that happened, he smirked wickedly and brought out his own sword. Then he raised it in the air and signaled for his crew to charge.

Having no time to recover from the first boarding party, the crew restlessly moved to defend themselves against these new aggressors.

Jorah paid them no mind. His only interest was in their captain.

Slowly, the bear lord marched towards Rodrik Greyjoy, Longclaw in both hands. The heir to the Iron Islands retained his smirk and lifted his sword up high. He taunted Jorah with "Come at me, bear."

Jorah did just that. When he was upon Rodrik, he leaned back as though he was going to hack at his side… then he made a slash at the younger man's legs.

Rodrik was caught off his guard; he had expected the first blow to come from higher. He managed to dodge the blow in time, but it was immediately following by a thrust at his shoulder. This time, Rodrik parried Jorah's sword with his own. Then the two men were locked in combat.

Jorah Mormont had at least ten years and six inches over Rodrik Greyjoy. He soon discovered he was twice the swordsman, as well. Rodrik Greyjoy was by no means an amateur with a blade, but his crude, barbarian style had nothing on Jorah's disciplined, strategic approach.

Nonetheless, Rodrik was faster than Jorah. He was also the more agile of them. He evaded more blows than he countered. That more than compensated for his inferior swordsmanship.

Jorah realized that Rodrik was trying to exhaust him. He must have believed that if he kept him on his toes, he would wear the Lord of Bear Island out. And if not that, he would still keep Jorah preoccupied long enough for them to deal with the rest of the crew of the Lord Steffon. Based on how quickly the boarding parties were coming, there was a distinct possibility of that.

For those reasons, Jorah decided that this skirmish would have to end as soon as possible.
As he sparred with Rodrik, he took note of a number of exploitable openings in the younger man's technique and posture. However, all those attacks would have been fatal, and Jorah was still determined to capture him alive.

At last, he spotted something that he could use to his advantage without killing the kraken lordling. Whenever he hacked with his sword, he held it with both hands. The fingers of his right hand were always turned towards Jorah whenever he moved in on him. With careful timing and the correct angle of attack, Jorah could incapacitate him. There would be some irreparable damage done, but the order had only been to take Rodrik alive.

*Alive… but not unharmed.*

Jorah waited for Rodrik to attempt to hack at him again. When the heir to Pyke got into that stance, the Bear Island lord delivered an underhand cut at his arms.

Rodrik Greyjoy yelled in anguish as Longclaw bit into the skin of his right hand. It sliced deep in his flesh, cutting through muscle and bone alike.

Rodrik's sword clattered to the ground. Three of the fingers and part of the palm of his right hand fell with it. He dropped to his knees and clutched what remained of his right hand with his left one, groaning in agony.

Jorah did not allow him an opportunity to rebound. He gripped Rodrik by his shoulder, held Longclaw to his throat, and declared "Rodrik Greyjoy, by the authority of Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell and King Robert Baratheon, I arrest you for the crimes of rebelling against the crown."

Rodrik was still in tremendous pain from losing part of his hand, but all the resistance seemed to have gone out of him. He gave a labored sigh and mumbled crossly "I… I yield."

Before long, the crew of the *Lord Steffon* managed to overpower the crew of the *Iron Fist*. Most of the Ironborn were put to the sword, but a few chose to surrender with their captain.

Within an hour, the entirety of Rodriks' armada had been sunk, seized, or put to flight. A number of Lord Stannis' ships had been lost, but it was a clear victory on the part of the Royal Army. Cheers ran all along their column as the surviving Ironborn vessels hastily made their way back towards the west.

After the battle, Jorah took charge of Rodrik Greyjoy and the other prisoners. Nymeria helped him bind them and escort them to the brig. On the way there, she congratulated him with "Good work subduing the kraken's heir, my lord."

Then she smiled at him. This smile of hers stood out to Jorah. It was very unlike the other ones she had given him. He found it to be warm, affectionate… and a little sensual.

*That's not so different from the way Blinda used to smile at me.*
A hundred miles to the southeast (more east-southeast than south-southeast), another former Sand Snake was smiling at another man. In this case, it was Obara Martell smiling at her intended, Sandor Clegane of Clegane's Keep.

The two of them were standing on the bridge of the Lady Jeyne, the flagship of the Westerlander fleet. It was one of the many ships that had been saved by Lord Gregor Clegane's warning.

The flagship had been named in honor of Lord Tywin Lannister's late lady mother, Jeyne of House Marbrand. When she had lived, her husband Lord Tytos had known by many as the Laughing Lion. After her death, no one could ever call him that again. That was when he had been mocked and derided by even his vassals as the Toothless Lion.

No one would ever think or dare to call his eldest son by that moniker. Lord Tywin had teeth, and anyone with the sense of a goat would never try to provoke him into bearing them. The last time someone did… a very ominous and infamous song had been written about what Tywin had done to them in response.

The Lady Jeyne was part of another blockade that had been established along the northwestern coast of Fair Isle. Lord Tywin Lannister himself was on board, commanding the whole of that fleet from the bridge. He was known to rule more by fear than by discipline, but his blockade was every bit as formidable and stalwart as Lord Stannis'.

Sandor was there to serve as Lord Tywin's squire and as the commander of the units from House Clegane of Clegane's Keep. For that very reason, Obara had accompanied him. Although she was not yet a member of House Clegane, she would be soon enough.

Her presence on the vessel had garnered a lot of stares and scowls, all of which she had decisively ignored.

Glare at me all you want. It won't make me disappear or change the fact that I'm here.

The Lady Jeyne was fully manned, and it carried half a dozen platoons of Royal Army soldiers. Most of them were Westerlanders by origin. That did not surprise Obara in the least.

Only in the company of his own does the lion feel comfortable. Then again, 'comfortable' may be
Obara was not bothered by the fact that she was one of the few on board who was not sworn to the Westerlands. After all, if she had been born a Westerlander, she would not have been here. Of course, she would marry into the Westerlands soon enough. Luckily for her, her betrothed was more broad-minded than most of his compatriots, and he did not wish to squander her abilities. He had seen her fight, and he knew she possessed excellent combat prowess.

Apart from that, one of the six platoons was composed of the men-at-arms of House Clegane. Obara had gotten to know each of them very well over the past year. She could identify each by his name, his face, and his strengths and weaknesses. Most of them already thought of her as their lady. Obara was comforted by the knowledge that if any of the other soldiers on board the Lady Jeyne tried to harass her, they would intervene. But only if things got out of hand. After all, it was no secret that Obara could defend herself as well as any man there.

In any case, Lord Tywin Lannister would not allow any disputes to erupt into quarrels on board his ship. He tolerated no nonsense or disorder from the units under his command. With that in mind, Obara would not have to worry about any serious "disagreements" breaking out until the Ironborn showed up.

Still, being so close to Tywin Lannister was not exactly appealing to her. The man was responsible for the murder of her cousins. Her father Prince Oberyn had told her how Ser Amory Lorch had – under Tywin's orders – killed Princess Rhaenys and Prince Aegon and attempted to kill her aunt Elia. It was only by the valiant actions of Lord Gregor Clegane that her aunt still lived.

Had Princess Elia died alongside her children, another war might have broken out between the Westerlands and Dorne. Her survival prevented that, but her children's deaths had greatly impaired relations between those two regions.

Her marriage to Sandor would be the first of many steps in the process of mending their relations. That was the chief political advantage of their union. As it happened, great many factors of their union were political in origin. But needless to say, there was more than politics at work there.

Obara was still uncertain if she actually loved Sandor, and she was more than a little certain that he did not really love her just yet. Nevertheless, no one could deny that the two of them were quite taken with one another. They had come to admire and respect each other's strengths, as well as accept and embrace each other's weaknesses.

Additionally, they were both still at the age when it was not uncommon for one to be playful with members of the opposite gender. The two of them enjoyed joking, japing, and jesting. They even liked to tease each other (but only in an affectionate manner).

For instance, there were the occasions when Sandor referred to Obara as "Princess." He was well-aware that she detested being addressed that way, even though it was now her rightful title by all the laws of the Seven Kingdoms. He mostly just called her that because he found her exasperated reaction to it amusing.

While Obara was annoyed, she had never gotten angry with Sandor. Instead, she had decided to come up with a pet name for him, as well. In this case, "pet name" was a rather fitting label; she had started to call him "The Hound."

As it happened, Sandor did not mind that moniker. If anything, he thought it appropriate, given the sigil of his house. However, Obara did not daub him "The Hound" simply because of the three dogs he wore on his doublet. She also called him that because in the time since their betrothal had
first been considered, he had gone out of his way to spend much of his time with her. Sometimes, he followed her around like a loyal puppy.

Obara knew he was not obsessed or infatuated with her; he merely wished to know more of the woman who would be his wife. She could understand and relate to that desire. She actually thought it was sweet of him. But she never told him that; in her experience, gruff men like Sandor Clegane did not wish to be described as "sweet."

Obara was only the first to label Sandor "The Hound." Before too long, the other occupants of Clegane’s Keep had taken to calling him that, too. However, even when using that moniker, they still addressed Sandor with respect. The servants generally went with "M'lord Hound," and the men-at-arms used "Master Hound." His parents frequently alternated between the name they had given him and the name Obara had given him. Ellyn Clegane called her brother "Hound" so much and so often that one would think she had forgotten his birth name.

In the end, nearly everyone who lived or worked in the keep was referring to their future master as "The Hound." Obara was a little astounded by how that title had gotten so popular so quickly. She was not even part of the Clegane family yet, and already she was influencing them and their retainers.

To her dismay, though, some of them had fallen Sandor's example, as well. Every now and then, she would be addressed by someone as "Princess" or "Your Grace." Actually, "Your Grace," she did not mind as much. But she would have appreciated it if no one spoke to her as though she were a royal. Even if she really was one then, she had not been one for most of her life.

*The Hound and the Reluctant Princess. What a pair we make.*

Whatever she or her intended were, they would be fighting the upcoming battle against the Ironborn together. Lord Tywin Lannister may have discriminated on basis of gender when it came to selecting his generals, but even he did not deny capable warrior women the opportunity to utilize their skills. For that much, Obara was grateful.

Shortly before they set sail, Lord Tywin had convened a meeting between the top commanders of his company. Obara had not attended, as she had not been permitted to. Sandor had been permitted to, but only because he was the squire to the Lord of Casterly Rock. Gregor and Dacey were there because they were the leaders of the Legion without Banners.

After the meeting, Sandor came to his betrothed and briefed her on the more important or noteworthy parts of the conversation. Most of it was just battle plans or strategies for creating and maintaining the blockade. However, there were a few… intriguing points.

Namely, there was the issue of who would be leading the Ironborn at this encounter. Lord Balon's younger brother Euron Greyjoy – known by many as the Crow's Eye – would be heading the invasion force aboard his *Silence.*

Even in the days of Lord Quellon, the Crow's Eye had been feared by those who lived on the west coast. His name was far more infamous across the Narrow Sea, as his father had never officially outlawed raiding there. He had plundered Yi Ti, Asshai, Ibben, Qohor, the Summer Isles, and even the ruins of Old Valyria. Because of that, he had accumulated much wealth in his travels.

Lord Tywin Lannister believed the battle would be a short one if Euron Greyjoy was taken out fairly early. He had given his officers an incentive to carry out that objective quickly. He declared that whoever managed to capture or kill the Crow's Eye could lay claim to his cargo.
If Sandor did not have Obara's full attention before, he certainly did when he made that point. She was amazed that Lord Tywin would make such a generous offer. Any other commander in the Royal Army – except Lord Eddard Stark, and possibly Lord Gregor Clegane – would have seized the Crow's Eye's riches for himself.

Either Tywin Lannister is not as utterly harsh and cruel as I was led to believe, or he really does shit gold.

Neither of those options seemed very plausible. In fact, the latter almost had a greater probability of being true than the former.

In any case, Obara was hoping the Lady Jeyne would have the opportunity to meet the Silence in battle. While the former Sand Snake personally carried little for gold and jewels, that much wealth would be beneficial to ensuring the endurance of her future house. Furthermore, the Silence carried things far more valuable than gold and jewels.

The exact size or composition of Euron's inventory was unknown, but Sandor had heard tell that he possessed a number of Valyrian steel blades. He told Obara of a master blacksmith in King's Landing who had been trained to handle Valyrian steel. If he was given enough of the substance, he could melt the metal down and reforge it.

After he informed her of this, Sandor had told Obara that if they managed to claim the Valyrian steel aboard the Silence, Clegane's Keep could have a Valyrian steel sword of its own. He would probably make it a longsword or a bastard sword. But that was not all. He brazenly offered Obara "How about I get you a Valyrian steel-tipped spear as a betrothal gift?"

Obara actually found that offer quite appealing. She was already plenty deadly with a spear. One with a Valyrian steel point might make her all but insurmountable.

Sandor mentioned that the Crow's Eye may have had enough Valyrian steel to forge at least four weapons. He felt it would be wrong if only one branch of House Clegane acquired such a rare and precious blade. As such, he wanted to have a greatsword made for his brother, and a longsword or bastard sword for his sister-by-law.

Sandor revealed that he and Gregor had made a deal with each other. If either of them happened to subdue Euron Greyjoy, they would share his supply of Valyrian steel with each other. Dacey had consented to that arrangement, so Obara felt she could, as well. She just hoped no one would beat them to the Crow's Eye.

Gregor Clegane and Dacey Mormont were stationed aboard the warship Sea Lion, another vessel that had been saved from the burning at Lannisport. Lord Tywin's blockade covered the entire northwestern border of Fair Isle. However, the Sea Lion was posted near the rightmost section of the blockade, whereas the Lady Jeyne was posted near the center. So there were a few dozen ships separating the Clegane brothers. But neither feared for the other's safety. The Mountain and the Hound were strong men, and anyone who said otherwise was a fool.

Once the blockade was in place, Obara spent much of her time interacting with the few people onboard the Lady Jeyne that she was familiar with. Since the entirety of the units from Clegane's Keep were there, she and Sandor were able to converse with Ser Wallis Peckledon and the other men-at-arms.

Interestingly, Ser Wallis was one of the fifty people that had been selected as a thrower for Gregor's black powder pouches. The Legionnaire that had been assigned to supervise and protect him was Garth Hightower, a member of Gregor's inner circle.
Also on board was Lord Tywin's youngest brother, Ser Gerion Lannister, who also happened to be in the Mountain's inner circle. He was rumored to have shown more loyalty to Lord Gregor than he ever had to his brother. Two of Gregor's men-at-arms, Tobbot and Rafford, were there, as well.

Obara knew that no one on the Lady Jeyne was there without Lord Tywin's leave. She wondered why Tywin had agreed to put so many of Gregor's closest companions on his flagship. Perhaps he wished to observe them; see just how disciplined they were when they served under a different commander. That was one theory. Whatever his motivations, he must have had his reasons for keeping the Mountain's men close to him.

In any case, Obara did find their presence somewhat comforting. Her father and sister were both at Seagard, and the half-dozen Dornishmen that had accompanied her to the Westerlands had stayed behind. As a result, Sandor was the closest thing she had to family on the Lady Jeyne. After him, the next closest was Ser Gerion, Garth, Ser Wallis, and the other Clegane men. None of them were Dornish, but they had treated her like family at Moat Cailin and Clegane's Keep.

Obara noted that the men on the Lady Jeyne were restless. That was not surprising. Most of them had never fought the Ironborn before, and those who had did not desire to do so again. She personally did not know what to expect. As far as she was aware, Dorne had almost never been raided. It had as little in common with the Iron Islands as the Vale did with the Reach. She was not even old enough to remember the days before Quellon Greyjoy. Still, she could imagine that she would always remember the upcoming encounter with the Ironborn. It would be her first true taste of battle, after all.

Once the blockade was formed, Obara wondered how long it would be before the Ironborn actually came. As it turned out… not that long.

Unlike the company at Seagard, the company at Fair Isle did not have to wait twelve whole hours. Euron Greyjoy proved to be much more eager than his brash nephew. Just three hours after Lord Tywin's ships arrived at Fair Isle, a great host of enemy vessels was spotted in the distance.

"Everyone to attention!" Lord Tywin sternly shouted.

As that command was repeated along the column of the blockade, everyone moved to their predetermined posts. Obara was stationed on the bridge. Sandor was there, as well. He was in the process of helping Lord Tywin into his armor.

It was a long process, but Sandor had been doing it before years. He could put Tywin Lannister's armor on blindfolded (and actually had). He even claimed to know his liege lord's exact measurements. Obara did not know whether to be impressed or disturbed by that.

Sandor was fast yet efficient. It took him no longer than ninety seconds to dress Tywin Lannister. When he was finished, the lion lord was clad from head to heel in enameled plate. His brother Gerion and the Lannister men-at-arms were dressed similarly.

As for Sandor, the Hound wore a mail hauberk, along with gauntlets and greaves of lobstered steel. Garth Hightower, Wallis Peckledon, and most of the crew preferred that variety of armor, as well.

Obara was dressed in her typical Dornish leather armor. It was not as protective as the metal armor of the other Seven Kingdoms, but it enabled her to remain light and nimble. After adorning a half-helm, she picked up her spear and held it firmly in both hands.

By the time everyone was properly armed and armored, the Ironmen were considerably closer than they had been when Tywin first ordered them to their positions.
From her spot on the bridge, Obara could see everything that was happening on the command deck. She saw Ser Wallis Peckledon and Garth Hightower at the very front of the bough. Ser Wallis had his supply of twenty-two black powder pouches in front of him. No one had brought him a torch just yet.

Obara had seen the very first demonstration of black powder at Casterly Rock. It had amazed her then, and she was certain it would amaze her now.

*We’ll give those Ironborn a proper “greelander” welcome.*

Lord Tywin did not put very much faith in black powder. Having served an insane monarch who worshipped wildfire, he was wary of using what was described as its dry equivalent. If the decision had been his, he would have forgone the powder and relied on groups of archers instead. But Robert Baratheon himself had authorized and demanded the use of black powder, and even Tywin could not refuse the King.

*Not this King, anyway.*

So Tywin had agreed to take on seventeen of Gregor Clegane’s fifty handpicked throwers. Even so, he kept a large number of archers in reserve. Obara and everyone else could hardly protest. Having a contingency plan never harmed anyone. Apart from that… Lord Tywin did not take kindly to people who obstinately disagreed with him.

When the Ironborn were a hundred yards away, Lord Tywin gave the command for the throwers to be given their lights. Gerion Lannister brought Ser Wallis Peckledon a torch, which Ser Wallis promptly accepted.

When the Ironborn were sixty yards away, Lord Tywin called for the throwers to prepare for the first volley. At that, Ser Wallis took up the first of his pouches.

When the Ironborn were less than twenty yards away, Lord Tywin authorized the throwers to set fire to their pouches. Ser Wallis carefully moved the flame of his torch to the string of his pouch. Even from higher ground over twenty feet away, Obara could see the wick catching fire.

Not long after that, Lord Tywin shouted for the throwers to release. Ser Wallis Peckledon chucked his pouch at the nearest ship. The instant it touched the bough of the Ironborn vessel, it exploded in a cloud of smoke, doing substantial damage to the hull and a number of the vessel’s crew. Even from the bridge, Obara could smell the burnt coal and sulfur.

After that, Lord Tywin told the throwers to use their remaining pouches of black powder at will. Ser Wallis was quick to obey that command.

Over the next several minutes, pouches were thrown from all along the blockade. Everywhere they landed, agonized screams and the sounds of shattering wood could be heard.

Any sensible foe would have turned their ships around after the fourth or fifth wave of pouches. The Ironmen, however, were a stubborn lot. Furthermore, this armada was better-equipped than the one that had sailed to Seagard.

Unlike Rodrik Greyjoy, Euron Greyjoy had not neglected to include archers in his ranks. He brought them out after the sixth wave of black powder pouches. Soon enough, the sky was filled with the arrows of Iron bows. Then it was the royalists’ turn to scream. Scores of them were claimed in the first volley alone.

None of the arrows reached the bridge of the *Lady Jeyne*. However, the lower part of the command
Every now and then, Ser Wallis Peckledon, Garth Hightower, and everyone else on that level had to duck down to avoid being hit.

Lord Tywin hastily called out their own archers in retaliation. Before too long, arrows were flying back and forth between the two sides. So much was happening that hardly anyone had time to aim. Most had to resort to pointing, notching, and releasing in rapid succession. That approach was successful for some, but ineffective for most.

Even the throwers were unable to concentrate on a target for long. But they never launched another pouch of black powder unless they were certain they would not miss.

Soon the Ironborn ships reached the Royal Army's. The foe already had boarding parties at the ready. Soon, bows were exchanged for blades, and clashing steel was audible all along the column. A number of Iron vessels attempted to break through, but the blockade held.

So much activity was happening off the coast of Fair Isle, but Obara could only focus on her immediate surroundings.

Ser Wallis Peckledon moved very quickly. In the span of ten minutes, he managed to sink four Ironborn vessels with twenty of his pouches.

Before long, he was down to his last pouch. He would have to make this one count; one single pouch would do little damage.

Just then, Obara's eye caught a certain vessel. It was as big as the Lady Jeyne and far more ominous. It had a single mast, and a massive black sail with a golden kraken had been erected. Its hull was painted a dark shade of red.

That has to be the Silence.

A moment later, Obara saw the ship's name imprinted on its side, and she confirmed her theory.

A tall figure was standing at the bough of the ship. By squinting her eyes, Obara was able to determine that he had long black hair, and a patch was over his left eye. On the breastplate of his armor, an image was imprinted. It was a red eye with a black pupil beneath a black iron crown supported by two crows.

No question; he's the Crow's Eye.

The Crow's Eye seemed to have noticed her; he was glaring right at her. Or perhaps it was Lord Tywin Lannister he was staring at. In any case, he had noticed the Lady Jeyne, and the Silence was coming directly towards the lion lord's flagship.

Obara went to the front of the bridge and called out "Ser Wallis!"

In response, the master-at-arms of Clegane's Keep turned around and gazed up at her. Once she had his attention, she pointed in the direction of the Silence. Ser Wallis followed her finger, and he spotted Euron Greyjoy at the front his fearsome vessel. Obara could not see Ser Wallis' face, but she was certain he was smirking at that moment.

Obara Martell watched as Ser Wallis Peckledon picked up his last pouch of black powder. He waited until he could see the white of Euron Greyjoy's one visible eye. Then he ignited the wick of his pouch. Once the flame vanished beneath the mouth of the pouch, Ser Wallis looked up and raised his arm in the air.
Obara expected him to throw the pouch straightaway. He did not. He seemed to freeze in his stance.

A moment later, Ser Wallis Peckledon collapsed onto his back. To her horror, Obara realized that an arrow was protruding from his throat. Ser Wallis had been shot down by an archer from another vessel.

The pouch of black powder was still lit. It slowly rolled out of Ser Wallis' hand. Garth Hightower hurriedly moved to pick it up and dispose of it. He managed to swipe it up of the ground, but before he could toss the pouch overboard or fling it elsewhere, its contents came into contact with the flaming string.

Obara turned away before the explosion came. When it did come, she expected a shout or yell to accompany it. But she heard nothing of the sort; not even a yelp of shock.

After about ten seconds, Obara forced herself to look back at the bough. Part of the mast had been blown off, and the ramparts were knocked a little loose. A small fire had broken out near the front of the deck. Several crewmen had ducked for cover, but Gerion Lannister bravely made his way through the cloud of smoke.

Even before the smoke lifted, Obara could predict what Ser Gerion would find. Sure enough, she saw Ser Garth Hightower lying flat on his back. While his body was somehow intact, it was devoid of all signs of life. Ser Gerion shook him vigorously in effort to incite a reaction out of him, but he got nothing.

Just like that, the Lady Jeyne had lost two of her crew. Unfortunately, that was the least of the surviving crew's worries. The Silence was almost upon them.

Tywin Lannister seemed unfazed. He stoically declared "Take up your steel!"

At that, Obara raised her spear, and Sandor drew his bastard sword. Gerion Lannister, Rafford, Tobbot, and everyone else bared their melee weapons, as well. Lord Tywin brought out his longsword, but Obara doubted he planned to actually use it. Tywin Lannister was an excellent swordsman, and he could never be called a craven, but in a battle, he deemed himself most useful at the sidelines, directing the actions of his subordinates.

Not twenty seconds later, the Silence reached the Lady Jeyne. The first boarding party was about to cross over. Euron Greyjoy himself would be leading it.

"Your orders, my lord?" Sandor requested.

Lord Tywin remained focused on the menacing Ironborn galley and its equally-menacing captain. Without the slightest indication of emotion, he muttered quietly "Spill their blood."

Right away, Obara Martell, Sandor Clegane, and everyone else on the bridge apart from Lord Tywin's personal guard made their way to the bough. Soon after, they met with Euron Greyjoy's encroaching warriors.

Obara had heard that the Silence was manned by mutes. Apparently, that was not a measly rumor; none of Euron's men unleashed a battle cry. Then again, neither did the Crow's Eye himself.

One of the very first boarders immediately went for Obara. He waved a huge mace at her head, and she evaded the blow just in time. He swung again at her chest, but she darted backwards. As he raised his weapon for a third move, she thrust her spear upwards. It pierced through the underside of his chin, and it went so deep that the tip remerged from the top of his head. Obara withdrew her
spear as the mute slumped onto the ground.

Nearby, Sandor was engaging two more boarders in combat simultaneously. One brandished a heavy battle axe; the other a spiked club. They both launched a number of blows at Sandor's head. Sandor was one of the few people on either side who wore no protection for his head. Obara knew he had never been fond of helms, but she knew he would manage well enough without one.

Indeed, after dodging and countering the attacks of his two opponents for thirty seconds, he threw a cut at the throat of the one with the spiked club. That mute dropped his club, and his hands went to his neck as blood leaked out of it. As he bled out, his associate slashed at Sandor's chest. Sandor ducked, and when he came back up, he plunged his sword into his second adversary's chest. This mute fell to his knees as his entrails began to leak out of his midsection. He breathed his last before his head even touched the deck.

Obara did not know how long the fighting went on for. It felt like hours. In actuality, it was only minutes. Obara found the skirmish quite exhilarating. Unfortunately, not every member of the Lady Jeyne's crew managed as well as her and Sandor. The crew of the Silence had its share of capable fighters, too. Euron Greyjoy himself managed to bring down five Westerlanders singlehandedly.

At one point, Gerion Lannister engaged Euron Greyjoy in single combat. Obara was able to catch glimpses of their encounter. Both men were unbelievably fast. So fast, in fact, that Obara had difficulty discerning which blade was Gerion's and which was Euron's. For a while, no one on either side dared to intervene for fear of being cut down.

After five uninterrupted minutes of intense swordplay, their match reached its conclusion. It ended in Euron's favor when his sword went for Gerion's left arm. The lion warrior yelled in pain as his foe's blade sliced through his gauntlet. The steel cut his forearm deep, almost to the bone. Euron nearly took off his arm.

The Crow's Eye extracted his blade and prepared to strike again. Obara Martell and Sandor Clegane rushed to intercede. Sandor brought his sword between Euron's and Gerion, deflecting the blow in the nick of time. The captain of the Silence growled in frustration at being denied his kill, but he hastily diverted his attention to his new challenger.

"Obara, get Gerion to safety!" Sandor told his intended, maintaining eye contact with Euron Greyjoy.

She nodded and helped Ser Gerion off the ground. She brought his undamaged arm around his shoulder and escorted him away from the scene. To her good fortune, none of her enemies tried to come near here. But neither did any of her allies. She looked to the lion warrior and asked him "Are you alright, Gerion?"

He weakly turned to look at her, grinned slightly, and murmured "Y-yes. Th-thank you, Obara."

She smiled back and asserted "Anytime."

From behind her, Obara could make out the sounds of steel striking steel. Euron Greyjoy had begun another duel. This time, it was with Sandor. Once Gerion was safely away from the conflict, Obara turned to witness the clash between her betrothed and his fearsome enemy.

The Hound was a fair amount younger than the Crow's Eye, but he was taller and stronger. Euron appeared to be the better swordsman, but Sandor had the more diverse skill set. Obara was not surprised by that.
Over the past year, Obara had taught him a few traditional Dornish tactics. Evidently, Sandor had been honing his skills from those routines. Several times, they enabled him to gain the upper hand over Euron. He was combing what Obara had taught him with his brother's teachings, essentially employing two different fighting styles at once. That made his moves utterly unpredictable, much to his (and Obara's) delight and Euron's annoyance.

In the third minute of their brawl, Sandor managed to back Euron into the front corner of the bough. The Crow's Eye realized he had nowhere else to go, but he had no intention of losing this duel. He hacked viciously at Sandor's face. Sandor dodged the blow and deftly delivered a counterattack to his opponents' wrists. It only touched the hilt of Euron's weapon, but the force of the blow was so powerful that he lost his grip on it. His sword was knocked out of his hands, and it flew overboard. It fell through the surface of the water with a gentle splash.

Now Sandor had Euron Greyjoy trapped, unarmed, and defenseless. Obara could not help but smile.

"Surrender," Sandor heatedly advised him, pointed the tip of his sword at Euron's throat, "Or I'll send you to your Drowned God."

For a moment, it appeared as though the Crow's Eye was actually going to yield. Then his eye fell across something, and he smirked. Obara was confused... then she saw it.

The small fire that had broken out from Ser Wallis Peckledon's last pouch was still blazing. It had not gotten any bigger, but given how much flammable rubble was around it, it would not go out any time soon, either. It continued giving off heat and light near the bough of the Lady Jeyne. That was less than five feet from the mast, which was where Sandor and Euron currently were.

Euron Greyjoy slowly raised his arms and said in a deceptively calm voice "Very well, boy. I give in."

Sandor gradually lowered his sword and gave a nod of his head. He took Euron by the shoulder and gestured for him to come along. Euron did so, but as he walked, his eye drifted to the fire at the head of the bough.

Obara jumped up from Gerion's side and shouted "SANDOR, LOOK OU-"

Before she could finish, Euron slid his legs between Sandor's and tripped him. The heir to Clegane's Keep lost his balance and fell onto his stomach. He landed directly beside the fire, his head less than a foot away from it.

Euron rapidly knelt down next to Sandor, seized his head in both hands, and shoved him towards the blaze. Sandor's face came in direct contact with the flame.

The sound that emanated from Sandor's mouth was practically inhuman. It was not a shriek, a wail, or a scream. It was like the sound of a dragon being tortured in the worst possible fashion. Of course, fire did not harm dragons. The same could not be said of humans. Or hounds.

At first, Obara could only stare in utter terror as Euron Greyjoy held her betrothed's head against the fire. She thought she could smell his flesh cooking. It did not smell very different from the aroma of venison roasting over a spit. That thought only made her feel even more uneasy.

She was finally brought back to reality when Ser Gerion Lannister shouted at her "Obara, do something!"

At that, Obara Martell cleared her head, took up her spear again, and charged towards Euron
To her displeasure, another of Euron's mutes came between them. She tried to go around him, but everywhere she went, he managed to jump in front of her. Everyone else was still preoccupied, so Obara was forced to fend him off.

In the end, she did not have to save Sandor. He was able to save himself. Even when overcome with unspeakable pain, he had not forgotten that he was still carrying steel. His bastard sword had fallen out of his reach, but a dagger was still sheathed in his belt.

Through tremendous force of will, Sandor brought his left hand to the hilt of his dagger and drew it from its scabbard. His left eye gazed upward and saw Euron's head directly above his. He brought his arm around, gave a bloodthirsty yell, and thrust his hand upward.

The dagger sank full into the side of Euron's throat. The sadistic grin on his face was quickly replaced by an astounded grimace. Immediately, he released his grip on Sandor's head. The Hound extracted his dagger and stabbed the Crow's Eye again. This time, Euron stumbled backward and landed on his side.

Sandor had just enough strength left to pull his head out of the fire. Once he was safely away from the embers, his arms dropped listlessly to his side.

By then, Obara had eliminated her own adversary. After she removed her spearhead from the mute's chest cavity, she rushed to Sandor's side and turned him over. The right side of his face was much redder than the left side.

Obara swiftly removed her helm and pressed her ear against Sandor's chest. His heart was still beating, but he had passed out. Obara frantically shook him, hoping against hope that that would bring him back to consciousness.

She roughly patted his arms, saying agitatedly "Sandor? Sandor. Sandor!"

After a minute, she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned around with her spear raised, but the hand's owner was only Tobbot. He backed away in alarm and told her "I mean no harm, m'lady. I only wish to ask if you would like some assistance."

What the fuck do you think?!

Obara was annoyed by the redundancy of that question, but she kept herself from losing her temper. She lowered her spear and stated in a tone as serene as she could muster "Yes, yes, please. Sandor's badly hurt. He needs a maester NOW."

Tobbot nodded in acknowledgment and moved to assist his lord's younger brother. Rafford the Sweetling quickly came to assist him. Working together, the two of them carried the wounded Sandor Clegane off the command deck and to the medical bay.

The fighting aboard the Lady Jeyne was rapidly coming to an end. After the death of their captain, the crew of the Silence seemed to have lost their confidence. It was not long before they were overcome. Most of them were put to the sword; the rest were clapped in irons.

Lord Tywin Lannister ordered a group of his own men to board the Silence and take control of the galley. If the surviving members of the crew resisted, they were to be executed. If they surrendered, they were to be put in chains and confined to quarters.

Tywin had given his boarders firm instructions that they were not to seize anything in the cargo
bay. He had seen Sandor's triumph over Euron Greyjoy, and he declared that the contents of the Silence were now the sole property of House Clegane.

Ordinarily, Obara would have been pleased. She and Sandor had been hoping to win custody of the Silence's caches. But after what her betrothed had gone through to earn that treasure, she wondered if it was all truly worth it.

Less than an hour after the Silence was commandeered by Lord Tywin's units, the rest of the Ironborn armada disbanded. Over half of their ships managed to retreat; the rest had been scuttled or taken by the ships of the blockade.

The sea-battle off the coast of Fair Isle was another victory for the Royal Army, but their losses were over three times greater than what they had been at Seagard. Lord Tywin seemed unperturbed by the greater casualty list. Not only was he expecting a greater fight from Euron Greyjoy, but he was also rather dispassionate when his troops were concerned.

Obara was not surprised that Lord Tywin was not bothered by his losses, but she was outraged at his indifference to what had happened to his own squire. Especially since said squire had saved his youngest brother from losing a limb (or worse).

Whenever Tywin gazed in her direction, Obara retained a neutral expression. But behind his back, she sneered at him angrily.

*If Sandor dies, you will join him, Lion.*

She was very serious in that allegation. She was fully aware that killing Lord Tywin would bring about her own death and ruin Dorne's relations with the Westerlands, but Obara did not care. The only reason Sandor had been aboard the *Lady Jeyne* was because of his liege lord, and Tywin Lannister had sent him into the fray. But Lord Tywin himself had not even directly participated in the fighting.

Obara was unable to see Sandor whilst the maesters were tending to him. They would not even give her progress reports on his well-being. To keep her mind occupied (and to avoid fearing for the worst), Obara busied herself with examining the cargo hold of the Silence. She discovered there was enough wealth for even the most destitute house in Westeros to thrive. Gold, jewels, and other valuable trinkets were in abundance.

Obara wondered who these items had belonged to previously. Given Euron Greyjoy's reputation, most of the former owners were likely dead. Some were probably still alive. If so, the right thing would have been to return their stolen goods to them. However, those individuals were half a world away, between the Port of Ibben and Asshai by the Shadow. The expenses of bringing back their lost property could have greatly outweighed the value of the property itself.

*I wonder if that's ample justification for holding onto all of this.*

Most lords in the Seven Kingdoms might have thought so. There were some, such as Stannis Baratheon and Eddard Stark, that might have called it laziness or selfishness instead. Even so, by right of conquest, everything aboard the Silence belonged the House Clegane.

*Both branches of House Clegane. That was the arrangement.*

Obara spent an hour searching through the vast piles of treasure. She managed to locate a large stash of Valyrian steel daggers. There had to be scores of them. There were enough to arm the entire crew of the Silence.
There's definitely enough for a spearhead, a longsword, a bastard sword, and a greatsword.

She could find some comfort in that, at least.

When Obara finally returned to the bridge of the Silence and climbed back aboard the Lady Jeyne, she noticed another ship drop its anchor nearby. She discovered it was the Sea Lion.

A gangplank was extended between the two ships so the people onboard both could traverse between them safely. After the gangplank was secured, several of the Sea Lion's passengers crossed over to the Lady Jeyne. Gregor Clegane and Dacey Mormont were the first to come aboard.

Obara tentatively approached the Mountain and his wife. When they saw her, she lightly bowed to them, and they bowed back. She briefly looked them over. Their armor was dented in some places and soaked with blood in others, but they appeared unharmed. The hull of the Sea Lion was riddled with arrows, but other than that, it was undamaged.

"How'd it go?" Obara enquired curiously.

"We managed to sink the Golden Storm, Aeron Greyjoy's longship," Dacey informed her merrily.

"He was floating in the water for a half-hour before we fished him out," Gregor recounted, scoffing a bit, "Now he rests in the brig of the Sea Lion."

"Nice," Obara commented.

After a short pause, Dacey queried "What about you? Did anything exciting happen on your end?"

Obara hesitated at first. She did not know how to break the news of what had happened. But her quietness would have been enough to reveal that something was amiss.

She ultimately began with "We suffered some losses. Chief among them are Ser Wallis Peckledon and Garth Hightower."

Gregor and Dacey seemed dismayed by that. Obara could understand why. Ser Wallis had been the master-at-arms of Clegane's Keep since the days when the Mountain had been the keep's heir. Ever since she came to the Westerlands, Obara had grown fond of the middle-aged knight. Dacey had never actually met Ser Wallis, but she would mourn for him merely because her husband would.

Garth Hightower, on the other hand, would be properly mourned by both Gregor and Dacey. was one of the top officers of the Legion without Banners. Not only that; he served on Gregor's secret council. The same council Obara's father was a part of. Prince Oberyn had spoken kindly of Garth Hightower. That by itself said something; there were few genuine friendships between a Reachman and a Dornishman in those days.

"However..." Obara resumed, hoping to give the conversation a bit of a more positive edge, "There is some good news. Euron Greyjoy is dead."

Dacey and Gregor seemed to brighten up at that. The Bear Islander enquired "Who was it that slew him?"

"Sandor had that honor," Obara notified them, pride easily discernable in her voice.

Gregor and Dacey Clegane were even more elated by that piece of news. The Mountain stated "So, does that mean...?"
Obara nodded and diverted their attention to the nearby galley with the black sail. As they turned to the *Silence*, she pronounced "That ship and everything on it is now Sandor's. And, by extension, yours and mine."

"Anything good?" Dacey asked rhetorically.

"Some gold and jewels here and there," Obara slyly replied, "And a fine assortment of Valyrian steel daggers."

At that, her two tall companions hastily turned back to her.

"How many?" Gregor queried curiously.

"Enough," was all Obara said in response.

That one word by itself was enough to answer the real question on the Mountain's mind. He broke into a wide smile and muttered "I'd better congratulate and thank Sandor when next I see him."

Obara softly nodded his head, trying not to frown.

Then Dacey looked around the deck and inquired "Where is Sandor?"

Obara had been dreading that question, but she knew it could not be avoided.

They have to know eventually.

"He's... well... he's..." she began uneasily, gazing off to the side.

By the break in her speech and her deliberate avoidance of making eye contact, Gregor and Dacey surmised that something was quite wrong.

"Obara?" Gregor beckoned her.

Finally, Obara Martell let out a sigh and told them grimly "Follow me."

She then took them below the command deck of the *Lady Jeyne*, and she led them all the way to the medical bay. When she got there, she lightly tapped on the door.

By this point, the ship's maester had finished treating the wounded. He came to the door and opened it just enough to peek outside. "Yes?"

"I'm here to see Sandor Clegane," Obara Martell remarked.

"He is in no condition to receive visitors, my lady," the maester apprised her.

"Not even his brother?" Gregor Clegane retorted sharply, stepping into the maester's field of vision.

At the sight of the massive Lord of Moat Cailin, the maester changed his mind. He slowly opened the door and stood aside. He mumbled softly "Very well. But please refrain from making any loud noises. He and many others are still recovering."

Obara, Gregor, and Dacey quietly stepped inside the infirmary. All of the beds – and some spots on the floor – were occupied. Relatively few of the bodies were covered by sheets. The rest were still breathing and moving.

Most of the victims were being treated for sword or arrow wounds. Gerion Lannister was among
them; he was sitting up in bed with his left arm in a sling. He smiled at his companions when they entered; they smiled back.

"Are you alright?" Gregor asked his longest-serving Legionnaire.

"I'm fine," Gerion assured him, "All thanks to the Hound."

Gregor chuckled at that. Of all the people who had heard Obara's pet name for her betrothed, Gregor Clegane appeared to join it the most. In fact, by the way he acted, one would have thought that he… expected Sandor to be given that moniker. Obara could not account for that, but then again, she did not particularly care.

Gerion then frowned a bit and gestured to the other end of the room. He proclaimed "Sandor's over there."

Obara, Gregor, and Dacey turned around and saw Sandor Clegane on a bed in the corner. He was propped up on his pillows, and he barely moved at all. The right half of his face was heavily bandaged.

"Oh, no… no, no, no," Gregor tensely muttered, his eyes wide in shock. He rushed to Sandor's bedside and knelt beside him, "No, no, no, no, no!"

Obara and Dacey quickly joined the Mountain at the side of his brother's bed. Dacey placed a comforting hand on her husband's shoulder. She placed her other hand on the left hand of her goodbrother.

Obara took a seat directly by the front of Sandor's bed. His uncovered left eye was open, and every few seconds, it blinked. Although he was still virtually motionless, at least he was awake now.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," Gregor murmured firmly.

Obara found that statement perplexing, but Dacey was the first to speak. She asked her husband "What wasn't supposed to happen, my love?"

Gregor did not answer right away. Instead, he stared at the wall, as though he was carefully contemplating his response. After a minute, he told his wife "I promised Father I'd keep him safe."

It was then that Sandor finally spoke. He focused his eye on his brother and said quietly "This isn't your fault, Gregor. You were on another ship in a different part of the blockade. There was nothing you could have done."

Obara felt waves of relief passing over her. Her betrothed had regained his tongue, and he spoke no differently than he had before.

"How do you feel?" Dacey queried in concern.

"I can't feel the right half of my face," Sandor informed his sister-by-law, "It's like it's been melted."

"Melted?" Gregor repeated, as though the mere utterance of that word was a curse.

"The Crow's Eye forced his face into a pit of fire," Gerion Lannister disclosed from across the room. Gregor's countenance suggested he was horrified.

"But that didn't stop me from shoving my dagger into his throat," Sandor muttered gruffly,
"Twice."

Obara and Dacey smiled at that, but Gregor retained his terrified expression.

"Greg?" Sandor asked, noting his brother's apprehensive look, "What's wrong?"

Gregor did not reply. Without looking over his shoulder, he called out "Maester?"

At that, the maester appeared at the foot of Sandor's bed and uttered "Yes, my lord?"

"Remove my brother's bandages," Gregor ordered him, "I would see his injury."

Obara, Dacey, and Sandor were alarmed by how demanding he sounded. The maester appeared indifferent, but he said sternly "I must protest, sir. His wound is still healing."

"Now," Gregor said through gritted teeth, "You can wrap them back up later."

At that, the maester sighed and conceded "As you command."

Gregor, Dacey, and Obara stepped aside so that the maester could kneel beside the heir to Clegane's Keep. He slowly unfastened and unraveled the gauze that covered Sandor's face. When he was finished, he stepped aside so that the others could see the damage.

The damage was even worse than Obara thought.

The right half of Sandor's face was grotesque. Everything between his brow and his lip had been charred. The skin was blackened, as if it was dead. His nostril was much thinner. His eyelid was drooping slightly over his eye. A patch of his hair had been seared away.

For a moment, Obara felt the urge to scream. She had to bite her tongue to stop herself. She looked over at her other companions. Dacey seemed just as shocked as her. But Gregor… Gregor was downright mortified. He continued whispering in denial "No, no, no, no, no, no!"

His words and the expression on his face were enough to tip off Sandor. The Hound turned to the maester and barked tensely "Get me a looking glass."

The maester was slow and hesitant to obey, but he obeyed, all the same. He retrieved a small looking glass from his desk and brought it over to his tallest patient. He held the object out, and Sandor promptly took it in his hands.

Sandor gradually brought the looking glass up to his face. When he saw what the others saw, he was flabbergasted.

"Oh, Gods…" he mumbled as he stared at himself.

Obara wanted to say something to comfort him, but what words could possibly comfort a man who lost nearly half his face to a fire?

After an unpleasant period of silence, Sandor gazed from the looking glass to the man who had given him it. He muttered hopefully "Maester… please tell me something can be done about this. Something. Anything."

The maester let out a sigh and professed "I have prevented the wound from festering, and I can alleviate the entirety of your pain. But I'm afraid the damage to your facial tissue is irreversible. You will bear this scar for the rest of your life, my lord."
"Oh, no. You cannot be serious."

For a few moments, Sandor just stared at the maester, as though he had not heard those words. Then he reacted. He scowled and flung the looking glass at the opposite wall. As it shattered into dozens of tiny shards, Sandor let out a roar of fury.

"My lord, please," the maester beseeched him, "The other patients are trying to sleep."

"Fuck you!" Sandor spat angrily, "Their wounds will heal! According to you, mine won't!"

"If I could repair your injury, I would," the maester insisted, "But I cannot. None of my order can."

"And you're telling me I should just live with that?!" Sandor shot crossly.

"Yes, you should."

It was not the maester who spoke then, but Obara. Sandor, the maester, and everyone else turned to look at the former Sand Snake. She leaned closer to her intended and declared "Sandor, you shouldn't take your anger out on the maester. This is not his fault. It is not yours either. The only person you can blame is dead now. Killed by your hand."

"I know," Sandor muttered quietly. He had calmed down a bit, but his voice was still full of tension, "But what will other people say when they see this?"

"It shouldn't matter to you what they say," Obara contended, "Aside from that, you got this scar defending your country from hostile invaders. They will respect you for that."

"But they will still think me a freak," Sandor debated.

"No, they won't," Obara refuted.

"How can you be sure?" Sandor questioned her.

"Because you aren't a freak," Obara proclaimed, "If anyone dares to call you one, I will make them regret their words."

Sandor appeared taken aback by that. "You... you will?"

Obara firmly nodded her head and stated "I don't care if you've been permanently scarred. Burn or no burn, you and I are still betrothed to each other. I have every intention of exchanging vows with you in a sept. It will require far more than a deformity to dissuade me from that."

Sandor was speechless, but in a good way. It was as though she had given him the self-confidence he had lost. Gregor and Dacey seemed to feel much better, as well.

Obara knew it would still be a long time before they could all fully cope with Sandor's injury, but at least they were past the denial stage. There would be grief, of course, but grief would fade away. *Perhaps in time, Sandor will come to cherish his scar.*

At that moment, Sandor raised himself up, cupped Obara's cheek with his left hand, and gently pulled her closer. He kissed her lightly on the lips.

A few times before the war, the two of them had kissed in private. Those kisses had always been playful. This one was fueled purely by passion. As such, Obara found it much more enjoyable.
Furthermore, to Obara's vast surprise (and delight), Sandor's kiss was not so different than it had been before his scar. His lips were just as soft, his skin just as smooth, his breath just as pleasant. If anything… his kiss felt even better. It felt special.
Hope Endures

Chapter Notes

Note: Well, I'm back home in Texas now! Really enjoyed my vacation in Rome, though. I even got to see the Pope make his public appearance on New Year's Day. Unfortunately, I got sick the day before we left. Still somewhat sick right now, but I should be better in a day or two. At least being sick did not impair my writing ability. In fact, I wrote almost this whole chapter in one day.

Anyway, this is the last chapter that includes the events of Greyjoy's Rebellion. The next three or four (maybe five) chapters will cover the aftermath of the war, namely the tourney at Lannisport and other things of similar precedence. And yes, Tywin has not forgotten his plan involving Ellyn Clegane.

It was not long before news of the Royal Army's maritime victories at Seagard and Fair Isle reached the mainland. Lord Stannis Baratheon and Lord Tywin Lannister informed King Robert that they had successfully neutralized Lord Balon Greyjoy's heir and killed the Crow's Eye. The stag king was quite pleased by his brother and goodfather's respective actions.

Now that the west coast of the Riverlands and the Westerlands was secure, there was nothing standing between the Royal Army and the Iron Islands. As such, King Robert amassed the rest of the Royal Fleet and set sail directly for the Islands.

Of the seven islands, only three presented any real challenge for besiegers. Harlaw, Saltcliffe, Orkmont, and Blacktyde had little defensive capabilities when they stood alone. However, Old Wyk, Great Wyk, and Pyke were far more formidable, and none of them would fall easily.

With that in mind, King Robert kept his armada divided into three smaller fleets. Each one would lay siege to one of the three strongest islands. Lord Stannis' forces would take Old Wyk, Lord Tywin's forces would take Great Wyk, and the king's forces would take Pyke.

Victarion Greyjoy was among the last company. He had not been at Seagard or Fair Isle. At the king's request, he had remained in the Westerlands to counsel the King on how to seize the Iron Islands with minimum loss of life or resources. Nonetheless, in the final stage of the war, Robert had decided to allow the Iron Captain to join into the fray.

Victarion now stood on the bridge of the *Iron Victory*. Before he and his fellow Legionnaires left Moat Cailin, he had arranged for the ship to be brought to Casterly Rock. In the meantime, he had ridden by horse to the Westerlands.

He was not as averse to travelling by land as he had been once, but he would always choose sails over horses. He never felt more alive and at peace as he did when standing on the deck of a ship.

As the king's fleet sailed towards Pyke, Victarion reflected on the present scenario. He had not been home in years. The only contact he had had with his people were the friendly interactions he shared with his fellow Ironborn Legionnaires. Victarion had always intended to return eventually.

*Who would have thought I'd be returning with a host of greenlanders?*
Victarion had very mixed feelings on what was happening at that time. On the one hand, he was on the winning side in this war. On the other hand, his family was on the losing side. Based on how easily the Iron Fleet had fallen at Seagard and Fair Isle, the Royal Army's triumph was all but guaranteed.

But at what cost will victory come?

In front of his fellow top officers of the Legion without Banners and the leaders of the Royal Army, Victarion Greyjoy had sworn his fealty to Robert Baratheon. He had meant those words when he spoke them, and he still did at that time. Even so, he could not help but wonder what consequences his oath would produce for his family.

His eldest nephew had already been maimed, one of his brothers had been imprisoned in the bowels of Casterly Rock, and another of his brothers had been killed. Only Victarion's eldest brother, niece, and younger two nephews remained free and unharmed.

Will they remain such for very long?

The uncertain fate of the rest of the Greyjoys was not all that troubled Victarion. He also thought on what would become of his name and reputation. On the mainland, they would probably hail him as a brave hero who willingly defied his traitor kin and protected the country from them. But in the eyes of the Islands… he would be the traitor. Not only that; he would be seen as a disgrace to everything the Ironborn stood for.

It was no secret that the Iron Islands were viewed as the most savage and unruly of the nine regions of Westeros. All the same, even they had principles and standards. On the voyage, Victarion realized that he was about to violate a great many of those policies.

He had told himself he could live with that. That was true enough; he had no reservations about breaking a few codes for the greater good. The king and his subordinates would surely understand and sympathize with him. As for the other Ironborn… they might understand, but they would never show any sympathy. Worst case scenario, they would ostracize him completely.

Whenever I decide to leave the Legion... I may not be able to return to the Islands. Moat Cailin may be the only home I have left.

That was the worst aspect of it all.

As trying and disconcerting as these mediations were, Victarion decided to push them out of his mind. He could not afford to have doubts. Not at such a crucial moment. He needed to stay focused on his current assignment. He would worry about his status in the Islands later.

When Victarion came out of his reverie, his ears detected something. Between the noises of wood creaking, waves breaking, and voices calling, he heard a soft buzzing sound. It appeared to originate from behind him.

Victarion looked over his shoulder and saw Nute the Barber standing a few feet away. He was leaning against the port rampart and gazing out to sea. His lips were quivering slightly; the buzzing sound was coming from his mouth. Victarion listened closely, and there actually seemed to be a melody to that sound.

"What is that you are humming, Barber?" Victarion asked him.

Nute turned to his commanding officer and answered him with "A song, my lord."
"What song?" Victarion murmured curiously.

"I heard it from the Mountain," Nute apprised him, "He claimed it's an old navy song where he comes from?"

"I didn't know the Westerlands had navy songs," Victarion commented.

"Neither did I," Nute admitted, "Perhaps he mistook its origin."

"Are there words?" Victarion queried. He was genuinely interested. While the Iron Captain had little taste for music, songs about the sea always intrigued him.

"I believe so," Nute the Barber replied, "However, I only picked up a handful of them."

"Indulge me, if you would," Victarion bade him.

Nute the Barber nodded and stood up straight. Then he cleared his throat and softly sang in a rather pleasant voice: "Anchors Aweigh, my boys, Anchors Aweigh. Farewell to foreign shores; we sail at break of day. Through our last night ashore, drink to the foam… that's all I can recall off the top of my head."

"Fascinating," Victarion remarked, rubbing his temple, "I must remember to speak with Lord Gregor on this later. I'd be interested to hear the whole song."

"Oh, he'd be delighted to share it, my lord," Nute proclaimed, "He mentioned that he's hoping to teach it to more people. Particularly those of us who are more comfortable on water."

"What happens today will certainly be worthy of a song," Victarion pronounced.

"Indeed," Nute conceded, "In any case, it would definitely be a good distraction."

"A distraction?" Victarion repeated, bewildered.

"Yes…" Nute affirmed, a little apprehensively. After a pause, he sighed and muttered "May I speak plainly?"

"Yes, but be mindful of what you say," Victarion cautioned him. Even from his own men, he did not tolerate any slights.

"I believe in what you are doing," Nute declared, "Working for the Legion without Banners has accomplished far more good for us than raiding Essos ever did. I also admire you for openly siding with the King over your own countrymen."

"Every man here has done the same," Victarion debated.

"True," Nute stated frankly, "The difference is that your family reigns over the Iron Islands. But it may not remain that way for long."

Victarion was confused. "How do you mean?"

"After the Rebellion, the King may remove your family from the seat of Pyke," Nute contended.

That statement gave Victarion pause. He had not considered that concept. Now that he had, he noted there was in fact a great possibility of it. Despite his loyalty to the Iron Throne, all the rest of Victarion's family had revolted against Robert Baratheon. For that reason, the king had legitimate grounds to take Pyke away from House Greyjoy and bequeath it to another house. Probably not
even a house from the Islands.

"You could be right," Victarion glumly admitted.

Nute leaned against the rampart again and uttered "If you will permit my asking, how does that make you feel, my lord?"

Victarion spent a good minute contemplating the idea of House Greyjoy being severed from Pyke. Ultimately, he looked the Barber in the eye and firmly declared "I am willing to accept that. If I must sacrifice my family's ancestral home for the sake of Westeros, so be it."

Nute merely nodded his head and said quietly "Very well. If that is what you believe, then I shall support you."

*I just hope you will not be the only one who does.*

A day after King Robert Baratheon's fleet departed from Casterly Rock, his company met up with Lord Stannis' and Lord Tywin's. The Iron Islands were nearly in sight of their rendezvous point.

When they met up, the King took some time to evaluate the composition of each company. In several instances, he chose to reassign certain units to a different armada.

Namely, he transferred the Cleganes and the Mormonts to his company. Since they had been instrumental in the battles at Seagard and Fair Isle, he wished to have them present at the fall of Pyke, as well.

Victarion was aware that it was Jorah Mormont who had crippled Rodrik Greyjoy, and Sandor Clegane had killed Euron Greyjoy. He did not hold those actions against either men; they had simply done what needed to be done. Apart from that, Victarion felt his cocky nephew could afford a harsh lesson in humility, and there had been little love between him and the Crow's Eye.

Once King Robert finished reorganizing the Royal Army, he launched the invasion of the Iron Islands.

The offensive began in the early morning, when the Sun was barely peeking over the eastern horizon. Before noon, Old Wyk and Great Wyk fell. After receiving a signal in the sky from both Lord Stannis and Lord Tywin, King Robert's forces advanced towards Pyke.

The siege of Pyke was conducted in a very methodical fashion. First, there was the conflict at sea. Half of the king's vessels – led by Lord Paxter Redwyne, Lord Mace Tyrell, Lord Hoster Tully – engaged the majority of what remained of the Iron Fleet occupied out in Ironman's Bay. Only a select few ships were still garrisoned on the coast, and all of them were at Lordsport.

While the sea battle raged on, the other half of the king's ships made for Lordsport with the intent of docking there.

To Victarion's surprise, when they reached Lordsport, the town's residents put up little resistance, if any. In fact, when Robert's flagship pentered the harbor, Lord Sawane Botley sailed out on his *Swiftfin* to meet the stag king under a banner of peace.

Robert was skeptical, but he agreed to meet with the lord of Lordsport. After Lord Sawane was brought on board *King Robert's Hammer*, he declared that he and his family were prepared to bend the knee.
When Victarion heard this, he was surprised. His astonishment was shared by many others. This sort of move was uncharacteristic of the typical Ironborn.

Ironmen usually did not give in to foreign power very readily. Even if they were faced with overwhelming odds, they were normally too stubborn to accept defeat. As such, Lord Botley's motives for surrendering were brought into question.

Initially, his bravery (or lack thereof) was suspected to be the reason. But Victarion was certain Lord Sawane had not yielded out of fear. Cowards and cravens did not last long on the Islands, and House Botley was not known for siring any.

It was discovered that Sawane Botley's true reason for yielding was that he no longer believed in Lord Balon's cause. As it happened, he did not have very much faith in it to begin with. Apart from that, his eldest son Harren was currently serving in the Legion without Banners. Lord Sawane had no desire to risk doing harm to any member of his family, particularly his heir, and Harren Botley's involvement in the Legion had brought about great things for their house.

At least some Ironborn have a bit of sense.

After some thoughtful deliberation, Robert Baratheon accepted Lord Botley's surrender. The rest of the king's vessels were allowed entry to the harbor of Lordsport. Once they were docked, the crews hastily disembarked.

It took over an hour for the king's forces to regroup on land. Over ten thousand units from all over the realm were gathered. They were complemented by an additional few hundred that Lord Botley was able to spare them. Once they were all assembled in an orderly manner, they began the trek for Pyke.

The castle of Pyke was only a short way away by horse. Alas, there were not enough horses for all the king's men. The king himself was mounted, as were his generals (which included Victarion). Everyone else had to proceed on foot.

Two hours later, they arrived at the front gate of Pyke. Victarion had been born there, he had been raised there, and he had lived there for a good part of his adulthood. In spite of that, the magnificence and vastness of the castle still amazed him. He was not alone in that sentiment; he could actually hear some of the soldiers mutter their awe.

Just wait until we're on the inside…

Pyke was composed of five towers built on a group of islets. The gatehouse was the only one that could be accessed directly on land. If one wished entry to the Great Keep, the Bloody Keep, the Kitchen Keep, and the Sea Tower, they would have to be a fair climber. The king had no intention of sending his units to scale the cliffs of Pyke, so they would have to enter through the gatehouse.

At this time, the gatehouse was sealed. The portcullis had been lowered, and the walls' six defensive towers were fully-manned. Evidently, Lord Balon Greyjoy would not give in as easily as Lord Sawane Botley did.

Fortunately, the king's forces had come prepared. A number of siege engines had been brought ashore by the Royal Army. These included scorpions, catapults, battering rams, and other fearsome machines. Robert called for all of them to be rolled out. Once the engines were within proper range of the gatehouse, they were unleashed on the walls.

The bulk of the king's forces were able to merely stand by and observe as the siege engines
ravaged the nearest wall of the gatehouse. Most of them did not have to worry about retaliation from the men in the towers. The only units who did were those of them who operated the engines. Most of them managed to duck for cover at the appropriate times, but more than a few of them fell to an arrow, a large stone, or a stream of boiling oil.

The Ironborn on the walls were determined to hold them, but they were too few and too slow to stop the king's siege engines. A few minutes into the assault, they had to be wary of enemy archers who returned fire on the ground below.

Within twenty minutes, the siege engines broke through. The southern part of the gatehouse buckled and swayed, and then it collapsed. The southernmost tower descended with it. The men stationed in that tower screamed as it vanished over the adjoining cliff.

Once the wall was breached, King Robert gave the order to advance.

Victarion Greyjoy managed to be the second man to climb the walls of the gatehouse. Lord Jorah Mormont was the first. He was immediately met by one of the crossbowmen posted on the wall. The guard attempted to shoot the bear lord at close range. Lord Jorah evaded the bolt and sank his Valyrian steel blade into the man's chest.

At approximately the same moment, Victarion engaged another of the wall's guards in combat. The Ironborn was initially stunned to see him, and then he sneered and mumbled angrily "Traitor…"

Victarion would not let that go unchallenged. He took out his axe and clashed it with his adversary's sword. After parrying blows for ten seconds, he delivered a fatal slash to the Ironborn's upper chest. His opponent sputtered and dropped listlessly to the ground.

All around him, similar deadly encounters were happening. Between his own bouts with other Ironborn, Victarion made a note of several of his companions' bouts.

Gregor Clegane was easy enough to spot, due to his massive height and impossibly heavy armor. He carried a shield in his left arm, and he wielded a greatsword in his right hand. There were few men alive who could balance a greatsword in one hand. Gregor Clegane did so perfectly. He moved about here and there, cutting down any Ironborn who dared come near him.

His lady wife Dacey Clegane was close-by. She bore a longsword in her right hand. With her left, she swung a Morningstar. If that was not quaint enough, her imposing size made it so. Anyone who attempted to challenge the Bear Islander did not last more than twenty seconds.

Victarion remembered when he had first met Lady Dacey. That was long before she had married Lord Gregor. But even back then, the Mountain did not allow anyone to slander her. Victarion had done so, and the Mountain had nearly struck him for it.

In time, Victarion had come to admire the Bear woman in many ways. He had accepted her as a soldier and as a leader. This was the first occasion when he saw her in full-fledged combat. From what he saw, no one could deny that she was an excellent warrior. For a woman.

No, not just for a woman. She's a fine fighter even for a man.

At one point, Dacey was approached by a tall man with a spear. He seemed amused to discover that his opponent was a woman. As he sparred with her, he commented derisively "You wish to resist my spear? Very well. It happens I've got a longer one. Put away your weapons and I'll show it to you."

That's not going to happen, you poor damn fool.
Victarion lightly scoffed at the Ironman's bluntness. In a strange way, he somewhat pitied the man, as he could predict how Dacey would respond to that lusty slur.

Sure enough, just a few seconds later, Dacey took her Morningstar and threw an underhand blow at the man's lower body. The spiked ball struck the spot directly between the man's legs. Almost straightaway, his hands let go of his steel-tipped spear and shot towards the one on his body. He fell to his knees and let out a shriek that was eerily reminiscent of a banshee.

Dacey smirked and remarked "It's not so long now."

Then she took her sword and plunged it into the area between the man's shoulder blades. Just like that, she made him a corpse as quickly as she had made him a eunuch.

If Victarion did not fully respect Dacey before that moment, he undoubtedly did then.

Not long after, something bright caught Victarion's attention. He paused to get a better look, and at first, he assumed it to be a line of fire. It was in fact a line of fire. But it was moving. Moving very erratically, at that.

Soon Victarion realized that the fire was really a burning sword. The blade was encompassed in the flames, but the damage to the steel seemed minimal. It cut down opponents as easily as any normal blade, and it struck much more fear into anyone who clashed with it.

Victarion then turned his attention to the man holding the sword. He was a plump man clad in red robes, like those of the priests of the R'hllor, the Lord of Light. It only took him a moment to recognize the man. He was indeed a red priest. He was Thoros, a follower of the Lord of Light from the Free City of Myr.

Thoros had arrived in the Royal Army's camps a few days before Robert Baratheon's company set sail. He had joined as a freerider, but he had requested to be on the front line when the king laid siege to Pyke. All it took was a single demonstration of his flaming sword and its abilities to convince Robert to grant his request.

Victarion had heard of Thoros' flaming sword, but he had not believed it to be true until that very moment. Now that he saw it… he was legitimately impressed.

*I never would have thought that fire could be harnessed for melee combat.*

Just then, a shout of anguish was heard from further up the walls. Victarion turned to the center of the disturbance, and he saw Jacelyn Bywater, a men-at-arms from the Crownlands, on the ground.

A moment earlier, Jacelyn had engaged three Ironborn at once. He had dispatched two of them quickly enough, but the third had managed to trip him. When he was on his back, his last opponent hacked at his right side. As a result, Jacelyn's hand was severed at the wrist, disarming him in both ways.

Victarion rushed to intercede. As the third Ironborn prepared the killing blow, Victarion waved his axe at the man's torso. He succeeded in burying it deep into the man's chest. The Ironborn dropped his sword, slouched, and fell. Victarion grinned in satisfaction as he pulled out his axe.

After getting Jacelyn Bywater to safety, Victarion reentered the fight. As he fought, he continued to observe his colleagues' performances in the battle.

Twenty feet away, Sandor Clegane and his intended, Obara Martell were dueling with a pair of swordsmen. Victarion had heard of the mark his brother had left on the Hound before he was slain.
The scar was very conspicuous, even on the field of battle. It had gained Sandor a fair amount of unwanted attention, but he had given little mind to it. Victarion had to praise him for that. Ironborn generally cherished their own scars of war, but even the Iron Captain would have dreaded to be deformed as the Hound had been.

There had been some debate on whether or not Sandor was well enough to return to active duty. Ultimately, Lord Tywin Lannister and the King had deemed him fit. Indeed, despite the temporary partial blindness in his right eye, Sandor was just as adept with a blade as before. Furthermore, his scar made him seem even more intimidating than Thoros of Myr's burning sword. On that note, Victarion noticed that Sandor was making an effort to avoid going near the read priest.

After his last experience with fire, I cannot blame him.

Sandor and Obara's duels ended with his bastard sword in his opponent's throat and her spear in the abdomen of hers.

By now, nearly all of the guards on the walls of the gatehouse had been eliminated. The few that were left began to retreat to the Great Keep. Unfortunately for them, the entrance to the Keep had been boarded up from the inside. Some of them pounded frantically on the doors, pleading to be let in. But the doors did not budge an inch.

Before too long, the soldiers of the Royal Army caught up to the Ironmen stuck outside the Great Keep. Those Ironborn were vanquished very quickly. Once they were all put down, the king's forces concentrated on breaking down the entrance to the Great Keep.

A score of strong men brought a large hewn log up the walls of the gatehouse. Together, they carried it to the doors of the Great Keep, and they used it as a battering ram.

It was quite a while before the log even had an impact on the Keep's sturdy entrance. The doors were made of ironwood pilfered from the wolfswood of the North. This wood would did not split easily, so neither would the door.

The Royal Army's problems were not limited to the door itself. As before, they had to deal with threats from above. Volleys of arrows, clusters of stones, and streams of boiling oil rained on them from the top of the outer wall. There was no canopy or covering for the battering ram, so those who held it were left extremely vulnerable.

Every minute, several of them fell to the dangers from overheard. Many of them had to be replaced, and the replacements were themselves replaced frequently. But they never panicked; they heaved and struck at the king's command.

Finally, after ten minutes and close to a hundred replacements, the battering ram smashed through the entrance of the Great Keep. After that, only a dozen more blows were needed to cast the doors aside. The Great Keep was breached.

The Royal Army poured in like the rapids of a flood. This time, the first man to enter was Dunsen, one of Lord Gregor Clegane's personal men-at-arms, and one of his longest-serving retainers.

He did fare as well as Lord Jorah had on the walls of the gatehouse. Almost the exact instant he stepped inside, Dunsen was intercepted by an Ironborn with a huge double-sided axe. The Ironman swiftly raised his axe and gave a hefty swing.

A moment later, Dunsen's head tilted backward. So far backward that it almost fell off his neck. Only a few strings of cartilage prevented him from being totally decapitated. Alas, those strings of
cartilage made no difference in the long run. Dunsen collapsed dead right at the entrance of the Great Keep.

He was avenged very soon after. Gregor Clegane let out a roar of fury and strode over to the Ironborn. Before the Ironman had a chance to even lift his weapon, Gregor delivered a powerful blow from above with his greatsword. He succeeded in opening up the man's head and much of his torso. Dunsen's killer was almost cut in half vertically.

All around the room, more skirmishes were breaking out. Soon enough, the fighting had resumed full-pace.

Victarion hurried to dodge this blow or parry that blow. He hastily moved to meet any foe that hoped to best him. None of them could.

*Of course they can't. Only a kraken can beat a kraken.*

Right then, he turned abruptly to the left and came face-to-face with a young man. This young man happened to have a kraken imprinted on his hauberk. Victarion recognized him immediately.

It was his nephew, Maron Greyjoy. He was armed with a longsword, which was pointed at the Iron Captain.

Maron smirked wickedly and muttered "So, Nuncle, I see you've forsaken your oaths to the Ironborn."

"I have done no such thing," Victarion crossly refuted, "Your father is the only oathbreaker."

"My father is simply executing his authority as Lord Reaper of the Islands," Maron disputed, a note of confidence in his voice, "You rose up in defiance of him. That makes you lower than the greenlanders."

"It is still higher than Balon," Victarion snapped back. He gripped his axe in both hands and murmured sternly "Maron, this is over. Your father's rebellion ends today. Your only option is to surrender. Yield, and I will ensure that no harm comes to you."

"I do not take advice from one who would stab me in the back," Maron heatedly countered.

He was about to raise his longsword and attack his Uncle. Right before he could, he was grabbed from behind. He struggled against his attacker, but he was speedily overpowered. This third party was clad in white enameled armor and a long white cloak. Victarion saw that he was Ser Barristan Selmy, Lord Commander of Robert's Kingsguard.

"Now would be a good time to start," the middle-aged knight's cleverly suggested, placing the tip of his sword against the backside of Maron Greyjoy's chest.

Victarion snickered at the knight's clever jape and looked to Maron for his nephew's response. Within five seconds, Maron grudgingly threw down his sword and gave in. His hands were bound and he was led away, glaring hatred at his uncle.

Soon, Ironborn reinforcements appeared. However, a corresponding number of royalist soldiers entered the Great Keep to counter this new strength. For the better part of an hour, the two armies fought for control of the Keep, replenishing their numbers as needed. In a little over an hour, the Ironborn began to run out of backup units. That was when they were forced out of the front room. After that, they were consistently pushed further and further back into the Keep.
Twenty minutes later, the fighting reached the Keep's long smoky hall. This was the very same hall where the Seastone Chair was found. Balon Greyjoy himself was seated in that chair, his hand firmly clasped around the hilt of his own sword. A makeshift crown of driftwood was upon his head, symbolizing his status as the self-proclaimed King of the Iron Islands. The crown was planted so deeply that Balon's eyes were hardly visible.

Scarcely two score of the castle's soldiers now remained. Most of them moved to surround their liege lord protectively, in case anyone made a move toward him. The rest fought on against the royalist units and perished.

For the moment, the fighting stopped. What happened next would determine if it had ended permanently or temporarily.

King Robert Baratheon stepped forward quietly. Lord Eddard Stark, Ser Barristan Selmy, Lord Gregor Clegane, and his other highborn warriors moved behind him and kept close. His warhammer was caked with blood, as well as bits of bone and brain. He had slain no less than half a hundred of the Ironborn soldiers. He was prepared to slay more, if need be. Nonetheless, Victarion could see that even the stag king was hoping to avoid additional loss of life.

When Robert was halfway to the Seastone Chair, he halted. Then he steadfastly proclaimed "Balon Greyjoy, Invader of Westeros and False King of the Iron Islands, I, Robert Baratheon, the rightful King of the Seven Kingdoms, order you to surrender your crown and put an end to this insurrection."

The surviving Ironborn looked to their lord. He did not respond to the king’s demand right away. Instead, he remained situated firmly in his chair, staring at Robert dispassionately.

"Come on, Balon. Even you know when you've been beat."

Eventually, the Lord Reaper rose. When he was on his feet, he started walking towards the king. Some of his men-at-arms moved with him to function as his guards. Simultaneously, Ser Barristan Selmy and a few other royalists came closer to Robert to guarantee his safety in turn.

Balon Greyjoy ceased his approach when he was nearly within arm's length of the King. His eyes were finally visible then. They were full of spite and malice. When they fell on Victarion, they bore an expression of utter loathing.

Victarion did not quiver. He had to make his position abundantly clear to his brother. It was the only way he could get him to surrender without any more deaths.

After a long, tense silence, Balon Greyjoy dropped to one knee and dipped his head. He pronounced in a hard yet steady voice "I relinquish my throne to you, King Robert."

Robert grinned, obviously pleased by the Lord Reaper's decision. He reached out his hand, took ahold of Balon's crown, and roughly removed it from his head. He tossed it to the side, not bothering to see where it landed. Then he stated in acknowledgment "I accept your surrender."

That denoted the official moment when the war which would be known as Greyjoy's Rebellion ended.

The rest of the day was spent negotiating the terms of the Ironborn's surrender.

Robert had considered allowing Balon Greyjoy to continue to rule in exchange for a renewed oath of fealty and a political hostage (one of his sons, most likely). Just before the siege, he had informed his generals of this tactic. Most of them found it to be an effective solution. However, a
few of the bolder ones had counseled the king to be much more severe with his chastisement of House Greyjoy. Chief among them had been Gregor Clegane.

Victarion had been present when Lord Gregor had advised King Robert. The Mountain had recommended that Balon Greyjoy be made an example of. As such, he debated that the Lord Reaper should be sent to the Wall for rising against the Iron Throne. Robert saw the logic in his Master of Order's words, and he agreed it would be the safest and most practical course of action.

Furthermore, to ensure the Ironborn's loyalty to the crown, Gregor proposed that Balon's children serve as hostages of the throne. Robert Baratheon was quite content with this suggestion. Doing so would help to prevent retribution on the part of the Ironborn. He himself decided what would be done with Balon Greyjoy's brood.

His daughter Asha would be allowed to remain at Pyke. But his sons would be sent away. Rodrik would be taken to King's Landing, Maron to Moat Cailin, and Theon to Winterfell. They would serve as wards to Lords Arryn, Clegane, and Stark in turn.

Rodrik and Maron had voluntarily joined the fight alongside their father, but Theon was still an innocent boy.

Normally, Robert Baratheon was not of a mind to completely separate a family, and Gregor Clegane was not one to threaten the life of a child, but they both had to make an exception in this instance. Still, to prove that they were not without empathy, they would not force Balon's sons to remain wards for the entire year. Once, on a predetermined date each year, each son would be permitted a week-long furlough to return home to Pyke. The furloughs would be arranged by the King and the respective lord who watched each Greyjoy, and only one of them would be allowed to return to Pyke at any point in time. After the furlough ended, they were to resume their position as political hostages.

Needless to say, Balon was not pleased with these terms when he first heard them. But he was forced to consent to them, as his only option other than the black was the block.

His wife Alannys Harlaw was deeply distraught over the loss of her sons. Interestingly, she did not seem even remotely troubled by the fact that her husband was to go north and never return.

Either she's already given up on him, or... they've had some "disagreements" since I was here last.

After Balon accepted the conditions of his surrender, he and his wife and children were led away. It was then that King Robert Baratheon made an announcement. An announcement that would change Victarion's life.

He declared to his subjects: "It has been brought to my attention that not all Ironborn resort to raiding simply because a thirst for conquest. Many of them raid because they are short on food. While that is still not a justification for pillaging and plundering, it is a sentiment that can at least be understood. Every man needs to eat. If a man does not eat, he starves. He will go to great length to avoid starving. Normally, when he is hungry, he will grow or buy crops. Those options are always present in the Seven Kingdoms. Alas, they are missing in Iron Islands. It is very difficult to cultivate crops in the soil, and the market here is quite poor. The Islands' unstable relations with the mainland make trade rather difficult. Fishing is an excellent resource for sustenance, but no one can live on fish alone. With all that accounted for, the only remaining method a man of the Iron Islands would use to gain his daily bread is if he takes it by force. Hence, the raiding."

You are rather observant, Your Grace. Did you arrive at that conclusion all on your own?
A moment later, Victarion Greyjoy spotted the smug expression on Lord Gregor Clegane's face, and he knew the answer to his question right away.

Robert continued with: "The raiding was what led to this rebellion in the first place. Although we now have assurances that the Iron Islands will not revolt again, I say more can be done to improve relations between the Islands and the Seven Kingdoms. Therefore, I shall take steps to make food more accessible to the Ironmen."

That gained the interest of everyone there, especially Victarion and the other Ironborn.

"How will you manage that, Your Grace?" Eddard Stark queried curiously.

"By making the Islands productive, Ned," Robert Baratheon notified his best friend and every other person there, "Most of the landscape is barren and eroded, but with proper tending, it can be made fertile. Once it is fertile, fruits, vegetables, and grains can be cultivated here."

"That's never been done, Your Grace," Jorah Mormont pointed out.

"Because no one's ever bothered with trying," Robert claimed, "Nothing is impossible if it's never been attempted."

"A very good point, Your Grace," Gregor Clegane conceded, "I for one believe fertilizing the Islands is an excellent idea. If the Ironborn are capable of feeding themselves, they will be much less inclined to seek food from others."

"But you are neglecting one thing," Dacey Mormont told her husband, "House Greyjoy's words are We Do Not Sow."

"Then it is past time they were changed to We DID Not Sow," King Robert debated.

That produced a long round of laughter from the assembled people. Even Victarion could not hold back a mild chuckle.

After the last of the giggles died, Robert Baratheon stated "When I return to King's Landing, I will have the small council draft the appropriate motions for farmland to be cultivated on the Islands. I will also push for better trading networks between the Islands and the rest of Westeros. That should ensure that no further disputes arise between them."

*It will be difficult to undo the traditions of millennia, but then again, no one's ever tried THIS. And who knows? It just might work.*

There were mutters of agreement all around the room. Robert Baratheon then gazed around and stated "We are nearly finished here. But before we return to the Westerlands, there is one last matter that must be resolved. Victarion Greyjoy, come forward."

For the duration of this meeting, Victarion had stood still as a statue, not uttering a single word. Now all eyes were fixed on him.

He fearlessly stepped up to the stag kind and tilted his head, saying "I am yours to command, Your Grace."

"Indeed you are," Robert coincided, "When this war began, I questioned where your loyalties truly lay. Since then, you have proven many times over that you serve the throne first and foremost. Such devotion is commendable, and it merits reward. Now you shall receive a reward; one fitting of your actions and deeds. Kneel."
Victarion slowly dropped to one knee, keeping his head inclined towards the stag king. Robert placed his hand on the Iron Captain's shoulder and announced "Victarion of House Greyjoy, for your unwavering allegiance to the crown and for your valiant efforts in purging the insurrection precipitated by your own family, I bestow upon you the lordship of the Iron Islands."

That declaration left many individuals in that room stunned. None was more stunned that Victarion Greyjoy himself. He gradually looked up at the stag king and murmured haltingly "Your Grace…?"

"No, you have not misheard, Lord Victarion," Robert cheekily remarked, "The Seastone Chair is yours now."

"But my nephews…" Victarion began.

"Cannot rule the Islands as captives," Robert finished for him, "Especially in their current predicaments. To remove all questions of inheritance, I'll have them removed from your house's line of succession. Or, I could have them placed in line behind you, if that is what you wish."

"I would prefer the latter," Victarion disclosed, "At least until I have an heir of my own."

"Very well," Robert conceded. He then extended his hand and bade the Iron Captain, "Rise, my lord."

Victarion took the king's hand, allowing him to full him back to his feet. Robert then turned to face everyone else there. He held Victarion's hand high in the air and pronounced resolutely "I give you the new Lord of the Iron Islands, Victarion Greyjoy!"

That declaration was met with almost unanimous approval. All the Ironborn present drew their weapons and bent their knees to Victarion. Everyone else loudly and energetically cheered for him. As for Victarion… he just stood absolutely still, as if paralyzed in disbelief.

He had always wanted the Seastone Chair, but never once did he think it would ever be his. Now it was.

*Some good came from this rebellion, after all.*

Although he was now the Lord Paramount of the Iron Islands, Victarion still wished to remain in the Legion without Banners for a while longer. Of course, it would be extremely difficult for him to rule the Islands from the mainland. Fortunately, Lord Gregor Clegane offered a solution. He suggested that Victarion appoint a steward to run the Islands in his absence.

Victarion found that strategy a favorable one. He spent the better part of an hour determining who would be his steward.

*I'll need someone highborn, obviously.*

Although he had been away for years, Victarion still knew the names of the heads of all the families on the Iron Islands. Several of them, such as Lord Baelor of House Blacktyde, Lord Sawane of House Botley, and Lord Gorold of House Goodbrother, had long yearned for peace between the Islands and the Seven Kingdoms. Many of them had served since the days of Quellon Greyjoy's reign, and they still believed in his policies just as strongly as Victarion did.

In the end, Victarion chose Lord Rodrik of House Harlaw. Known as the Reader by his compatriots due to his profound love of books, Rodrik Harlaw was an intelligent, reasonable, and cautious individual. He was also the brother of Balon Greyjoy's wife, which made him Victarion's brother-
by-law. Lord Gregor Clegane had also taken steps to ensure that Lord Rodrik's sons were captured alive and returned to Harlaw unmolested.

Victarion was confident he could trust Rodrik Harlaw to maintain the peace and uphold the integrity of the Islands while he was gone. He sent a raven presenting this offer to Lord Rodrik, and before the day was out, he received a response. To his satisfaction, the Reader had accepted the responsibility eagerly and with grace.

Soon after this, the Royal Army returned to their ships and departed from the Islands.

Lord Gregor Clegane and the other Legionnaires sailed back on the Iron Victory at Victarion's personal invitation. Victarion met with the Mountain in secret and thanked him profusely for all he had done for the Ironborn. Gregor asserted that there was no need for thanks; he had simply acted out of the best interests of everyone in Westeros.

_Just like he always does._

Victarion also approached Lord Gregor on the subject of the song Nute the Barber had picked up from him. He revealed that he was curious to know more lyrics of that song. Gregor Clegane claimed that he was more than willing to share the full song with him. He claimed there were a few verses that needed to be "tweaked," whatever that meant. He needed a few minutes to do this, and when he was finished, he presented the abridged song to Victarion and everyone else on the ship.

The song proved rather popular with the crew and the passengers. As a matter of fact, every single person onboard the Iron Victory sang the full, modified version of "Anchors Aweigh" for the entire voyage back to the Westerlands.
Signs Of Adjusting

Chapter Notes

Note: Longest chapter yet. Hope the extra length does not bother you, as it may not be very exciting. There is not as much action in this one as there was in the last three, but it will contain a fair amount of character development. Also, this chapter focuses more on the family dynamic, as well as how it drives the people of Westeros. You also get to see the beginning stages of a new conflict; one even more complex and dangerous than Greyjoy's Rebellion.

It had been over four months since the Ironborn Fleet attempted to burn the Westerlander ships at Lannisport. Three and a-half months since King Robert Baratheon declared war on the Ironmen. Two months since the sea battles off Seagard and Fair Isle. Less than one month since the siege of Pyke.

Now, the insurrection known as Greyjoy's Rebellion was over. The result: a decisive tactical victory for the Royal Army. Balon Greyjoy would be sent to the wall, his three sons would be wards of the crown, and his brother Victarion was the new Lord of the Iron Islands.

That was all the information that had reached the mainland of Westeros. The specific details, such as who had endured and who had perished, had not yet been released. Some saw this as a blessing, as they could not bear receiving news that any of their loved ones had fallen in the fighting. Others, however, would wish to be told straightaway. To them, silence was worse than no news at all.

Alas, they had no sway on when the news would arrive. So until it did, they would have to tolerate this silence.

Ellaria Sand had come to terms with the silence long ago. Every time her lover needed to employ his combat expertise elsewhere, she did not protest. Sometimes he could afford to bring her along. Normally, he did so whenever he was simply required to settle a dispute nonviolently. But whenever his errands involved straight-up fighting, she opted to remain behind. So she had not joined Prince Oberyn or her stepdaughters when they set sail with the other royalist soldiers.

Instead, she lingered at Clegane's Keep. There she looked after her own daughters, as well as the children of the other parents in the Legion without Banners.

Ellaria was with Lady Daliah Clegane and her daughter Ellyn in the keep's nursery when they were visited by Maester Velix. He revealed to them that a message had just arrived; a message from the king. He read it aloud, informing them of the Royal Army's triumph over the Ironborn. The Royal Army would be coming back to the mainland eminently.

Furthermore, the King had proposed for a tourney to be held in Lannisport in celebration of their victory. The majority of the royalist soldiers would stay camped at or near Casterly Rock. However, House Clegane's retainers had been granted the exclusive privilege of returning home before the tourney. Lord Gregor Clegane and the other Legionnaires would be accompanying them. They were due to arrive within one day of the raven that carried this message to Clegane's Keep.

That's the best news I've heard all year.
After sharing this news with his lady and Ellaria, Maester Velix went to share it with Ser Tarrence Clegane, whom he had been seeing a lot more of ever since he diagnosed him with palsy.

Ser Tarrence's condition was still a secret to all but his family and his family's closest allies. Oberyn and Ellaria were counted amongst those in the latter category, given their close friendship with Gregor Clegane.

From what Ellaria could gather, she had done much to lessen Lady Daliah Clegane's prejudices towards bastards. In fact, after spending so much time with Lord Harmen Uller's baseborn daughter, Daliah thought of Ellaria Sand as a dear friend.

So there are some decent Westerlander women. What a pleasant surprise.

After Maester Velix left to find her husband, Daliah walked over to the center of the nursery. There her grandson Rickard was playing with Ellaria's girls, Elia and Obella. Daliah Clegane – who would once have sneered at the very thought of her own sons mingling with bastards – smiled at the sight of how well her grandson was getting along with two of the Sand Snakes. That in turn made Ellaria smile.

Just then, Daliah gently picked Rickard up and cradled him in her arms. Rickard giggled and welcomed his grandmother's warm embrace. As she held him close, she whispered softly "Your father's coming home, sweetling."

"And his mother," Ellaria added in coyly.

"Of course," Daliah conceded with a light chuckle, "Never forget her."

I don't think anyone is likely to forget the woman who set the record for the largest babe ever born.

Rickard Clegane was entering his twenty-first month. According to Lady Daliah's claims, he was still not as large as his father had been at that age, but he was still much bigger than average. Seeing Rickard next to her eldest daughter, Ellaria could confirm that herself.

Elia Sand had seen roughly thirty-nine months, eighteen more than Rickard. Yet the two of them were roughly the same size. In addition to that, Obella Sand was only two months younger than Rickard, but she was tiny compared to him. She would grow, of course.

But not at the rate "little" Rickard has.

At one point, Obella got up off the ground and toddled over to her mother. When she got to Ellaria, she smiled up at her. Most of her primary teeth had grown in. Only the secondary molars had yet to appear. So the smile was complete.

It's a beautiful smile, nonetheless.

Ellaria was sitting down at this time. She reached down, picked up her younger daughter, and set her on her lap. Obella was still at the age where she craved her mother's attention. Elia had nearly grown out of that phase, but she still thoroughly enjoyed her mother's attention.

I hope she always does.

In Ellaria's mind, she had the two most wonderful children anyone could ask for. Granted, many mothers thought the same of their own. Still, Ellaria felt Elia and Obella were everything she could ever want.
That was not to say she did not truly want more, or at least the possibility of more.

As she held her younger girl close, Ellaria wondered if Oberyn would be interested in having a third child someday. He already had six (or seven, as far as the rest of the country knew), but he done what most fathers of baseborn children had not. He had acknowledged each of them as his, and he had gone to great lengths to win full custody of them from their mothers. Except in the case of Elia and Obella, of course. Because of her status as his lover, he and Ellaria shared custody of his two youngest girls. Maybe they would someday share custody of three. Or four. Or even more…

*I should speak to Oberyn on this when he returns to me.*

A couple minutes after Obella came to her, Ellaria noted Rickard Clegane stand up. For some reason, his legs were quite shaky. She watched as he made his way over to his grandmother and tugged on her dress. He said a little anxiously "Grandma… Grandma…"

Daliah Clegane looked down at her grandson and stated curiously "Yes, Rick?"

That was what his parents often called him. As such, Lady Daliah had agreed to address him by that way, as well.

"Have to… have to…" Rickard began haltingly.

Ellaria was a bit bewildered and concerned by the young boy's actions. Then she saw that only one of his hands was griping his grandmother's gown. His other hand, he held near the top of his trousers. Additionally, he was squirming in place.

Straightaway, Ellaria knew what the trouble was. Luckily, so did Lady Daliah. She grinned down at Rickard kindly, took his outstretched hand in hers, and told him "Very well, let's go."

The two of them went over to the privy in the adjoining room. Daliah beckoned Rickard to enter first, and she stepped in after him. She made certain to shut the door.

Ellaria soon heard the sound of liquid striking metal. It started as a stream, but it gradually faded to trickling, and then it disappeared altogether. That noise was soon followed by water being splashed in a wash-basin.

*He remembered to wash his hands. Very good.*

Ellaria next heard Daliah say "Stand still, dearest."

*She must be helping him refasten his trousers.*

"Yes, Grandma," Rickard affirmed. Ellaria's supposition was proven true a moment later, when he added in "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Daliah said plainly.

There was a slight pause. Then the door to the privy opened, and Rickard and his grandmother remerged.

As Rickard went back to playing with Elia, Ellaria asked curiously "How'd it go?"

Daliah looked to the Dornishwoman, smirked, and stated merrily "I think he's nearly mastered the chamber pot."
"Good for him," Ellaria commented, grinning back. She gazed down at Obella after that. As she brushed her daughter's hair, she thought aloud "As I recall, that's usually a rather messy affair."

"Not this time, thankfully," Daliah wryly remarked.

"That's fortunate," Ellaria pronounced, "I taught Elia how to use the chamber pot easily enough, and Obella is learning quickly, as well. But I can imagine male children would have… more room for 'error.'"

Daliah Clegane scoffed and muttered "You'd be correct. That was the case with Sandor."

"What about Gregor?" Ellaria enquired. Again, she was genuinely interested. Although she and Oberyn had been friends with the Mountain for years, they still knew very little about his childhood. For whatever reason, he seemed unwilling or reluctant to discuss it with anyone. But his continuous refusal to divulge anything about his early years only made the Red Viper and his paramour more determined to find out about him.

It was at that moment that Ellaria realized that she had the next best source of information on Gregor Clegane's early life: the one who had primarily carried for him during those years.

Why did that not occur to me before now? I could have asked Lady Daliah about Gregor's life months ago.

At least she had this realization before Oberyn and Gregor returned. Now once they got back, she would know something one of them did not, and something the other did not know she knew.

Ellaria had to resist the urge to smile deviously.

A few seconds later, she was able to. That was when she saw the expression on Daliah's face.

Daliah folded her hands over her stomach, and she revealed "Actually… it wasn't so difficult with Gregor. It was surprisingly easy, as a matter of fact."

"You mean training Gregor to use the privy was a simple affair?" Ellaria presumed.

Daliah nodded her head and informed her "After the first lesson, he seemed to understand the process straightaway. He didn't even require a… demonstration."

Ellaria lightly nodded her head in acknowledgment. Then another thought entered her mind. She asked the elder woman "How old was he at the time?"

"He had not even seen seventeen moons," Daliah Clegane disclosed, "Interestingly, a few months before even that, he was able to clothe himself."

"That's rather unusual," Ellaria observed.

"Yes, but Gregor managed it," Daliah recounted, "In fact, even as a babe, he matured at any alarmingly fast rate. He said his first word when he was closer to his birth than to his first nameday. He spoke in complete sentences very shortly after his first nameday. He was weaned in his fourteenth month. He could walk without stumbling in his sixteenth. And he hardly ever cried."

Ellaria whistled at that. "It sounds as though he was the ideal babe."

"At the time, he certainly seemed so," Daliah expounded, "But there was something that always perplexed me. It was not the fact that he grew out of infancy sooner than the average babe. It was..."
the fact that he almost seemed… eager to grow out of it."

"You mean on a subconscious level?" Ellaria supposed.

"No, not just subconsciously," Daliah clarified, "Even when awake, I was under the impression that Gregor physically desired the ability to communication, move independently, and feed and care for himself."

Now Ellaria was baffled. "Forgive me if I sound impertinent, my lady, but you seem to be implying that Gregor was… already aware of the world when you could hold him in one arm."

"You are not out of line, Ellaria," Daliah asserted, "That truly is what I believe. From the day I brought Gregor into this world, I was convinced that he was smarter and wiser than any babe had a right to be. Whenever his name was mentioned, he would give his attention to whoever said it."

Ellaria must have looked very astonished, for Daliah told her next "I know; it sounds ludicrous. For the longest time, I keenly denied it all myself. But now, I can assure you everything I say is the truth. I honestly believe there is a distinct possibility that Gregor understood and comprehended his surroundings from the moment he drew his first breath."

Ellaria thought on that concept, and after a minute, she murmured "That... would be nightmarish. I mean, if one could not only remember, but also fully grasp the entirety of one's life... I don't like to think on what effect that might have. The experience would be both unimaginable and unbearable."

"To say the least," Daliah coincided, "Even so, allow me to set your mind at ease, if you will. As of yet, there is no firm proof that Gregor actually was conscious of the world as a babe. All the same, as hard as I try to, I cannot think of any way to negate that he was, either. So until I can arrive at a definite conclusion, I cannot wholly ignore my theory."

_I can relate to that mindset._

"Does anyone else know of your theory?" Ellaria enquired in interest.

"I have shared it with several others," Daliah Clegane illuminated, "None of them found it very plausible."

"What of your husband?" Ellaria Sand contended, "Or the maester?"

Daliah shook her head and disclosed "Tarrence and Velix strongly contested my claims, as well. They have dismissed them as nothing more than 'motherly intuition.'"

Ellaria released a heavy sigh and mumbled "I cannot claim to be surprised. Men are often so irritatingly ignorant."

"Indeed," Daliah concurred, "Alas, we do not live in a world where our sex has the better say."

_Unless that 'world' includes Dorne. Or Moat Cailin. Otherwise, that grim observation is incontestably true._

Ellaria felt that this conversation was rapidly becoming uncomfortable for Lady Daliah. It certainly was for her. As such, she elected to change the topic.

She smiled lightly and stated "In any case, I'd like to make an observation, my lady."

"What sort of observation?" Daliah Clegane queried curiously.
"It is often said that the first child is the hardest," Ellaria pointed out, gazing over at Elia, and then looking back down at Obella, "That was how it was for me. I assume it was not that way for you?"

"Indeed it was not," Daliah confirmed, grinning slyly, "For me, my first child was by far the easiest to raise. My second was slightly more difficult, and the third and final one was an absolute chore."

At that time, Ellyn Clegane was in the nursery. She was playing a game of cyvasse with Joy Hill, Ser Gerion Lannister's daughter. Ellyn was about to position her elephants so that they would flank Joy's dragon. Then she would have the younger girl cornered.

But before she could make her move, she heard her mother's last remark. She could tell that her mother was somewhat joking. Even so, she turned to Lady Daliah and glared at her. Her countenance suggested she was quite unamused. She uttered in a very sardonic voice "It happens that I'm right here, Mother."

Daliah Clegane chuckled at her daughter's reaction to her words. She stated in a reassuring tone "I am only being partly serious, Ellie."

"On which part?" Ellyn inquired.

"Well, you were a bit of a handful," Daliah claimed, "Your brothers can attest to that."

"Of course they can; they were there," Ellyn debated, "Whereas I wasn't even around until well after they were babes. They remember the earliest part of my life better than I ever will, but I have no way of knowing that what they tell me is the truth. That's a disadvantage I have to put up with. I mean, I'm the only one in this family with no memory of any other member's infancy."

"Not so, my dear," Ellaria countered, gesturing to Rickard Clegane in the center of the room. "Rickard does not count," Ellyn disputed, "He's been in the North for most of his life. He's hardly even an infant anymore. Apart from that, Gregor and Dacey could always have another child."

They probably will. I am almost certain they will.

"I know how you must feel, darling," Daliah proclaimed, "All your aunts and uncles are older than I. I know full well how challenging it can be to be the youngest in the family."

"Being the youngest is not what troubles me, Mother," Ellyn murmured, gazing off to the side, "It's... well..."

Ellaria could tell that Ellyn was upset. Out of concern, she asked the tall girl "Ellyn, is something bothering you?"

"No, not really, Ellaria," Ellyn claimed, staring down at the floor. After some quietness, she looked back up and uttered softly "Well, actually, yes."

"Tell us what troubles you," Daliah beseeched her daughter, "Please."

After a little more silence, Ellyn slowly turned to Lady Daliah and said inquisitively (and worriedly) "Mother, am I really a burden to you?"

Daliah looked downright flabbergasted at that. "I never said you were anything of the sort."

"You said I was a 'chore'," Ellyn reminded her
"That was just a jape," Daliah insisted, "A very poor jape; I see that now."

"I know it was a jape," Ellyn pronounced, "But the jape itself is not what bothers me."

"Then what is?" Daliah Clegane asked her daughter.

"You might call it… a feeling of inadequacy," Ellyn vaguely answered.

"Inadequacy?" her mother repeated, baffled.

Ellyn opened her mouth to speak again, but this time, nothing came out. It was here that her motivation and desire to continue this conversation must have declined. Eventually, she did talk, but all she said was "Oh, never mind. Please, let's not go on with this. I was merely being too sensitive about all this."

Ellaria was in no way convinced that the tall girl's sensitivity was the sole motive behind her outburst. Lady Daliah did not seem convinced, either. The latter assuredly told her daughter "Are you certain, sweetling? I'm your mother; you can tell me anything."

"Perhaps some other time," Ellyn proposed, "I do not wish to cause a conflict to arise. We've already won one war. No need to start another so soon."

That was when Lady Daliah agreed not to force the issue. "As you wish, Ellie."

Daliah may have been content not to discuss this topic anymore. Ellaria, however, could tell what Ellyn's problem was right then. Her so-called "feeling of inadequacy" evidently stemmed from the insecurity often felt by the youngest child in the family.

I wonder if Lady Daliah realizes that Ellyn is jealous of her brothers. Oh, she loves them; no doubt of that. But it's very probable she wants to be them, too.

In that one afternoon, Ellaria learned more about Ser Tarrence Clegane's children than she had during her entire stay at Moat Cailin. She had found answers to some questions, but so many more questions had been raised, as well. She decided she would simply meditate on what she had learned for a while before she looked for any more explanations.

The following morning, before daybreak, the Royal Fleet came within sight of Lannisport. By dawn, all their ships were garrisoned in the harbor. By midmorning, virtually all the soldiers had disembarked onto the docks. They spent the remainder of the morning and part of the afternoon returning to their camps in the fields between Casterly Rock and Clegane's Keep.

In the early afternoon, House Clegane's units and the units from the Legion without Banners could be seen approaching Clegane's Keep in the distance. Ser Tarrence, Lady Daliah, and Ellyn Clegane all stood at the front of the keep, eagerly awaiting the return of the Mountain and the Hound. Daliah currently held Rickard in her arms. Ellaria Sand was there, as well. She held Obella in her arms, and Elia was standing near her feet, as was Joy Hill.

Just before one o'clock, the Legionnaires and the Clegane soldiers reached the keep. Once again, Gregor rode at the very head of the column. Alongside him were Dacey Mormont, Oberyn Martell, Victarion Greyjoy, Gerion Lannister, Allard Seaworth, and Smalljon Umber. Ellaria noted Garth Hightower was missing from the top Legionnaires' ranks.

Isn't that curious?

As before, Gregor was the first to enter the grounds of the keep, and the first to dismount. His
captains and lieutenants followed him straight after; the rest of the Legionnaires remained ahorse outside the walls.

Once the Mountain was on his feet, he strode over to his parents, his sister, and his son. There he removed his helm and held it under his armpit. He gave Ser Tarrence a respectful bow, kissed Lady Daliah a kiss on the forehead, and hugged Ellyn warmly. He gave his regards to Ellaria and her daughters, and then he turned his attention to Rickard.

"Hello, dada!" the little boy said excitedly.

Daliah Clegane gently passed her grandson over to her eldest. The Mountain had a very strong grip, but he was delicate with his son. After placing a kiss on the top of Rickard's head, Gregor said to his mother "I hope he was on his best behavior."

"No trouble at all," Daliah reassured him.

A proper gentleman, like his father.

It was then that Dacey joined her husband and his family. The moment she saw Rickard, she broke into a wide smile, and he smiled back.

"Mama!" he joyously remarked.

Dacey reached out for Rickard, and Gregor carefully transferred their son to her arms. She embraced him tightly, as though it was the last time she would hold him. She told him softly "Mummy missed you, Rick."

This display of affection brought warm feelings to Ellaria's heart. Dacey Mormont may have been fiercer and gruffer than most Westerosi women, but at times, she could be very caring and tender. Ellaria always admired such unconditional love.

The reunions were not limited to the Cleganes. Just then, Joy Hill ran to her father, and Ser Gerion Lannister embraced her affectionately.

A moment later, Oberyn Martell came to Ellaria and their two daughters. He hugged both Elia and Obella, and he gave their mother a kiss on the lips. A very passionate, elongated kiss. It was insufficient in conveying just how much the prince had missed her, but Ellaria did not mind.

He’ll be able to properly show me how he longed for me tonight.

Smalljon Umber, Allard Seaworth, and Victarion Greyjoy had no immediate family there. So they just stood off to the side as their colleagues reunited with their relations.

"So, I hear you're now the liege lord of the Iron Islands," Tarrence Clegane called out to Victarion.

"You've heard correctly, good ser," the Iron Captain affirmed, "It was the king's way of repaying my devotion to the crown."

"I'd say you've earned it, my lord," Ellaria commented.

"Thank you, my… Ellaria," Victarion said in response, remembering at the last moment that Ellaria hated to be addressed as "lady."

"Your Ellaria?" Oberyn humorously muttered.

"Oh, let him be," Ellaria beckoned her lover.
Ellyn then stepped up and asked "Where is Garth Greysteel?"

That was the alias Lord Leyton Hightower's second son normally went by.

"He was killed at Fair Isle," Allard Seaworth grimly informed the others, "I wasn't there when he died, though."

"It happens that I was," Gerion Lannister disclosed, "I saw it with my own eyes. One of Lord Gregor's black powder pouches did the deed."

"I thought Ser Wallis was managing the black powder, and Ser Garth was monitoring him," Lady Daliah recalled.

"He was, my lady," Smalljon Umber confirmed, "Alas, Wallis Peckledon was slain in battle. He was down to his last pouch, which had already been lit before he died. Ser Garth tried to dispose of it, but it went off before he could."

That was an even more astounding revelation. Ser Tarrence said in astonishment "Ser Wallis is dead?"

"Arrow to the throat," Gerion Lannister responded.

Ser Tarrence sighed in frustration. Ellaria could hardly blame him; Wallis Peckledon had been the master-at-arms of Clegane's Keep for over two decades. He would be mourned by those who knew him, and replacing him would not be easy.

"Did you bring Ser Wallis' bones back?" Tarrence Clegane asked the Legionnaires.

"Of course we did," Dacey answered him.

"Good," her father-by-law stated appreciatively, "They need to be sent back to his family's ancestral home. I also need to write to Lord Peckledon, expressing my sincerest condolences for the death of his eldest nephew."

"Very well," Gregor agreed, "We'll be sending Greysteel's remains back to Oldtown, as well. Along with an official apology for Lord Leyton."

A somber silence came over that vicinity. It lasted about thirty seconds. Then Gregor announced "There is some good news, though."

"What?" Ellyn asked her brother.

"The Ironborn vessels at Fair Isle were commanded by Euron Greyjoy," Gregor disclosed, "His galley, the Silence, is infamous for its vast horde of treasures stolen from the lands beyond the Narrow Sea. Lord Tywin offered possession of those treasures to any man who managed to successfully apprehend or slay the Crow's Eye. Now he is dead. Guess who did the deed?"

"You?" Ellaria assumed.

"Close," Gregor told her, smirking.

The answer came to nearly everyone straight away. Tarrence assumed eagerly "Sandor killed him?"

"He did," Gerion validated that presumption, "Originally, I thought to be the one to eliminate the Crow's Eye. I almost lost my arm in the process. I risked losing even more, but Sandor saved my
life. Now because of him, I still draw breath and Euron Greyjoy is a rotting corpse."

"Good for Sandor," Ellaria remarked in amazement.

"Good for all of us," Gregor corrected her, "He and I made a deal. If either of us take out the Crow's Eye, we would split the wealth."

"Fair enough," Tarrence Clegane perceived. After a short pause, he asked "Do you know when Sandor will be here?"

"Soon; very soon," Oberyn Martell proclaimed, "He is bringing in the treasures taken from the Silence. Naturally, the goods are under heavy guard. My daughters are assisting him with the convoy."

"They should be here momentarily," Allard Seaworth contended.

Tarrence and Daliah smiled and nodded in acknowledgment. Their smiles faded slightly when they saw the uneasy look on the Mountain's face.

"Gregor?" Daliah said worriedly.

"There is… something else you should know," Gregor uneasily revealed.

"What?" Tarrence inquired apprehensively.

"It may be better if Sandor showed you himself," was all their firstborn son told them in response.

"Showed?" Ellaria noted.

"Or told, depending on how you wished to be informed," Gregor muttered solemnly.

*Neither option sounds very favorable.*

Ten minutes later, three more horses rode through the gate of Clegane's Keep. They were followed by a dozen heavy-laden carts, which were surrounded protectively by no less than a hundred Legionnaires and Clegane's Keep soldiers.

The riders on the right and the left were both young women clad in leather armor. The one with the spear was Obara Martell; the one with the whip was Nymeria Martell.

The middle rider was wearing a cloak with the hood drawn over his head. His head was tilted so that his face was totally invisible to anyone on the ground. But based on his height and the massive black destrier he rode, he could only be Sandor Clegane.

The Hound and the two former Sand Snakes remained astride their mounts as they approached the large group that had already assembled in the courtyard. Sandor stopped when he was five feet from his family. Beneath his hood, he smiled at them and declared "Father, Mother, Ellyn, I come bearing gifts."

He then gestured at the carts behind him and continued with "These are the exploits I earned from my triumph over Balon Greyjoy's treacherous brother. Half of them are ours now. The other half belongs to Gregor."

"We know," Tarrence proclaimed, looking over the treasure carts in fascination, "He told us of your agreement."
Sandor nodded his head to acknowledge that statement.

Daliah Clegane was not as interested in the carts as her husband. She was far more intrigued by her younger son’s current appearance.

"Sandor… why is your face concealed?" Daliah asked nervously.

Sandor did not answer straightaway. Instead, he looked to his brother.

"We told them," Gregor revealed.

"How much?" the Hound requested.

"Just that something happened," the Mountain elaborated, "I felt you should be the one to tell them what that 'something' is."

Sandor let out a sigh and conceded "Yes, I suppose that's best."

It was then that the younger Clegane son got off his horse. He gradually came closer to his parents and sister. Gregor stayed close by. Ellaria and everyone else there watched him intently.

Even on the ground, Sandor's face was hidden in shadow.

"Just what happened at Fair Isle?" Tarrence questioned in an almost demanding tone.

"My victory over the Crow's Eye came at a price," Sandor ambiguously declared.

"What price?" Daliah inquired, her voice dripping with worry.

For a moment, Sandor just stood there, not moving a muscle. Then he sighed once more, took ahold of his hood with both hands, and threw it back.

*Oh, Seven help him…*

... 

Most young girls would likely shriek at the sight of a man with a deformed face. Even if said man was her elder brother.

That was not the case with Ellyn Clegane. When she saw Euron Greyjoy's mark on her brother Sandor's face, she did not scream. She was stunned, but she did not scream.

"What did he do to you?" Ellyn muttered quietly.

"The Crow's Eye tried to burn my head," Sandor illuminated, "In response, I planted my dagger in his neck twice."

*Now that's what I call retaliation.*

Ellyn's mother did not share her composed reaction. By contrast, Lady Daliah Clegane appeared to be in shock. Sandor noticed her discomfort, and he told her "If you wish to scream, Mother, go ahead. I would not blame you if you do."

To some, that comment may have seemed mocking. Sandor was known for his bluntness and occasional lack of tact, but he was not trying to be disrespectful or insensitive when he made those two statements.
At any rate, Mother did not scream, either. But if she did, it would not have been out of fear. Instead, it would have been out of horror for what had happened to her son.

Amidst an unpleasant quietness, Ellyn observed Mother as she stepped up to Sandor. When she stopped, she slowly lifted her left hand and moved it up to his head. Sandor remained silent and motionless as his mother lightly tapped the tips of her fingers against his scar.

*He doesn't so much as flinch.*

"Does… does that hurt?" she asked in concern.

*You probably should have asked before you touched it.* Ellyn did not say that aloud, of course. She was not indifferent to her mother's grief.

All the same, Sandor firmly shook his head and revealed "The right half of my face is completely numb. The maester who treated me claimed that feeling will eventually return to it. But the damage to my skin cannot be undone."

Maester Velix was in the company of House Clegane retainers assembled in the courtyard. Father beckoned him to come forward and inquired "Maester, what say you to that?"

"My colleague was correct in his diagnosis," Velix dismally informed his master as he looked over Sandor's wound, "The numbness will subside, but the scar, I'm afraid, is permanent."

At that, Mother finally broke down. She pulled Sandor close and embraced him as though he was on his deathbed. She sobbed loudly into his breastplate. Sandor said nothing; he merely wrapped his arms around his mother and held her tenderly, all the while letting her weep onto his shoulder.

Ellyn was inclined to try to comfort her mother, but she chose not to intercede just yet. She would wait until Mother moved away from Sandor. That turned out to be a prudent choice on her part.

Eventually, Mother regained her composure and forced herself to let go of Sandor. She was still crying, but most of her tears had been spent. She wiped her eyes with a handkerchief, and she mumbled glumly "I'm so… so sorry, Sandor."

"Mother, you did not cause this," Sandor attempted to reassure her, "You were nowhere near Fair Isle when I faced the Crow's Eye. You did not participate in the fighting, nor did you push my head into that fire. You have no reason to apologize. And there was nothing you could have done to prevent this."

"There was something I could have done," Tarrence Clegane debated, apparently cross with himself, "I could have led the troops. I could stopped Euron Greyjoy."

"In your condition, Father?" Ellyn whispered so that only those who were immediately around them – which were the Cleganes and the Martells – could hear.

"Ell is correct," Sandor conceded, "The Crow's Eye could have killed you, Father. You may have fought as valiantly as I, but the risk to your safety would have been too great. I am not that eager to succeed you. Especially when you're so close to getting your lifelong wish."

Father raised an eyebrow in bewilderment. "What wish would that be?"

"Lord Tywin has all but decided to go through with his proposal to raise this house to lordly status," Gregor announced.
That produced a fair deal of muttering from the assembled crowds. Father uttered gleefully "He has?"

"Indeed so," Sandor confirmed, "We'll know his final verdict on the issue sometime before the tourney at Lannisport begins. That will be about a month from now."

"That is wonderful," Father stated, stepping forward and patting Ellyn's brother on the back. "Very good work, Sandor. You've done well."

"I just do what I can, Father," Sandor casually remarked, smiling. Oddly enough, when he smiled, his face looked a little less deformed.

*Maybe now he'll smile more often.*

Ellyn then noticed Mother did not seem to share Father's joy. As a matter of fact, she appeared somewhat outraged at his happiness.

"Your son has been mutilated beyond hope of recovery, and all you care about is that you may become a lord soon?" she snapped angrily.

Father was alarmed by that outburst. Ellyn, Sandor, and Gregor were quite stunned, as well. They had all seen their parents argue on many occasions, but Mother had never raised her voice to Father like that.

Ellyn knew that Father would not tolerate that sort of insolence from anyone at Clegane's Keep, least of all his lady wife. But he made an effort not to seem unruly in front of the present company. He murmured through gritted teeth "Of course not. I am pleased that Sandor has secured a great deal of wealth and the almost-official guarantee of lordship for this house. But that will not be sufficient to distract me from the suffering he endured to acquire those benefits. Nothing would ever make me immune to that."

"By your behavior, you could have convinced us otherwise," Mother snapped in fury.

"Mother, I very much appreciate your concern," Sandor claimed, gently placing a hand on Mother's arm, "But I do not wish for this scar to be the cause of any conflict, particularly amongst my own family. I already got justice and revenge when I buried my knife in the Crow's Eye's neck. Perhaps you can take some comfort from that."

"I believe I can," Mother admitted, calming down considerably "But do you mean to say that you've already come to accept having this scar for the rest of your days?"

At that, Sandor shook his head and disclosed "I don't suppose I'll ever fully accept it. But I have learned to live with it."

"That is what truly matters," a feminine voice interjected.

Ellyn and the other people on the ground looked in the direction of the voice. It belonged to Obara Martell, the woman who would soon be Ellyn's sister-by-law.

Prince Oberyn's oldest daughter had remained mounted on her horse, as had her sister Nymeria. It was at that moment that both of the Dornishwomen climbed off their mounts and joined the others on the ground. Nymeria stayed close to her horse whilst Obara stepped next to Sandor.

The former Sand Snake then took Mother's hand in hers and proclaimed "I cannot pretend to understand how you must feel, my lady. I do not, and – at the risk of sounding selfish – I hope I
"I hope you never have to know it either, child," Mother claimed softly.

Ellyn noticed there were still a few tears in Mother's eyes. Obara gently wiped them away, and then she declared "When I first saw Sandor's scar, I was just as shocked as you are now. He was not the least bit receptive of it, either. But I persuaded him to look at his scar differently."

"Differently how?" Ellyn enquired. She got her answer immediately.

Obara kept one of her hands interlocked with Mother's. Then she turned to Sandor and delicately placed her other hand on his burn. After that, she gazed around the area and announced "I have no way of knowing what form of anguish Sandor went through when Euron Greyjoy gave him it, but you must remember that it was he who survived that skirmish, not the Crow's Eye. I myself saw Sandor stab and kill his opponent… while his head was still in the flame. He overcame unspeakable pain to triumph over his adversary. A weaker man would have given up in his situation. Not he. He proved to be the strongest man in that battle. As such, I say that this scar is not a blemish to be pitied or scorned. It is a symbol of victory and hope. Those carts of treasure we brought in, Lord Tywin's newfound respect for House Clegane, this family's practically-guaranteed ascension to lordly status… we owe all of that to this scar."

For more than a minute after Obara's speech ended, the entire courtyard was struck by tense silence. Ellyn looked around and saw that many of the others were taken aback. In the good way. One could plainly tell that Obara Martell had greatly impressed everyone with her words. Oberyn Martell just smiled proudly at his daughter.

The quietness was ultimately broken by Ser Tarrence Clegane. He gazed at the assembled crowd and professed "My lady Obara Martell has the right of it. Sandor's scar was what won the battle of Fair Isle. For that, I declare he should be praised for the scar."

"Yes, he should," Mother quietly conceded. Her hand was still being held in Obara's. Her other hand was free, and she used it to wrap the former Sand Snake in a hug, much to Obara's surprise… and Ellyn's amusement.

Mother soon released the Dornishwoman and stated gratefully "Thank you, Obara."

"I only said what needed to be said, my lady," Obara decreed, smiling a bit.

"Nevertheless, not every woman can bring such comfort to her future mother-by-law," Mother contended, "I know that you will make a fine ruling lady in your own right one day."

"I thank you for your confidence," Obara stated appreciatively.

A moment later, Sandor stepped behind Obara. He placed his hands on her biceps and kissed her on the cheek. Mother, Father, and Gregor smiled at that. Ellyn tried not to roll her eyes.

Really? Do you have to be so open with her in public?

Sandor then turned to Mother and remarked "On that note, Mother… I wish to remind you that the tourney at Lannisport will not be for at least a month. A lot can be done in a turn of the moon."

He kept his hands on Obara's arms when he said that. He subtly gestured at his intended with a nod of his head. His family grasped the meaning of the gesture almost right away.
According to the ecstatic expression that had just appeared on Obara's face, Sandor was not the only "eager" one there.

"Well," Father thought aloud, "We were talking on conducting the ceremony sometime after Greyjoy's Rebellion ended. Prince Oberyn is here, and we have a large congregation nearby. There is plenty of food and wine on-hand, and there are bound to be minstrels somewhere in the Royal Army's camp. So... yes. I agree with you wholeheartedly, Sandor."

Sandor and Obara grinned widely and asked in unison "When?"

Father stood contemplating a reply for about twenty seconds. Then he folded his arms, grinned kindly, and announced "Three weeks from today, you two shall be joined together."

Sandor and Obara ardently nodded their acceptance. Then he turned her so that they faced each other, and they kissed passionately on the lips. That produced a large wave of cheers and applause from the assembly. Even Ellyn Clegane could not help but clap energetically for her brother and his betrothed.

The following three weeks, Clegane's Keep was busier than it had been since Gregor relocated to Moat Cailin. That by itself said something; the keep was three times larger than it had been in those days, and it housed five times as many soldiers and servants.

The rest of the Royal Army was preoccupied with the upcoming tourney. But that affair was of little importance to House Clegane. They were focused entirely on preparing Sandor and Obara's nuptials. Gregor and his Legionnaires planned to attend the tourney, but for those three weeks, they wasted no thought on it. They would wait until after the wedding to worry about the tourney.

Mother was principally in charge of all the arrangements. This was perhaps the only occasion where Father virtually relinquished total control of the keep to his lady wife. After how hard Mother had worked to prepare Gregor's wedding to Dacey at Moat Cailin, Ellyn could understand and respect Father's decision to do so.

Since Mother was the one primarily responsible for the wedding, she ensured that everything got done, and that everyone in the keep pitched in. Gregor handled security preparations. Dacey busied herself with guest accommodations. Ellaria Sand sent out invitations. Father assumed the position at the front of the receiving line. Smalljon Umber was made head of catering (how that happened, no one knew, but it turned out to be a good choice). Victarion Greyjoy selected the drinks. Allard Seaworth organized the gifts. Gerion Lannister monitored the funds.

Oberyn Martell was able to provide the cloak of his house. Obara and Nymeria were a little suspicious that he just "happened" to have the cloak with him. He innocently claimed that he believed in being prepared. His daughters and Ellyn doubted that, but even so, Obara was grateful to have the cloak.

Ellyn helped out when and where she could. Her mother mainly put her on the decoration committee. Like at Gregor and Dacey's wedding, the adornments of this one were relatively modest. There were plenty of banners that displayed the sigils of House Nymeros Martell and both branches of House Clegane. Apart from that, decoration were limited to some tapestries and various wall-hangings.

Mother also took it upon herself to stitch together a dress for Obara. Dacey's wedding gown had been made of silks and laces from the Free Cities. They had no such expensive and exotic materials
at Clegane's Keep, but Lady Daliah Clegane was able to make do with what they had.

Ellyn was there when Obara was being fitted for her bridal gown, as well as when she put it on for the first time. At first glance, Obara looked as though she detested the garment. Then again, after living with the former Sand Snake for nearly two years, Ellyn had surmised that she hated dresses in general. When Mother saw the look of disgust on Obara's face, she fretted that she had done something terribly wrong.

Obara's disgust hastily vanished, and she assured Mother that the gown was gorgeous. She reminded her that she had an aversion to all formalwear. However, she could tolerate this dress. While looking beautiful had never been one of her foremost concerns, she wanted to at least look beautiful for her wedding.

Mother became visibly relieved and elated when Obara admitted that she loved her bridal gown.

Nymeria had also been in the room when her sister first tried the dress, and she had teased her relentlessly for it. Obara attempted to disregard her younger sister's playful jeering, but after a while, it just flat-out annoyed her. Luckily, she got her vengeance when she told Nymeria "You could be in this same position one day. And when that happens... be afraid, little sister."

Ellyn all but guffawed at the subsequent expression that struck Nymeria's face. It was a mixture of realization and what appeared to be sheer terror. Those emotions could have been feigned, but even if they were, Ellyn could not resist the urge to snicker. Soon after, Obara joined the Clegane daughter in laughter. After a while, so did Nymeria. Then all was well between the two sisters once more. For the time being, of course.

The day before the wedding, nearly all the guests who had been invited to the wedding had sent a response. The majority of them were from the Westerlands, so they were able to attend.

That very night, Clegane's Keep received a response from a most unexpected invitee. It was from Lord Tywin Lannister himself.

Ellyn recalled reading somewhere that in all nine regions of Westeros, whenever a marriage was held by a house, it was traditional for the liege lord of that house's respective region to be invited to attend. Lord Tytos Lannister had attended nearly every wedding that occurred in the Westerlands during his reign. His eldest son was not so outgoing. He rarely went to any of his bannermen's weddings. Nonetheless, every time one of his vassals held a marriage, an invitation was sent to the lord of Casterly Rock as an act of courtesy.

This was one of the rare instances when he decided to accept the offer.

When word of this spread around the Keep, most of the people – including Father and Mother – were surprised, but thrilled. However, Ellyn noticed that everyone else was also surprised, but instead of being thrilled, they were skeptical.

Gregor and Dacey fell into the latter group. From what Ellyn could tell, they suspected Lord Tywin had an ulterior motive. She distinctly remembered overhearing a brief exchange of dialogue between the two of them.

"What do you suppose he's planning, my lord?" Dacey Mormont queried.

"I don't know, Dacey," Gregor admitted, "But I do not believe for a moment he is coming only to sample House Clegane's hospitality. He must have his own intentions for attending the wedding."

"Then we must be cautious whilst he's here," she proposed.
"We must be cautious always," he debated, "This is just one situation where we must be even more cautious than usual."

Ellyn ran off after that. She would have lingered to hear more, but she did not wish to be caught eavesdropping on her brother and his wife.

She found herself agreeing with their sentiment, however. It was possible that Lord Tywin actually did have something planned. Something unforeseen and unwanted. But she chose to push that to the back of her mind. Tomorrow was supposed to be a joyful event. It would do no good if anyone was distracted by what Lord Tywin might do when he arrived.

The next morning, the residents of Clegane's Keep awoke earlier than usual. They broke their fast even before the Sun rose. By the time the first rays of sunshine appeared over the eastern horizon, everyone was in the process of finishing up the final preparations for the ceremony.

The guests started to arrive very early in the day. Many of them were friends and acquaintances of Father and Mother, such as Stafford Lannister and Myranda Lefford, Damion Lannister and Shiera Crakehall, Darlessa Marbrand, and Gawen Westerling and Sybell Spicer.

When the Westerlings showed up, Gregor had gone out of his way to avoid making any form of contact with them. He was subtle in his evasion, but Ellyn was able to detect his distaste. She had a talent for noticing things that most others disregarded or thought unimportant.

For instance, she was aware of Gregor's profound disdain for House Westerling. She had realized that facet of his at a very young age. But she did not try to discuss it with him, as he never discussed it with anyone else. Even so, his deep-seated, unexplained hatred of one of the smallest houses in the Westerlands caught her interest. Later in life, she had discovered he held a similar loathing towards House Frey, House Bolton, House Whitehill, and several of the Ironborn houses. This was the same brother of hers who preached universal tolerance everywhere he went, yet he secretly abhorred quite a few individuals in Westeros.

There were several other occasions when Ellyn's shrewd observance served as a valuable asset. One such example was when Gregor moved to the North. Even before he broke the news to his family, Ellyn had surmised that something both good and bad would happen. A similar scenario had transpired when Sandor returned with a horde of wealth and a lengthy scar across his face. In that instance, she had conclude that something good and bad had already taken place. For all her life, Ellyn had been able to determine if she would receive good or bad news before she was even given it.

No one was aware of just how perceptive Ellyn Clegane truly was. That was because she had never told any other human being about it, and she had always done a fine job of keeping it a secret. She never shared the knowledge of her gift with anyone because she felt it made her special, and there was a possibility that it could get her in trouble. Most of all… she was not quite as sociable as her brothers.

Despite being one of the tallest and assertive females of her generation, Ellyn Clegane was more than a little shy. She preferred the company of her family and brothers to the company of other girls her age. Her bonding time with Obara Martell had made her less reluctant to socialize, but she still did not go out of her way to make friends.

But that did not mean she was without ambition or empathy.

That was the most unique aspect about Ellyn Clegane; there was something of a peculiar contradiction about her. While she never troubled herself with making friends, she had an internal
desire to positively impact those around her. In that (as well as height and strength), she was most similar to her brothers.

The difference was that their brothers already had made such an impression.

Gregor had been a recognized warrior throughout all of Westeros for the past five years (and in the Westerlands for even longer), and Sandor had been pivotal in ending the country's last war. Now both men were beloved and praised by the people of the Seven Kingdoms.

Meanwhile, Ellyn was known by few, and those that did know her only thought of her as the younger sister of the Mountain and the Hound.

Ellyn was content if no one actually knew her name. Due to her shy nature, she had never craved attention. Even so, she felt queerly inefficient, like she could be doing something noteworthy or for the good of others. Recently, her selfless yearning had led her to worry that she would never accomplish anything of the sort. Her brothers' celebrated deeds only intensified her insecurities.

That was the reason for Ellyn's outburst in the nursery three days earlier. On top of the knowledge that she had contributed practically nothing in comparison to Gregor and Sandor, the idea that she was actually a chore to others instead of a helpful person made her feel downright useless. She knew now that her mother had not meant to hurt her feelings, and she had forgiven her for implying that. Even so, Ellyn wondered constantly if she would ever be capable of greatness like her brothers.

The wedding preparations had helped to distract her from that envy. For the last three weeks, she had remained focused on making certain the ceremony and the feast were ready in every way possible. She had rarely given any thought to how she had done so little compared to her brothers.

By now, she had decided that her anxieties were unfounded, needless, and silly. If she was meant to do good things, then in time, she would. There was no need for her to wish a challenge would come her way before she was actually ready to face it.

Besides, today Sandor is the one facing a challenge

From what Ellyn had seen, marriage suited Gregor very well. It remained to be seen if it would do the same for Sandor. But from what she knew of his betrothed, Ellyn was convinced that he and Obara would make a wonderful couple.

In the late afternoon, the grand event took place at last.

The sept of Clegane's Keep was one of the many addendums that had been made to the keep in the past five years. It was about a quarter of the size of the Great Sept of Baelor in King's Landing; it could hold around two hundred individuals.

That many people had gathered there for the ceremony. The first row on the right was composed of the groom's family, meaning Ellyn, Mother, Father, Gregor, Dacey, and Rickard. The first row on the left was composed of the bride's family, meaning Nymeria, Ellaria, Elia, and Obella.

At the front of the sept, the keep's septon – a thin man named Ames – stood waiting with two other men. On his right stood the father of the bride, Oberyn Martell, clad in his traditional royal Dornish robes. On his left stood the groom, Sandor Clegane.

Sandor wore a leather doublet over a clean tunic, as well as a pair of ceremonial boots and a pair of starched trousers. The cloak of House Clegane of Clegane's Keep was draped over his shoulders.
His hair was combed back and tied in a small ponytail. From where he stood, the burnt half of his face was invisible to all but the prince and the septon. All the same, he no longer attempted to hide his burn. Instead, he displayed it shamelessly.

Before too long, the bride appeared. All eyes were on her as she gracefully went down the aisle.

All those who knew Obara – which included Ellyn – would normally have thought the sight of the spear-wielding former bastard in an elaborate gown as a comical one. But even the Clegane daughter had to admit that in this dress, she was absolutely stunning. Around her shoulders, she wore the cloak of her father's house: a golden spear impaling a red sun on an orange field.

Soon Obara Martell reached the front of the sept. There Prince Oberyn kissed her on both cheeks and carefully removed the orange cloak from her shoulders. With little prompting from Septon Ames, Obara turned her back to her intended, and he took his cloak of three dogs on a yellow off and meticulously placed it around hers.

Everything gradually fell into place after that. Septon Ames' traditional speech of unity and love, the tying of yellow and orange motley ribbon around the groom and bride's interconnected hands, the septon's blessing, and Sandor and Obara's vows to each other. It was a very similar routine to Gregor's wedding, only there was no mention of the Old Gods or anything pertaining to their worship.

Finally, they got to the part where the union was officially sanctioned. That was when Sandor placed both his hands on Obara's cheeks, announced "With this kiss, I pledge my love," and firmly pressed his lips against hers. The kiss was meant to be a short one, but Obara kept it going for nearly an entire minute. Sandor did not resist her (or he was unable to).

Apparently, the Dornish really have perfected the art of kissing.

There was applause and cheering; plenty of both. It seemed to last hours. At least it did to Ellyn. But eventually it did end, and after that came the festivities.

Like Gregor and Dacey's wedding, the feast for Sandor and Obara's took place outside their holdfast. The fields east of Clegane's Keep were more crowded than any part of the Royal Army's camp. The dais and trestle tables covered an area of approximately 10,000 square feet, and there was at least one person per every ten square feet. The Hound's wedding may not have been as big a deal to some as his brother's, but it had more than twice as many guests as the Mountain's.

Several officers and prominent men-at-arms of the Royal Army were in attendance. Ellyn's mother's father, Lord Lewys Lidden, was there with her aunts and uncles. And, as foretold, Tywin Lannister himself had come.

Lord Tywin had not been at the ceremony. He had waited until after the words were said to make his appearance.

His sudden arrival from seemingly nowhere had taken many by surprise. But Father was able to properly welcome the lion lord before his house lost face.

Out of respect, Lord Tywin was offered the seat of honor on the dais, which the Lord of Casterly Rock declined, claiming it belonged to Sandor and his new wife. However, he asked to give an announcement at the beginning and the end of the feast. No one dared to deny him that request. Apart from that, it was a reasonable one.

It was here that Ellyn began to share her eldest brother and sister-by-law's belief that Tywin
Lannister may have been there for a sinister purpose. He was being uncharacteristically benign to the other guests, many of which were his own bannermen. Ellyn had never actually met Tywin Lannister before that day, but she knew enough from Sandor to know that such behavior was not typical of him.

After the Cleganes and the Martells were seated on the dais, Lord Tywin was given a spot on it, as well. The lion lord called for wine, and after his goblet was filled, he stood up tall and straight. He raised his goblet and made his first announcement: "As you are undoubtedly aware, there are two branches of House Clegane. The branch in the North is considerably younger, but from the moment of its creation, it has been run by a lord. Whereas this branch is still led by a landed knight. Not long ago, House Clegane of Clegane's Keep had done nothing of worthy repute. But in time since the rebellion of our good King Robert, it has grown in power and influence. Its rate of growth is almost unprecedented, and one could debate it would merit some form of reward. The king and I have deliberated on this issue, and we have made a decision."

Lord Tywin kept holding his goblet in his right hand. With his left, he produced a scroll marked with the seal of House Lannister. He continued with "For everything the Westerlander branch of House Clegane has accomplished in the last five years – with especial emphasis on its achievements in the Ironborn rebellion – I decree that it has earned the right to be recognized as a noble house. Therefore, this very moment, effective immediately, I raise House Clegane of Clegane's Keep to lordly status."

Tywin Lannister gestured for the nearest servant to take the scroll and deliver it to Father. Between that moment and the moment when the scroll reached Father's hands, there was absolute silence. Once Father had the scroll, he gradually stood up, turned to face his liege lord, and proclaimed delightedly "I accept your declaration, my lord."

Lord Tywin then raised two toasts. The first was to Tarrence Clegane, lord of Clegane's Keep. The second was to the union between his heir, Sandor "The Hound" Clegane and Obara Martell, the future lord and lady of the keep. Ten thousands goblets were subsequently drained twice.

The first of the feast's three planned courses was served. It consisted mostly of Westerlander appetizers, but there were a number of Northern and Dornish hors d'oeuvres, as well. Smalljon Umber had evidently done his research.

While the first course ended, a troupe of mummers came out and did a dramatic reenactment of Greyjoy's Rebellion. All of the actors and actresses playing the soldiers of the royalist army were made to appear attractive and refined. On the other hand, most of the actors playing the Ironborn were made to look savage and unruly. But one of them – who was obviously meant to be Victarion – was handsome and civilized. By the end of the performance, he was the only actor playing an Ironborn left standing. Every other one was on the ground or on his knee.

The thespians earned a long wave of applause for their performance. Even Victarion was intrigued by the quality and attention to detail of the reenactment.

The mummers' entertainment was soon followed by the second and main course. This one had a much more diverse selection of food than the first course. Once again, Smalljon earned a pair amount of praise for his work.

Music began to play halfway during that course. By the end of the course, many couples where out on the space reserved for the dance floor. Among them were Father and Mother, Gregor and Dacey, and Sandor and Obara.

Ellyn would have been content to remain seated until the dancing ended. But someone else had
Near the start of the dancing, Tywin Lannister approached Ellyn and asked for a dance. Ellyn was taken aback, but she decided to oblige her liege lord. So she took his hand and allowed him to escort her off the dais to the ground below.

Unsurprisingly, Ellyn garnered a number of stares when she and the lion lord were together on the dance floor. This attention was unwanted, but Ellyn managed to ignore it.

To her astonishment, Lord Tywin was a rather fine dancer. She would have thought his movements would be as stiff as his mannerisms. But that was not so. He was very graceful. Ellyn was only thirteen, but given her family's size, she stood only six few inches shorter than Tywin Lannister. Their relative evenness in height made them function better as partners.

While they were on the dance floor, Ellyn watched Lord Tywin closely. She was now more certain than ever that he had something planned. Whatever it was, she was determined to at least have an inkling of it. In order for that to work, she would have to remain as observant as possible.

However, Lord Tywin did nothing menacing or out-of-the-ordinary. All he did was ask her some questions about herself, her family, and her interests. The questions appeared harmless, so Ellyn answered them as best she could. Although she tried to be totally honest, there were times when she had to bend the truth a little. She never flat-out lied to him, though. She was not that foolish.

Ellyn and Lord Tywin continued their dance until the music finally ended. After that, they and the other participants went back to their seats. Then the third course – the desserts – were brought out.

As she helped herself to a strawberry tart, Ellyn thought back on her encounter with Lord Tywin. By this point, she could all but confirm that Lord Tywin was up to something sinister. He may have been a proper gentlemen when he had his hands on her waist, but she knew a conniver when she saw one.

All the same, she could not guess what the Lord Paramount of the Westerlands was scheming. But she suspected it would not be pleasant.

The dessert course was shorter than the first two. Once it ended and the dishes were cleared away, Tywin rose again and told Father "The wedding and the feast have both been done, and quite well, my lord. But one matter must be attended to before your son's marriage is deemed legitimate in the eyes of the Gods and the law. Shall we commence the bedding?"

Of all the people who might have called for the bedding ceremony, Lord Tywin was far from the top of Ellyn's first guesses. He may have been a strict follower of procedure, but a bedding ceremony seemed too crass for his liking.

All the same, Father had to answer the lion lord's proposition. He gazed over at his son and his new daughter-by-law. The two of them looked to each other, and then they looked back at Father and gave a synchronized nod.

At that, Father looked around the area and declared "Yes, let the bedding begin!"

In response to that, no fewer than a hundred guests got up from their chairs and rushed towards the bride and groom.

The men quickly surrounded Obara, picked her up and carried her back to the keep. On the way, they began to strip her out of her dress. They avoided getting too firsy, as many of them were
aware that she could kill them easily.

The women took a little longer with Sandor. He was quite a bit larger than his new wife, and the sight of his deformed face up-close was discouraging to some. However, a number of them found that his strong physique more than compensated for his scar. Once they managed to get him off his feet, they worked together to carry him to the keep, as well. They wasted no time in removing his clothes.

After Obara and Sandor were taken off to be bedded, the atmosphere gradually eased down. It was then that Tywin Lannister made his second announcement. This time, he did not lift his goblet.

Ellyn had no doubt that this was when Lord Tywin would make his true intentions known. But she said nothing; she simply watched the lion lord intently, as did everyone else there."

The Lord of Casterly Rock announced to Father "Now that your son has gone to bed his wife, the future of House Clegane has been guaranteed. I congratulate you on how far you have come, Lord Tarrence."

"You have my gratitude, my lord," Father proclaimed.

Tywin lightly nodded his head, and he went on with: "However, while your house has developed rather finely, there is one aspect it lacks that the other noble houses in the Westerlands do not. That aspect is a direct connection to its Great House. Every other chief Westerlord house has married into House Lannister at least once. Yours has not. In order to solidify your new position, this problem should be remedied as soon as possible."

"How so, my lord?" Father queried.

Tywin gradually leaned forward, placed his hands on the table in front of him, and he declared "I propose a marriage contract between your daughter Ellyn… and my son Tyrion."

For that entire evening, Ellyn had been paying attention to everything and everyone, and she herself had never been the center of attention. But after that last statement, that was not the case in any way. Now, every single eye was concentrated on her… and she paid no mind to anything that went on around her.
Chapter Notes

Note: Okay, so I made in error in judgment on which would be the longest chapter. Oh, well. No harm ever came out of making an update longer than one intended. Then again, considering how long it's taking Martin to publish The Winds of Winter…

Anyway, I hope you guys enjoy this update. Especially since it's been only five days since the last one. But don't get used to that. Last week, I began my final semester of graduate school. Unlike previous semesters, this one is heavily project-based, and it involves a huge amount of group work. As such, my time for writing will be stretched thin, and updates will be a little more spaced-out than they have been. They'll still come, I promise you. But I cannot guarantee that they will be weekly anymore. Just wanted you to be aware of that.

At the very same instant, the bedding ceremony was well underway. By the time the guests carried the bride and groom to the bridal chamber, both of them had been clad in only their smallclothes. Once there, Sandor Clegane and Obara Martell were deposited inside.

After taking a minute to shut and lock the door, Sandor turned his attention to his new wife. Already, she was laying on the bed, striking a lusty pose. She gazed at her husband with what he classified as her "Dornish seductiveness." She wordlessly beckoned him over.

That was enough for the Hound to catch his bone.

The bedding lasted for about three hours. The people standing outside or beneath the chamber could verify that. That was how long the noises could be heard, at any rate. Even so, Sandor did not give a fuck how long the bedding went on for. Time actually seemed to lose meaning when he held Obara in his arms. And when he was inside her.

It was well after midnight when the future lord and lady of Clegane's Keep finally drifted into a deep slumber. It was the most restful night of sleep Sandor had gotten since before the Ironborn attacked Lannisport.

Sometime after midmorning, Sandor awoke rather abruptly to a throbbing sensation originating from his groin. As he sleepily opened his eyes, he gazed downward. When he discovered the source of the disturbance, he smirked.

Obara had her lips wrapped around his manhood. She was sucking vigorously on his morning wood.

*What a thing to wake up to.*

The former Sand Snake quickly realized her husband was conscious, but she did not relent. Nor did he ask or gesture for her to stop. He just laid his head back down and moaned in arousal. She kept increasing her pace overtime. The harder she sucked, the louder he moaned.

It only took Obara five minutes to bring Sandor to climax. After he hit his peak, she removed her
mouth from his cock and swallowed everything it had released. Sandor just smiled and placed his hands behind his head.

Obara wiped her mouth and laid down next to Sandor again. She was on the right side of the bed, so she saw the burned half of his face. That may have bothered some, but Sandor knew Obara was not repulsed by his scar.

*She probably never was.*

"How was that?" Obara queried.

"The best wake-up call I've ever had," Sandor slyly commented, tracing his hand along her left breast.

"Just as I hoped," Obara impishly remarked, caressing the dry skin of her husband's right cheek, "You know, we could have been doing that long before today. If *someone* hadn't insisted on waiting…"

"It was more at the insistence of my mother that I abstained," Sandor debated, a wry grin on his face, "In some parts of the world, people actually respect their mothers' wishes."

"If I did that, I wouldn't be here," Obara muttered bluntly.

"I know; you told me," Sandor murmured.

*Your father told you to pick between his weapon and your mother's, and you chose the spear over the tears.*

That turned out to be the right decision.

Sandor then took his wife's hand and lightly kissed her knuckles. Then he stated "Now that we've been joined, I won't deny you any longer… Princess."

He expected Obara to scowl, groan, withdraw, or feign the act of slapping him. That was what she had done every other time he had addressed her by that title.

Surprisingly, this time, she gave no apparent negative reaction. For a few seconds, she just looked him in the eye with a neutral countenance. Then she gave a small smile and admitted "I think I actually could become accustomed to being called that."

*Now that's something I never thought to hear her say.*

"Truly?" Sandor asked, thinking he may have misheard her.

Obara nodded her head a bit, and then she expounded "But only by you, and only when we are alone."

"I can accept that," Sandor conceded. He paused and added cheekily "Princess."

She just giggled.

The bedchamber's window was open. It faced the south, but based on how the light flowed in, it had to be around ten o'clock in the morning. More than two hours later than when Sandor and Obara normally awoke.

"We should probably get up and head downstairs," Sandor proposed.
"As you say, my lord," Obara agreed. She and her husband pulled themselves out of bed and proceeded to dress themselves. Although she had worn a gown the night before, Obara did not feel the need to continue wearing that form of apparel. As she slid on her normal pair of leather breeches, she asked Sandor "Are you hungry?"

"Somewhat," the Hound replied as he put his jerkin on over a white tunic, "What about you?"

"Well, I just ate," Obara Clegane wittily told him.

Sandor snickered and stated humorously "Indeed. Are you interested in another 'course'?"

"I certainly wouldn't mind a second helping of what I just had," Obara uttered slyly, wrapping her doublet over her breasts. Her stunning breasts.

"You can have one later," Sandor asserted, fastening his trousers around his waist, "I'd prefer to eat something that I did not make myself."

"Very well," was Obara's simple response.

By that point, the Hound and his princess were both fully clothed. Neither of them had bathed since before their wedding, but other than their activities following the feast, they had done nothing that warranted one. At least, that was their belief.

We can take one later. Maybe together. If so, I could give her that 'second course.'

The moment they stepped outside the bedchamber, they came face-to-face with a brown-haired man. He was Zedric Sarsfield, the man who had replaced Erryk Ruttiger as the castellan of Clegane's Keep.

"Hello, Zedric," the Hound greeted him warmly.

"Good morning, my lord," the castellan bade his master's heir. He looked to Obara, dipped his head, and added in "My lady."

"Zedric," she said in response kingly.

"I assume you wish to break your fast?" Zedric proposed.

"You assume correctly," Sandor affirmed, "We did not keep anyone waiting, I hope."

"As it happens, you did not," Zedric revealed, "Your parents and siblings have already broken their fast."

"So the Main Hall is empty?" Obara asked rhetorically.

"It is," Zedric replied, "And it most likely will remain as such until the midday meal. Today, you will be served the morning meal in your father's solar."

Interesting…

"Why might that be?" Sandor inquired.

"Ser- pardon, Lord Tarrence requested that you both come to his solar as soon as you were up," Zedric Sarsfield elaborated, "He has a matter of precedence to discuss with you."

"So be it," Sandor acknowledged, "Go ahead and have the servants prepare our breakfast. Obara
and I will head to the solar."

Zedric nodded, bowed his head, and headed down the corridor.

Sandor and Obara remained at the door of the bedchamber for another minute longer. Obara must have noted the perplexed expression on her husband's face. She murmured in concern "Sandor? Are you alright?"

He hastily turned to her and claimed assuredly "I am fine, Obara. Come; my father awaits us."

To his relief, his wife said nothing; she merely followed Sandor through the holdfast's hallways.

In actuality, Sandor was not entirely truthful when he told his wife that nothing troubled him. He was not exactly anxious about anything, but he was a little troubled by the prospect of breaking his fast in his father's solar. When last he had done so, Gregor had announced that he was leaving Clegane's Keep.

Sandor and his wife soon arrived at the keep's solar, expecting to find Father there.

He was indeed there, but he was not alone. Mother too was there, and so were Gregor, Ellyn, and Dacey. For whatever reason, Ser Gerion Lannister was present, as well. They were seated in six of eight chairs that had been placed around the desk. All of them smiled at Sandor and Obara entered. They both smiled back, but almost straightaway, Sandor could feel that the aura in the room was not wholly a happy one. That struck him as curious.

"Sit down, please," Father beckoned his son and his new daughter-by-law, gesturing to the two empty chairs.

Sandor and Obara promptly took up the two vacant chairs. Once they were settled, the Hound gazed around at the others. Their smiles had faded, replaced by expressions lined with apprehension. He enquired nervously "Is anything amiss?"

"We'll tell you once your food arrives," Mother claimed in assurance.

Her younger son and his wife found that arrangement fair.

Within ten minutes, a pair of servants brought their breakfast. After setting it in front of the Hound and the former Sand Snake, they departed from the solar, making certain to close the door behind them.

As Sandor and Obara began to eat, Gregor leaned forward and asked them "Enjoy last night?"

"Very much," Sandor answered him, chewing on a large piece of bacon

"In many ways," Obara stated wryly, peeling a blood orange.

"Yeah, we heard," Dacey mumbled cockily.

"Good. Then we were doing it right."

Instead of saying that, Sandor chuckled. So did Obara. The former of them gazed as his brother and goodsister, and he contended "We couldn't have been any louder than you two were."

"I'd say not," Ellyn commented as Gregor and Dacey blushed lightly, and Obara chuckled again. After a pause, the Clegane daughter mumbled sullenly "All else aside, you two must've enjoyed last night more than the rest of us did."
Sandor found that statement a little baffling. He asked his sister "How do you mean?"

"That is what we are here to discuss," Father disclosed. He waited for everyone in the room to be silent and give him their attention. Then he explained to Sandor and Obara "After you were taken away for the bedding, Lord Tywin made his second announcement of the evening. Like the first, this one was centered on the future of House Clegane. But unlike the first one, it also involved the potential future of House Lannister."

As Sandor salted and bit into a hardboiled egg, he asked in interest "And just what did he have in mind for the future of our house and his?"

"Something none of us could have foreseen," Gregor revealed ambiguously.

Mother provided some clarification to that remark: "Lord Tywin was keen to point out that our house is now the only noble one in the Westerlands that has never wed into House Lannister. Determined to 'remedy' that problem, as he claimed, he suggested another contract."

"Between whom?" Obara queried, biting into an orange segment and a piece of buttered bread.

It was Ellyn who responded this time. She sighed and pronounced "His son Lord Tyrion… and me."

At that moment, Sandor had been in the midst of taking a swig of ale. Once he heard his sister's reply, he sputtered into his mug, spilling some on the table. He managed to swallow what was in his mouth, but he coughed violently at being forced to down so much liquid at once.

Obara patted him on the back to help him steady his breathing. Once he stopped coughing, he gave her a brief look of appreciation, and then he turned to Ellyn and muttered in astonishment "What?"

"Lord Tywin seems convinced your sister and the Imp would be a good match," Mother apprised him.

Sandor had not reacted as he had because he was disgusted or flabbergasted by Lord Tywin's proposition. He had done so simply because he had not expected it.

Evidently, no one else here did, either.

"How did you respond?" Obara asked the very question that was on her husband's mind.

"I begged some time to consider his offer," Father disclosed, "He 'generously' agreed to grant that favor. By the time the tourney at Lannisport begins, he will want an answer."

"Six bloody days from now?!" Sandor pointed out crossly, "That is hardly enough time to make a decision of this magnitude!"

"Alas, it is all the time we have," Gregor solemnly informed his brother, "We must use it wisely."

"Quite so," Father conceded, "By the time we leave this room, we must have arrived at a decision on whether or not we will go agree to Lord Tywin's offer."

Obara appeared both stunned and slightly angered by that declaration. She heatedly muttered "My lord, you cannot honestly mean to consider delivering your own daughter to that monster."

To her credit, she at least tried to sound respectful. Even so, Sandor and the others were alarmed by her angry remark. Especially when given the apparent meaning of it. He told his wife patiently
"Obara, Tyrion Lannister is many things, but he is definitely not a monster."

"I know, and I apologize for my outburst," Obara calmly said to everyone, not just to Father or her husband, "But you should know that I was not speaking of Lord Tyrion."

It only took a moment for realization to come to Sandor and everyone else there. Mother cautioned her gooddaughter "Obara, you can't say such things. Lord Tywin is not a man to take slights lightly."

"Be that as it may, Lady Daliah, she is correct," Gerion Lannister interjected, "My eldest brother is a monster, and anyone who claims otherwise is a lackwit."

Again, everyone was taken aback by a very eloquent comment. Sandor noted Gregor did not seem to disagree with Gerion's. Neither did Dacey. Of course, the two of them had spent much of the past few years with Ser Gerion in the North. So either they already knew of his feelings towards Lord Tywin, or they shared them.

*It could be both, but I'd lean more to the latter.*

Sandor had to agree with the three of them. He had been Lord Tywin's squire for the past few years; he had seen him at work. While he himself had been fortunate enough to avoid incurring his liege lord's wrath, he had often stood witness when the lion lord implemented his form of justice. What was regarded as justice at Casterly Rock was often seen as cruelty throughout the rest of Westeros.

*But just because Lord Tywin is a monster, I could not say the same of Tyrion. I don't think anyone could.*

"So what shall we do?" Sandor queried in genuine interest.

"Gregor recommended that we go over all the possible advantages and disadvantages of accepting or refusing this union," Mother illuminated, "As well as all the… personal factors involved. We all must have some input to contribute. That is why every member of our family is present."

"And Ser Gerion," Obara noted, looking to the blond man.

"It was also Gregor's idea to have Ser Gerion here," Dacey revealed.

Gregor nodded in confirmation and debated "All things considered, he's the only true ally we have from House Lannister."

"Believe me, Gregor," Gerion Lannister pronounced, "After all you've done for this country and its people, and after serving with you, I would choose you over Tywin any day."

*Gregor must be honored.* By his brother's prideful expression, the Mountain have been quite touched indeed by Gerion's words.

"Alright," Sandor remarked as he and Obara continued eating, "May as well begin our discussion now. Where do we start?"

"Well, let us say we refused the match," Mother conjectured, "Obviously, we'd need to supply a reason."

"We could merely claim we do not think our house worthy of his son," Sandor proposed.
"Tywin would never buy that," Gerion argued, "Given how readily Tarrence accepted his lordship, he would expect him to be similarly thrilled by the prospect of joining House Clegane to House Lannister."

"Furthermore, Lord Tywin **hates** false modesty," Gregor pointed out, "Almost as much as he hates true modesty."

"Could you claim you've already got a betrothal planned for Ellyn?" Obara suggested.

"That's an even worse idea," Father refuted, "While we have been considering some potential suitors for her, we have not so much as contacted any of them. It would take far too long to even arrange a meeting with one of them, let alone negotiate a marriage contract. Lord Tywin would insist on knowing who we had in mind for Ellyn, and once he realized we were misleading him… I shudder to think what he would do.

"Well, Tywin has **no** tolerance for liars," Gerion commented.

"What if we say Ellyn is too young?" Dacey contended.

"He would say she will grow, and that the marriage could wait," Gregor disputed, "In fact, he may say that she'll be old enough to wed once she's bled for the first time."

"It happens that I had my first moon's blood last month," Ellyn informed the others.

Sandor was astounded to hear that. Based on their reactions, Gregor, Gerion, Dacey, and Obara were, as well. Mother and Father did not react, which suggested they already knew. The Hound eyed his sister and mumbled "And you did not tell us of this sooner because…?"

"It wasn't really your business," Ellyn proclaimed frankly.

"It is now," Gregor countered. *Yes, it is. Girls have been known to marry at younger than thirteen.*

"We cannot claim Ellyn does not wish to marry, either," Mother noted, "Lord Tywin would just say marriages are supposed to be done out of duty, not out of desire."

"Then I suppose our only available alternative is to refuse for… the obvious reason," Father disclosed.

Sandor stared at his Father as though he had gone mad. After hearing that last remark, Lord Tarrence may as well have had the sanity of Aerys II.

Gregor shared his shock and disbelief. "You propose we refuse the marriage contract on the grounds that the groom is a dwarf?"

"It's been done before," Mother explicated, "Lord Tywin once offered Tyrion to the second daughter of the Lord of Riverrun. Hoster Tully denounced the offer as an insult."

"In my mind, it **was** an insult," Gregor irately debated, "But not to Lord Hoster."

Father appeared dumbfounded by that comment. He questioned incredulously "What do you mean by that, Gregor?"

"Have you **met** Lysa Tully, Father?" Gregor snapped somewhat angrily, "I have, and just being in the same room as her made me uncomfortable and edgy. I wouldn't wish her hand on anyone, including Tyrion Lannister."
"In case you've forgotten, she's the wife of the Hand," Mother needlessly reminded him.

"I know," the Mountain muttered indifferently, "And I deeply respect Lord Arryn for his patience and endurance."

"You could tell him that when he arrives for the tourney," Dacey cockily proposed.

"I've more tact than that," Gregor humorously told his wife.

*We're getting a little off-topic here.*

"Back to the issue at hand," Gerion Lannister advised the others, as though he had read Sandor's mind, "I am very much against the concept of using the fact that Tyrion's a dwarf to dissuade Tywin."

"So am I," Gregor coincided, "That's probably the worst solution we've thought of so far. Lord Hoster had the privilege to call the match between Tyrion and his daughter an insult, but only because he is the head of another Great House. THIS house, however, is one of his vassals."

"You're right, I suppose," Father admitted, "Lord Tywin would not be pleased if we all but called his son a freak. Especially so soon after raising us to lordly status. He would call us 'ungrateful.'"

"You might say he's backed us into a corner," Dacey contended, "In recent years, both branches of House Clegane have been recognized throughout the country for their tolerance of everyone. People believe we are accepting of all. But if we refuse Lord Tyrion merely because he is a dwarf… our image would be seriously damaged. People would call us hypocrites and condemn us for being so shallow."

Sandor was impressed with Dacey's argument. Mainly since everything she said was the truth.

"Apart from that…" Gregor began tentatively. He gazed around the solar, and he continued with "In the long run, are there really any benefits to turning down Lord Tywin? I mean, even if he agreed with our refusal, imagine what the other Westerlords would think. The lesser houses might be led to believe we thought ourselves too good for House Lannister, and – by extension – for them, too. The noble houses might think the same."

"Well, that's their problem," Sandor argued. By now, he and Obara had cleaned their plates.

"It's also ours, if no one else in the Westerlands will have Ellyn because of it," Gregor contended.

"Couldn't I just marry outside the Westerlands?" Ellyn proposed, looking back and forth between her brothers, "Both of you did, after all."

*No denying that.*

"And just who from the other Kingdoms would you see yourself with?" Gregor inquired.

When Ellyn was unable to give a response, the Mountain smirked and stated "Then let's focus on the local prospective match that has been offered."

"No matter how we do it, refusing Tywin seems to yield bad results," Obara perceived, "Perhaps there is a way to turn him down discreetly and peacefully. If so, it may come to us later. But until then… maybe we should actually give the other approach some thought."

*That's surprising, coming from the one who wanted to protect Ellyn from the 'monster' at Casterly*
Rock.

Despite what he thought, Sandor was not averse to this proposal. Neither were Gregor, Obara, or Dacey. Father and Mother appeared more than a little skeptical and unwilling. As for Ellyn… she was practically unreadable.

"Alright, let's discuss the possibility of accepting Lord Tywin's offer," Mother conceded, "Where would that bring us?"

"Well, for starters, you'd be marrying into the wealthiest house in the Westerlands," Dacey pointed out, "Perhaps even the wealthiest house in the country. That by itself is a benefit."

"That may have been a compelling enough reason five years ago," Father disputed, "But money is no longer a concern of ours. Particularly after what Sandor brought back from the Ironborn rebellion."

*True that. Maybe someday it'll be Lord Tywin who wishes to borrow from us, not the other way around.*

"Still, House Lannister has more to offer than wealth," Obara notified the others, mainly her sister-by-law, "Tyrion is by all the laws of the Seven Kingdoms Lord Tywin's his heir. Imagine what influence you'd have as Lady of the Rock."

"That sounds appealing," Ellyn admitted, "But it would come with a lot of risks. I mean, remember what happened to the last Ellyn Lannister and her family?"

"Of course we do, sweetling," Mother asserted, "Actually, that could be a sign, seeing as the last Lady Ellyn Lannister did not meet a pleasant end."

Sandor had heard this story many times before. Tytos Lannister had had an elder brother, Tion Lannister, who had wed Lady Ellyn Reyne of Castamere. Lord Tion had died childless, leaving the title of lordship to Tytos. Nevertheless, his widow Lady Ellyn had made a daring and foolish attempt to hold on to her power as Lady of Casterly Rock.

*And we all know how that ended. The Rains of Castamere were not just a couple of light showers.*

"All you have in common with Ellyn Reyne is her given name," Father informed his daughter, placing his left hand – the unstable one – on his daughter's shoulder, "You were not named after her. So there is no reason to believe you'd share her fate."

"We would never let that happen to you," Gregor assured his sister.

"I know you wouldn't," Ellyn pronounced, placing her hands on her lap, "But that aside… this seems too much a burden to cope with. I mean, I didn't ask to be Lady of Casterly Rock. I don't want to be Lady of Casterly Rock."

"In all probability, you won't be," Gerion apprised her.

Sandor looked to the blonde and asked in perplexity "How so, Ser Gerion?"

Gerion Lannister told the seven Cleganes "Tywin has no intention of passing the Rock to Tyrion. He is hoping that Jaime will be released from his vows to the Kingsguard, or that he will find another wife who will give him another son. If neither scenario transpires, he is content to pass lordship on to our brother Kevan, who would then give it to our nephew Lancel."
"What possible reason would he have for that?" Father inquired, astounded.

It was Gregor who answered: "Lady Joanna Lannister, Tyrion's mother and Tywin's wife, died in childbirth. For that, his father has never forgiven him. Neither has his sister, the Queen."

“Yes, Lady Joanna died birthing a dwarf, whereas our mother delivered three babes who were all twice as large, and she survived in perfect health. That just shows which the stronger bloodline is."

“So, Lord Tarrence, Lady Daliah, I hope you weren't expecting your daughter to be the wife of the future lord of Casterly Rock," Gerion commented straightforwardly.

"The thought was tempting." Mother professed, "But at the end of the day, it may be better if Ellyn married a member of House Lannister besides its heir."

"I agree," Father proclaimed, "We are still a relatively young house, and we were only just granted lordly status last night. If a member of our family was to wed the Westerlands' next Lord Paramount so soon after… the older noble houses – and the lesser houses which have yet to wed into House Lannister – would almost certainly come to resent us."

"And the last thing we need is the ire of the other Westerlords," Obara surmised.

"Exactly," Gregor concurred, "This could put us in an ideal position."

"In terms of prestige and overall standing, I agree," Mother uttered plainly, "But we have yet to discuss Lord Tyrion himself."

"Discuss him how, Mother?" Gregor inquired.

"Think on this, Gregor," Lady Daliah Clegane beseeched her firstborn, "If we accept, we'd be establishing a contract between Ellyn and a man who is at most three-quarters her height. That by itself is disconcerting. But that is not Tyrion's sole defect. I… I have heard he is hideous. His face alone is a horror to behold."

Sandor grimaced at that. He leaned forward and barked "Have you looked at my face recently, Mother?"

Mother went pale in her own face. She hastily tried to retract her last statement. "No, no, Sandor! That's not what I meant-"

"Then what did you mean?!" Sandor sharply retorted, "Tell me."

Daliah Clegane was at a loss for words. She had not seen Sandor that angry in a very long time. He knew she had not meant to offend him, but he was disappointed in her for making such a shallow observation.

Ultimately, Mother lowered her head and mumbled "I'm sorry. I did not mean to imply I was disgusted by you or Lord Tyrion."

"You've done nothing to warrant forgiveness, Mother," Sandor asserted, "I won't deny that Tyrion is ugly. Neither will he. He is not ashamed of being a dwarf. Instead, he's embraced it. Just as I have embraced my scar."

"That's rather mature of you both," Father contended approvingly.

I'd call it optimistic.
"I don't care if Lord Tyrion's attractive, and neither should any of you," Ellyn drily murmured, "I just want to know what kind of man he is."

"I could tell you plenty on that, dear sister," Sandor told her, smirking.

"So could I," Ser Gerion claimed.

"And I, as well," Gregor put in.

For the next hour, much of the conversation was controlled by the two Clegane brothers and the Lannister knight. They spent most of that time divulging what they knew of Tyrion Lannister. Gregor and Gerion both knew a fair deal of the Imp's early life, but Sandor was the one who knew the most about his post-childhood years.

Sandor and Tyrion had become fast friends during the former's time at Casterly Rock. He told his family and Ser Gerion all about their experiences together.

Sandor's visits to the Rock had been frequent and mostly work-related, but he and Tyrion always found some time to mingle with each other. In the Hound's mind, Tyrion was almost nothing like his father. He was just as intelligent as his father, if not more so, but Tyrion held none of Lord Tywin's ruthlessness and utter disregard for ethics.

Indeed, beneath that gruesome façade and mismatched physique, there was a compassionate, decent young man of unrivaled wits, tremendous cunning, and commendable chivalry. He would never be a warrior like his elder brother, but not all men were destined to wield a sword.

Sandor told his family everything about his time spent with Tyrion, including a certain incident that occurred a few years back.

A number of months before Gregor and Dacey wed, Ser Jaime Lannister had been given leave to return home for a few weeks. He had spent much of his furlough with Sandor and Tyrion. On one particular evening, the three of us had been riding on the crossroads when they encountered a young woman being pursued by a group of would-be rapists. The three of them had rushed to her defense. While Tyrion gave the girl his cloak to cover herself, Sandor and Jaime each managed to kill one of the assailants before the others fled.

Jaime had been determined not to let a crime so close to Casterly Rock go unpunished. So he had chased after the remaining attackers. Sandor would have joined, but the Kingslayer had ordered him to escort Tyrion and the girl to safety.

They ended up taking shelter in a nearby inn. Sandor had mostly kept to himself, but he had observed the chemistry building between Tyrion and the girl, whose name turned out to be Tysha.

Tyrion ended up bedding her that very night. That was the first time he ever laid with a woman. Additionally, the women had done so willingly.

The following morning, Tyrion had mentioned to Sandor that he was already scheming to marry Tysha in secrecy.

Sandor made an effort to talk him out of that. While he did not hold any ill will towards Tysha, he had pointed out that she was merely a common girl, whereas he was a Lannister of the Rock. Even if they were to wed in secrecy, Lord Tywin would eventually find out. And there was no telling what he would do to either of them then (or to Sandor himself for allowing it to happen).

Initially, Tyrion had been hesitant to heed Sandor's words, but before long, they ended up sobering
him. He decided he would not wed Tysha, but for her safety (and his reassurance), he would give her asylum within Casterly Rock.

He had gotten Tysha a job in the laundry as a washerwoman. She received fair pay for her services, and occasionally, Tyrion visited her privately. Overtime, their encounters became more and more infrequent. As far as Sandor can tell, Tyrion had not made any form of contact with Tysha in nearly a year. But she still lived within the Rock, and neither Tywin nor Jaime had been made aware of his relationship with her.

When Sandor was done recounting this episode, Father told him admiringly "You made the right decision, Sandor. If would say that, even if Lord Tywin had not made his offer last night."

"So far, Lord Tyrion does indeed sound to be a respectable man," Mother perceived, "And if an ordinary woman could come to love him, there could very well be a chance that Ellyn might, as well."

"It is possible," Obara conceded, "But even with all of this accounted for, there is one detail about this matter that perturbs me."

"What might that be?" Sandor questioned his wife.

"Lord Tywin's real reason for wanting this contract to happen," Obara explicated, "I do not believe for an instant that the sole purpose for the match is that he wishes for each noble house in the Westerlands to be connected to his own house. He must have another motive."

"That is what we believe, too," Dacey revealed.

"By 'we,' you mean...?" Ellyn inquired.

"Gregor, Gerion, and myself," Dacey elaborated.

"We spent the better part of an hour going over this topic last night," Gerion pronounced, "By the end of our discussion, we arrived at the same conclusion for Tywin's true reason for proposing the match."

"Go on," Father bade them.

Gregor sat up in his chair, leaned forward, and declared "We believe he intends to use Ellyn as a hostage."

That brought an interval of unpleasant silence to the room.

Why in the Seven Hells did he not mention this sooner? Perhaps this should have been addressed at the start of this conversation.

"Why?" Sandor uttered quietly.

"Ever since the fiasco with Amory Lorch, Lord Tywin and I have not gotten along," Gregor explained, "That was why he forced me out of the Westerlands in the first place. Even today, he still sees me as a threat to his authority. Luckily, now that I am sworn to Lord Eddard, he knows he cannot touch me. You, however, are still his subjects."

"As such, we believe Tywin is convinced that having one of you close will keep Gregor inline," Dacey went on for her husband.
A thought occurred to Sandor "So, is that why he made me his squire?"

"It more than likely was the reason," Gerion admitted, "But even if it was, you should know that Tywin does not tolerate incompetence in his ranks. So even if you were there as a hostage, he must have appreciated your skills as a squire."

That does bring me some comfort. I never thought for a moment that Lord Tywin was giving me special treatment by making me his squire. But it's reassuring to know that he did not just see me as a head he may have separated from its shoulders.

"Of course, now that Sandor is a married man, he can no longer serve as Tywin's squire," Gerion professed, "So he'll need someone else from this family to play the part of hostage."

"In other words, me," Ellyn realized.

Gregor, Dacey, and Gerion gravely nodded in confirmation.

"Unlike Sandor, Ellyn would be bound to the Rock once she and Tyrion wed," Father noted.

"But after they married, Ellyn would be Lord Tywin's daughter-by-law," Mother pointed out, "Surely even he would do nothing to harm his own blood."

"Alas, Tywin does not hold the same reverence for kinship as others," Gerion disclosed, "He would not hesitate to kill Ellyn if either branch of House Clegane did something to severely displease him."

"Worse yet, he knows we, on the other hand, do respect kinship," Gregor proclaimed, "So we would be obligated to make no move against him, for fear of angering the Gods."

"Why would you move against him?" Father queried in interest.

"I do not know, Father," Gregor claimly, "I am merely considering all possible situations. Even so, based on our discussion thus far, it appears the best way to resolve this predicament is if we agree to Lord Tywin's proposal. And that could prove just as bad as refusing him would."

Several of the others murmured in agreement. Sandor then tapped his mug on the desk to get everyone's attention. Once he had it, he stated "There is one thing you all seem to be neglecting: Ellyn's opinion. She's the one who will be most affected by the outcome of this meeting, after all."

"He's absolutely right," Obara agreed with her husband.

"Yes, he is," Father concurred. He turned to his daughter and told her firmly "Ellyn, despite everything we have talked on, the final choice should be yours. What answer would you prefer to give to Lord Tywin's proposal?"

Every other person in the room locked their eyes on Ellyn, as well. She had never yearned to be certain of attention, but this was one scenario when she had to be.

She sat in complete quietness for five minutes, contemplating her options. Evidently, she wished to be thorough in her considerations.

Ultimately, she rose from her chair and announced "From what's been said, we would take a risk regardless of whether we accept or refuse. At least if we accepted, we'd appease Lord Tywin for a time. Sandor, Gregor, and Gerion all seem to agree that Lord Tyrion is a good man. The fact that he is a dwarf does not bother me, nor does the fact that his father plans to remove him from their
family's line of succession. So perhaps a contract between him and myself might actually work out well. Nonetheless… I'd like to meet Lord Tyrion just once before I decide."

"I can arrange that," Gregor informed her, "Tyrion is supposed to be at the tourney. You can talk with him there."

Ellyn nodded in acknowledgment, and she declared "After I have spoken with him, I'll make my decision."

Everyone there found that an acceptable arrangement. No lord would ever deny his potential daughter-by-law the request to meet his son before they were joined. Even Lord Tywin would grant her that opportunity.

Soon after this, the meeting ended, and everyone departed from the solar.

After he exited, Sandor remained at the door. He beckoned for Obara to go on without him; he would catch up in a minute.

Ellyn was the last one to leave. Sandor stopped her and asked to speak with her privately.

"What do you need, San?" she asked her brother in interest.

"I just wished to tell you that I admire what you are doing, Ell," the Hound told her, "You're doing something that most other highborn girls wouldn't even consider doing. Moreover, you're willingly putting yourself in danger."

Ellyn just shrugged and debated "You and Gregor honor our House in your ways; I honor it in mine,"

"What amazes me is how fearless you're being about all this," Sandor thought aloud.

"I am not afraid to risk my life for the good of my family," Ellyn candidly informed her brother. She then adapted a wicked smile and muttered "And even if Lord Tywin intends to use me as a hostage, being at the Rock would produce an advantage or two for us, as well. For all you know, we just might be able to turn Lord Tywin's plot against him."

Sandor was initially stunned by that proclamation, but then he saw the truth in it. Now it was his turn to grin. Right there, in that very moment, he realized his sister had grown up.

*She's not a girl any longer. No; a woman stands before me.*

…

Thousands of camps, hundreds of campfires, and dozens of pavilions composed the massive camp of the Royal Army. However, a considerable portion of the camp was currently deserted.

Willas Tyrell noticed that as he came down the hills from the south. He rode at the head of his party astride his brown courser.

His younger brother Garlan rode beside him on his red garron. He squinted at the camp in the distance, and, noting the significant number of missing individuals, said inquisitively "Where is everyone?"

"Most likely at Lannisport," the heir to Highgarden speculated. *Where else would they be?*

"No, they would not start without us," Garlan firmly debated. After a pause, his conviction faltered
a bit, and he looked to his elder brother and asked "Would they?"

Willas had to keep himself from snickering.

"The tourney has already begun, but the main events are not scheduled to take place for a few more days, my lords," a stout voice muttered from behind.

Willas peered over his shoulder to gaze at Mathis Rowan, Lord of Goldengrove. Lord Mathis had been the last of their father's bannermen to merge his company to theirs. Since Goldengrove was the only holdfast in the Reach that stood directly between Highgarden and Lannisport, House Rowan had been given special permission to wait until the other Reachmen arrived at his home to join up with them. Every other present lord had been ordered to go straight to Highgarden instead.

Not long after leaving Goldengrover, Willas found himself wishing that Lord Mathis had been with them from the beginning. He was quite pleasant to be around, and he was a great conversationalist. By contrast, the days before had been rather dull. He had mostly had Florents and Fossoways for company, and they had proved to be a tiresome lot.

*If only Grandmother Olenna could come. She'd definitely liven up that crowd.*

Fortunately, Lord Mathis had accomplished that on his own.

The Hightowers had gone ahead and travelled from Oldtown to Lannisport by sea. Willas could at least look forward to seeing his aunts, uncles, and grandfather when he arrived there. That would not be long, given how close Casterly Rock seemed in the distance.

"Hey, Willas, aren't they holding the knighting ceremony today?" Garlan queried in interest.

"I believe so," Willas replied, getting out a piece of paper from his vest. It contained a copy of the planned agenda for the tourney. He had received it alongside the invitation to the tourney at Highgarden. It was concise, but very specific. After looking over it, he revealed "Yes, it is scheduled for midday."

"If we hurry, we might get there in time to witness it," Garlan proposed eagerly.

Willas scoffed at his younger brother's enthusiasm. As he tucked the agenda back into his vest, he remarked "We'll get there soon enough, Garlan. It won't do us any good to rush the convoy."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Garlan conceded, albeit a little grudgingly, "Oh, well. Hopefully we'll arrive in time to see the last of the knightings."

"I'm certain we will," Willas claimed assuredly.

Truthfully, he himself would have preferred to watch the whole of the knighting ceremony, as well. But his company had been travelling for days with just enough time in-between rides to adequately eat and rest. He did not wish to chance overexerting his father's vassals before they even reached their destination.

*That would be irresponsible for the future liege lord of the Reach.*

A moment later, Lord Mathis appeared at Willas' other side. "A word, my lord?"

Willas Tyrell promptly turned to the head of House Rowan. "Yes, Lord Mathis?"

"If you wish to get to Lannisport sooner, you have the means to make such happen," the Lord of
Goldengrove notified him, "Simply given the command, and the convoy will quicken its pace to your liking."

Willas scoffed at that. "I appreciate your advice, but I am not Lord Paramount of the Reach yet, my lord."

"Even so, there is no harm in reasserting your position," Mathis Rowan contended. As he took ahold of his horse's reins and returned to his place behind Willas, he added in "Your choice, my lord."

Willas turned back to his front and thought on Lord Mathis' counsel. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Garlan watching him intently. Clearly, his brother – a plump yet fierce and levelheaded boy of twelve – was hoping him to follow that proposal.

After a minute of contemplation, Willas looked back at the Lord of Goldengrove and told him "Pass the word down the column. We shall go from a hard trot to a soft gallop."

"As you command, my lord," Mathis Rowan avowed.

As Lord Mathis went to call out Willas' command along the Reachmen's ranks, Willas remained focused on the lands in front of him. He gradually increased his horse's step until it was just barely starting to run. Garlan increased the pace of his own mount to match his brother's.

There were times when Willas Tyrell was truly amazed at just how much authority his voice carried. With one word, hundreds – no, thousands – of grown men, many of them hardened by battle and winter, would hasten to obey the order of a boy who had only recently seen his thirteenth nameday. What intrigued him even more was that the Reachmen responded even better to his command than they did to his lord father's.

But such was the way of the world. He was the firstborn son of the head of a Great House. Thus, he was expected to rule that house and all the other houses in the region after his sire passed on.

Some future heirs often wondered if they would lead their houses as well as (or even better than) their fathers had. Willas was not among that group. He had never once doubted himself or his capabilities. He knew he would be an excellent leader. Some would say he already was.

In any case, that was the general impression he got from Garlan and Lord Mathis.

Within an hour, the Reachmen appeared at Lannisport. Another camp (almost as large as the Royal Army's) had been erected in the stretch of land between the port and Casterly Rock. This one, however, was filled with a huge variety of noises. Even before he reached the site, Willas could hear blacksmiths hammering at their forges, vendors announcing their products, soldiers laughing as they raised their tankards, children playing, and cheering everywhere.

If it's this abuzz with excitement now, I wonder what it will be like once the main events begin.

Willas brought his horse to a halt when he reached the edge of the tourney grounds. The whole of his company stopped right when he did. He gave the order to dismount, and several hundred men collectively climbed down from their horses.

A great number of stableboys immediately came forth to take charge of the Reachmen's mounts. After giving custody of his courser and Garlan's garron to one of them, the two Tyrell sons headed further back into the caravan. Every now and then, Willas received a bow of the head and a murmur of "m'lord."
Soon, he and Garlan came to a wheelhouse. At his beckoning, one of the servants opened the door, revealing a tall woman with silver hair.

Willas smiled, extended his hand to the woman, and said politely "Mother."

Lady Alerie Tyrell, formerly of House Hightower, grinned at her firstborn and took his hand, allowing him to aid her down to the ground. Once she was on her feet, she turned back to the wheelhouse and muttered sweetly "Come along, darlings."

A boy of seven and a girl of six swiftly exited the vehicle. Both of them shared their elder brothers' brown hair, but whereas Willas' was short and smooth and Garlan's was tied in a short ponytail, the boy's was flowing and the girl's was curly.

"Are we there yet?" the boy asked, impatience detectable in his tone.

Garlan chuckled, and Willas drily answered him with "Yes, Loras; we're here."

Loras Tyrell's impatience was quickly replaced with ecstasy. *He can barely contain his excitement.*

Willas knelt before his youngest brother and told him "Now, we need you to watch Margaery. Garlan and I are expected to pay homage to father's bannermen, and Mother must seek out Father. You can either go with her or us, if you want, but keep a close eye on our sister."

Most brothers would dread the chore of watching after their younger sister. Loras, however, was never one to decline a task. At least when it came from his parents or brothers, or when it involved protecting or fighting someone.

Loras saluted his brother and pronounced solemnly "I won't fail you, Willas!"

Again, Garlan chuckled. Willas just gave a proud smile. *I know you won't.*

Loras had always been somewhat protective of Margaery. Like Willas and Garlan, Mace Tyrell's third son and only daughter had been born just one year apart. Since there were five years between Garlan and Loras, Margaery had become fonder of Loras than their elder brothers. But she loved all of them just the same. No one could contest that.

After Willas stood back up, he headed towards the tourney grounds. He rapidly moved through the camp with his mother, siblings, and household guards. All the while, he kept an eye open for his father and for his mother's family.

He ending up spotting Father first. He was near the center of the grounds, conversing with Lord Randyll Tarly and Lord Paxter Redwyne.

At first, Willas was inclined to both wave and cringe. On the one hand, Lord Paxter was the nephew of his grandmother, Olenna Tyrell, as well as his uncle by his marriage to Willas' aunt, Mina Tyrell. So he always enjoyed Lord Paxter's company. Lord Randyll, on the other hand, not so much. As a future Lord Paramount, Willas knew he was supposed to be exceptionally brave. In spite of that, the head of House Tarly secretly intimidated him. There were many who said Lord Randyll was a just man; as just as Lord Stannis Baratheon. Nevertheless, he was known to be even less forgiving and compassionate than the king's stoic brother. Willas had heard of how he had tormented his own son Samwell in effort to make a man out of him.

Still, as he approached the three men, Willas did not let his face display any indication of fear. When he, Mother, and his siblings reached them, he dipped his head to Lord Mace Tyrell, greeting him with their house words "Growing Strong, Father."
The Warden of the South grinned and placed a hand on his heir's shoulder. He remarked merrily "No need for formality here, my boy. This is a celebration, not a conference."

Willas resisted the desire to roll his eyes. As much as he loved his father, Lord Mace Tyrell had a habit of disregarding protocol and forgetting his courtesies on occasion. If he only exhibited that behavior in front of his immediate family and no one else, Willas could probably tolerate it. Alas, Father tended to act the way in front of his own lords bannermen, which annoyed and bothered Willas.

Fortunately for him, Lords Redwyne and Tarly paid no mind to their liege lord's conduct. They both bowed their heads to Willas and Mother, and they greeted them with the usual civilities.

"How was your journey, my lady?" Lord Paxter asked Mother friendly.

"It went well, my lord," she responded, smiling again, "I appreciate your concern, my lord."

"Concern is expected of us, Lady Alerie," Lord Randyll mumbled, not disrespectfully, "You are Lady of Highgarden. As such, your well-being and that of your children is supposed to be a foremost concern of ours."

"Yes, Lord Randyll," Mother avowed, trying to keep her grin, "All the same, please know I am grateful to you for readily answering my husband's summons when he went off to war."

"I simply did what was required of me," the Lord of Horn Hill uttered indifferently.

*I don't think I've seen a man show so much contempt for gratitude.*

By her façade, Mother strongly wished to change the subject. She asked Father and the other two lords "Is Lord Stark here?"

Most people might have been inclined to wonder why Alerie Tyrell would suddenly seem so interested in the whereabouts of the Lord Paramount of the North. Of course, Willas was aware that she only asked that question because she was actually more interested in Robb Stark, Lord Eddard's son and heir. Specifically, she must have been interested in the proposition that had been made concerning Robb and Margaery. Looking over at his sister, Willas mused.

"I'd be very interested in knowing how that turns out, as well."

"Yes, I believe he is with King Robert," Paxter Redwyne disclosed.

"So where's the King?" Loras queried gladly. He seemed elated at the mere mention of Robert Baratheon.

"He is occupied with knightng a few hundred men," Father proclaimed.

"So the knighting ceremony has already started?" Garlan presumed.

"Not just yet," Randyll Tarly said bluntly. He looked to Mother and added "Incidentally, I believe I sighted your lord father amongst the ceremony's audience, my lady."

"Is that so?" Mother murmured, a trace of happiness in her voice. Lord Randyll nodded once, and she muttered in mild glee "Thank you for informing me of this."

The Lord of Horn Hill said nothing in response. He and the Lord of the Arbor were dismissed by the Lord of Highgarden, and then Father proposed that they head to the knighting ceremony. His wife and children gave no word of protest. Subsequently, Willas made his way to the knighting
ceremony with Father, Mother, Garlan, Loras, and Margaery.

As they neared the huge stage, Willas caught of glimpse of his mother's father, Lord Leyton of House Hightower. He was at the back of the assembly, surrounded by his children. He had been accompanied to the tourney by Willas' uncles Baelor, Gunthor, and Humfrey and his aunts Malora and Lynesse. Apparently, his aunts Leyla, Denyse, and Alyssanne had been unable to attend. And his uncle Garth, of course.

Grandfather Leyton was laughing at something Uncle Gunthor had said when he noticed the Tyrells. He directed the attention of his other five children towards Willas and his family. All of them made a grin at their sister, her husband, and her children.

"Alerie!" Lord Leyton Hightower cheerfully called out to his second daughter when she was within earshot.

Mother grinned widely, stepped up to her father, and embraced him. He held her tightly, as though he had not seen her in over a decade. In actuality, it had only been a few months.

For a long time, Willas had suspected that his mother was his grandfather's favorite child (even before she had wed his liege lord). For obvious reasons, he had never asked either of them if his suspicions were true. All the same, he was somewhat convinced that they were.

After Mother came apart from Lord Leyton, she, Father, and Willas exchanged pleasantries with her siblings. Uncle Baelor and Uncle Humfrey were as gracious as ever, Aunt Malora and Uncle Gunthor were less excited but still pleasant, and Aunt Lynesse… she just said "Hello" and left it at that. She was not one to get sentimental, even at reunions between family members.

"Have we missed anything?" Garlan enquired.

"No, you arrived just in time," Uncle Gunthor revealed, "The ceremony should commence very soon."

"Oh, quiet down; quiet down," Aunt Malora beckoned the others, "It is starting now!"

At that, Willas and the other present members of his family looked to the stage. Indeed, King Robert had just stepped onto it. The audience silenced as one as he moved to the front of the stage. A tall man with dark hair and an image of a direwolf on his doublet stood off to the side of the stage.

Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell.

Willas wondered what purpose Lord Eddard had for being on the stage. He had heard there were few knights in the North, as they held to the Old Gods. They preferred to kneel before ancient trees than before seven statues.

In any case, Willas noted Lord Eddard did not seem to care very much to be there.

*Perhaps he's merely there out of obligation.*

Given the knowledge that Eddard Stark was said to be Robert Baratheon's lifelong best friend, that was not unlikely.

Willas quickly discovered Lord Eddard's true reason for being there. When the King stopped in the center of the stage, a number of individuals from the crowd climbed onto it. As they entered the stage, their names were called out by a herald. Gregor Clegane. Dacey Mormont. Oberyn Martell.
Gerion Lannister.

All of them were renowned members of the Legion without Banners, whose base was located in the North. Not all of the Legionnaires were Northmen by birth, but they had been living in the North for much of the past few years.

In any case, Willas was glad to see Lord Gregor Clegane there. Now once the ceremony was over, he would be able to see to an affair that had been on his mind since before he left Highgarden.

From what Willas could discern, the Legionnaires were there as overseers of the knighting ceremony. Once they were all in place, King Robert gave a short speech. It was nothing very eye-opening; just a basic summary of the importance of fighting with honor, integrity, loyalty, and truth, and how those qualities were quintessential to being a knight.

Once that was over, a score of men were called onto the stage. They stood apart from each other in four rows of five. It was then that Ser Barristan Selmy, the Lord Commander of Robert Baratheon’s Kingsguard, made his appearance. He drew his sword and stood beside the King.

One-by-one, King Robert and Ser Barristan approached each of the twenty men. In turn, each man felt to his knees and dipped his head. As King Robert said some words about what deeds each of them had done to earn his place on that stage, Ser Barristan lightly tapped his sword against the shoulders and head of that respective man. Then each man was told to rise as a knight of the Seven Kingdoms.

After those twenty men had been knighted in full view of the assembly, they climbed off the stage, and their spots were quickly replaced by twenty more men.

This routine went on for close to three hours. Twenty men entered the stage as simple men, their deeds were announced, and they exited the stage as knights. Interestingly, each new group’s deeds were more praiseworthy than those of the preceding group.

The final group was composed of men who had played a key role in bringing about the Royal Army’s victory against the Ironborn. One of them was Jacelyn Bywater, who had lost his hand during the siege of Pyke. He now wore a prosthetic made of iron in place of it, giving him the alias Ironhand.

He’s probably the only non-Ironborn to ever receive a moniker with the word "iron" in it.

The last two men to be knighted struck Willas as the most intriguing. First, there was a tall man with a brown beard who had a bear as his sigil. He was Lord Jorah Mormont, and he had maimed and captured Rodrik Greyjoy in the battle of Fair Isle. The second was an equally tall man with a sigil of three hounds. Many people in the audience gasped at the sight of his face. But he gave no heed to their shock. He was Sandor Clegane, brother of Lord Gregor, and he had managed to kill Euron Greyjoy in single combat at Fair Isle.

Like Eddard Stark, Sandor Clegane did not seem to care very much for being there. Willas found that curious. Lord Eddard may have been there out of duty to his best friend the King, but the men being knighted were all there voluntarily.

So why does the Hound not seem pleased by his knighthood?

After Sandor Clegane had been given the title of "Ser," the audience finally broke into a long round of applause and cheers. Unsurprisingly, most of the new knights were very receptive of that recognition. But Sandor appeared deaf to it. He just stood still as a statue at the front left corner of
the stage with a neutral facial expression.

The ceremony was concluded a moment later. King Robert and Ser Barristan exited the stage through the back side, where no one was gathered. The last twenty knights and the Legionnaires went their own ways. Similarly, the people on the ground started to disperse.

Willas noted that Lord Jorah Mormont and Sandor Clegane exited with Gregor Clegane, Dacey Mormont, and Oberyn Martell. Lord Eddard Stark got off at the same spot as them. That may or may not have intentional, but in any case, it was convenient.

"Mother, I believe you wished to have words with Lord Eddard," Willas told his mother.

"So I did," Lady Alerie Tyrell affirmed.

Willas pointed out the wolf lord to her. He was currently in the midst of speaking to some of the Legionnaires. Willas proposed "Now is your opportunity."

Mother smiled at that and said "Indeed."

Willas would have been content to walk over to Eddard Stark. Alas, his father happened to overhear that exchange of dialogue, and he must have thought himself too good to be the ones to approach. So before Willas or Mother could take a single step, Father raised his arm and called out "Lord Eddard!"

Despite the tumultuous noise in the area, Father was loud enough to be heard by Eddard Stark. When the wolf lord heard his name, he turned in that direction. He saw Mace Tyrell waving at him. After a moment's pause, Lord Eddard excused himself from the Legionnaires and made his way over to the Reachmen.

He did not come alone. A few of the Legionnaires chose to follow him. To Willas' good fortune, Lord Gregor was among them.

Eddard reached the Tyrells and the Hightowers first. He spoke to Father "You wished to see me, Lord Mace?"

"No, my lady wife did," Father revealed.

"I see," was all Lord Eddard said in response. He sounded grim. He turned to Mother and stated inquiringly "Lady Alerie?"

She grinned at the Northman and "Have you some time to converse, my lord?"

"On what, might I ask?" Eddard Stark murmured

"A certain arrangement that was proposed," Mother told him vaguely, "One meant to benefit both our families."

With her eyes, she pointed out Margaery, who was standing near her feet. Lord Eddard caught on to what she was implying fairly quickly.

"I was hoping to discuss that with you myself," the Warden of the North proclaimed, "Shall we go somewhere… a little less crowded, perhaps?"

"Excellent idea," Father declared, as though he had thought of it himself, "Come to my tent. We can talk further on this issue there."
Lord Eddard was taken aback by Father's abrupt interruption, but he made no remark.

"Willas, look after your siblings," Father ordered his firstborn, "Your mother and I have business to go over with Lord Stark."

"Yes, Father," the heir to Highgarden conceded.

*And please make an effort not to embarrass us in front of Lord Eddard.*

Willas noted that Gregor Clegane was one of the people who had followed Lord Eddard over. Shortly after Mother and Father exited the vicinity with the Lord of Winterfell, Willas tried to speak with the Mountain. It turns out he would have to wait a while.

Right when his parents left, Gregor went over to his grandfather. He expressed his sincerest apologies and regrets for the loss of Uncle Garth. Although condolences were expected of him, these sounded genuine. Grandfather Leyton must have thought so, too; he accepted them accordingly.

In fact, he decided to introduce his children and grandchildren to the people in Gregor's company.

Not all the people who had accompanied Lord Eddard were Legionnaires. In addition to Dacey Mormont and Oberyn Martell, the newly-anointed Jorah Mormont and Sandor Clegane had come over, as well. There were also a trio of Dornishwomen. One of them was around the same age as Prince Oberyn. She was actually Ellaria Sand, his paramour. The other two were his daughters. The elder, Obara, turned out to be the wife of Sandor Clegane. The younger, Nymeria, was currently unwed. However, Willas noticed that she spent a lot of time by Jorah Mormont's side.

Ellaria had been holding a small boy; he could not have been older than two years. He was Rickard Clegane, the son of Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey. Ellaria had been watching over him throughout the ceremony. Now that it was over, she was able to return Rickard to his parents. Thus, he was speedily transferred from Ellaria's arms to Dacey's.

After Grandfather Leyton introduced his descendants to Lord Gregor's colleagues, he asked to know more about the latter group. That was rather characteristic of him; he always was interested to learn more about new people.

Some of Gregor's companions decided to indulge the Lord of Oldtown. So they mentioned a few tidbits of information about themselves. When Lord Jorah revealed he was a widower, Aunt Lynesse suddenly became a fair deal more interested in him. She walked up to the bear lord and bade him to talk more about himself.

*This could mean trouble.*

Willas must not have been the only one who felt so. Gregor Clegane sneered at Aunt Lynesse, and Nymeria Martell appeared outraged.

In fact, the Mountain discreetly brought the former bastard girl over and whispered something into her ear. Several times, one or both of them glared over at Aunt Lynesse.

When Lord Gregor stopped whispering, Nymeria nodded her head, smirked, and muttered compliantly "You can count on me to do that, my lord."

Willas wondered what "that" was, but decided he would rather not find out.

He did, however, find out why Sandor Clegane was less than thrilled about his knighthood. As it
happened, the Hound had only attended the ceremony at the insistence of King Robert and his brother. Truthfully, he did not care much for being a knight. He eloquently professed his belief that a true warrior was one that fought selflessly and for the good of others, not one who had "Ser" in front of his name.

*Now that's a sentiment I can understand.*

Eventually, all the small, separate conversations ended. Before long, Willas' aunts and uncles went their own ways, as did Gregor Clegane and his associates. Still, Willas was determined to have a word with the Mountain before the day was out.

He turned to Garlan, Loras, and Margaery, and he instructed them "I need you three to stay with Grandfather Leyton for a few minutes. There is something I have to get done elsewhere."

To his relief, his younger siblings did not try to protest or argue. After entrusting them to Grandfather Leyton, Willas rushed to catch up with Lord Gregor Clegane.

He found the Mountain near the blacksmiths. He and his lady wife were speaking to one of the metalworkers on a certain project they had commissioned his services for. Something involving Valyrian steel, if what little Willas managed to overhear was true.

Not knowing how long this endeavor might take, Willas chose to interrupt rather than to wait. He approached the massive man and said as civilly as possible "Excuse me, Lord Gregor."

The Mountain hastily looked over his shoulder. "Yes, Lord Willas?"

Willas took a deep breath and stated "I was hoping maybe you could spare me a few minutes of your time. There is something I wish to consult with you."

After a few mere seconds of contemplation, Gregor decided to grant Willas' favor. He turned to his wife and told her "I'll be right back, Dacey."

The Bear Islander nodded at that. She was still holding their son in her arms. But even with her hands full, she was a capable negotiator.

As the heir to Highgarden and the Mountain headed away, the former heard the latter's wife say to the blacksmith "Now, Master Mott, where were we?"

After walking for about a minute, Willas and Gregor managed to find a quiet, secluded spot where they could converse without being eavesdropped on.

"Now, what can I do for you, my lord?" Gregor stated enquiringly.

Willas did not answer straightaway. He chose his words carefully: "In all honesty… it's more a matter of what I can do for you."

Lord Gregor was intrigued. "How so?"

"It's quite simple, my lord," Willas Tyrell proclaimed. "I wish to join the Legion without Banners."

That remark seemed to take the Mountain by surprise. Lord Gregor stood in silence for a minute, and then he uttered tentatively "Normally, I would always welcome a promising, young volunteer…"

"But…?" Willas beckoned him to continue.
"But we do not receive many firstborn sons of highborn families," Gregor apprised him, "And we've never gotten the heir to a Great House."

"It appears I would be setting a precedent, then," Willas wittily observed.

"Yes, you would," Gregor conceded, rubbing his temple, "But tell me; what reason do you have for wishing to enlist?"

"The same reason as most of the other Legionnaires," the heir to Highgarden replied, "To establish peace, order, and stability in Westeros."

"You could accomplish plenty of that well enough from Highgarden," Gregor debated.

"Yes, but my influence does not extend far beyond the Reach," Willas contended.

"It could if you marry into a house outside your homeland," Gregor suggested.

"That might take too long," Willas uttered dourly, "I am merely a lad of thirteen."

"Well, I was a man grown at thirteen," Gregor countered.

Willas glared at him incredulously. He wordlessly emphasized how much he had to crane his neck upwards to look the Mountain in the eye.

"Alright, bad example," the Lord of Moat Cailin admitted, scoffing a bit.

"My lord, I am here offering you my services by my own volition," Willas pointed out, trying to remain patient, "Just tell me; am I wasting my time?"

Gregor stood thinking for another minute, and then he asked the younger man "Have you discussed this with your lord father and lady mother?"

Somehow, I knew he was going to bring them into this.

"I have not," Willas confessed, "But not because I was reluctant or afraid to. Instead, it was because I was more concerned about being denied this chance by you than by them."

Gregor seemed to understand that point. It appeared as though Willas was starting to convince him that he would indeed be useful to the Legion.

"Alright, let us say for a moment I allowed you into the Legion," Gregor hypothesized, "Every Legionnaire brings something practical and valuable to the table. Tell me, my lord; what makes you special? What would you have to offer that others would not?"

Willas had prepared for a question like that. He apprised the older man "I'm a fair jouster and swordsman. I'm also skilled at training horses, hawks, and hounds; they make fine animal companions. At the risk of sounding vain, I am very well-educated on the many ways of the Known World."

Gregor Clegane nodded in approval and thought aloud "That all sounds quite appealing."

After a long and hopeful silence, the Mountain nodded again and declared "Alright, my lord. I will permit you entrance into the Legion without Banners."

Willas soon broke into a wide grin. He was about to open his mouth to thank Lord Gregor profusely. Before he could, the Mountain hastily added in "On two conditions."
Willas Tyrell closed his mouth to listen. Once Gregor Clegane had his attention, he told him "Firstly, if you ever get the idea to joust with Oberyn Martell, I must have assurances that you will be cautious."

*That's a strange proviso.*

"May I ask why, my lord?" Willas enquired.

"Simply because the Red Viper is known to be deadly with a lance," Gregor claimed, "I will not have any person under my command being harmed by him or any other Legionnaire. Especially when the former party will one day be the Lord Paramount of the Reach."

"I understand," Willas asserted, "And the other term?"

"Have your parents arranged any prospective marriage contacts for you yet?" Gregor inquired.

Willas raised an eyebrow in confusion. But he gave an honest answer: "As of yet, no."

"Then for the present, I would like you to avoid forging any marriage contracts involving yourself," Gregor told him, "And here is why: I believe there is an ideal betrothal candidate for you. But circumstances as they are, I may not be able to secure a contract between you and her right now. Furthermore, due to another complicated drawback, I cannot tell you or anyone else about her just yet."

Now Willas was absolutely fascinated. And more than a little suspicious of Lord Gregor's intentions.

*Just what is he planning to accomplish? And who is this mystery woman?*

He did not bother asking those questions; he could tell he would not get answers. That aside, he decided that Lord Gregor's stipulations were reasonable. "I can accept that, my lord."

The Mountain grinned, held out his hand, and commented "Then I welcome you to the Legion, my lord."

Willas took his hand and shook it firmly.
The Unexpected

Chapter Notes

Note: So, in spite of how busy my projects have kept me, I still managed to post a new chapter one week later. Not only that, but this one is even longer than the last one. Don't worry; I don't intend for this "each-new-update-is-the-longest-yet" thing to be a routine. By the way, some of you may have questions about Lord Arryn's family and the Royal Family by the end of this chapter. If so, let me go ahead and reassure you that those topics will be addressed sometime in the next few chapters. So will Ellyn's possible betrothal to Tyrion. In fact, the latter issue will be the main focus of the next chapter.

It was a magnificent armament. Nearly six feet long, taller than its owner. Made of solid ironwood, straighter than an arrow. But its primary feature was the blade. It was the sharpest and lightest spearhead anyone had seen in recent years.

*Genuine Valyrian steel. I never would have thought to see it in my own lifetime.*

Lady Daliah Clegane had never been trained in the ways of war. Growing up in Deep Den, she had been kept safe by her father's men-at-arms. There had never been any great reason for her to learn to fight; most Westerlander women generally stayed at home and indoors.

She could defend herself with her hands and feet, if need be, but she had no formal experience with weapons. She had rarely even held anything deadlier than a steak knife. But she could not resist the opportunity to examine this newly-made masterpiece of a weapon.

Presently, Daliah was on the tourney grounds with her husband, sons, grandson, daughter, and daughters-by-law. They were just outside the forge of one Tobho Mott, a master blacksmith from King's Landing. In her hands, she gripped Master Mott's latest creation: a long, hefty spear fitted with a Valyrian steel tip.

Daliah have arrived early that morning with Tarrence, Ellyn, and a handful of their retainers. Gregor, Sandor, their wives, and Rickard had camped in the tourney grounds overnight, and – as such – had already been present when the lord and lady of Clegane's Keep appeared with their daughter.

As the eight Cleganes broke their fast, Gregor, Dacey, Sandor, and Obara informed Daliah, Tarrence, and Ellyn that they had something special to show them. They never gave any direct hints as to what that "something" might be; they merely claimed it was to be a surprise.

*Quite a marvelous surprise it is.*

Up until the moment they came to Tobho Mott's workshop, Daliah had been clueless as to what her sons and daughters-by-law had planned. When they arrived at the workshop, she presumed they had hired the blacksmith to forge some new weapons for House Clegane. While that assumption turned out to be correct, she never would have expected an object of **this** quality.

"Would you care to give it a spin, Mother?" Obara suggested kindly.
Ever since her wedding to Sandor, the former Sand Snake had made a habit of addressing Daliah that way. The Lady of Clegane's Keep found she deeply enjoyed being called that, especially since she was aware that Obara had severed all connections to her own mother.

Daliah Clegane gazed at the spear and thought on that proposal. Then she shook her head, held the spear out to the Dornishwoman, and pronounced "I appreciate your offer, dear, but I would rather not. I may cause unintentional harm to someone."

"I understand, Mother," Obara acknowledged, accepting her spear back.

"I'll try it out," Ellyn abruptly suggested. Daliah and everyone else looked at her in slight astonishment. She bashfully gazed at the ground and added in "If you do not mind, of course."

Obara Martell smiled at the young girl's remarks, and she offered her the spear. As Ellyn tentatively took it into her hands, Obara cautioned her "Be careful with it."

*Oh, she knows how to handle it.*

Unlike her mother, Ellyn Clegane was not unversed in combat. After she had been born, Gregor had proposed that when she was old enough, she be taught to wield a weapon. Sandor had backed his brother's idea, and Tarrence ultimately agreed to it.

Thus, starting after her eighth nameday, Sandor and Wallis Peckledon had drilled Ellyn on how to properly brandish a dagger. After she mastered that, they moved her up to the longer melee weapons. She fought with wooden swords for a long while before they let her have a real one. She was a slow learner, but she turned out to be a promising fighter.

After Obara moved to the Keep, Ellyn was able to expand the range of her expertise to the spear, as well. Interestingly, she turned out to be more proficient with Obara's weapon of choice than the Mountain's and the Hound's.

*I doubt she'd be able to defeat Gregor, Dacey, Sandor, or Obara in a duel, but she could definitely hold her own against the average soldier.*

Although Daliah had initially been averse to her daughter learning how to handle weapons, she had come to appreciate and embrace that idea. She was secretly proud of Ellyn for becoming such a superb combatant. That was something Lady Daliah herself never had the chance (or wish) to do.

Ellyn gripped her sister-by-law's new spear firmly in both hands. She backed away from the other members of her family, and she waited until nobody else was within ten feet of her. After that, she began to twirl the spear in both her hands.

Her pace started out slow, but gradually, she quickened it. She spun it directly in front of her for about twenty seconds, and then she waved it along the sides of her body. She moved so quickly that Daliah had difficulty keeping track of where her hands were.

*She's so fast. Now that is impressive.*

"Faster," Obara instructed her. Ellyn compliantly twirled the spear faster.

"Show me those techniques I taught you," Obara proposed. In response, Ellyn efficiently and expertly demonstrated some of the various maneuvers she had picked up from Obara.

"Good," the Dornishwoman remarked, nodding in approval, "Now, deliver home!"
At that, Ellyn turned to her family, took the spear in a backhand grip, and lunged forward. When she landed on her feet, she stabbed at the ground in front of her. Grass, dirt, and soil went everywhere when she struck.

*If someone's throat had been there, she could have taken his head off.*

Panting a little, Ellyn hastily withdrew the spear from the ground and gave it back to Obara. The former Sand Snake proceeded to clean its head with a piece of thick cloth. She was careful with how she wiped the blade; she did not wish to chance cutting herself on the edge of the steel.

*And if Ellyn is that good... no one in his right mind would strive to cross Obara when she's armed with that.*

Once the spearhead was clean, Tarrence enquired "Have you thought on a name for it?"

Obara shrugged and muttered "Names are usually reserved for swords. Normally, no one bothers with giving a name to a spear. But, of course, I have never been one to uphold all customs. So I suppose I shall make an exception."

*I expected you to. So did everyone else, apparently. Daliah asked her gooddaughter "Do you have any apt names in mind?"

Obara stood looking over her spear for a couple minutes, and then she declared "Because it's so light, agile, and formidable, I can only think of one name that would do it appropriate justice: Swift Thrust."

"I like it," Sandor told his wife almost right away. He was not being untruthful, Daliah could tell.

"Simple, accurate, and unpretentious," Lady Daliah commented, "It definitely suits your weapon."

Everyone else appeared to approve of Obara's choice of name, too.

She grinned and stated "Then it seems one of Master Mott's four projects has been officially completed."

"Indeed," Tarrence conceded, "When can we expect the others to be ready?"

It was Gregor who answered: "As you can imagine, the longsword, the bastard sword, and the greatsword all require a far larger amount of steel than the spearhead. As such, they will take longer to forge. We have spoken with Master Mott, and according to him, all three of them will need at least a week to fold; no more than two."

"So you'll be unable to use them in the tourney's melee?" Ellyn presumed.

"Correct," Sandor affirmed.

"That's a shame," Daliah remarked, though she was not truly disappointed.

"Not really," Gregor disputed, "Sandor and I already possess superior strength and size to most of the other participants."

"It would be a touch too unfair if we had this advantage over them, as well," Sandor contended.

"Whoever said a tourney had to be fair?" Dacey cheekily uttered. She was currently holding Rickard in her arms. When everyone chuckled at his mother's jape, he joined in with a bit of
"That aside," Gregor bluntly murmured, dismissing his wife's jest, "It would be unwise to enter a skirmish with the Valyrian steel swords before they have been tested."

"True," Sandor stated, "Furthermore, Valyrian steel is known to be lethal. The purpose of the tourney is to best our foes, not slay them."

"Yes, but you never know," Ellyn debated, "These tourneys are unpredictable. Even in the safest of conditions, accidents can occur."

"No denying that," Gregor coincided, "For all we know, an accident or two could happen at this one."

Daliah felt her eldest son sounded strangely certain of that prospect. That made her worry. She bade her sons "Promise me you'll be safe."

"You needn't worry, Mother," Gregor asserted, "I was not implying that we would be in an accident. Sandor is much too wary to be caught unawares, and I am in control of everything that occurs on the jousting field. And I mean everything. It is the other contenders who should worry about accidents."

While that was likely meant to reassure her, Daliah was still a little concerned. It was as though Gregor was confident some manner of accident would indeed transpire at the tourney. She must have been the only one there who believed so; everyone else appeared to assume the Mountain was merely providing an example of one possible occurrence. So she chose to disregard that suspicion of hers.

"At any rate, once the swords are ready, we'll be back here to receive them," Sandor professed, "Gregor and Dacey will take the greatsword and the longsword back North. The bastard sword, however, will remain at Clegane's Keep. I intend for it to be the ancestral blade for this branch of House Clegane."

He then turned to his father and proposed "If it be your wish, Father, you may take possession of the sword first. I am content to wait until I succeed you to take custody of it."

Daliah looked to her husband, and she discovered that he was not tempted by that offer at all. A few years ago, he would have been. But not today.

Lord Tarrence Clegane solemnly shook his head and stated "No, Sandor. From the moment of its creation, the sword is yours."

Sandor and Gregor were stunned by their father's refusal. The Hound pointed out "You are my sire and my lord. By rights, the sword should belong to you for the duration of your life."

"Only if I had a hand in acquiring it," Tarrence countered, "It was you who triumphed over Euron Greyjoy in single combat; you who won his stash of Valyrian steel. Therefore, ownership of this sword goes straight to you."

There was a very brief pause, and then Tarrence explicated "Additionally… I've no more use for a blade. Such a superb weapon would be wasted on me."

It was at that moment when he lifted up his hands. He had worn leather greaves that day. They were thick and tight enough that his arms were mostly stable. But even with that safeguard, Daliah could spot a quiver in both of her husband's wrists.
In these past few months, his palsy had gotten worse. Before Greyjoy's Rebellion, it had only encompassed his left arm. Now it had spread to his right arm, too. Maester Velix had counseled him not to attend the tourney, but Tarrence would not be denied the first opportunity to appear at a grand event as a lord.

Sandor grudgingly sighed and mumbled empathetically "If that is your wish, Father."

Tarrence lowered his arms and reassured his heir "It is."

Daliah had sided with Velix on the issue of whether or not Tarrence should attend the tourney. Alas, he had paid as little heed to his wife's advice as he had to the maester's. He was very determined not to be absent from the festivities. Daliah was not pleased by Tarrence's obstinacy, but she could not protest.

*As long as his twitches do not become any more pronounced, everything should be alright.*

Just then, there was the sound of a horn being blown. All heads turned in the direction of the noise. Many people in the area began to make their way to its point of origin.

"The jousting's about to start," Dacey observed.

Ellyn nodded and asked rhetorically "Shall we head over?"

"Better we do," Daliah said candidly.

The Cleganes speedily proceeded towards the grounds set aside for the jousting competition. When they got there, Sandor and Gregor parted from the group. Daliah and the others went to the stands.

Other than the platform designated for the Royal Family, no section had been reserved for people from any one specific region. Even so, the Reachmen and the Dornishmen tended to sit apart from one another, as did the Riverlords and the Westerlords.

*Even when celebrating the victory of war, old rivalries are hard to expunge.*

Daliah spotted Nymeria Martell and Ellaria, Elia, and Obella Sand in the front of the eastern stands. They were near the center of that section. She suggested sitting there, and the Cleganes seemed to advocate the idea. The Dornishwomen were very accommodating of them. Daliah herself sat next to Ellaria in the front row.

*Whoever would have thought I'd make such good friends with a bastard?*

She no longer thought of Prince Oberyn's paramour as a baseborn woman who mothered two more baseborn girls. In fact, in the past few years, her opinion of bastards had changed as a whole. She was even willing to have Elia Sand sit on her lap.

Nymeria sat on the other side of Daliah, and Obara positioned herself next to her sister. The four women and the two young girls occupied a whole bench in the front row.

Since Tarrence, Ellyn, and Dacey were the tallest of their group, they chose to sit in the second row. Tarrence took up a spot behind his lady wife, and Ellyn sat on her father's right side, in turn. Dacey seated herself to his left with Rickard on her lap.

The jousting field was empty for the present. Though she did not show it, Daliah was excited for the competition to begin. She was looking forward to seeing her sons contest some of the other
renowned fighters in Westeros.

*I wonder who they will face-off first?*

Daliah was aware that Dacey and Obara had considered entering the lists. They had ultimately decided against it. For one thing, they would have had to argue with many of the knights and lords who intransigently insisted that women had no place in tourneys. The only fighting Dacey and Obara were in the mood for was the type that involved steel, not words. Plus, if either of them actually won, crowning a Queen of Love and Beauty would have been terribly awkward for both of them.

*If the crown was made of steel instead of flowers, they might have been able to crown a King. But a King of Love and Beauty would be exceedingly foolish.*

Other than her sons, Daliah did not know who all would be involved in the joust. She had heard from her daughters-by-law that Lord Jorah Mormont and Prince Oberyn Martell had enlisted. While she did not know either of those men particularly well, Daliah would not have been surprised if they did.

It had been rumored that King Robert himself would be partaking in the joust. *That would certainly be a remarkable sight.*

Once the stands were filled, a herald climbed onto the platform and called out "All rise for His Grace, Robert Baratheon, the First of His Name, King of…"

Daliah paid no mind to the rest. In her opinion, the time it took to give the entirety of the king’s title was tediously long.

*We know he's our King. Can you not leave it at that?*

When the herald finished, the crowd stood as one. It was then that Robert Baratheon made his appearance. Daliah had to admit he did look quite regal. He was fully clad in black and gold leather. From his shining boots to his stag-adorned crown, he seemed the very image of what a king should be.

A few seconds later, the Queen appeared on the platform. In contrast to her husband, she instead wore a dress of crimson, the color of the Lannisters. It hung loosely around her thighs and legs, but it was tighter around her arms and chest. The space around and beneath her throat was left uncovered, rendering her bosom partly visible.

*As beautiful as she is shameless.*

Cersei Lannister took her place next to Robert Baratheon. Soon after, they were joined by the Hand of the King, Lord Jon Arryn took up the spot beside his former ward. His lady wife, Lysa of House Tully, stood beside her own husband.

Jon Arryn was an elderly man, but he was said to still be spry and healthy. His wife actually appeared to be far feebler by comparison. Daliah had heard that after the death of her childhood friend, Petyr Baelish, Lady Lysa had been devastated, almost to the point of mania.

She knew that the Legion without Banners had been assigned to escort Baelish to Harrenhal safely, and Gregor himself had been in command of the convoy. Nevertheless, on the way, their party had been attacked by the mountain clansmen of the Vale, and Littlefinger had perished.

That had been three years ago. Lysa Arryn had not yet gotten over the loss of the Mockingbird.
Despite that, she had improved much since then. Her mental state was still in question by some, but at least she did not disgrace or shame her husband or her king in public. She had even managed to give Lord Jon a child a year ago.

Daliah had heard that childbirth had not been easy for her. On that note, Daliah considered the possibility that that could have been the real reason for Lysa's slightly disheveled appearance.

There are some women who simply cannot handle the burden of childbirth.

Daliah could not speak for herself, of course. She had birthed three of the largest children in Westeros' modern generation, and she had recovered excellently after each one. As a result, she had come to believe that there was no excuse for any mother who could not take to childbirth as easily as she had. Some would call that haughty, but she felt her belief was a reasonable and justifiable one.

Looking at Lysa Arryn and her husband, Daliah was reminded of the early days of her own marriage.

As the youngest daughter of Deep Den, Daliah Lydden had grown up believing she would never be part of anything great. She had often been overlooked by many, including her own family. She had been fifteen when her father first approached her with the idea of a match between her and the master of Clegane's Keep. Back then, the keep had been small, foreboding, filthy, and generally unpleasant to look at. Furthermore, House Clegane had only seen its second generation at the time, and Tarrence Clegane was more than a decade her senior. Worst yet, he was the son of an upraised kennelmaster.

Daliah had adamantly refused the betrothal at first. She had argued that she was a highborn lady; if she was to marry into any family, it should be to one of the other noble houses. Her father Lord Lewys had explained to her that her sisters were to marry into noble houses. She, however, was supposed to be content with a landed knight.

Her father had not been unsympathetic to her qualms. Neither had her mother nor her siblings. Even so, they had all encouraged her to consent to the contract. Their primary argument was that House Clegane was closer to Casterly Rock than any other family – highborn or otherwise. As such, her presence at their keep could somehow help strengthen House Lydden's relations with House Lannister.

Eventually, Daliah had agreed… albeit resentfully and with much reluctance. Her wedding had been arranged very expediently afterward. The ceremony had been a ridiculously simple affair. It seemed to be just a step or two above a wedding conducted by the smallfolk. She did not even have the luxury of meeting Tarrence beforehand.

She had wed the master of Clegane's Keep sometime after her sixteenth nameday. The ensuing feast (if one could call it that) had been as simple as the wedding. Only two courses with no form of entertainment or merriment. At that time, that had not bothered Daliah as much as what she knew would follow.

The bedding ceremony had been the most unsettling part of the evening by far. At the very least, Tarrence had been gentle with her. Even so, he had refused to consider the idea of putting the bedding off. He claimed he would be a laughingstock if it became known that he had not lain with the woman who became his wife on the same day he had married her.

The next two years were probable the most miserable of Daliah's life. Tarrence and his retainers went to great length to try to make her comfortable. She never once complained about or criticized
anything, but her lord husband could tell she was not pleased. In an attempt to persuade him otherwise, she had started calling him "my love." That ploy had failed.

Daliah had not yet reached her twentieth nameday when Gregor was born. That was easily the most traumatic event of her life. She had been in labor for hours, and on several occasions, she was convinced she would not survive the ordeal.

Of course, in the end, she did. Once her firstborn finally came into the world, she could relax.

Tarrence had held their boy first. Daliah had her turn soon after. That very moment, when she took Gregor in her arms… that was the happiest she had been since she left Deep Den. At the time, she had not even loved her husband. But the child they had created together… she felt overwhelming adoration for him immediately.

Daliah needed a good couple weeks to recover after Gregor was born. She was bedridden for nearly a fortnight. Maester Velix was the one primarily responsible for her health, but Tarrence played the most significant role. He had constantly checked up on her throughout her recovery. All his other functions and responsibilities around the keep were secondary to her well-being. It was as though he had been personally obligated to see to her every need.

During that period of time, Daliah finally realized just how much her husband cared for her. Not only that; he actually did love her. In that moment, she began to love him in return.

By the time Sandor was born, she had come to call Tarrence "my love" not out of duty, but out of genuine affection.

By the time Ellyn was born, Daliah truly felt at home at Clegane's Keep. Despite its drear appearance and decaying structure, she found happiness in the arms of its master and their children. In fact, she no longer cared for wealth, power, or influence. She had discovered that family was the one greatest, irreplaceable joy in life; the one that mattered the most. As such, she had become far more comforted with living at the keep than she had ever been at her father's ancestral home.

Daliah would even have been happy to have raised her children and grown old with Tarrence in that decrepit building. Regardless of its state, she would feel at home in Clegane's Keep, being the wife of a landed knight. She was prepared to remain that and nothing more.

But the Gods decided to reward my family for my humility.

Thirteen years later, House Clegane's status in Westeros had greatly improved. There were now two branches of it; both holding lordly status. Clegane's Keep had been cleaned, refurbished, and expanded. It was a proper ancestral home by the nobility's standards. Her sons had married outside the Westerlands, and there was a chance her daughter would wed the son of her liege lord.

When Daliah was first sent to Clegane's Keep, she had inwardly cursed her father. Now she blessed him for it.

As it happened, Lord Lewys Lydden had attended Sandor's wedding. During the feast, Daliah was able to reunite with her father for the first time in twenty years. He had embraced her tenderly, and he had whispered to her "I'm so proud of you, Dali."

That was the best part of all. She had done what she had always endeavored to do: she had won her father's praise.

Of course, all good things must end at some point.
She had faced the truth of that at the beginning of the year, when her husband and Maester Velix had shared some grim news about the former's health.

Palsy was said to be fatal. Daliah did not know how long her husband would last, but she prayed to the Gods for his relief (if they would not grant his recovery) every day. The very same gods she had once beseeched not to send her to Clegane's Keep.

*Love comes about in the most unexpected and mysterious ways.*

Daliah wondered if Robert Baratheon and Cersei Lannister were in the same dilemma she and Tarrence had been in. No one could say with total certainty that the King and Queen truly loved each other. Be that as it may, Daliah could sense no enmity between them, either. The marriages between the Targaryen kings and their sisters had been notoriously unhappy. This one, however... it had promise.

After the Hand and his wife arrived on the platform, Robert turned to Cersei and held his hand out to her. She interlocked her fingers with his, smiling all the while. He smiled back, and the two stepped forward, raising their connected hands together.

"Let the joust begin!" the King declared boisterously.

The audience voiced their approval of that announcement with a wave of enthusiastic cheers. They all remained standing, as it was traditional not to sit until the King did.

Six seats had been set out on the platform beforehand. Three were thrones, meant for the Royal Family. The other three were elaborate chairs, meant for the Hand's family. Two of each trio were normal-sized. Between the two thrones and the two grand chairs were each a smaller throne and grand chair of similar design.

King Robert, Queen Cersei, Lord Jon, and Lady Lysa gradually took their place in the four large chairs. As the people in the audience went silent and sat down in turn, a young boy and a young girl were brought out onto the platform.

The girl was Lord Arryn's daughter. She was placed on the small grand chair in-between her parents. As soon as she was in her seat, Lysa Tully leaned over to her and placed a kiss on her forehead.

The boy was the Crown Prince. He was old enough to walk to the throne and climb onto it himself. Once he was settled, the Queen smiled down at her son and delicately brushed her hand through his natural black locks. The King grinned again. And so did Daliah.

*Even if they do not love each other now, there is one thing they both love already. That's a hopeful sign.*

Now that the King had given his blessing for the jousting competition to commence, the first of the contenders came out.

A knight of the Kingsguard, the sullen Meryn Trant, was on the one side. A pair of young boys – who Daliah could have sworn were actually girls – were assisting him with his arms and horse.

On the other side was Gregor. He had already donned his armor. Only his head was uncovered, but that changed when his helm was given to him by his new squire, Willas Tyrell, the heir to Highgarden.

Gregor put on his helm, and he climbed onto his massive destrier. Once he locked his feet in the
stirrups, Willas handed him his lance. By then, Ser Meryn Trant was astride his own horse with his own lance in hand.

The Kingsguard and the Mountain brought their horses to the front of the platform. They dipped their heads to their King, and he gave a wave of his hand and proclaimed "Start your round, gentlemen."

At that, Ser Meryn and Gregor rode to the opposite ends of the jousting field. Once in position, they faced each other off. Both men lowered their lances in the direction of each other, and they waited for the signal. Once it came, they broke into a charge.

Daliah watched intently as the distance between her son and his opponent became progressively smaller. She knew the Kingsguard was no match for the Mountain That Rides, but in spite of that, she found herself holding her breath.

Soon the two men were upon each other. Daliah willed herself not to look away.

Meryn Trant's lance merely bounced off of Gregor's shield. But Gregor's lance struck true. He roughly jabbed the other rider in the center of his chest. The impact that blow was so powerful that Ser Meryn practically flew off his saddle.

The audience burst into cheers again as Meryn Trant hit the ground and rolled around in the dirt. After letting out a sigh of relief, Daliah joined her voice to theirs.

 Needless to say, she was very proud of her son's performance. But she did not rejoice just yet.

*This is only the first round, after all.*

The next tilt was between Jorah Mormont and Jason Mallister. The Lord of Bear Island managed to unhorse the Lord of Seagard on the first pass.

Nymeria had cheered louder than anyone else in Daliah's company when that happened. Amidst the applause, Daliah heard her whisper to Obara "One day, he's helping him defend his holdfast. The next, he's beating him with a lance."

Daliah scoffed at that observation, partly because it was true. Both Jorah and Nymeria had been present at the defense of Seagard.

The next four rounds were between men Daliah had either never heard of or did not especially favor. She was relatively indifferent to the outcome of each of those bouts.

After that, Sandor was up against Ser Ryam Florent, younger brother to Lord Alester Florent of Brightwater Keep and Lady Selyse Baratheon's father.

Sandor had chosen to forgo wearing a helm, as usual. Of course, that was the reason half of his face made most people cringe. Even so, he believed leaving his scar visible would drive fear into the hearts of his opponents.

His theory may have had some merit to it. When he and his adversary faced off, Ryam Florent appeared to become startled by the Hound's countenance for a split-second. That momentary distraction was enough for Sandor to catch him off-guard and knock him off his mount.

After three more duels between six unfamiliar parties, Oberyn Martell made his first appearance. He sparred with and easily defeated Ser Jon Fossoway of New Barrel.
Within a few hours, over thirty matches had been staged, and just as many men had been removed from the competition.

To the astonishment and delight of many, Robert Baratheon participated in the last round of the first wave. There were some who tried to dissuade him, but he insisted that he had the situation in control.

He did indeed. The King had gained a little weight since his Rebellion, but he still fit into his armor perfectly. He held his lance and balanced his shield with the same stable hands as before.

Ironically, his opponent was Rhaegar Frey, one of Lord Walder's many grandsons. Unsurprisingly, the Frey was far from the King's equal. Robert managed to defeat him far more effortlessly than he had defeated his namesake.

Among the group of victors in the first wave of tilts were Ser Barristan Selmy, Ser Jaime Lannister, Polliver, and Rafford. Three more of Gregor's personal men-at-arms had entered the lists, but they had not lasted beyond the first wave.

The first three rounds of the second wave were between Sandor and Galbart Glover of Deepwood Motte, Jorah and Ser Boros Blount of the Kingsguard, and Gregor and Ser Ryman Frey of the Twins.

Sandor eliminated his opponent on the third pass; Jorah on the second. Both rounds ended with the head of House Glover and the Kingsguard knight lying in the dirt.

Gregor's round ended a little differently.

To Daliah (and others), it was a wonder that Ryman Frey had survived the first wave. He had been conspicuously half-drunk at the time, and his posture had been lacking of grace and discipline. Then again, his adversary had been Shitmouth, and while the most foul-mouthed of Gregor's men-at-arms was excellent with a sword, he was hopeless with a lance. In fact, he had kept mumbling "Bugger me with a lance" after he had been knocked off his mount.

*It's fortunate he did not say something worse.*

At any rate, Daliah had no doubt as to who the victor of **this** round would be.

Not only was Gregor the superior fighter, but Ryman Frey was even more disheveled than before. He was closer to full-drunk than half-drunk, he did not even bother to secure his feet in his stirrups, and he could not hold his lance straight. He looked more a mummer playing a rider than an actual rider.

"This should be unexciting," Ellyn muttered blankly. Daliah had to agree with her daughter.

Ellyn's prediction turned out to be untrue.

Ryman Frey and Gregor Clegane soon began their charge. Somehow, Ser Ryman managed to keep his horse galloping alongside the rail that separated him and Gregor. That was about the only thing he did right. He could hardly even lift his lance.

Gregor kept his horse running in a straight line. He held his lance in a steady hand. He had it pointed directly at Ser Ryman's chest. The Frey knight's shield was hanging uselessly from his left arm, leaving his upper body exposed. One firm nudge would have been enough to throw him off.

Gregor gave him more than that.
In the split-second before they were upon each other, Gregor raised his lance slightly higher. Instead of striking Ser Ryman in the chest, the lance was driven through his throat. Upon impact, Ryman Frey lurched violently. By the time Gregor passed him, the tip of Gregor's lance broke off, and he had fallen off his horse, flat onto his back.

Many of the women in the audience screamed in response. Daliah fought hard to suppress a scream of her own. She, Dacey, Obara, and Nymeria managed to stay silent, but Ellaria and Ellyn did not hold back.

Ryman Frey was erratically convulsing on the ground. His eyes were wide-open, blood was spilling out of his throat, and the only sound that came from his throat was a sickening gurgle.

Gregor hastily brought his horse to a halt and climbed off it. He rushed to Ryman's side. He had his back to his family, but Daliah could hear him say "Ser Ryman? Hold in there. Try not to move. You're going to be alright."

He sounded authentically frantic and anxious. If Daliah did not know better, she would have thought he really was convinced that Ryman Frey would live. But it happened she knew her son very well.

*He's killed enough men to know that a stab to the throat is deadly.*

Apart from that, Gregor was not one to feed people false hope. If a person was doomed to die, Gregor would not mislead him into believing otherwise. Daliah had never seen a man die before, but she could tell Ryman was going to.

By the time a maester arrived on the scene, Ryman Frey had breathed his last. His body was carried off the field, and servants moved in to clean up the mess.

Once that was done, the King announced that due to the circumstances, the remainder of the second wave of the joust would be moved to the following day. No one there gave a word of protest.

As the crowd dispersed, Gregor came to his family. He seemed quite guilty over what had just happened. His wife, father, and the Dornishwomen attempted to comfort him.

Daliah just remained in her seat. She felt a tap on her shoulder, and she turned to see Ellyn. She whispered softly "Mother… did you see it?"

*Ever the observant one.* Daliah knew what "it" was. She lightly nodded her head.

Clearly, Ellyn too had noticed how Gregor had lifted his lance at the very last moment before he had reached Ser Ryman. There had been no need for him to do so; he could have kept his lance level with Ryman Frey's chest and he would have won.

He must have spotted the opening above the Frey knight's chainmail vest. Gregor did not miss details such as that. Furthermore, Daliah could not forget what Gregor had mentioned earlier. He had proclaimed rather certainly that an accident might take place during the joust. Either he had correctly forecasted this fiasco, or…

*That was no accident.*

Daliah realized this when she recalled something else Gregor had said. *He claimed to be in control of everything in the joust. He made certain to emphasize "everything."*
Although he had seemed concerned for Ryman's well-being, anyone could feign concern. Additionally, Daliah knew her son could kill a man with any weapon, including a lance. He never killed anyone by mistake.

What bothered her most was that he had made a victim of Walder Frey's grandson. Daliah was less than fond of Freys herself. But even so…

*What possible reason would Gregor have for killing a member of House Frey in a joust?*

…

In spite of what happened, the death of Ryman Frey did not generate any lasting hostility between his kin and Gregor Clegane. Straight after the jousting field was vacated, the Mountain had gone straight to the other members of House Frey who had attended the tourney. Then he offered them a hundred golden dragons to atone for his misdeed.

Any other family would most likely have been outraged to be given money as reparation for the loss of one of their own. The Freys, however, were not known for being mournful of anyone. They had eagerly accepted the Mountain's recompense.

*You would think they much prefer the dragons to Ser Ryman.*

If that was so, Nymeria Martell would not have been astounded. She could still vividly recall how rudely Ser Ryman had treated her during both of her visits to the Twins. The first time, when she had first gone north, many of his brethren had been rude to her simply because of her baseborn status. Ryman in particular had been downright harsh. His opinion meant little and less to her, but she would not forget a slight.

On the second occasion, most of the Freys treated her with a considerably larger amount of respect. Actually, they were closer to nonexistent.

He had been as drunk as he had during the joust, and he had tried to pressure her into agreeing to a marriage contract between her and his son Edwyn. Even after she had clearly voiced her disdain, he had continued to force the issue.

*At least Papa put him in his place before I had to.*

Nymeria had never been more grateful to her father than when he had led Ryman Frey away and knocked him out cold. She personally would have done worse. Luckily, worse had ultimately happened to him anyway.

When Gregor thrust his lance through Ryman Frey's throat, Nymeria had been as shocked as everyone else in the stands. But right after, she felt a queer sense of satisfaction from watching him bleed out on the ground. She had received suitable retribution from when Ryman Frey had humiliated her.

Nymeria had suspected that Ser Ryman's death might not have been accidental. Truthfully, she did not really care if it was. All the same, after the jousting field and the stands were cleared, she had gone to Gregor Clegane with the intention of talking to him on the topic. Fortunately, even before the Mountain killed the Frey knight, Nymeria had already been planning to speak to him on a different matter.

"I will be honest with you, Nym," Gregor admitted to her when they were alone, "I did not misjudge the distance between Ser Ryman's neck and chest. My hand did not slip. My horse did not buckle. My lance struck precisely where I intended it to."
*He must be honest right now. No one else would confess so readily.*

"I would much sooner praise than condemn what you did, my lord," the former Sand Snake pronounced, "But I'm curious to know; why did you do it?"

"For three reasons," the Mountain enlightened her, "Firstly, he was the heir to the heir of the Twins. While Stevron Frey could help his house regain its honor, Ryman would destroy his work upon succeeding him. By removing Ryman and installing his son Edwyn as Ser Stevron's heir, we have avoided that problem. Secondly, I did it for you. Your father told me of how crass Ryman had been to you. Any man who treats women – especially a highborn lady – like that is an insect, and should be dealt with as one."

*Isn't that chivalrous of him?* Nymeria folded her arms and queried "And the third reason?"

"I killed him for Dacey," Gregor disclosed candidly.

Nymeria raised an eyebrow and murmured in confusion "For Dacey? Why? Did Ser Ryman insult her, too?"

"He did not," Gregor informed her, "But given the chance, he would have something far done worse to her."

"How can you be certain?" Nymeria said inquisitively.

"That, I cannot explain," Gregor claimed, "Not yet, at least. But believe me; as inept and simple as Ryman Frey was, he was also capable of terrible things. I did not cherish the act of killing him, but even so, I did it out of necessity. In my mind, he was nothing more than a waste of space."

"Mine, as well," Nymeria conceded "But are you not worried about fallout with House Frey?"

"I am not," Gregor told her drily, "I have already compensated House Frey with a stash of golden dragons. Given how quick they were to accept my remuneration, Ryman will not be missed. It is quite probable that even Ryman's father and children will not shed any tears for him."

Oddly enough, Nymeria felt a touch of pity for Ryman Frey then. As much as she despised him, it would be a terrible thing for anyone to die and have no one grieve for them.

A moment later, she remembered her personal encounters with Ryman Frey, and she decided he was undeserving of her sympathies.

"Your mother and sister may suspect foul play, my lord," Nymeria informed the tall man. Back at the jousting field, she had noticed how Lady Daliah Clegane and Ellyn Clegane had seemed a little dubious about the whole affair with Ryman Frey. As such, the young Dornishwoman thought it best to let Gregor know of that."

"They may talk to me on this later," Gregor muttered, "If so, I'll tell them something to set their minds at ease."

"Will you tell them the whole truth?" Nymeria inquired.

"If I must," Gregor told her, "I derive no thrill from lying to my family, but at times, I must do so to protect them and myself."

"I understand, my lord," Nymeria asserted.
"Does anyone else suspect?" Gregor queried.

"Not that I know of," Nymeria replied.

"Excellent," Gregor said approvingly.

But if anyone else does suspect, I know he'll find a feasible solution to ease their minds. That's his way.

There was some silence, and then Gregor remarked "While you're here, perhaps we can discuss that other subject of precedence."

"That's what I was hoping to do, my lord," Nymeria revealed.

This other matter had to do with Lord Leyton Hightower's youngest child.

A few days ago, the tourney's knighting ceremony had been held. Nymeria had attended it under the premise of wishing to see her sister's husband get knighted. In actuality, there was another reason for her presence there.

In addition to witnessing Sandor Clegane's knighting, she had gone to see Jorah Mormont gain his knighthood, as well.

Nymeria's experiences with Lord Jorah had not been limited to their time on board the Lord Steffon. Even after they returned to the Westerlands, the two of them had continuing to bond. Since then, she had grown to greatly appreciate the bear lord's company.

He was one of the few men outside the Legion without Banners who treated her like a fellow comrade. She was aware that the women of House Mormont were seen as equals to the men, and that they fought alongside the other Northmen in battle.

Still, Nymeria was pleased to discover that Lord Jorah's tolerance for warrior women extended beyond his own family. He had developed a profound fascination with the totally unbiased military principles of Dorne. She had been all too happy to educate him on them.

The subject of how the two of them were of opposite genders had never entered into the conversation. As a Dornishwoman, Nymeria was accustomed to talking to males and females in the same fashion. Even when the topic of sexual intercourse entered the discussion, she spoke indifferently.

Nevertheless, she had to admit Jorah Mormont was a fine specimen of a man. Strong, brave, relatively handsome, understanding… those were desirable qualities in any male.

Even so, Nymeria did not have any suggestive thoughts about the lord of Bear Island. Lord Jorah was around twice her age. He was past his thirtieth nameday; Nymeria had only seen her sixteenth. For that reason, she did not believe he truly regarded her as a woman. He probably saw her the same way her father did: as a girl.

Nymeria would have been content with that. She had seen friendships between men and women fall apart when the issue of sex came up. She did not wish to jeopardize her relationship with Jorah Mormont on that basis. Not unless there was a distinct chance it might lead to something greater.

Alas, there may never be such a chance.

So Nymeria elected to keep her friendship with Jorah Mormont strictly platonic. For the last several
weeks, she had done an admirable job of maintaining that mindset. They had interacted, they had talked, they had exchanged interesting stories, and in all that time, they had never once brought up their difference in gender.

At the knighting ceremony, Nymeria had only appeared to provide support for the bear lord and cheer for him.

However, her resolve was put to the test straight after the ceremony. That was when she first encountered that harlot from Oldtown.

It was common knowledge that the Reach and Dorne had never peacefully coexisted with each other. The only two notable exceptions were the Night's Watch and the Legion without Banners, the latter of which had proven to be more successful. But the number of Legionnaires from the Reach and Dorne accounted for a mere fraction of the total populations of both countries.

Be that as it may, Nymeria's reason for detesting Lynesse Hightower was not her homeland.

Nymeria had actually been relatively indifferent to Lynesse and her family when they arrived. She did not know very much about House Hightower. She knew that their seat was Oldtown, which was where the Citadel was located. Secretly, her half-sister Sarella plotted to apply to the Conclave and become the world's first female maester one day.

In addition to that, her father and Aunt Elia had been there at least once.

They had been very young at the time; the reason for their visit was to seek out potential betrothals for the both of them. Nymeria's grandmother had considered wedding her daughter and second son to Lord Leyton's two eldest children, Baelor and Malora.

For a while, the prospect of those matches actually seemed quite plausible. Oberyn had discovered that Malora had indeed earned her moniker Mad Malora, but he could put up with a bit of madness.

Just when the contracts were practically on the verge of being drawn up, Baelor Hightower had the misfortune of farting in Aunt Elia's presence. After that, she had been unable to even be in the same room as him without laughing. She had gone so far as to call him Baelor Breakwind.

The prospect of marriage between House Hightower and House Martell had quickly died after that.

Despite that, Nymeria's family and Lord Leyton's were able to treat each other fairly when they met up after the knighting ceremony. Although the Hightowers all held their heads high, most of them at least possessed the chivalry the Reach was lauded for.

Nymeria Martell did not officially decide she disliked Lynesse Hightower until the latter threw herself at Lord Jorah. The primary reason she was so angered was because Lynesse had waited until Jorah mentioned that he was unmarried to approach him.

Whatever idea's she getting, it cannot be a good one.

Gregor Clegane seemed to greatly object to Lynesse Hightower's behavior, as well. However, unlike Nymeria, he appeared to dislike the Reachwoman from the moment he first saw her. Perhaps even before that.

During the bear lord's first encounter with the Hightower woman, the Mountain had come to the former Sand Snake and whispered into her ear.

"We must be mindful of Lady Lynesse," he had remarked to her, "I have seen her like before:
manipulative, greedy, and selfish. She does not truly care for Lord Jorah. She is merely out to exploit him."

Nymeria was appalled by the mere concept of that. She did not even have to say a word for Gregor to realize just how disgusted she was.

"I know what you must be thinking: we cannot allow that to happen," Gregor had continued, "And we will not. I have a task for you, Nymeria. If you think yourself up to it."

Nymeria had given a lone nod in compliance, and the Mountain had told her "For the time-being, I need you to keep a close eye on Lady Lynesse whenever she's around Lord Jorah. He is a strong man, but still a man all the same. Even he can fall victim to the intimate charms of a woman. You must guarantee that he does not give in to hers."

Lord Gregor must have noticed how much time Nymeria had been spending with Jorah, as well as how close the two of them had become. However, his knowledge of their relationship was not what perturbed her at that moment.

What really perturbed her was that Gregor was right. Lynesse Hightower had the means and the will to seduce Lord Jorah, if she so wished.

Nymeria had never once considered the likelihood that she would be jealous of another woman, even if said woman was after the affection of the Lord of Bear Island. Lynesse's intimate interaction with Lord Jorah was a kind of sudden awakening to her.

For the first time in her life, she actually felt envious of another woman.

As a result, she had earnestly responded to Lord Gregor's request with "You can count on me to do that, my lord."

Indeed, he could.

Over the next few days, Nymeria continued to spend time with Jorah Mormont, just as she had been doing since the battle of Seagard. However, whenever he was not with her or his retainers, he could usually be found in the company of Lynesse Hightower.

Whenever they were together, Nymeria watched both of them from a safe distance. She monitored everything they did. For the most part, they just talked. But she could see Lynesse giggled at times, and at other times, Jorah smiled back at her.

Part of her felt a little guilty for spying on the bear lord. But another part recalled that in the long run, she was doing so for his benefit. That lessened the guilt considerably.

In the end, nothing especially notable had happened these past few days. At least nothing which suggested that Lynesse Hightower was striving to have Lord Jorah wrapped around her finger. Even so, she recounted every detail of all their encounters to Gregor Clegane. When she was finished, he did not seem displeased by her report. But his reservations about Lynesse Hightower had not waned.

"Either she is merely flirting with him, or she has already done more than that, and he has ignored her advances," Nymeria conjectured.

"It could be either case," Gregor perceived, "She may make more of an effort to entice him as the tourney goes on."
"After he's won a few more tilts, I'm certain she will," Nymeria supposed.

Gregor nodded at that. Then he patted the young Dornishwoman on the shoulder and stated in approval "Good work so far, Nymeria. If you wish, I can take over from here. You do not have to continue observing Lord Jorah and Lady Lynesse."

"I would not mind continuing to do so, my lord," Nymeria sternly proclaimed, "I have the situation well in control. Other than browsing through a few shops and visiting with family and friends, I had nothing special planned for the tourney. I have more than enough time to do all that and ensure that Lynesse Hightower behaves herself. That will also allow you to devote your focus to the remainder of the joust."

Gregor was visibly proud and impressed by the logic of her answer. He smiled down at Nymeria and said to her "Very well. Keep up the good work."

"I shall, my lord," she swore. With that, she and the Mountain exited their shelter and went their own ways.

The joust lasted for four more days. Sandor, Gregor, Papa, and Jorah continued to be amongst the contenders most likely to win. Nymeria cheered for all four of them with her family and theirs.

Inwardly, the former Sand Snake would have been satisfied if any of them won the competition. She wondered who would be the Queen of Love and Beauty in each case. She felt she could predict who would receive that honor if the Mountain, the Hound, or the Red Viper emerged victorious.

If Gregor won, Dacey would be crowned. If Sandor won, Obara would be crowned. Alternately, they could have crowned their mother Lady Daliah, if their wives did not want it. If Papa won... he had five choices between his paramour and his four present daughters.

Secretly, Nymeria would have preferred for her father to crown Ellaria over her and her sisters. It would have been worth it just to see the expressions on those stuffy highborn cunts' faces when a baseborn woman was made Queen of Love and Beauty.

Jorah's choice was a mystery. Nymeria honestly had no idea who he would pick. He might have selected Dacey, given she was his closest living relative.

Regardless of who he chose, she was praying he would not give the crown to Lynesse Hightower.

For the next three days, Nymeria monitored the interactions between Jorah and Lady Lynesse. To her delight, he still made time to mingle with the young Dornishwoman. But with each passing day, he spent a little less with her and a little more with the Reachwoman. She tried not to assume the worse, but she could not ignore what that may have entailed.

At the same time, the joust went on. No more deaths (staged or otherwise) took place, but more and more names were removed from the list of participants.


Even Robert Baratheon was no longer among the remaining contenders. In the fifth wave, he had faced Gregor. The King had put up a very formidable bout. He actually appeared to have had the upper hand over the Mountain for most of their round. But the Lord of Moat Cailin managed to
wear him down and unhorse him on the eighth pass.

In the sixth wave, Oberyn and Sandor were removed from the lists. They had been dispatched by the Kingsguard knights Ser Barristan Selmy and Ser Jaime Lannister respectively.

Jorah Mormont was still at the top of his game. He had defeated Yohn Royce, Hosteen Frey, Walter Whent, and Lyle Crakehall in rapid succession. Every time he won a tilt, Nymeria cheered loudly. Across the field, she could hear Lynesse Hightower cheer just as loudly. But Nymeria felt that at least with regards to cheering, she was the Reachwoman's superior. Lynesse's cheer lacked passion, whereas hers was laden with it.

By the end of the seventh wave, only four contenders were left: Gregor, Jorah, Ser Barristan, and Ser Jaime. The victor of the joust would be determined on the morrow.

After the field was cleared, Nymeria met up with Jorah and offered "Would you care to go for a walk, my lord?"

"Perhaps later, Nymeria," he replied, "I beseech your pardon, but I have a previous engagement elsewhere."

"As you say," she said in response. She sounded understanding, but inwardly, she was apprehensive.

Nymeria watched Jorah as he headed away from the area. When he had gone thirty feet, she went after him. She kept that much space between them, as always.

Five minutes later, they arrived in the section of the tourney grounds set aside for vendors. Nymeria spotted Lynesse Hightower standing at a jewelry kiosk. She appeared to be haggling with the jeweler over the price of a necklace.

When Jorah showed up next to her, she turned away from the kiosk and grinned at him. He smiled back at her. Then they began to talk with the jeweler.

Nymeria could not hear what any of them were saying, but she could surmise much from their gestures.

Evidently, Lynesse wished to purchase the necklace, but she was unwilling to pay the established amount for it. She had had no luck convincing the jeweler to lower his price. Jorah attempted to negotiate with the jeweler. The jeweler seemed to appreciate Jorah's patience and reasonable nature, but he still refused to lower the price. Subsequently, Jorah…

Oh, no. Please, no.

Jorah BOUGHT the necklace for Lynesse. He even fastened the clasp around her neck. The Reachwoman was elated by his gift to her. She kissed the Northman on both of his bearded cheeks. He appeared alarmed at first, but he did not resist. He even smiled afterward.

Nymeria just stood by and watched, overcome with both bewilderment and fury.

Jorah departed from the vicinity soon after. He was heading towards the camps. Lynesse did not go with him. She instead walked in the opposite direction, almost towards Nymeria.

Normally, Nymeria would have avoided making any form of contact with the Reachwoman. But at that moment, she was so angry that she could not restrain herself.
When the woman from Oldtown was nearly upon her, the former Sand Snake emerged from her cover and muttered through gritted teeth "Lady Lynesse."

Lynesse Hightower promptly stopped and turned her head when she heard her name. When she saw who had addressed her, she gave a slight nod and uttered nonchalantly "Oh, Princess Nymeria."

Nymeria did not even bother informing the Reachwoman that she deplored that title. Instead, she mumbled crossly "I have some information for you."

Other than a slight raise of her eyebrow, Lynesse did not seem interested. Nevertheless, she stated "Fine. Be quick about it, though."

Nymeria stepped closer and said menacingly "If you value your well-being, you will stay away from Lord Jorah,"

Lynesse's eyes widened for a second, and then her brow furrowed and she murmured indignantly "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Nymeria pronounced irately, "I've seen the way you gawk at him. You may claim to be fond of him, but I know that all you care about is what luxuries he could provide. It's disgraceful, appalling, and outrageous, and I will not allow it to go on."

Lynesse did nothing to deny that accusation. That was enough to convince Nymeria that it was in fact true. Even so, the Reachwoman merely smirked and presumed "And you plan to stop me?"

"Yes, I do," the Dornishwoman firmly answered. At this time, she still had her whip attached to her belt. It was coiled up tightly, but the handle was accessible. After that last statement, she touched the palm of her right hand against the whip's handle.

The threatening gesture did not go unnoticed by Lynesse Hightower, but she did not appear intimidated.

"Do not think I can be frightened so easily, little girl," Lynesse spat, putting a mocking emphasis on the last two words.

"You call me 'little girl?" Nymeria snapped heatedly, "You cannot be more than two years my elder."

"You would be amazed what difference two years could make," Lynesse wryly retorted, "Especially to the eyes of a man."

Nymeria enclosed her fingers around the handle of her whip, took another step forward, and proclaimed "I am warning you, bitch. If you do anything to shatter Lord Jorah's happiness, I will make you suffer."

Lynesse scowled and uttered angrily "Why do you care?"

"I care because he is my friend," Nymeria professed.

"And you believe that gives you the right to decide who Lord Jorah pursues?" Lynesse countered hostilely, "I may be interacting with him out of my own interests, but at least I am not forcing him to do so. He's doing so by his own choice. But you… you're standing directly in his way."

"Because I know he'd be better off without you," Nymeria declared.
"Even so, whoever he wishes to be is his decision alone," Lynesse sharply debated, "Yet you're trying to make his decision for him. You are dictating his actions. You claim to care about him, but you do not even allow him to make his own choices."

Nymeria was speechless. She never would have thought Lynesse Hightower would be so clever. Nor had she considered the point the Reachwoman had just made. Now that it had occurred to her… she was at a loss for words.

*Everything she just said is true.*

Lynesse Hightower smirked, thinking she had won the argument. She continued walking away from the vicinity. As she left, she gazed back and called out scathingly "Think on that, Princess."

By her tone of voice, one would have thought she meant to call the younger woman "cunt" or "bastard" instead.

Nymeria remained where she was for a good few minutes, hardly moving a muscle or saying a word. After that, she went to find her family, and she spent the rest of the day with them. She had totally forgotten about the walk she had planned on having with Jorah Mormont.

The next morning, right before the final rounds of the joust, Nymeria rendezvoused with Lord Gregor Clegane again. She told him about her encounter with Lynesse Hightower. She expected him to be frustrated or disappointed with her for confronting Lynesse as he had. Instead, he was sympathetic to her. Lynesse had made her question what she was doing, but Gregor had reassured her that it was the right thing.

The Mountain had some disquieting news to share with Nymeria, as well.

"Last night, Dacey and I visited Jorah at his tent," Gregor apprised her, "He was not there when we arrived. A few minutes later, he showed up. He was carrying a clock over his shoulder. His house cloak."

Nymeria was stunned to learn that. "Are you certain of that, my lord?"

I am," Gregor affirmed, "I recognized it as the very same cloak Dacey wore when she and I wed."

"Why did he have it?" Nymeria queried.

"He claimed the cloak had gotten damaged on the journey south," Gregor disclosed, "A couple days back, he had hired one of the seamstresses on the tourney grounds to repair it. Last night, when we met with him, he was just coming back from picking it up from her."

"I see," Nymeria avowed. She folded her arms and inquired "Why did he bring it to the Westerlands on the first place?"

"He explained that, too," the Mountain replied, "Since his wife Blinda died without giving him an heir, he is expected to take a new bride. Even before he left Bear Island, he thought to find one after the war with the Ironborn ended. According to him, the tourney has made his search all the easier."

"What do you mean?" Nymeria asked, though part of her did not truly wish to know more.

"He mentioned that he has his eyes on a certain woman," Gregor revealed, a note of tension detectable in his own voice, "When I asked who, he was very vague. All he said was that I knew who she was, I have met her before, she appears to have a personal interest in him, and he has
called upon her frequently during the tourney."

*Sounds too much like someone from Oldtown.*

"I see," Nymeria muttered frankly.

Gregor smiled gently at her and remarked optimistically "Actually, Lynesse Hightower is not the only woman here who meets those criteria. There is another."

Nymeria was genuinely perplexed. "Who?"

At first, Gregor looked at her as though she was jesting. When it dawned on him that she was not, he frowned and stated incredulously "Nymeria, if you yourself do not know by now, I will not even be bothered to tell you."

"Suit yourself, my lord," Nymeria conceded. She did not truly care who this other woman was. As long as she was better than Lynesse Hightower, she was content. "So, how will he approach this woman he wishes to marry?"

"He told me he has a plan," the Lord of Moat Cailin elucidated, "If he wins the jousting competition today, he will crown her his Queen of Love and Beauty."

"And if he loses?" Nymeria proposed.

"Then he will simply propose in the tradition way," Gregor professed, "He argued that she should be content with having one of the tourney's finalists, if not the winner."

*If I were him, I would not be too certain of that, my lord.*

"Now that does not sound like Lynesse Hightower," Nymeria commented slyly, "I imagine that with her, it's either the best or nothing at all."

"I agree," Gregor concurred, "With that in mind, the only surefire way to keep Lynesse Hightower away from Jorah… is if he is defeated in the final tilts."

"True…" Nymeria admitted, "Not pleasant to think on, but true just the same."

This conversation came to an abrupt end. Mostly because neither the Mountain nor the former Sand Snake wish to say anything more on the topic.

As Nymeria made her way to the stands, she wondered how the joust would turn out.

For the duration of the competition, she had been cheering for Lord Jorah. However, he was one of only four men she would have liked to see win the joust. The others were Lord Gregor, Sandor, and her father. Only Lord Jorah and Lord Gregor had made it to the finals.

Before this moment, she would have loved to see either of them emerge victorious. Now… she had mixed feelings about the bear lord. If he lost, his troubles with Lynesse Hightower would be over. But despite that, Nymeria could not bring herself to actually wish defeat upon Lord Jorah. She still wanted him to win. Just as much as she wanted to see Gregor win.

Of course, if Jorah *did* win…

*I do not know who this other woman Lord Gregor mentioned is, but I just hope she's the one Lord Jorah truly favors. Then again… oh, Gods; what if she's even worse than Lynesse Hightower?*
Nymeria tried not to dwell on that concept. She managed to push it from her mind once she reached the stands. After she took up her usual spot in the stands with the other Martells and the Cleganes, she talked to no one, preferring to sit in relative silence.

The first round of the day was between Jorah Mormont and Jaime Lannister. That proved an extremely tense bout, even by the standards of this tourney.

Lord Jorah and Ser Jaime managed to strike each other on the first tilt, and both of their lances practically splintered apart.

After the two men were given new lances, they charged each other once more. On the first pass, their lances only hit each other's shields. On the second pass, Jorah's lance broke against Jaime's gold armor.

The third tilt yielded similar results. Only this time, it was Jaime's lance that shattered against Jorah's shield.

This pattern went on for the next five tilts. Each time, one or both riders' lances ended up in pieces. Clearly, neither man would go down easily.

Finally, in the ninth tilt, Jorah's lance struck Jaime's armor in his far left torso. The off-center blow was enough to disorient the Kingslayer. A moment later, Jaime Lannister lost his balance and fell off the right side of his horse.

Nymeria could have sworn she saw the Queen herself join the audience in the subsequent cheers.

*Her twin brother, her bodyguard, the sworn protector of her husband... yet she applauds when he faces defeat. Or maybe it is for him she cheers.*

The following round between Gregor Clegane and Barristan Selmy was not as long, but it was just as intense.

Half a-dozen passes were made before Ser Barristan jammed his lance against Lord Gregor's shoulder. The Mountain groaned in pain loudly, but he remained ahorse. Alas, he was unable to lift his shield so that it protected the whole of his chest, which Barristan was quick to note.

Thrice more, the Lord Commander of Robert's Kingsguard delivered a fierce jab to the upper left of Gregor's chest. Each time, the Mountain's concentration and endurance seemed to weaken more and more.

Just when it appeared Barristan Selmy had won... Gregor Clegane made an astonishing comeback. On the next pass, he kept his shield lowered until Ser Barristan was nearly upon him. Then, with the agility of a Braavosi water dancer, Gregor threw up his shield to divert Barristan's lance and simultaneously drove his own lance towards his opponent's midsection. He caught the legendary knight right in the abdomen. Ser Barristan had the wind knocked out of him. Unable to catch his breath soon enough, he leaned to the side and collapsed onto the ground.

Dacey Mormont's cheer was so loud that it could be heard above everyone else's, all around the jousting field. Nymeria snickered at that.

*I wonder how she'll cheer after the last round. No matter who wins, she'll be pleased.*

Nymeria did not know if she herself would be, though.

After a five-minute hiatus, the final two contenders – Lord Jorah Mormont and Lord Gregor
Clegane began the last round. If the two previous rounds were not exciting enough, this one most definitely was. That was partly because the two participants were cousins-by-law.

*Only in a joust could a domestic quarrel be a source of entertainment.*

Both men had been rendered somewhat fatigued by their brutal stints against the Kingsguard knights. All the same, they were determined to come out on top.

Nymeria constantly shifted her gaze between the Mountain and the bear lord. She had no idea which of them would be named victor. Nor could she decide who she favored more.

After a while, the more likely candidate became obvious.

Gregor's left shoulder still pained him greatly. Because it had not been tended properly, he was unable to lift his shield higher than his pectorals. That left a very small part of his upper body vulnerable. But it was not too small that Jorah did not notice it.

After eleven rounds of Jorah's lance merely grazing the top of Gregor's shield, he managed to break through the Mountain's defense.

He thrust his lance high up and to the right. He struck Gregor directly on his already-wounded shoulder.

The Mountain let out a horrific shout of anguish as he toppled backwards. Had he been a regular-sized man, he would have landed on his head. It was only due to his great height that he landed on his upper back.

"Gregor!" Dacey yelled in shock.

Nymeria sat up and covered her mouth with both hands. A collective gasp ran through the stands. Even Ryman Frey's death had not been so terrifying to behold.

Lord Jorah Mormont led his horse around the rail and stopped a few feet away from his fallen opponent. He gazed down at the Mountain in deep concern.

"Lord Gregor?" he stated nervously.

For a moment, Gregor Clegane lay totally still. The next moment, he stirred and forced himself to sit up. Then he raised his right arm, used it to pull off his helm, and looked up at the bear lord.

He just smiled and declared wittily "I'd be the first to congratulate you, my lord"

Jorah Mormont chuckled at that. Nymeria, Dacey, and everyone else in their company joined in. So did the whole of the audience in the stands.

Jorah dropped his lance, brought his horse a couple paces closer, and leaned down, holding his now-free right hand out to Gregor. The Mountain took ahold of the offered hand and allowed the Lord of Bear Island to pull him to his feet.

*That'd be hard enough to do on the ground. Jorah must be even stronger than I thought.*

After helping Gregor back to his feet, Jorah rode over to the platform at the far end of the field. The King and Queen were on their feet.

Nymeria noted that while Gregor could stand unaided, he had his right hand pressed against his left shoulder. Obara must have noticed, as well.
"Are you alright, my lord?" she asked compassionately.

"I will be fine," Gregor asserted, "It's just a sprain."

That's a relief. But hopefully not the only relief to come out of this.

The whole audience shifted their attention to the platform. Jorah was directly before the King and Queen. Robert Baratheon gazed around the area and boisterously announced "The champion of the joust: Jorah of House Mormont, Lord of Bear Island!"

That was when the cheers came. They came louder than those of any prior tilt. Nymeria joined them with hesitation.

Cersei Lannister was holding a wreath of flowers in her hands. She stepped forward and held it out to Lord Jorah, who accepted it graciously.

Here it comes… the moment I've been anticipating and fearing…

Nymeria watched Jorah as he trotted along the perimeter of the jousting field. Out of the corner of the eye, she spotted Lynesse Hightower with her father and siblings. She could have sworn the Reachwoman was smirking at her. Nymeria tried hard to ignore her and kept her focus on Jorah Mormont.

As Lord Jorah drew nearer and nearer to the youngest of Lord Leyton's children, Nymeria let out a deep sigh. She wanted to look away, but found she could not.

Soon, Jorah reached Lynesse Hightower… but he did not stop. His horse trotted right past Lynesse, and her smirk changed to a sneer.

Now it was Nymeria's turn to smirk. At that very moment, she felt an overwhelming sense of satisfaction in knowing that Jorah had never intended to marry Lynesse Hightower after all.

Her own smirk faded when Jorah finally brought his ride to a halt. He had stopped only three feet from her seat. In other words, he was directly in front… of her.

A wave of silence came over the crowd. But Nymeria took no notice. She could barely even register Lord Jorah as he smiled at her and placed the wreath of flowers in her lap.

He then looked around the field and proclaimed severely "I give you my Queen of Love and Beauty, Princess Nymeria Martell!"

The cheers returned after that. For the second time in as many days, Nymeria did not rebuke a person who called her by that dreaded title. Her mind was too busy trying to piece together what had just taken place.

She managed to see Lord Gregor standing behind. He had his arms folded (despite his sprained shoulder), and he was grinning and nodding.

Suddenly, she recalled the description Lord Jorah had given Lord Gregor of the woman he intended to marry. Every one of those aspects applied to her as they had to Lynesse Hightower.

Nymeria never felt more foolish than at that moment.

How did I not see this coming?

She would have been alright remaining friends with Lord Jorah, but never once had she thought
would be the one who wanted more.

Be that as it may… Nymeria was not opposed to the idea. As a matter of fact, she reveled in it. Her astonishment was hastily replaced with enthusiasm.

After coming to her senses, Nymeria picked up the wreath of flowers and placed it on her head delicately. Then she rose to her feet, eliciting even stronger cheers from those around her.

With a single gesture of her hand, she beckoned Lord Jorah forward. When he was within reaching distance, she leaned over the handrail and kissed his lips passionately.
During the Age of the First Men, weirwood trees were ubiquitous throughout Westeros. Then the Andals came and instilled their Seven as the country's dominant religion. As a result, the majority of the heart trees in the Seven Kingdoms were uprooted. The godswoods of the North were spared, but nearly all the ones south of the Neck had been destroyed.

Nevertheless, a few godswoods could be found in just about every other region in Westeros. An example was the one in the Stone Garden at Casterly Rock. Its weirwood was twisted and small for its size, but it was sufficient to serve its intended purpose.

Three men and a young woman now stood before the godswood. Two were Northern lords. The younger had his back to the weirwood; the other stood to his right. The first had a direwolf on his attire; the second wore a bear on his doublet and the cloak around his shoulders. The third man was from Dorne, and he stood across from the elder of the Northmen. The young woman – who seemed more a girl – stood in-between them the bear lord and the Dornishman. The latter was obviously her father; aside from their similarity in appearance, the image of a spear impaling the Sun was found on both his robes and her cloak.

At that moment, there were only five other persons present in the Stone Garden. Two of them were exceptionally tall men, and they – along with the two women by their sides – bore the icons of mountain and three hounds on their clothing respectively.

The fifth individual had not been officially invited, but he had chosen to come anyway. There was nothing the other eight could really do to protest. They are in my home, after all.

Even so, he did not wish to disturb them, as he could imagine how much this event meant to the rest of them. So after he quietly entered the godswood, he climbed up the wall and sat on the balustrade that encircled the Stone Garden. Once he was comfortable, he witnessed the ceremony from his perch.

He observed as Lord Eddard Stark conducted the ceremony in the typical fashion of the Northmen. At one point, Prince Oberyn Martell removed the cloak of his house from his daughter Nymeria's shoulders. After that, Nymeria allowed Lord Jorah Mormont to drape the cloak of his own house around her.

More words were said by Lord Eddard, and then Lord Jorah and Princess Nymeria shared their first kiss as man and wife. In response, Prince Oberyn, Lord Gregor Clegane, Ser Sandor Clegane, and their wives Dacey of House Mormont and Obara of House Martell applauded.

The dwarf atop the bannister offered a few soft claps of his own.

A wondrous thing, marriage.

Tyrion Lannister had once given the concept some consideration himself. His friend Sandor Clegane had dissuaded him from going through with it. Although Tyrion had been a little resentful at first, he was grateful that the Hound had intervened now. Marrying a common girl would have been a huge mistake.

Tyrion knew his father would have found out sooner or later. His father always found those types of things out somehow. Once he learned of Tysha… it would have ended badly for Tyrion and worse for her.
At least now she's safe in the Rock's laundry rooms, and at least I learned what it was like to lay with a woman.

Then again, even if his episode with Tysha had been avoided, it appeared he would be destined to learn that experience anyway. Furthermore, it seemed he was destined to become a married man. Those were the plans his father had for him, at any rate.

Seeing the wedding ceremony, recalling his past with Tysha, and undertaking his potential future made Tyrion reflect more deeply on the topic of marriage.

Marriage suited some people rather well. In fact, there were some who said marriage was the best thing to ever happen to Lord Tywin Lannister.

And I was the worst.

Both the Mountain and the Hound had married outside of their homeland, but their marriages were clearly happy ones. One glance at Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey or Ser Sandor and Princess Obara, and Tyrion could easily surmise that much.

He predicted that Lord Jorah and his new wife would be likewise prosperous. He did not know the bear lord as well as he knew the two Clegane men. However, Tyrion's brother, Ser Jaime Lannister, respected Lord Jorah as a warrior, which by itself said something. Additionally, Jaime had told him how the betrothal between the Lord of Bear Island the former Sand Snake had come about.

Just the day before, Jorah Mormont had won the joust at Lannisport and crowned Nymeria Martell as his Queen of Love and Beauty. That same day, he had asked her father for her hand, and Oberyn Martell had been quick to give his blessing.

The wedding had been put together hastily, and it was shockingly modest by highborn standards. Luckily, neither the bride nor the groom were partial to extravagance.

Since Lord Jorah kept to the Old Gods, it was quickly decided that the wedding would be conducted in their manner. The only godsdowd to be found for over fifty miles was at Casterly Rock, so Lord Jorah had sought out Lord Tywin Lannister to request the usage of the Stone Garden. Eventually, Lord Tywin agreed to the bear lord's wish, but he demanded that as few people attend the ceremony as possible.

Of course, Father would say that a wedding only really needs a bride, a groom, the bride's father or guardian, and a minister.

Be that as it may, four guests had been permitted at this wedding. Dacey Mormont and Obara Martell had been allowed, as they were the only legitimate members of the groom and bride's immediate families. Since Lord Gregor and Ser Sandor were the ladies' respective husbands, they had been allowed to attend, as well.

Nymeria's bridal gown had been put together somewhat hastily, but she still looked very much the part of the bride. Once the ceremony was concluded, Obara Clegane made some playful remarks about Nymeria's current appearance. She seemed to derive a certain vindictive pleasure from ridiculing her younger half-sister on her formal apparel. It may have seemed cruel, but Nymeria did not deny her sister this "vengeance." Whatever that means.

The subsequent meal was as modest as the wedding. Lord Tywin had not given permission for a full-fledged feast to take place in the confines of the Rock. After all, neither the bride's family nor...
the groom's family were among his vassals. However, he did allow Lord Eddard, the Mormonts, the Cleganes, and the Martells a brief three-course meal at the Rock. The eight of them were given part of the Grand Hall after the Lannisters and their retainers had eaten.

They had brought most of their own food. Everything else, they had bought from the Lannisters. They had paid for the services of the Rock's cooks, as well. In any case, the small feast was sufficient for all eight of them.

It was during the second course that Tyrion chose to approach them. He waddled up to the trestle table that had been designated for the guests, and he casually inquired "Is everything to your liking?"

Most of them did not even notice him until he made that remark. He did not mind. He was used to not being spotted straightaway, seeing as there was less of him to spot than there was for most other men.

"It is, Tyrion," Sandor Clegane said appreciatively.

As the dwarf nodded at that, Eddard Stark proposed "Can we offer you a plate, my lord?"

"No," Tyrion responded, "I have already eaten. Still, know that I appreciate your asking, my lord. Most would not even afford me that courtesy."

"That mistake is their loss, denying themselves the pleasure of your company." Gregor Clegane cheekily remarked. Tyrion and a few of the others snickered, and the Mountain suggested "Even if you will not eat, would you sit with us anyway, my lord?"

"Certainly." Tyrion pronounced. The spot to Lord Gregor's right was vacant, so Tyrion climbed next to him. Once he was settled on the bench, he queried "Have you any more wine, perchance?"

Oberyn Martell passed him a jug of Dornish red. As Tyrion poured himself a goblet, the prince asked him "Did you enjoy the ceremony, my lord?"

For a moment, Tyrion was stunned. He had never made a sound in the Stone Garden. So I did not go totally unnoticed, after all.

The Imp's astonishment did not betray his facial expression. He merely sipped his wine, nodded his head, and stated "Yes, I did. Short, private, and eloquent. Reminds me of someone I know."

More laughter. Obara then said "There was no need for you to sneak in, my lord. We would have welcomed your company."

"I will remember that next time," Tyrion bluntly muttered, "And if you were wondering, no; I have no intention of showing up uninvited to the final event, as well."

Gregor, Dacey, Sandor, Obara, and Oberyn chortled at that. Nymeria gave a giggle, but Lord Jorah and Lord Eddard seemed indifferent. If anything, they were annoyed by that jape.

Tyrion looked back and forth between the eight individuals there. Recalling their origins, he got an idea to make a toast. He held his glass into the air and proclaimed "I would like to raise a glass for what has been accomplished here."

A few of the others reached for their mugs. They were the ones who were always willing to share a toast. The others stayed still; they were a little perplexed.
"Just **what** has been accomplished, my lord?" Dacey Mormont enquired.

Tyrion explicated "Ten years ago, the North, the Westerlands, and Dorne had absolutely nothing in common. Now one house from each of those regions has married into another house from the other two. If that does not warrant a toast, what does?"

No one could dispute that logic. Consequentially, everyone who had not picked up their own mugs did so and lifted them accordingly. *This is excellent; I've gotten them to agree.*

After the cups were drained and filled again, Nymeria murmured "I did not realize you were so interested in the relations between the Seven Kingdoms, my lord."

"Oh, I am interested in all manner of current affairs," Tyrion claimed, "Particularly those that may change the balance of the country."

"Is that why you came to the wedding?" Jorah presumed.

"It is partly why," Tyrion disclosed, "I also came to learn. It is not often the weirwood in the Stone Garden is put to use. I was curious to see how a wedding in the style of the Old Gods was carried out. As I said before, I enjoyed the experience."

"So did I," Nymeria giddily declared, "And before yesterday, I myself never thought I would ever even kneel before a heart tree, much less be wed in front of one. Yet I find the godswood strangely appealing. It has an air of simplicity and openness to it that a sept tends to lack."

"So do you plan to pay homage to the Old Gods or the New Gods?" Sandor queried.

"She's never really given much thought to either," Obara jested.

Nymeria rolled her eyes at her sister's remark. She answered the Hound's question with "Maybe the Old Gods. It would be intriguing to follow a different faith. Aside from that, Bear Island has no sept."

"One can be built," Jorah contended.

"I will keep that in mind, my lord," the former Sand Snake told her husband with a smile.

There was a bit of quietness, and then Tyrion looked to Eddard Stark and observed "On the subject of marriage contracts between regions, I have heard tell you yourself are in the process of forging one, Lord Eddard."

"You've been informed correctly," the wolf lord candidly affirmed, "I have spent the better part of the week conferring with Lord and Lady Tyrell on the possibility of a betrothal between their daughter and my son. After some lengthy discussion, we arrived at an arrangement. When Lady Margaery is of age, she will come north to meet my boy Robb. We will not decide to finalize the match until then. But in the meantime, no other contracts will be considered for either of them."

"Sounds like an ideal pact," Oberyn Martell professed, "Children should always be allowed the option to meet the one who is supposed to be their future intended."

*The Mountain and the Hound would have to agree, given the plans my father has for their sister.*

Either the two Clegane men could read his mind, or they were thinking similar thoughts. The dwarf noticed both of them flashing a glimpse in his direction. Neither of them seemed quizzical or suspicious of him, but they were not entirely empathetic, either.
I should count myself fortunate that Sandor regards me as a friend. Otherwise he and Lord Gregor might be giving me a warning about messing with their sister about now.

It was said that Gregor Clegane was twice the size of any other man. While that was mostly an exaggeration, it was literally true in Tyrion's case. If he stood on the shoulders of another dwarf of similar stature, he and the Mountain would be of a height.

Although Tyrion was accustomed to looking up at everyone else, even he could not ignore the Mountain's conspicuous size. Still, he did not forget that Gregor Clegane had a reputation for being an abnormally tolerant man, and although he was capable of inflicting great carnage, he was only violent towards those who wronged him or others.

Long as I do no wrong, I should be safe.

Soon the second course was cleared away and it was replaced with the third. Tyrion decided to indulge himself with some more wine and a cup of berries and cream.

"By the way, Tyrion," Sandor mentioned as he bit into a cherry tart, "I was surprised to not see you at the jousting competition."

The dwarf looked to the tall man with the half-burned face and pronounced "It happens that I actually did see the joust. I simply was not there in person."

Upon seeing the confused looks the others gave him, Tyrion illuminated "If you go to the very top of the Rock, you get a very fine view of Lannisport. The whole of the tourney grounds is visible from up there. With the use of a far-eyes, I could clearly make out the jousting field. I witnessed the entire competition from that vantage point. It was quite a spectacle, I must say."

Particularly the ending.

"Ingenious approach," Prince Oberyn remarked approvingly, "Now you know what it's like to see from a bird's perspective."

"Still, would it not have been more practical to take a place in the stands?" Eddard Stark debated.

"Yes, it would have," Tyrion glumly conceded, "Alas, certain factors prevented me from appearing."

Factors that could not be altered. Or reasoned with.

Gregor Clegane seemed to catch on to that implication. He presumed "Would one of these factors by any chance have the approximate size and appearance of your brother, only without either of his swords?"

"That is the main factor," Tyrion confirmed.

Dacey Mormont looked somewhat baffled. "What do you mean?"

"He is referring to Queen Cersei," Lord Gregor informed his wife.

Tyrion Lannister nodded and clarified "My sister and I do not get along."

"They never have," Oberyn Martell disclosed, "I can attest to that."

Tyrion made a note to question the Dornishman on that statement later. In any case, it was true.
From the day he was born, Cersei Lannister had despised him. She blamed him for the death of their lady mother, Joanna Lannister. So did their father. Despite his attempts to win their affections, they had never forgiven him.

Fortunately, not every member of Tyrion's immediately family held such disdain for him. His uncles Kevan and Gerion had always treated him fairly, and his brother Jaime had been closer to him than any other person he had met.

Strangely enough, in these days, Jaime too seemed closer to Tyrion than he was to anyone else in their lives. That included their sister.

Once, Jaime and Cersei had been nigh on inseparable. Only Tyrion knew just how close the two of them really were. But ever since Cersei married King Robert Baratheon, a distance had formed between his elder twin siblings. From what Tyrion could gather, the Kingslayer and the Queen hardly even spoke to each other anymore. He would not go so far as to say he was the favorite of Cersei's brothers, but Jaime was not very far ahead of him.

I do not envy Jaime. Spending the last five years guarding someone you once loved but now resent and who resents you in return… that cannot be pleasant.

"The Queen will not be present at the melee, my lord," Jorah Mormont apprised the Imp, "Perhaps you could attend that."

"I just might," Tyrion supposed, shrugging and taking another drink of wine.

"Our lady sister will be there, too," Sandor added in.

At that, Tyrion abruptly stopped chewing his tart and sat totally still. He slowly turned his head towards the Hound, gazing at him in astonishment. THAT came out of nowhere.

Gregor noticed the expression on Tyrion's face, and he inquired "Were you hoping to avoid that topic?"

Yes.

"No," Tyrion claimed, "But I did not anticipate it would be addressed at this very moment, either."

"It would have to be addressed at some point," Obara pointed out.

"True enough," Tyrion coincided, "But tonight should be for your sister and Lord Jorah."

"I appreciate that, my lord," Nymeria said gratefully, "But you should know I do not care to be the center of attention very much."

"Neither do I, as it happens," Jorah Mormont remarked.

"Well, I myself am rarely the center of attention," Tyrion disclosed, "I will confess; there are times when I'd love to be. But this is not one of them."

Everyone quickly understood his meaning. They dropped the subject of Ellyn Clegane's future whereabouts and resumed the dessert course.

Fifteen minutes later, the dishes and cups were cleared away by the servants. It was then that Lord Gregor, Lord Jorah, Lord Eddard, Sandor, Oberyn, Dacey, Obara, and Nymeria prepared to take their leave of Casterly Rock. Tyrion elected to accompany them to the stables.
"A pity you couldn't stay the night," Tyrion commented.

"Lord Tywin did not extend us that hospitality," Eddard informed him. *Ever the courteous host, my father.*

"Besides, we've all some form of business to see to tonight," Gregor revealed.

"Of course, some of us will be mixing business with pleasure," Obara uttered, gesturing to the bear lord and the younger former Sand Snake.

Nymeria and Lord Jorah walked at the front of the group. They had missed Obara's gesture, but they could tell she was referring to the two of them.

"At least we were able to forgo the bedding ceremony," Jorah thought aloud.

"I would not say 'at least,' my lord," Obara debated, "In Dorne, the bedding is actually taken more seriously than the wedding."

"Then perhaps you and I should travel to your homeland sometime," Sandor slyly proposed to his wife, wrapping his arm around her waist. Obara just giggled at her husband's playful suggestion and placed her own arm around his shoulders.

Nymeria stepped up to her own husband and stated sensually "In the meantime, we should make haste for our tent, my lord."

*Well, someone is eager.*

Lord Jorah must have thought the same. He muttered softly "Why the rush? The night is young."

*Those should be House Nymeros Martell's words.*

"It took us nearly five hours to climb the Rock," Nymeria recounted.

"We were going uphill," Gregor reminded her, "That is how long the ascent generally takes. The descent only requires about half that time."

"Even so, it could still be past midnight by the time we clear the Rock," Nymeria pointed out, "Not to mention we'll need more time to reach the camps. Once we arrive there, we may only have three or four hours before sunrise."

*Hardly enough time for a proper bedding by Dornish standards.*

"If you are concerned we will run short on time, we could put off the bedding until tomorrow," Jorah offered.

"Not a chance, my lord," Nymeria wryly stated, "What kind of Dornishwoman would I be if I did not consummate my marriage on the same day as my wedding?"

Jorah scoffed at his young wife's point and murmured "A fair argument."

Before long, the nine people arrived at the stables. The stableboys dipped their heads to Tyrion respectfully, and then they helped the other eight with their horses. Lord Eddard Stark, Prince Oberyn Martell, Lord Gregor Clegane, Lady Dacey Clegane, Ser Sandor Clegane, Lady Obara Clegane, Lord Jorah Mormont, and Lady Nymeria Mormont all swiftly mounted their rides. Tyrion merely stood off to the side and watched as they began to head out.
Lord Eddard, Prince Oberyn, Lady Dacey, Lady Obara, Lord Jorah, and Lady Nymeria proceeded down the long cobblestone path that ran all the way down to the Lion's Mouth.

The Mountain and the Hound did not join them straightaway, but instead lingered behind for a minute. They brought their horses over to where Tyrion was.

As they neared him, Tyrion noticed how absolutely massive both of them looked whilst mounted, particularly in the case of Lord Gregor. If he thought the Lord of Moat Cailin was exceptionally tall on his feet, he was practically a giant out of legend ahorse.

*If he was just a little higher, I'd probably have to lend him my far-eyes in order for him to see me.*

"So, can we expect you at the melee, my lord?" Gregor assumed.

Tyrion thought for a minute, shrugged, and proclaimed "Yes, you can. Can I expect you both to be there, as well?"

"Of course," Sandor remarked, "We'll be there as participants."

"But our lord father and lady mother will be there as spectators," Gregor amended.

"So will Ellyn," Sandor pronounced.

*That again. At least this time they waited until we were alone to bring it up.*

"I hope she enjoys the experience," Tyrion commented candidly.

"Oh, she will," Gregor asserted, "You should know she is looking forward to meeting you, Tyrion."

For the second time that evening, the Imp was taken by surprise. This time, he did not hide his astonishment so well. He could not be blamed; no one had ever expressed a wish to make his acquaintance before. Someone may falsely claim to have such an interest as a cruel joke at his expense, but as far as Tyrion knew, the Cleganes would not mislead him.

"Truly?" Tyrion asked skeptically.

"Truly," Sandor confirmed, a grin across his scarred face, "Queer as it may seem, this is the first time she's ever had such a strong desire to meet anyone."

*That could either be good or bad on my part. If Lady Ellyn is anything like her brothers, it's most likely good.*

"In that case…" Tyrion tentatively began, "Tell her I eagerly anticipate our first encounter, as well."

"She'll be delighted to know that, my lord," Gregor disclosed.

Tyrion smiled slightly, gave a small salute to the two large men, and pronounced in an official tone "Until next we meet."

The Mountain and the Hound bade the Imp a good evening and departed from the stable yard. Tyrion kept his eye on them as they regrouped with their six companions. After that, they galloped down the cobblestone path that wound all the way to the bottom of Casterly Rock.

Tyrion spent much of the next five days in solitude. That was how he normally preferred to spend his time anyway, but usually he was reading, drinking, or whoring. He still read and drank plenty,
but he kept a safe distance from anything with a skirt. He made a vow that until after the melee, he would not seek out another whore.

Since he was not preoccupied with fucking, Tyrion was able to focus on other matters. He primarily focused on preparing for the melee. To be precise, he prepared for his first encounter with one of the attendees.

Before the evening, Tyrion had not given much thought to the possibility of his betrothal to Ellyn Clegane. He had fully expected her parents to refuse, just as Lord Hoster Tully had done. Hopefully, Lord Tarrence and Lady Daliah would have had more tact than to publicly call the match an insult. If not, Tyrion not have cared. He was accustomed to being the laughingstock of his family.

Tyrion had been stunned when he learned that House Clegane did not turn down the match right away; there was a chance they would actually accept it. At the time, he had presumed that Gregor and Sandor may have convinced their parents into considering the marriage contract. Perhaps Lord and Lady Clegane were striving to gain some political advantage, or they feared the consequences of displeasing their liege lord.

Tyrion had never once contemplated the idea that Ellyn Clegane herself had consented to the match.

Now he had discovered that it was Lady Ellyn who had wished to meet him in the first place. Her own brothers had brought that to his attention.

As a result, Tyrion quickly became a fair deal more invested in the likelihood of their betrothal. He was now genuinely curious about Ellyn Clegane. He found himself wondering what type of woman she was.

The majority of women, even the most well-mannered, would cringe at the mere concept of meeting him. Ellyn Clegane was not only willing to meet Tyrion, but also excited to do so. That alone established that she was neither shallow nor closeminded. Normally, Tyrion would consider the likelihood that she simply wished to see how grotesque Tyrion really was; that was a common reason for wanting to meet him. But given the family she came from, that was unlikely.

Ultimately, Tyrion decided not to reflect too much on Ellyn Clegane's personality. In his experience, by having small or no expectations, he was far less likely to be disappointed. Aside from that… there was no point in imagining what a woman would be like before he actually knew her. In his opinion, the image of a woman in his mind's eye and the woman's actual image should be one in the same. Otherwise, he would be making a fool of himself.

The day of the melee soon arrived. In the early morning, Tyrion departed from Casterly Rock. He rode on a horse fit with a special saddle designed to accommodate his specific measurements. He was accompanied by a pair of his personal bodyguards. They were not among the best of the Lannister soldiers, but they were competent and loyal, and that was enough for Tyrion.

Tyrion and his guards reached the tourney grounds shortly before midday. From the moment they entered the vicinity, a number of people paused and turned towards the Imp. The Westerlanders bowed their heads respectfully; everyone else just continued to gaze at him in bewilderment. Tyrion had long ago learned to disregard those stares, so he paid them no mind.

The melee was to be held in a large arena that been assembled in the center of the tourney grounds. It was five times larger than the jousting field, and it sat ten times as many spectators.
Tyrion was among the first hundred to be seated. As a member of a Great House, he was given a spot in the front row. His guards sat directly behind him.

Before long, more and more people showed up. As the rows were gradually filled, Tyrion kept his eyes open for anyone bearing the sigil of the Cleganes of Clegane’s Keep.

When the stands were halfway occupied, Tyrion spotted Lord Tarrence and Lady Daliah. They arrived with their daughter-by-law, Obara Martell. However, their own daughter was nowhere to be seen.

The three of them went to the other side of the arena. They were in the same section as Dacey Mormont and Nymeria Martell. Ellaria Sand and her two daughters were nearby, as well.

Yet there's still no sign of Ellyn Clegane.

Tyrion initially assumed that Lady Ellyn was fixing her hair or doing whatever women did before they appeared at a public event. Women tended to be very self-conscious of their façade, especially when around so many other people. Not all women were like that, of course. But it applied to just about every woman Tyrion personally knew. Even whores want to look their prettiest.

When the arena was closer to completely full than halfway full, Tyrion began to suspect Ellyn was not being delayed because of her hair or anything of the sort. It was then that he developed a more grim theory.

Could it have been possible Ellyn had elected not to come at the last moment? Maybe Gregor and Sandor had misinformed him. Maybe they had been misinformed. Or maybe Lady Ellyn had actually come to have second thoughts on this meeting. He would not have blamed her; she would not be the first woman to avoid his acquaintance. But even so… he was hoping this scenario would be different.

I should not rush to conclusions just yet. She's probably just…

"Is this seat claimed, my lord?" a soft, feminine voice interrupted his broodings.

Tyrion promptly turned to his left, and he finished his thought. Just right here.

Standing before him was a maiden of thirteen. She was quite tall; she had to be closer to six feet in height than five. Despite her large stature, she was clearly blossoming into womanhood. Her breasts were already forming. They were emphasized by her tight bodice. Her somewhat wide hips accentuated her thin waistline. She maintained her posture and her stance with the confidence and grace of someone twice her age. Her long, dark hair was combed neatly and hung loosely over her shoulders.

At first glance, Tyrion honestly thought he was looking at a woman grown. The only indication that she was still a girl was in her face. Her lips still had the fullness that was commonplace in children. Nevertheless, when she opened her lips, her white teeth formed a lovely smile. Additionally, although she looked down at Tyrion from a great height, she gazed at him with understanding and compassionate eyes. Those were her most endearing features: her smile and her eyes.

After taking a moment to absorb the beauty before him, Tyrion composed himself and said in his most polite tone "Oh, no. Not at all, my lady. Please, settle down."

Ellyn Clegane continued to grin and moved to sit beside Tyrion Lannister, saying appreciatively "Thank you."
Tyrion had come to the melee in a doublet, cloak, and trousers; all of them a hue of Lannister crimson red. Lady Ellyn had likewise worn the colors of her own house. She clad entirely in yellow and black apparel. But in place of a formal dress, she had worn a riding gown. Beneath that, she wore a pair of breeches, and a cloak was fastened around her shoulders. Tyrion thought she quaintly resembled one of the warrior women from Westeros' history.

On her back, she wore what seemed to be a parcel of some sort. It was wrapped in a sheet of thick brown wool, which was tied securely with a length of string. It was at least five times longer than it was wide. Tyrion's interest was piqued.

"Would you care to place that on the ground, my lady?" Tyrion proposed, pointing out the parcel.

"No, my lord," Ellyn respectfully declined, "But if it please you, I would place it in your lap."

Tyrion was perplexed by that commented, but he did not throw aside his chivalry. He stated "I would be happy to hold your burden for you."

"It is not a burden, nor is it mine," Ellyn apprised him as she reached back, took a hold of the parcel, and brought it to her front, "It is a gift meant for your family."

Tyrion raised an eyebrow at that. This is rather unusual. Despite his skepticism, his curiosity got the better of him. "Oh? What might it be?"

"Something that was once lost to House Lannister," Ellyn revealed as she carefully held the parcel out. As Tyrion took it in his short arms, Ellyn went on with "My brothers intended to give it back to your father weeks ago. But due to the circumstances, they thought it better if I was the one to present it."

Tyrion gave a slight nod at that. He then turned to the parcel and swiftly unwrapped it. When he saw what was inside, he was aghast.

It was an ancient greatsword. Its length was nearly one and a-half times Tyrion's height. The handle was large enough that a grown man could hold it comfortably with both hands. The blade was five feet of metal. The hilt was made of solid gold painted red; the pommel was shaped in the form of a lion's head.

Normally, Tyrion could hardly even lift a weapon of such size. In spite of that, he was able to pick this one up without difficulty. And he knew why; it was because of the blade's composition. Valyrian steel... So light yet so sharp.

And he knew it was made of Valyrian steel because he knew this weapon. He had only seen illustrations of it in books of his family lineage, but there was no mistaking it for anything else.

Tyrion slowly gazed up at Ellyn Clegane and murmured quietly "This... this is my family's ancestral sword."

The tall girl lightly nodded her head and proclaimed "Yes, that is indeed Brightroar. It is past time it was returned to Casterly Rock."

Tyrion grinned again and looked back to the sword. As he wrapped Brightroar back up in the wool sheet, he muttered "I'm amazed you are just handing it back to my family like this. You could have sold it back to us for a healthy sum. Its worth is said to be so great that it could pay for an entire army."

"I'm aware of that," Ellyn declared, "But money is no longer a concern for my family. You see,
"Brightroar was found amongst the spoils aboard Euron Greyjoy's galley. Since Lord Tywin awarded my house all that wealth, parting with a single sword was easy. And even if we were in need of gold... well, what kind of people would we be if we forced our liege lord to buy his rightful property from us?"

"That is a superb point," Tyrion admitted, tying the parcel shut again, "Only mercenaries and pirates would be so bold as to sell a person's own goods back to them."

"Precisely," Ellyn conceded, "House Clegane has no desire to be associated with those types of people."

"That's commendable of you," Tyrion perceived. He then placed the parcel at his feet. He could have given it to one of his bodyguards, but he would not trust either of them with his family's ancestral sword. He trusted them with his life (to a reasonable extent), but not with Brightroar.

After sitting up straight again, Tyrion remembered he had brought something to offer, as well. He reached into his vest and proclaimed "On the subject of gifts... I have something I'd like to give you, as well, my lady."

Now it was Ellyn's turn to be intrigued. She gazed down at Tyrion expectantly. A moment later, he pulled out a small wooden box.

"This is for you personally," Tyrion enlightened her, holding it out to her, "Not your family."

"I'm certain my parents and brothers will be thankful all the same," Ellyn conjectured, gratefully accepting the box.

"What matters to me is what you think of it," Tyrion proclaimed frankly.

Ellyn opened the lid of the box, and she let out a small gasp of surprise. Pleasant surprise; I can tell.

Inside were two items. One was a golden necklace. The other was a dagger.

The necklace contained two ornaments: a lion's head and a lioness's head. Based on how they were positioned on the chain, they were meant to be facing each other.

The blade of the dagger was standard smith-forged steel, but its hilt was exceptional. The pommel bore the likeness of a massive hound bearing its fangs, and its balance was remarkable. Ellyn picked the dagger up first, and she examined it thoroughly.

"I know from your brothers that you have been trained in armed combat," Tyrion apprised her, "Hence the dagger. By the way, the blade is interchangeable. So if you wish, you could switch it out for the blade from one of those Valyrian steel daggers your brothers won from the Crow's Eye."

"Now there's a thought," Ellyn muttered, fascination evident in her voice. She set the dagger back down in the box, and she turned her focus to the other object "And the necklace?"

Tyrion plainly replied with "Well, I know from other experiences that all women are fond of jewelry."

"I cannot dispute that, my lord," Ellyn professed, smiling a bit.

Tyrion picked the necklace up and enquired "Would you mind if I put it around your neck?"
"Please do," she bade him.

Lady Ellyn turned her back to Tyrion as he rose to his feet. By standing on the bench, he was taller than she was when seated. After Ellyn moved her hair aside, he pulled the necklace around her neck and fastened the clasp at the back.

"Alright, let me see," he requested.

When Ellyn faced him again, he got to see the necklace on her, and Tyrion found he quite liked how it looked on her. *I have to admit it suits her rather well.*

"It's a beautiful necklace, my lord," Ellyn told him sincerely.

"I am glad you think so," was all Tyrion said in response.

Just then, one of Tyrion's bodyguards tapped him on the shoulder and whispered "Beggin' your pardon, Milord, but I believe the melee is about to start."

Tyrion turned to his front and saw that the soldier was correct. The contenders for the melee were beginning to file into the arena. There had to be over a hundred of them.

Gregor Clegane and Sandor Clegane were both among the first twenty men to enter the field. Not long after they appeared, both of them managed to spot Tyrion Lannister and his companion. Ellyn remained seated, but she vigorously waved at her brothers. They both smiled and waved back at her.

Tyrion's other bodyguard leaned down to Ellyn's level and informed her "I've bet ten golden dragons on your lord brother to win, milady."

"He'll be pleased to know that," she pronounced happily.

*For his sake, let's hope Lord Gregor does win. I doubt he even has ten dragons to his name.*

The last man to enter the arena was Robert Baratheon himself. He was clad in his stag armor, looking regal as ever. Under one arm, he carried his antlered helm. With the other, he held his warhammer. The entire audience became silent as the king took up his position in the very center of the line. All the other participants momentarily bowed their heads to him in respect.

Once he gained everyone's attention, Robert addressed the crowd and his fellow participants. He announced "Remember, gentlemen. This is by all means a mock combat scenario. The concept involves defeating your opponent without slaying him. I cannot emphasize that strongly enough. Blood may be shed here, but I will not allow outright bloodshed. We are not Dothraki; we do not celebrate victory with death. We celebrate as brothers-in-arms and as compatriots. We do NOT kill brothers-in-arms or compatriots. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Your Grace," the other fighters chorused altogether. Most of them at least sounded truthful.

Robert nodded in acknowledgement, donned his antlered helm, gripped his warhammer in both hands, and declared "Then let the melee commence!"

In response to that, a wave of approving applause swept through the stands.

The melee was essentially a free-for-all battle. Everyone could fight whomever he pleased at any time. In the beginning, the majority of the fights were one-on-one duels. Sometimes, two people had to team up in effort to best someone who was more skilled than either of them.
However, no renowned swordsmen ever opted to pair up with another fine swordsman so that they could gang up to beat weaker opponents. That was a craven's tactic, and cravens were not welcome in tourneys.

The main rule of the melee was quite simple: once you were knocked onto the ground or your blood was drawn, you were eliminated from the competition. The last unwounded man standing was the victor.

For a while, Tyrion kept his concentration primarily on his brother, Ser Jaime Lannister. The Kingslayer managed to dispatch five men in as many minutes. Tyrion felt an odd sense of pride, seeing his brother perform so superbly. He did his family proud. *If only I could somehow do that, as well.*

Of course, Jaime was not the only notable warrior on that field. There was something to be said about Lady Ellyn's brothers, too. Not only did they have substantial combat prowess, but their fighting style also utilized a fair amount of their presentation.

Sandor Clegane did not wear a helm. The sight of his face up-close was sufficient to scare the fight out of many of his adversaries long enough for him to overpower them. Gregor Clegane had no deformity to display, but his sheer height was just as intimidating. He was like eight feet of heavy metal with a hazardous, fast-moving steel addendum. Between the two of them, a dozen combatants fell in the first ten minutes.

Of course, the melee could only have one winner.

*We'll have to wait and see which turns out to be the more ideal asset: repulsion or size?*

"My lady," Tyrion spoke to Ellyn Clegane, "Between your two brothers, who would say is more likely to emerge victorious?"

Lady Ellyn reflected on that, and she pronounced "Most people would pick Gregor without hesitation. However, I know that bigger is not necessarily better. Sandor may have learned the basics of swordsmanship from our brother, but he knows a few things even Gregor does not. His skill set is just as broad, and he is just as adept with a blade."

"I see," Tyrion avowed, "But who do you believe to possess the better chances?"

"That would really depend on the setting," Ellyn contended, "In close quarters, I would have to favor Sandor. On an open field, Gregor would have the upper hand. Since both of those conditions apply here, it would be hard to decide. But if I absolutely had to choose one… I would place my money on Gregor."

"So would I," Tyrion admitted, "At the end of the day, he's still the Mountain, and mountains do not fall easily."

"Quite so, my lord," Ellyn agreed, "But be that as it may, my brother says a warrior's capabilities should not be evaluated by his height. There are even times when he debates that tremendous size can actually be a disadvantage. On that, I would have to agree with him."

"Why is that?" Tyrion queried in interest.

"Because I would know," Ellyn somberly apprised him.

Tyrion was taken aback. "How do you mean, my lady?"
"Well…" Ellyn Clegane began uncertainly. After a pause, she let out a sigh and asked "May I confide in you, my lord?"

"Absolutely," Tyrion assured her.

Ellyn leaned in so that only he could hear her, and she mumbled softly "Just look at me. I have only seen thirteen namedays, but I am already as tall as the average man in Westeros. I am taller than my lady mother, and I will continue to grow overtime. If my lord father and brothers are any sign, I could ultimately grow to six and a-half feet or more. Other than my sister-by-law Dacey, I might be the tallest woman in the Seven Kingdoms."

"You make it sound a travesty," Tyrion noted.

"I do not mean to," Ellyn asserted, "But being so much taller than others can be difficult at times. The majority of the men I've met seem to prefer to be friends with women who are shorter than them."

"Not all men are like that, my lady," Tyrion assured her, "If we were, I would have no one of your gender as a friend. Besides, there are some men who actually appreciate tall women."

"Yes, but they are a rarity," Ellyn disputed, "It is not uncommon for members of my gender to be fond of tall men, either. But they do not feel the same about tall women. In fact, I know firsthand that many girls see tall women as freaks."

Tyrion was stunned. "What are you saying? Have you been ridiculed or scorned… because of your height?"

"Not directly," Ellyn gloomily revealed, "However, behind my back, there are some who point and whisper about me. I ignore what they say, but I cannot ignore them altogether. Because of that… making friends with other girls is harder for me."

"You cannot mean to tell me you are friendless," Tyrion firmly insisted.

"Oh, I have plenty of friends," Ellyn proclaimed, "But I believe some of them are only my peers because their fathers are retainers to my father. As far as I am aware, I have made enemies of no one. Still, there are very few I'd call a true friend."

"I find that very difficult to fathom," Tyrion contended, "In the time since you sat beside me, you have been nothing but kind, empathetic, and accepting. How could someone with those qualities be so alone?"

"By choice, my lord," Ellyn expounded, "In all honesty, I have never cared very much for social interaction. I appear in public when it is expected of me, and I make time for my closest friends and my family. Even still, apart from them, my favorite company is my own."

I know that feeling far too well. By now, Tyrion had developed an interesting theory about the woman before him. He placed his hand on his shoulder and stated "My lady, are you saying you are… resentful of your height?"

Ellyn did not answer straightaway. After ten seconds, she looked away and shrugged. She professed "Somewhat. I mean, what good is being so tall if people are instinctively wary of you?"

Never in his lifetime did Tyrion consider that viewpoint.

As far back as he could remember, Tyrion Lannister had wondered what it would be like if he was
taller. He frequently imagined himself of a height with Cersei and Jaime (and sharing their goods looks, as well). In his mind, there was no such thing as being too tall. There had even been a time when he had thought that if he was tall enough, most (if not all) of his problems would vanish.

Now, in the span of five minutes, this young but precocious woman had made him rethink his whole position on height. Seeing the issue from her perspective, he fully realized that height played no role in determining one's overall standing in the world. It was merely a single aspect of one's identity.

*It appears being too tall can be just as challenging as being too short.*

"You present an interesting argument, my lady," Tyrion remarked, "Long ago, I came up with an ideal that the amount of esteem a person garners from others is proportional to his or her height. Generally, one who stands higher can command respect more easily. However, I have found that that is true only if the individual has the confidence to match."

"That would explain my situation," Ellyn pronounced, "Confidence is something I tend to lack."

"You approached me without protest," Tyrion pointed out, "An unconfident person could not have managed that. You are more confident than you realize."

"Or, one could argue, a shallow person could not have done that," Ellyn contended, "I may be a solitary person, my lord, but I always remember my courtesies. When I have an appointment with someone, I never miss it. What my brothers told you is true; I really did wish to meet you. But that was not my only reason for coming here. I also came here because it was expected of me. Confidence had nothing to do with the affair."

"On the contrary," Tyrion countered, "It had everything to do with it. In fact, you are far more confident than you realize, my lady."

Ellyn seemed mildly astonished and relieved by that. "How so?"

Tyrion explained: "Although you claim interest and obligation led you here, neither of those reasons can truly dictate your actions. A person may wish to see what is north of the Wall, but he may decide he does not wish to climb the massive structure or pass through it. Just because one is willing to do something, it does not mean anything unless they actual do it. Additionally, a person's duty does not always determine what course of action he or she will take. My brother was once sworn to serve Mad King Aerys; now he is known as 'Kingslayer.' Similarly, you and I were expected to meet eventually, but this meeting was not arranged by our fathers. You could have chosen to avoid coming to this melee. You did not."

"Indeed not," Ellyn perceived frankly, "You were not forced here either, my lord. May I ask what exactly brought you here?"

"Several reasons," he revealed, "Firstly, there's the obvious reason; the reason every other spectator in this arena is here. But other than that, my motivations are the same as yours. I was eager to make your acquaintance, I was expected to follow my father's wishes… and I possessed the confidence to appear here. In front of all these people. Many of whom may be false friends."

Ellyn must have seen the point he was trying to make. Judging by her countenance, she was now a great deal cheerier than she had been when the subject of height first came up in this conversation. She also seemed far less self-conscious about how high her head stood.

Tyrion placed his hand on her shoulder and professed "I have struggled with having an unusual
height myself, my lady. But I discovered that at the end of the day, the difference in height is not worth brooding over. So do not let other people bother you because of it, and do not allow other people to be unintentionally intimidated by you because of it, either. You are who you are, regardless of how much of you there is."

For a minute, Ellyn said nothing in response. *I hope I was not too philosophical for her.* Tyrion did not believe so. Ellyn Clegane struck him as an intelligent young woman, in spite of her apparent low self-esteem. As such, he wished to know what she thought of his interpretations.

Ultimately, Ellyn Clegane turned to Tyrion, smiled down at him, and uttered sweetly "Thank you for telling me that, my lord. You said precisely what I was hoping you would say."

Hoping I would say? Once more, Tyrion Lannister was perplexed. How could Lady Ellyn have hoped he would say anything? Had she expected to converse with him on this matter? Did she anticipate he would attempt to reassure her when she discussed her sensitivity to her height? Could that have been why she had chosen to confide in him in the first place?

As those questions passed through Tyrion's head, he looked back up at Lady Ellyn. Her smile was still there, but his eyes went immediately to hers. He was drawn to the look she was giving him now.

He knew that look. It was one that graced his own face quite often. And whenever he had that face on, he was always busy pondering or analyzing something. *The look of inquisitiveness and knowledge.*

While he lacked the ideal physique for a soldier, Tyrion felt he had the ideal brain for an intellectual. Since he first learned to read, Tyrion had gone to the library as often as Jaime had to the training yard. Jaime was deadly with a sword, but Tyrion was just as deadly with his mind. In his sixteen years, he had become smarter, wiser, and more cunning than just about anyone else who dwelt in Casterly Rock. In time, probably more so than anyone else in Westeros.

He firmly believed that, as he had never met anyone with a mind that could contest his in such a way.

*Until this very moment, perhaps. Sandor did mention that his sister was very astute for her age, but I never would have thought her capable of this. I wonder if she ever actually had those insecurities about her stature, or if she just invented them to see if I would comfort her.*

He was partly inclined to believe both possibilities. It was well-known (in this part of the Westerlands, at least) that unlike her elder brothers, Ellyn Clegane was not very outgoing. Her unnatural height was as good a reason as any for her shyness. In any case, Tyrion knew that the most introverted people were often the ones with the greatest opportunities to learn the ways of the world. Often, they also developed the ability to notice things that were often overlooked by most other people.

It suddenly occurred to Tyrion Lannister that Ellyn Clegane had to be one of those individuals. She was definitely more assertive than she claimed to be. Moreover, she was incredibly observant; observant in the studious sense. That whole discussion about height and how it affected her emotionally… it must have been a test. A rather elaborate test meant to bring out Tyrion's good nature (assuming it was there, and it was).

*She may have invented that test after she sat down beside me. If so… she is even cleverer than Sandor gave her credit for.*
In a match of wits, Tyrion had never been caught off guard. This marked the first instance when he was. One would think he would hold a grudge against the person who managed to outwit him. But as it may, he did not resent Lady Ellyn for her actions. In fact, he admired her for it. In his experience, sharp women were scarce to come across. Now he found one who could probably match him in acumen, and that was a blessing in itself.

*It is likely she intends to observe me all throughout this meeting. In that case… I shall do the same.*

As the melee progressed, Tyrion Lannister and Ellyn Clegane discussed various other issues in depth.

They talked about the role one's appearance has in making both first and lasting impressions. Tyrion used Sandor Clegane for one of his major points. One thing he and the Hound now had in common was that both their faces were partly deformed. He paid especial attention to Lady Ellyn's reaction when he addressed that fact. In the end, she contended that while a person's appearance could impact how others saw them, it was not what was mainly responsible for leaving an impression. Their deeds were. Tyrion had to agree with her.

They talked about ambition and how it influenced one's achievements. In five years, Gregor Clegane had gone from a mere knight of the Westerlands to a renowned lord of the North. Along the way, he had formed the most unified fighting company in all of Westeros, and he had made the country the safest it had been in decades. Tyrion and Ellyn wished to be part of something just as magnificent and grand, but they had never been given the opportunity. But... the opportunity could certainly become available in the future.

They talked about change and how it was consistently coming to the country with each passing year. Once more, the Legion without Banners was a focal point in the discussion. Ever since the tourney at Lannisport began, Lord Gregor and his lieutenants had been searching the grounds for new recruits. Dozens of Legionnaires had been made in the last few weeks, including Thorsos of Myr, Ser Jacelyn Bywater, Eddison Tollett, Ser Wendel Manderly, and Ser Bonifer Hasty. Most notably, Gregor had taken on Willas Tyrell, the heir to Highgarden, as his own squire. Lord and Lady Tyrell had put up surprisingly little protest to their firstborn joining the Legion. Ellyn had even heard that her brother had convinced Lord Randyll Tarly to consider sending his son Samwell to Moat Cailin when he was of age. Samwell was said to be a craven. That gave Tyrion and Ellyn an idea. If cravens were welcome in the Legion, why not dwarves or giantesses? *Just one possible future to think about.*

With every new topic they discussed, Tyrion came to appreciate and like Lady Ellyn even more. By her behavior and the way she looked at him now, she was rapidly developing similar feelings for him. They were now longer calling each other "my lord" or "my lady." By now, they were on a first-name basis.

The last thing they talked about was love and the role it played in everyday life. By the time they reached this topic, the melee was nearly over. Only a dozen contenders remained unwounded and on their feet. Gregor and Sandor were among them. Tyrion and Ellyn frequently alternated their attention from each other and the ongoing battle before them. All the while, they spoke about the various types of love.

First, there was domestic love. Ellyn had always been loved by her parents and brothers unconditionally. Tyrion, however, had never been loved in such a way. While his brother and uncles had loved him in a way, his father and sister had never had anything but cold disdain for him. Then again, it was debatable as to whether or not Lord Tywin or Queen Cersei were actually capable of loving anyone. *Other than themselves, that is.*
Then there was platonic love. That was the type of love Ellyn felt for her sisters-by-law Dacey Mormont and Obara Martell, as well as all the friends she had made growing up. Tyrion had a number of friends at Casterly Rock he felt a similar form of love for.

Lastly, they arrived at romantic love. The type of love people normally thought of when they heard the word "love." Ellyn admitted she was totally unversed in that field, and Tyrion confessed to her that he was not. There was only one woman he had loved, and he had not seen her in a year. He was not surprised when Lady Ellyn revealed that she knew about Tysha. Tyrion had fully expected Sandor to tell his sister about the Imp's first and thus far only love.

Tyrion also revealed that he had lain with a number of whores. Luckily, he had not been such a fool as to fall in love with any of them. Ellyn did not mind the whores; she was just pleased that he was honest with her. Furthermore, Tyrion assured her that he took marriage vows very seriously. Once he was a married man, he would never look at a whore again.

Of course, the outcome of this meeting will determine whether I ever will be a married man.

By the end of that talk, there were only two participants left in the melee: King Robert Baratheon and Lord Gregor Clegane.

Throughout the stands of the arena, the spectators watched closely as the two men sparred, greatsword against warhammer. All eyes were locked on them.

Actually, in all technicality, all but four eyes. Tyrion Lannister and Ellyn Clegane were more engrossed in each other.

It was in this moment, as two of the strongest men in Westeros fought in mock combat, that Tyrion finally addressed the issue that had brought him and Lady Ellyn together in the first place. He took her hands in his, gazed up at her, and he told her in a delicate yet firm voice "Ellyn, we have talked at length for hours, and in that time, I have come to admire you both as a woman and as a person. I already feel as though I know you as I would my dearest friend. But friendship is not the intended result of this engagement. So it is now that I must ask you... will you one day do me the honor of becoming my lady wife? I will not force you to accept; the decision is yours entirely."

In spite of how well he now knew Lady Ellyn, part of him still expected her to flat-out refuse him or take a very long time to reply. But she did neither. Instead, she grinned gently and placed a kiss on Tyrion's forehead. After that, she gazed into his eyes and declared "I doubt there is any man I would rather ask me that question. I gladly accept your offer, Tyrion."

Tyrion smiled. He could not see his own face at that time, but he was certain his smile extended the length of his cheeks.

At that very same moment, the melee ended. Lord Gregor Clegane managed to knock the King onto his back. No one uttered a sound while the King was on the ground. After Lord Gregor helped him back to his feet, the king spontaneously burst out laughing. He laughed for nearly thirty seconds. Then he shouted comically "That's one mountain this stag won't try to conquer!"

Everyone in the arena laughed and erupted in tumultuous cheers. Everyone except Tyrion Lannister and Ellyn Clegane. The two of them paid no mind to that or anything else that was happening around them. Instead, they moved closer together and embraced each other fondly.
After the melee, the archery competition was all that remained of the tourney's major events. This time, the list of contenders was not as long or diverse as that of the joust or the melee, but it still had an impressive turnout.

King Robert Baratheon chose not to participate in this event. He inwardly felt archery was for those who were too craven to meet their foes face-to-face. Then again, it had been quite a while since he had last used a bow. Although there was a chance he could still shoot as straight as he did in his youth, he had no desire to risk humiliating himself in public by displaying his lack of practice. *Ned would probably accuse me of "just not wishing to lose."*... *And he would not be entirely incorrect.*

The winner of the archery turned out to be Lothor Brune, a Legionnaire Robert had knighted at the tourney.

For the early part of his life, Ser Lothor had been a freerider of the Crownlands. He was a distant cousin of the Brunes of Brownhollow, but no one of that house regarded him as kin. For that reason, he had chosen to join the Legion without Banners, who treated him far more pleasantly than his own relations ever did.

Lothor Brune had shown considerable skill and dedication during Greyjoy's Rebellion. At the siege of Pyke, he had been pivotal in singlehandedly fighting off a wave of Ironborn reinforcements at both the top wall and the Great Hall. That in turn enabled the King's forces to advance through the castle more easily. For those heroic deeds, the king had knighted him.

Although he did not partake in the archery, Robert had attended it all the same. He still found it quite exciting, and he cheered as loudly as anyone else in the stands.

After Ser Lothor Brune was declared victor, the tourney more or less reached its unofficial end.

Several days had elapsed since then. The tourney grounds had been almost entirely disassembled. The majority of the traders, merchants, and vendors had left with fewer of their goods and a greater amount of gold than when they had arrived. Many lords and knights had returned to their homes.
with their men.

Some had decided to linger. The King, his forces, the Lords Paramount, their retainers, and the Legionnaires were among those who remained. They too would be leaving soon enough. But first, they were to attend a private gathering at Clegane's Keep.

The gathering had been sanctioned by Robert, but it had been called at the request of Lord Gregor Clegane.

Robert could still vividly recall his duel with the Mountain, and how he had laughed at its conclusion, even though it had not ended in his favor. Normally, Robert Baratheon did not accept defeat so well or in such good humor. But he made an exception when Lord Gregor Clegane bested him in the melee.

As a matter of fact, King Robert had come to greatly respect the Mountain, and not just as a warrior. Ever since he took the throne, it had been his duty to stabilize the realm, secure his rule, and unify the Seven Kingdoms. Lord Jon Arryn, Grand Maester Marwyn, Lord Varys, and the rest of the Small Council had done plenty to aid him in those endeavors, but none of them had done as much as his Master of Order.

It all began on that one fateful day, when Lord Gregor had told Robert of Lyanna's "last words." The stag was not one to shed needless tears (one of the few things he and his brother Stannis had in common), but he had nearly been driven to them when he was told that Lyanna's dying wish was for him to be the best king he could possibly be.

At the time, Robert had doubted his own ability to govern Westeros properly. Lord Gregor had given him the assurance that he could. From that day onward, Robert had put his all into being a good king.

He liked to believe he had done an excellent job so far. At the end of his rebellion, the North, the Vale, the Riverlands, the Stormlands, and the Westerlands had terrible relations with the Reach, Dorne, and the Crownlands. Now, they were fighting alongside each other as brothers and sisters-in-arms. A couple months back, the Iron Islands had been welcomed into the fold, making the entire realm completely whole for the first time in recent history. As much as Robert would have loved to claim credit for this accomplishment, he could not. Much of it belonged to his subjects; Gregor Clegane most of all.

So when Lord Gregor asked to have a private gathering without even providing a reason for it, Robert Baratheon had granted his request without hesitation. Lord Gregor then presented the king with a list of people he expected to appear at the gathering. Fortunately, all of them had not yet departed. As such, Robert assured him that every person on that list would be summoned to the Main Hall of Clegane's Keep as soon as humanly possible.

The king took some time to look over the list by himself. There were a total of thirty individuals on it.

Lord Gregor had placed himself, his wife Lady Dacey, and his immediate family at the top of the list. That was composed of Lord Tarrence, Lady Daliah, Ser Sandor, his wife Obara, and Lady Ellyn.

After that, Robert noticed that his Hand, his best friend, his brother, and his father-by-law were the next people on the list. So were Mace Tyrell, Victarion Greyjoy, and Hoster Tully. All but one of the Lords Paramount had been asked to go to the gathering. Since Prince Doran Martell was currently in Sunspear, Oberyn Martell would be there in his brother's place.
Next were a few more Legionnaires, such as Smalljon Umber, Allard Seaworth, Gerion Lannister, Willas Tyrell, and Lothor Brune.

With the death of Ser Osmund Kettleblack at Moat Cailin, Lord Gregor Clegane's inner circle no longer had a representative from the Crownlands. Sometime during the tourney of Lannisport, the Mountain had picked Ser Lothor to serve as Ser Osmund's replacement. Furthermore, the Reach's vacancy caused by the death of Ser Garth Hightower had been filled by his nephew, Willas Tyrell. Lord Willas was only a lad of thirteen, and he was merely serving as Gregor's squire for the time being, but he already had the respect of the Reach and the means to speak for them.

The next eight people on the list were Davos Seaworth, Barristan Selmy, Jorah Mormont, his wife Nymeria, Ellaria Sand, Kevan Lannister, Tyron Lannister, and Jaime Lannister. Unlike the twenty listed before them, the reason for their inclusions did not seem as obvious. The Onion Knight, the Lord Commander of my Kingsguard, the bear lord and his Dornish bride, the Red Viper's baseborn lover, Tywin's overlooked brother, the Imp, and the Kingslayer. Quite an ensemble. But what could they possibly have in common with the others? Or, in some cases, each other?

The last two people on the list had been marked as "optional attendees." They were the King and his Queen. Apparently, the two of them were not being commanded to attend. Instead, they had been invited to come. At least Lord Gregor does not try to abuse his authority.

All the same, after some meditation on the issue, Robert decided he and Cersei would go to the gathering. Whatever his Master of Order had to show them, he figured it would be worth their attention. Lord Gregor would not waste the king's time with petty matters.

It was not difficult to talk Cersei into accompanying him to the gathering. In fact, she seemed just as eager and curious to learn the purpose of the gathering as he was.

Then again, Cersei had never denied herself the privileges of being Queen. Ever since their wedding, she had insisted (or "begged," as he called it) on joining Robert at the Small Council meetings. Initially, he had been reluctant to bring a woman to that table. Overtime, though, he was able to look past Cersei's tits and focus more on her brain. She had a special talent for politics. She was definitely more familiar and better-versed in them than he was, at any rate. Now she there was always a seat for her on the Small Council. All of the members, especially King Robert, appreciated and valued her input.

The private gathering was set to take place in the Main Hall of Clegane's Keep right after dinnertime. Robert and Cersei reached the keep in the late evening, just after the Sun disappeared over the horizon. Ser Jaime and Ser Barristan had accompanied them there.

As they approached the large holdfast, Cersei mentioned she was impressed by how much the Cleganes had improved it, but she still felt Casterly Rock would have been a more appropriate place for the gathering. She would know; she grew up there. Robert had to admit Casterly Rock would make a more ideal meeting site than most other places. All the same, the ascent took longer than he would have liked, and Lord Tywin would not have been pleased to host anyone in his ancestral home without his consent. Robert ultimately reassured Cersei that the keep would be adequate.

The King, the Queen, and the two Kingsguard knights soon arrived in the keep's Main Hall. Robert discovered they were the last ones to show. Everyone else was already assembled in the room.

Once the four of them were inside the Main Hall, Lord Gregor dismissed the guards, the servants, and anyone else whose name was not among the thirty he had sent for. After that, he had the doors locked and braced, and he had the walls examined to ensure that there were no openings anywhere.
He would not allow even the slightest possibility of eavesdroppers. Now I'm very interested to know what he has to tell. It must be extraordinary. Or dangerous. Or extraordinarily dangerous. Or dangerously extraordinary.

It turned out to be all the above.

The trestle tables had been arranged in such a way that they formed a circle around the Main Hall. A bench had been placed on a platform directly below the dais. Robert, Cersei, and Lord Tywin took up spots on that bench. Everyone else took up a spot on one of the trestle tables. They sat so they were facing inward.

Gregor Clegane stood in the very center of the circle. Although he was dressed informally in a doublet and a pair of trousers, he was armed. Strapped to his back was a massive greatsword. At least, it would look massive in the hand of a regular-sized man. Next to the Mountain, it looked no longer than the typical bastard sword.

Also, this greatsword was not the one Lord Gregor had fought with in Greyjoy's Rebellion or the one he had used at the tourney. Robert had seen that blade up close a number of times during the melee, and he could tell at a glance that this sword was different. It seemed far sharper and deadlier, yet much lighter at the same time.

*Looks quite a bit like Ice. I wonder if Ned thinks so, too.*

Gregor Clegane waited for everyone to give him their undivided attention. Then he commenced the meeting. He opened with the following introduction: "Twice over the course of the last sixteen months, I provided you vital information about the Ironborn Rebellion. That information was critical in minimizing the length of the ensuing war and the damage it inflicted on the realm. Of course, since I was able to produce this information before the war actually began, many of you were left wondering on how it came into my possession. Alas, the only explanation I gave for my knowledge was that I had a 'source.' I am grateful you did not pressure me into yielding further elaboration at the time. Nevertheless, I have decided it is time you were all told the truth of my source."

That last sentence succeeded in capturing Robert's interest. From the looks of the others' faces, it had captured theirs, as well. During the Rebellion, Robert had given little thought to this source of Lord Gregor's. Back then, all that mattered to him was that it was reliable and accurate. However, throughout the tourney, his mind had occasionally drifted back to the "source" and its origin. *It enabled us to win the war swiftly and decisively. Yes, I would very much like to learn the nature of it.*

Gregor folded his hands together behind his back and began pacing around the circular space within the trestle tables. As he walked, he made eye contact with whoever was directly in front of him. After a minute of this, he asked rhetorically "Have you ever pondered on our purpose for being here?"

"Well, you summoned us," Ser Lothor commented bluntly. That produced a number of scoffs.

"I don't mean here specifically," Gregor stated, "I mean 'here' as in 'anywhere.' Do you know our reason for living? Moreover, what would you say is the reason for us to even exist?"

"I am not certain we understand the questions," Kevan Lannister remarked. There were some murmurs of agreement.

"Let me clarify," Gregor expounded, "Imagine life as a tale out of a book. Suppose the Gods are
"The storytellers and the people of the world are merely characters in their saga of the ages."

"That would be a fitting description," Tyrion Lannister debated, "After all, regardless of who among men has the most power in this world, the gods are the ones who really pull the strings."

"Precisely," Gregor Clegane affirmed, "Now, as features of the story, we – meaning the characters – would be expected to go about their daily lives while the gods played the part of the authors to determine our fates. Each character would have a unique part to play, no matter how insignificant it may seem. However, suppose one particular character somehow became aware that he was living in a story. Now suppose that overtime, he became capable of predicting what the authors would write next."

"How could a fictitious individual possibly gain such an awareness?" Tywin Lannister disputed.

"This is merely speculation, Lord Tywin," Lord Gregor reminded him, "Look past the relationship between the authors and the characters, and you'll see I am making an analogy of the relationship between gods and men."

"By that logic, if a real man learned the will of the gods, he could foresee the intended future," Oberyn Martell contended.

"Correct," the Mountain muttered. He gazed around the room and announced "That is my source."

That is quite a fabulous declaration. Some of the others began whispering to each other. A few stared at Gregor Clegane as though he had gone mad or as though he was speaking in tongues. Most everyone else seemed rather intrigued by that revelation.

"What do you entail, Lord Gregor?" Robert enquired, "Are you saying you can communicate with the gods?"

"Not necessarily communicate with them, Your Grace," Gregor disclosed, "But I have the means to learn what plans they have for the future."

He paused for a moment, but before anyone could ask a question, the Mountain added in "Alas, these means are not entirely within my control."

"Well, what are these means?" Allard Seaworth queried.

"Yes, tell us, Lord Gregor," Willas Tyrell bade the huge man, "How can you gain such insights from the gods?"

"They come to me in the form of visions," Gregor Clegane claimed, "They always come in my sleep. At first, I dismissed them as mere dreams. But when I observed the exact same sequence every night for a week, I was quick to reevaluate my judgment. In addition to that, each sequence is far too vivid and detailed to be a dream. Before too long, I began to connect the visions with events that were occurring in real life. That was when I started to believe that the gods were showing me glimpses of the future on an irregular basis."

"Remarkable," Tarrence Clegane mumbled softly. Just what I was thinking.

"Could you possibly be a greenseer?" Eddard Stark hypothesized.

"I can see why you might think so, Lord Eddard," the lord of Moat Cailin admitted, "However, whatever a greenseer sees, he cannot prevent. That restriction does not apply to me."
That statement only captivated the Mountain's audience even more so than before.

"How so, Greg?" Sandor Clegane asked his brother.

"Here I go back to the scenario of the authors and their characters," Gregor Clegane pronounced, "Let us assume for a moment that the self-aware character discovered that a certain imminent part of the story would produce dismal repercussions for himself or those he cared about. What do you imagine he would do?"

"There is nothing he could do," Hoster Tully debated, "If the authors decide to incorporate that unfortunate part, then it is their choice and theirs alone. Once it is written, the story cannot be undone."

"The original story, perhaps," Lord Gregor disputed, "But the original story only truly exists in the authors' minds. They may have intended for things to occur differently than they actually did. Those alternate ideas would live on elsewhere. Apart from that, the authors have no direct control over this rogue character they created."

"In that case... the character would be free to change the story as he saw fit," Ellyn Clegane theorized.

"That is my point," the Mountain revealed, "For more than fifteen years, I have seen certain events of the future countless times. If I wished to, I could have been a spectator and nothing more. Instead, I chose to take advantage of this knowledge of what was forthcoming. Now, the Westeros of my visions is no longer the definite Westeros of the future; it merely one possible future Westeros."

"Do you mean to tell us that you have deliberately altered history?" Stannis Baratheon uttered incredulously.

"That is indeed what I have done," Gregor shamelessly confirmed.

*He's done what many have hopelessly attempted, yet he speaks as though any person could have done the same. Whether it's modesty or confidence, I could not say. Both, perhaps.*

Although Robert was astonished and impressed by the Mountain's audacity and conviction, not everyone else seemed to share his fascination. Some were startled, some were shocked, and some were beyond flabbergasted.

"Gregor, do you realize the risks of what you have done?" Daliah Clegane murmured nervously, "Tampering with fate is dangerous enough. Tampering with the will of the gods... that is perhaps the most dangerous act a person could ever dare commit."

"I agree with your lady mother," Jorah Mormont conceded, "Neither the Old Gods nor the New nor any other gods look kindly upon mortal interference. Your actions could put the entire country at the risk of incurring the gods' wrath."

"I understand your concerns," Gregor Clegane proclaimed, "I assure you that I did not act hastily. I spent many hours considering all the possible consequences of my intervention. Even so, I ultimately decided that while the risks were great, they were worth the overall benefits. Aside from that, if the gods did not mean for me to become an unpredictable factor, why did they allow me to have these visions in the first place?"

No one there could dispute that point. Robert had to admit it was a very practical and sensible
argument. The only reason he'd even have those visions is if he was meant to rewrite our country's history.

Lord Gregor grinned in mild satisfaction when no one offered a counterargument. He folded his arms and muttered "I doubt any one of you would have done differently. Especially if you saw the things I saw."

"What did you see?" Mace Tyrell inquired.

"And what all have you altered?" Queen Cersei demanded.

Gregor answered both their questions at once: "I have seen many things; all of them equal parts undesirable and horrific. I try to alter them in any way I can, but like the visions, I do not have absolute control over how much change I can instill. It mostly depends on where I am and the position I am in."

"Could you give us an example?" Nymeria Mormont requested.

The Mountain nodded and kept walking along the small circular area as he illuminated: "Near the end of King Robert's Rebellion, when the Westerlords made for King's Landing, I had a vision every night for the duration of the march. This vision was of the Sack of King's Landing. The taking of the city was meant to be far more violent than it really was. Thousands would have been put to the sword, and I do not mean just soldiers. Unarmed men, women, and children alike would have been slaughtered indiscriminately. Moreover, Princess Elia would have been among them."

That statement made the Dornishmen gape in astonishment. Prince Oberyn sat up and murmured quietly "She was not?"

Lord Gregor solemnly nodded and explicated "She was destined to die alongside her children. So I took steps to ensure that the duty of supervising the Westerlander units who seized the city. I knew King's Landing would never fall without a few civilian casualties, but I was determined to minimize the number."

"Yes, and you accomplished that superbly," Jon Arryn stated in approval.

"Thank you, my Lord Hand," Gregor said appreciatively. Then he returned his attention to everyone else present and continued with "After the city was secure, I rushed to the Red Keep with the intention of rescuing Princess Elia and her children. I was unable to save Rhaenys and Aegon, but I managed to prevent Ser Amory Lorch from butchering their mother."

"For that, Dorne will always be grateful," Obara Clegane declared. Her half-sister, her father, and father's paramour all mumbled in agreement.

"That solves your mystery, Tywin," Kevan Lannister slyly said to his older brother.

Mystery? What in the gods' name...? Gerion Lannister seemed to share the king's curiosity. He turned to the Lord of Casterly Rock and asked "What does he mean by that?"

"Never mind that," the lion lord told his youngest sibling dismissively. He then focused his glare on Lord Gregor and uttered "You expect us to believe it was the gods who told you that Amory Lorch would go after Elia and her children?"

"Yes, I expect you to believe that," Gregor Clegane confirmed plainly, "I also expect you to believe that from that very same vision, I know the true reason why your elder son earned his moniker."
Now even Lord Tywin was perplexed. He leaned back in his seat and said sharply "What?"

"Ser Jaime did not slay Aerys just to do us all a favor," the Lord of Moat Cailin revealed, "Granted, it was a favor. Even so, he had another motivation for shoving his sword through the Mad King's back. A far more noble and admirable reason."

"Gregor, that's enough!" Jaime Lannister sternly interjected.

The Kingslayer had not spoken since the meeting began. That sudden outburst took many of the others by surprise. Lord Gregor appeared indifferent to it.

"Is it?" the Mountain snapped, "They should know."

"Know what?" Victarion Greyjoy uttered inquisitively.

Neither Gregor Clegane nor Jaime Lannister answered straightaway. The Mountain took a minute to gaze at the people around him. Then he looked back to the Kingslayer and pronounced "Either you tell them or I will. Why protect the name of an insane, undeserving monarch who burned people alive for pleasure? What could you possibly gain by continuing to withhold the truth?"

That argument seemed to sway Ser Jaime's mind. A few seconds later, he sighed and remarked "Very well."

When all eyes were on him, he rose to his feet and proclaimed "When Father's forces took King's Landing, Aerys issued the order for the city to be burned to the ground. Up until then, I had stood by his side without a word of protest. But when he yelled "Burn them all," I reached my breaking point. So I left with Lord Rossart under the pretense of guarding him to the Alchemist's Guild safely. Once we were alone, I ran him through. Then I returned to the throne room and did the same to the Mad King. Even as he died, his last words were 'Burn them all… burn them all… burn them all…'"

A wave of silence came over the room. Everyone except Lord Gregor was dumbfounded. Robert could not even find words. He always knew that Aerys was a sadistic lunatic, but he never would have thought that even the Mad King could have been capable of such atrocities. And I let Ser Jaime be scorned by the very people he broke his oath to protect. I should have had him reveled as a hero.

"Why did you not tell anyone this?" Tywin Lannister muttered crossly.

"Who'd believe the word of an oathbreaker?" Ser Jaime retorted heatedly.

"His bloody brother, perhaps?" Tyrion countered irately.

"Or his sister?" Cersei spat. One of the very few moments when the two of them agree on something. How ironic they are arguing against their other sibling; the one who is usually on better terms with both of them.

"As family, people would have expected you to believe me," Jaime Lannister argued, "Your word would not have been any more credible than mine."

"I have a hard enough time believing it myself," Lothor Brune murmured.

"Everything Ser Jaime just said is true," Gregor Clegane announced, "I can attest to it."

That seemed to ease the potent feeling of disbelief that was present all around the room.
Just then, Ser Barristan Selmy got to his feet, and he declared "While I take my oath as a Kingsguard as seriously as any other man who's worn a white cloak, I cannot deny that I may very well have done the same as Ser Jaime, had I been the one left with King Aerys in his place."

He then turned to Ser Jaime and offered him his hand. The blonde knight was hesitant at first, but he ultimately took the elder knight's hand and shook it firmly.

That was quite unexpected. For the last six years, Ser Barristan the Bold had looked at his young colleague with nothing but contempt. Now, he actually seemed to look at him with a mixture of remorse and respect.

"I would have done it, too," Sandor Clegane professed, "No oath is worth the lives of half a million people."

"Quite so," Gregor coincided, "In fact, when I arrived in the Red Keep during the Sack, I considered making a detour to the throne room and killing Aerys for Jaime. But I had no way of knowing if Ser Amory would reach Princess Elia before or after that happened. So I took a moment to reflect on my options. In the end, I gave priority to rescuing the princess. Alas, that one instant of hesitation may have cost her children their lives."

"Do not blame yourself, my lord," Eddard Stark bade the Mountain, "For all you know, Princess Rhaenys and Prince Aegon might have been killed by someone other than Ser Amory."

Robert noticed Ned sneered at Lord Tywin when he said that. Both the king and his best friend where aware that the Lord of Casterly Rock had sent Ser Amory after the royal Targaryen family in the first place. Odd how Lord Gregor did not mention that Ser Amory was acting under his liege lord's orders. Then again, perhaps that is a good thing. I have no desire to incite a struggle between Lord Tywin and Prince Oberyn.

"What really matters is that my sister survived," Oberyn declared, "If she was killed, diplomatic relations between the Westerlands and Dorne would have been beyond disastrous."

"I believe that," Dacey Clegane muttered drily.

*For starters, the Hound would not be sharing a bed with Prince Oberyn's eldest daughter.*

There was a brief period of silence, and then Robert looked to his Master of Order and supposed "So, Lord Gregor; I assume these visions of yours are where you acquired your intelligence on the Ironborn's rebellion?"

"You assume rightly, Your Grace," Gregor Clegane confirmed, "In my vision, I saw the Westerlander Fleet burn at Lannisport. That is why I sent out ravens to alert the country of an invasion from the sea. Of course, it would have been suspicious if only the Westerlords received this warning. As such, I ensured that the residents of all the maritime holdfasts in Westeros took steps to fortify their defenses. By doing so, I ensured that the entire coast would be safe if the Ironborn chose to bypass Lannisport. Fortunately for us, almost all of the Westerlander vessels were saved."

"We are indebted to you for that, my lord," Tyrion Lannister proclaimed, "But we received your raven six months before the Iron Fleet attacked. You said your vision of King's Landing first came no less than a fortnight before the Sack. How do you account for the vast difference in time?"

"I cannot," the Mountain confessed, "I have no influence over when the visions come, or how often they recur. Luckily, they always seem to happen at a very opportune time."
"Your vision of Seagard and Fair Isle was definitely convenient," Robert debated, "It enabled us to win both battles, and it proved Lord Victarion's loyalty to the throne."

"I will not forget that anytime soon," the Iron Captain commented in an uncharacteristically warm tone. Ever since he had been named Lord Paramount of the Iron Islands, he had been conspicuously friendlier to the people of the mainland. People he used to call "greenlanders" in disdain.

"According to my vision, you would have won the war regardless, Your Grace," Gregor informed the king, "My actions in response to the vision just made victory more easily attainable."

"Nevertheless, I am thankful for all you did," Robert Baratheon claimed in a sincere tone, "But there is still one aspect I do not fully comprehend. Why did you wait until this moment to tell us all this?"

"I'd like to know that myself," Mace Tyrell conceded.

"As would I," Davos Seaworth muttered.

Practically every other person in the Main Hall shared a wish for some form of explanation. Luckily, Lord Gregor was able to provide one.

"Because at the time, I would have sounder madder than your predecessor, Your Grace," the Mountain professed, "Up until Greyjoy's Rebellion, the majority of my visions had only been about small, isolated incidents. The Sack of King's Landing was an exception, of course. Other than that, they were all relatively minor. There were also some where I ended up making little difference or none at all. For instance, I saw Prince Rhaegar making off with Lady Lyanna, the skirmish at the Tower of Joy, the death of Queen Rhaella at Dragonstone, the flight of Prince Viserys and Princess Daenerys across the Narrow Sea… I was either partly or wholly unable to change the outcome of all of those events."

"But you did plenty in the war with the Ironborn," Ellaria Sand perceived.

"Nonetheless, if I told you of my visions before the war, it would have sounded fantastical," Gregor pointed out, "Back then, I had no evidence to support my claims of these visions. I knew I would need some irrefutable proof before I could present you my explanation. Now, since I correctly predicted the attempted burning of the Westerlander Fleet and the assaults on Seagard and Fair Isle, I like to think that my word is sufficient evidence."

"It is more than enough evidence for me," Robert decreed.

"It may be enough for me, as well," Stannis Baratheon remarked.

That took Robert by surprise. Normally, Stannis was far more difficult to convince than his royal brother.

The Lord of Dragonstone leaned forward and said to Gregor inquisitively "My lord, when you warned me on the likelihood that my daughter would contract greyscale, was that one of your visions at work?"

"It was," Lord Gregor validated, "So long as you burn every doll that is gifted to her anonymously, she should be safe from the disease."

"And is that why you cautioned me against jousting with Prince Oberyn?" Willas Tyrell presumed.
"Hmm?" said the Red Viper, a little baffled.

"Yes," Gregor answered the heir to Highgarden, "Your horse would have fallen on your leg in the tilt. It would have been an accident, and you would have remained on good terms with the prince, but you would have been stuck with a cane for the remainder of your life."

"Then I owe you a great debt, my lord," Mace Tyrell proclaimed with a wide smile.

Oberyn Martell raised an eyebrow in amusement. Then he leaned back in his seat a bit, and he uttered inquiringly "Tell us, Gregor; have you any other visions involving the forecast of the world that you would care to share with us?"

At that, the expression across Lord Gregor's countenance seemed to darken. Then he pronounced in a rather unsettling voice "Yes. As it happens, that is my main motivation for this private gathering."

Hoster Tully cocked his head and stated "I thought your main motivation was to explain your 'source',"

"No, that is only my secondary reason," the Lord of Moat Cailin enlightened them, "The primary reason is far more noteworthy and imperative, and it is infinitely more disturbing."

*That is not a very promising transition.*

"What could be more disturbing than learning that one has inexplicably received the ability to see all the possible ordeals of the world in the future?" Eddard Stark contended.

"Learning that the world might not even have a future," Gregor Clegane ominously replied.

The atmosphere in the Main Hall quickly changed from fairly inquisitive to overwhelmingly anxious. Even the King and Lord Tywin were notably bothered by the implications of that statement.

"What are you saying, my love?" Lady Dacey asked her husband.

Lord Gregor looked to his wife and held eye contact with her for about thirty seconds. Then he reluctantly looked away and resumed his stride along the circular space between the trestle tables.

He began this next account with "Most of my visions, I only see a couple weeks or months ahead of time. However, there is one vision I have had at least once a week for the last seven years. That is far longer than I've ever had any other vision. All the same, the event it focuses on will not transpire for another decade."

Here he paused for a few seconds, and then he went on: "As you know, the country's last winter ended nearly two years ago. However, as you may have noticed, it is not officially summer yet. The Conclave has yet to dispatch the white ravens. We're having an abnormally long spring, don't you think?"

"Now that you mention it… yes," Smalljon Umber admitted. From what Robert could recall of what Ned told him of the North, the Umbers of Last Hearth lived closer to the Wall than any other family on the mainland. *If they can tell it's still spring, it must be warm indeed.*

"The seasons will change soon enough," Gregor Clegane revealed, "The next summer will be the longest in recorded history. It will last ten full years."

Allard Seaworth whistled in amazement. There were a few more mutters of surprise.
"You heard me correctly," Gregor asserted, "Due to its length, some will believe it to be the Great Summer of legend. For many people, those ten years will be the greatest of their lives. However... they could also be the last."

A very tense, very unpleasant silence encompassed the room. Mace Tyrell asked worriedly "Why? What will come after this decade-long summer?"

Gregor gazed around the room and proclaimed "It is said that a long summer is followed by an even longer winter. When was the last time a winter of ten years or more struck this country?"

"Not for eight millennia," Eddard Stark grimly responded, "When the Long Night came."

"Just so, Lord Eddard," Gregor affirmed. He stopped pacing, and he asked rhetorically "Do you see where I am headed with this?"

I'm afraid I do see. So did everyone else, given the horrified expressions that had come across their faces.

"Gregor... did you have a vision that the Long Night would return?" Lady Daliah murmured softly.

The Mountain gave a light nod of his head. "Normally, I view these visions as gifts or blessings. But this one is a curse. I have been forced to endure it hundreds of times. It always ends the same way: Westeros is buried under yards of snow, and the land becomes overrun by the Others."

No one spoke for the next five minutes. Most of them needed that much time to comprehend what they had heard. Even after that interval, some of them could not fully grasp it. Robert personally did not know what to make of it. His Master of Order – a man of unquestionable integrity and moral standing – had just told him that in less than fifteen years, the world would end. Had anyone else told him that, he would have written it off as inane ramblings. But after what he had just learned from Lord Gregor, he saw no reason to doubt him.

Robert was the first to come to terms with Lord Gregor's haunting revelation. He did not lose his composure or panic. There must be a way out of that nightmare. The king remained totally calm and queried "So... how do we avoid this?"

"That cannot be done, Your Grace," Gregor dismally expounded, "Most of the events in my other visions were avoidable in some degree. Be that as it may, no amount of intervention on my part or anyone else's can prevent the Long Night from happening."

"So, what?" Victarion said sardonically, "Are we supposed to just lie down and freeze to death?"

"I did not say that," Gregor Clegane serenely refuted, "The Long Night will come; make no mistake of that. But there is much that can be done to prepare the country for its arrival. Still, I am only one man. There is only so much I can do, even if I command thousands of proficient warriors. That is why I brought you all together."

"To alert us?" Davos Seaworth assumed.

"To plead for your help," Gregor Clegane clarified. "Together, the thirty people in this room possess more influence than everyone else in the Seven Kingdoms combined. The other houses and the smallfolk need to know what is coming, and we need to guarantee their full cooperation in the measures we take to prepare for it. The only way we can ensure that is if we deliver the news together."

"He's right," Ellyn Clegane observed, "If just one of the Lords Paramount – or even the King –
announced that the Long Night was quickly approaching, he would be laughed at and ridiculed. But if all the Lords Paramount, the King, and the commander of the Legion without Banners made that announcement, people would be far more willing to listen and believe."

Robert could understand that logic. *Strength in numbers is not limited to brute force.*

"It will be no easy task to persuade the residents of the Seven Kingdoms to come together fully," Stannis Baratheon observed.

"Indeed," Hoster Tully concurred, "We will be asking former enemies to become allies."

"Their only other option is to die alone," Gregor firmly contended, "Whatever our past grievances, they are trivial compared to the hardship that awaits us."

"But even if the whole of Westeros is united, how can we ensure the survival of its occupants?" Ellaria Sand enquired.

In response, the Mountain smirked and stated "I'm glad you asked that. I've had plenty of time to review my vision of the Long Night. I have analyzed it from every angle, and you'll be pleased to know that it is very much possible for us to overcome it. I have a plan."

_He always does._ The King smiled, folded his arms again, and said to the tallest man there "Very well, Lord Gregor. Proceed to tell us of your plan. We are all listening."

In that, he spoke for every person there. Although it was considerably later than it had been when the meeting began, Gregor Clegane still had everyone's undivided attention. However, he notified them that this meeting would likely go on for several more hours. While no one offered a word of complaint, they were hoping they would be able to leave before dawn. Gregor assured them he would do his best to have the meeting wrapped up by midnight, but he made no promises.

_It's going to be a long night. But at least we'll be using it to prevent a different type of long night._

The first item of business was relatively small in scale. Lord Gregor proposed that Jaime Lannister be released from the Kingsguard. No one could have anticipated that, least of all the Kingslayer. Even after he stained his sword with Aerys Targaryen's blood, Ser Jaime had shown no eagerness in hanging up his white cloak. The king had offered him a pardon from his duties, but the blonde knight had adamantly refused. Much to Lord Tywin's despair, Robert Baratheon had accepted his choice.

Gregor would not give up so easily. He seemed determined to persuade Jaime to resign from the Kingsguard and reassume his birthright as the heir to Casterly Rock.

Having seen the Kingslayer in combat, the Mountain contended that Ser Jaime had to be among the top ten greatest swordsmen in the country. *Maybe even top five.* As such, it made no sense to waste in his skills in the mundane role of a bodyguard. Lord Gregor also pointed out that with the realm at peace, the king was as safe as he would ever be. There was also the matter of how unpopular Jaime had become in King's Landing since he rid them of the Mad King. With all that in mind, there was absolutely no reason why Jaime could not be honorably discharged from the Kingsguard.

Tyrion Lannister and his intended Ellyn Clegane did not protest this suggestion. As a matter of fact, they seemed to be in favor of it. Lord Tyrion seemed to enjoy the pleasures of being a second son; he liked to think he had been spared the burdens of the heir. He and Lady Ellyn actually cared little for the positions of Lord and Lady of Casterly Rock, and the Imp argued that Jaime would be far better suited to the role of Lord Paramount of the Westerlands. *Ser Jaime would certainly have
an easier time of gaining the respect and allegiance of the Rock's vassals. Even so, it's debatable as to whether he or Tyrion would be the better ruler. From what I hear, the Imp's the one with all the wits.

Despite his younger brother and future sister-by-law's words of assurance and encouragement, Ser Jaime Lannister had no intention of stepping down from the Kingsguard. Then Cersei and Lord Tywin joined in the attempts to dissuade him. She claimed she had no more need for her brother to protect her; he claimed he had every need for his firstborn son to be close-by. Quite a rarity; Lord Tywin, Cersei, and Tyrion all agreeing on one thing. But even then, Jaime declined.

Over a half-hour passed before Ser Jaime finally gave in. It was Ser Barristan Selmy who persuaded him to see reason. He argued that although Jaime had tainted his cloak with the slaying of King Aerys, he had cleansed himself of that taint with his years of loyal service to Robert. At the same time, he had redeemed himself for acting out of the best interests of the populace of King's Landing.

It was then that Jaime finally agreed, albeit reluctantly, to resign from the Kingsguard. Right then and there, he stood up and removed his white cloak. He was not so imprudent as to carelessly deposit it onto the ground. Instead, he folded it up neatly and set it on the trestle table before him.

Replacing him will not be easy. But I need to find another knight to fill the new vacancy. Maybe Ser Malcolm Branfield. His sister's husband is of the North. Then again, his family was loyal to Aerys. Oh, well; I'll worry on that later.

Lord Tywin was pleased by his son's decision. He actually thanked Lord Gregor and Ser Barristan for convincing Jaime to shed his white cloak. That in itself was an astonishing sight. Lord Tywin never thanked anyone for anything.

The next topic of discussion pertained heavily to the Wall. In recent history, the Night's Watch's numbers had dwindled to an all-time low, and over half of the current black brothers had been criminals before.

In Lord Gregor's mind, this degradation was unacceptable. He pointed out that the Wall was the Seven Kingdom's primary line of defense from the Others. If it fell, the rest of the country would, too. That said, Gregor Clegane argued that steps be taken to reinforce the Wall in every way possible.

To begin with, it would need more men. By that, he was not referring to the occupants of the country's dungeons. He debated that the Wall would require good men. Learned men. Honorable men. Men trained extensively in the art of war. Most of all, it needed men who would join willingly, not men who merely chose it as an alternative to chastisement.

In order to encourage people to enlist, Gregor suggested that incentives be offered. Ideally, whenever a man voluntarily took the black, his family would be given enough food and coin to last them for a year. If they had relied on the volunteer heavily for everyday life, that would be enough time for them to learn to care for themselves.

King Robert and the Lords Paramount all greatly approved of this tactic. I'll draw up that decree as soon as we get back to King's Landing. He claimed as much to the others in the Main Hall.

Of course, no matter how many men joined the Night's Watch, their numbers would amount to little and less if they did not have the appropriate means to defend the Wall. Fortunately, Gregor Clegane was able to give them assurances that such means were well within their reach.
There was a well-known expression: in time of war, one must fight fire with fire. Lord Gregor claimed it would apply here, but instead, they would be fighting ice with fire. According to his visions, there were only three known materials that could successfully obliterate the Others and the White Walkers.

The chief of these materials was fire. The only approach that could permanently dispel the wights was by burning them. Lord Gregor felt he could not emphasize that strongly enough.

The other two materials were substances that been designed from fire. They were obsidian and Valyrian steel. Obsidian was said to be solidified fire, and Valyrian steel was described as fire-made-metal.

Obsidian was also known as dragonglass, which could be found in abundance on Dragonstone. Lord Gregor bade Lord Stannis to authorize the mining of obsidian on the Targaryen island stronghold and the transportation of it to the Wall. Robert was relieved that his brother was quick to accept the Mountain's proposal. *Weapons made of dragonglass could prove invaluable against all manner of foes, not just the White Walkers.*

Valyrian steel was a little harder to acquire. More than a little, actually. Be that as it may, it was still attainable. Gregor and Sandor Clegane had come into the possession of scores of Valyrian steel daggers when they seized the Silence from Euron Greyjoy. They had also found House Lannister's ancestral blade amongst the vast horde of treasure. The sword had been returned to its rightful owner.

It had been Ellyn Clegane who gave the sword to her intended Tyrion Lannister just before the melee began. The Imp had gone to his father immediately after the melee and given the weapon to him.

Robert had been present at that occasion. He would never forget the expression on Lord Tywin's face when he is dwarf son presented him with Brightroar. He doubted anyone had ever seen the lion lord look so happy. He had actually dared to smile. Lady Ellyn had arrived on the scene a moment later, and Tywin had given her a very appreciative kiss on the cheek. He commended both her and his son for their actions. He was even more pleased when they informed him that they had agreed to the betrothal he had suggested for them.

Although Brightroar was back at Casterly Rock, all the other Valyrian steel blades found on board the Silence were still being held by the Cleganes. Lord Gregor revealed that they had sought out the services of one Tobho Mott to have several of the daggers reforged into four new blades. The first had been the spearhead on Obara Martell's javelin, which she had named Swift Thrust.

*I'll bet my thrust is swifter. Heh heh.*

The other three blades were a longsword for Lady Dacey, a bastard sword for Ser Sandor, and a greatsword for Lord Gregor. The three of them had brought these blades to the gathering; they took the opportunity to show them to the other attendees.

Ser Sandor had named his bastard sword Hound's Fang, and Lady Dacey had named her longsword Beastrwraith. His had the head of a large dog on its pommel; hers was fit with one of a fierce bear. Both of them were as deadly as their owners.

The biggest attraction of all was Lord Gregor's greatsword. He had named it Summit. He drew it from the scabbard on his back so that everyone could get a closer look at it. It was larger than even Ice, but its owner could balance it in one hand effortlessly. The pommel of its hilt bore the likeness of a mountain's peak. The hilt was so sharp that it could be used to stab an adversary just as well as
Gregor revealed that they still had a few dozen Valyrian steel daggers left over. One of them, Lady Ellyn had taken for herself. Her brothers did not intend to hold on to the rest for too much longer. Gregor recommended that they make a gift of the daggers to any high lords who desired one. While the Night's Watch would have weapons of obsidian, the Valyrian steel would be reserved for the citizens of the Seven Kingdoms. If only they made warhammers of Valyrian steel. Then again, I suppose a dagger would do just fine. With that arrangement, everyone would have a probable chance to fend off the Others.

While they were on the subject of how fire and weapons based on it were the White Walkers' greatest weakness, Lord Hoster Tully proposed that Lord Gregor consider manufacturing more of his black powder. Of the eleven hundred pouches the Mountain had supplied to the Royal Army, slightly less than two hundred remained unused by the end of Greyjoy's Rebellion. All of them were back in his possession, and he still intended to lock them away, but he was open to considering the manufacture of more, as long as they were only used against the White Walkers.

After this, they moved on to the next issue of precedence. This time, Gregor mentioned that there may not have been enough people in the Seven Kingdoms to stand against the Night King's massive undead army. He declared that they would need to build up their own forces. Initially, Robert had assumed Lord Gregor was suggesting that they seek out one of the free companies of Essos, such as the Golden Company or the Second Sons. I always wanted to see one of those sellsword armies in person.

While Gregor admitted that that was not a foolish idea, he claimed he was looking a little closer to home for reinforcements. Neither the king nor anyone else understood his meaning at first. Then he made this point: "Are the people of Westeros limited to the citizens of the Seven Kingdoms?"

Eddard Stark and Jorah Mormont were the first to realize what he was implying, and they were quick to apprise the others. They stated that Lord Gregor was advising them to make an alliance with the wildlings who lived north of the Wall. The Mountain did not deny that accusation; he fully admitted its truth.

That part of the conversation took well over an hour to resolve. Nearly every person there was against that concept. For as long as the history books could tell, the wildlings and the people of the Seven Kingdoms had never been at peace. They had invaded each other's territory at every opportunity. Although the wildlings rarely made it past the Neck, the Northmen were not the only ones who detested them. The other residents of the Seven Kingdoms despised them greatly. Even the Ironborn held little love for them.

Lord Gregor claimed he understood why they were reluctant to even consider the possibility of an alliance with the wildlings. Even so, he argued that it was safer than remaining adversaries with them. For every person who died north of the Wall, the Others would have one more body to make a wight out of. Aside from that, the Mountain informed everyone that the wildlings would one day attempt to come south of the Wall anyway. That had been part of his vision. In the autumn before the Long Night, Mance Rayder would amass an army of one hundred thousand of his people and send them charging towards Castle Black all at once. Gregor was hoping desperately to avoid that.

I cannot blame him. We'll already have plenty of undead enemies to worry about. We don't need any live ones making things worse.

Lord Gregor claimed that he had seen how the wildlings lived. Normally, the tribes did not coexist with each other peacefully. Then again, for the longest time, neither did the Seven Kingdoms. Since Mance Rayder would somehow manage to establish a peace – be it a tentative peace –
between his own people, there was no reason to think the Seven Kingdoms and the Free Folk could not reach some type of compromise with each other.

The Mountain pointed out that the main reason the wildlings disliked the Seven Kingdoms was because they looked down on "kneelers." That was why they called themselves the Free Folk; no one ruled over them. In spite of that, Gregor debated that the wildlings could be persuaded to keep peace without bending the knee.

Gregor was willing to take full responsibility of any wildlings that were brought south of the Wall. He would ensure that they did not harass the people of the Seven Kingdoms or vice versa. Perhaps in time, they would even come to coexist with each other. Although Gregor could not ascertain that they would answer a call to arms, he was absolutely confident that when the time came, they would be more than willing to join the fight against the Others.

Lord Gregor was quite persuasive. By the end of the hour, he had convinced most of the twenty-nine other people in the Main Hall that the idea of a coalition with the wildlings was worth pursuing. The King and Lord Eddard gave the Mountain authorization to open negotiations with the wildlings. But they would not allow them to settle south of the Wall until he could guarantee their cooperation.

Gregor Clegane assured them that within the next couple years, he would be dealing with Mance Rayder directly. *He'll have to find him first, and that is no easy task. If the man is caught south of the Wall, he is likely to be beheaded for a deserter.*

Robert was relieved when they were able to agree on the matter of the wildlings. He doubted anything else discussed at this gathering would be more difficult or controversial.

Then Lord Gregor made his next proposal. This one involved making peace with someone even more unexpected and unpredictable than the Free Folk: the Targaryens.

Unsurprisingly, that suggestion was very unpopular with practically every person in the room. Particularly the king. He had never forgotten what Rhaegar had done to his beloved Lyanna, what Aerys had done to Rickard and Brandon Stark. It had been six years, and he still hated the Targaryens as much as ever. He would never allow them to set foot on the country ever again. That was what he told himself, at any rate. He had believed that at the beginning of his reign. But now his conviction was beginning to lessen.

He had mourned Lyanna Stark when he learned of her death. He could have drowned his sorrows in wine. But that was not what she would have wanted. She wanted him to move on, and he had. Robert had found happiness in his marriage to Cersei Lannister. She was a caring wife; she had given him a strong son. She was everything he could have hoped for and more. At times, he went full months without even thinking of Lyanna Stark.

There was also the matter of the throne itself. Robert had never asked for it. He had never wanted it. He would have been content to have remained the Lord of Storm's End and the Lord Paramount of the Stormlands. Actually, he would have been content with even less than that. If he could, he would have given Stannis the lordship of Storm's End and travelled across the Narrow Sea to join one of the free companies.

At times, he still entertained the idea of doing that when his son was old enough to succeed him. But he knew it would have been grossly irresponsible of him. Aside from that, he was already doing a fine job of ruling the Seven Kingdoms. It was unenviable work, but someone had to do it. The smallfolk and the highborn alike had faith in him. As long as they believed in him, he could
not and would not stand down. *Not unless someone better qualified and more deserving of the crown was to come along.*

That bade the question; would Robert allow the dragons to return to Westeros and reclaim the Seven Kingdoms? He would never allow them to take back the throne, but under the right circumstances… he may welcome them back.

Robert was not the same man who had looked upon the mutilated bodies of Princess Rhaenys and Prince Aegon and called them "dragonspawn." That man had indiscriminately hated all Targaryens. But the man who now sat the Iron Throne was a different Robert. This one would never sanction the murder of innocent children, even if their parents were anything but.

Robert had developed that ideal that even before Lord Gregor suggested bringing the Targaryens back to Westeros. The Mountain was able to provide a number of legitimate reasons as to why this course of action was worth considering.

Firstly, he debated that if it was known that Robert and the Targaryens were cooperating, the Targaryen sympathizers would sympathize with him, as well. That would severely reduce the possibility of another insurrection. Furthermore, it was the Targaryens who had brought the Seven Kingdoms together in the first place. Despite the fact Aegon the Conqueror had done so by force, Gregor contended that there were some Targaryens that were capable of innovative thought. According to his visions, Viserys was likely as mad as his father, but Daenerys could be reasoned with.

Lord Tywin pointed out that even if they somehow managed to make peace with the Tagaryens, certain Targaryen loyalists could still attempt to put Viserys or Daenerys on the throne. In response to that, Lord Gregor bade the lion lord to tell him who would ever follow a ruler who was put in power against his or her will. Such a ruler would be a figurehead leader and nothing more. Those types never lasted long, and neither did the people who manipulated him into doing their bidding. *He's got a great point there.*

In the end, Robert agreed to consider bringing Prince Viserys and Princess Daenerys back to Westeros. Years back, he had sent out hired knives to put an end to them. When he returned to King's Landing, he would give those pursuers new orders. Rather than having them kill the Targaryens, they would be instructed to either capture them alive or approach them peaceably. Lord Gregor found that acceptable.

Lord Gregor also mentioned that when the Long Night happened, the Targaryens would likely have one other advantage than no one else in the Known World possessed. However, he did not specify as to what that advantage was. Robert and a few of the others in the room would have liked to have known, but the Mountain claimed the Targaryens did not even have this advantage currently, and there was a slight chance that they might not even have it when they were supposed to. For those reasons (among others), he did not wish to feed the king or anyone else with false hope before he could confirm that his interference had not impacted the Targaryens’ advantage. *Whatever this "advantage" is, it must be absolutely incredible. I mean, if it can actually help us gain the upper hand in the fight against the Others…*

Shortly before midnight, the gathering finally ended. Gregor thanked everyone for their time, and he asked that they remember everything that was discussed. Their actions from this day onward would determine how prepared Westeros would be when the next winter occurred. *Let the Others come. I'll show the Night's King there is only room for one king in Westeros.*

At the conclusion of the meeting, Lord Gregor asked his brother and the king to linger for a moment. Everyone else left the Main Hall. Ser Barristan and Queen Cersei stood outside the door
and waited for Robert. Now that he had been released from his vows, Ser Jaime was not required to remain behind. Instead, he left the keep with his father, uncle, and brother.

When Robert was alone with the two Clegane brothers, he asked the elder of them "What do you need, my lord?"

"I just wish to give you a word of caution, Your Grace," the Mountain disclosed, "There is something you must know about these visions of mine. Something very unsettling. I thought it best not to share it with anyone other you two."

"The King, I can understand," Sandor Clegane remarked, "But why do you want me to know? It can't be because I'm your sibling. If it was, you would have had Ellyn stay behind, too."

"Because this concerns you directly," Gregor revealed. After a pause, he looked between Robert and his brother, and he went on with "From my visions, I have managed to impose many positive changes throughout Westeros. But in spite of how many changes I have made, I believe there are certain things that cannot be fully prevented. Some things are predestined to happen."

That caught Robert's interest, as well as Sandor's. The latter asked "How do you mean?"

Gregor apprehensively revealed "I had this one certain vision when I was in my eleventh year. In it, your face was burned. Horribly burned to the point where half of it was damaged beyond recognition."

The Hound stared at his brother in shock. Slowly, very slowly, he reached his hand up to the right side of his head. He placed his fingers against his burned cheek and let it rest there for a moment.

"I was able to prevent the initial incident that was supposed to give you that scar," Gregor pronounced, "But, much to our misfortune, it appears you were meant to acquire it in any case. And if that is the case… there is no telling what else fate will deny us the chance to change."

_Different setting; same results. That's an alarming notion._ "Have there been any incidents of a similar nature?"

"Not so far," Gregor reassured him, "But we need to be on full alert. Fate could strike back at any moment. It already took its toll on my brother. There is no telling who else it could turn against."

Robert nodded his head and "I appreciate your telling me this, my lord."

"It is no bother, Your Grace," the Mountain proclaimed, "I simply did not wish to give you too much hope in my ability to affect change from my visions. I can change many things, but not everything."

"I suppose that is for the best," Robert Baratheon murmured, "No man should have that much power."

"Which is why I chose to share it," Gregor Clegane revealed, "It is only just that you knew the full scope of my capabilities."

"Then you have performed superbly as Master of Order," the stag king debated with a smile.

Gregor Clegane smiled, as well. Sandor Clegane did not.

The Hound was standing still and openmouthed with his fingers pressed against his blackened cheek. He appeared to be in some form of trance.
"Ser Sandor?" the king said in concern. At that, the Mountain turned his attention to his brother.

He placed his hand on his shoulder and queried "What's wrong?"

The younger Clegane son gradually removed his hand from his face and looked up at his brother. He murmured softly "In that other life, how did I get burned? Was it an accident?"

Gregor did not answer right away. Then he gazed at the wall and muttered "No, it wasn't. But it was not the Crow's Eye who did it."

"I gathered as much," Sandor remarked, "If you were eleven, I was only six. I assume someone else did this?"

"Correct," Gregor affirmed.

"Well, who was it?" Sandor inquired, "Who burned me then?"

I'd like to know that myself.

King Robert and the Hound looked to the Mountain for a reply. He hesitated at first. Then he stared blankly at the wall. Finally, he let out a deep sigh, turned to face his king and brother, and disclosed "I did."

To say Robert and Ser Sandor were stunned would have been an understatement. They were flat-out speechless.

"What?" Sandor Clegane murmured quietly.

Gregor had to look down to make eye contact with anyone. But now, he was looking down at his feet. He gloomily pronounced "There is one thing all my visions had in common. In all of them, I was a much different person. Seven Hells, I was a monster. I had no principles, no ethics, and no morals whatsoever. I would have been responsible for the deaths of countless innocents, including Father, Mother, and Ellyn."

"Why would the gods possibly show you that?" Robert asked, baffled.

"I do not know," Gregor claimed, "Perhaps it was a warning. They may have been telling me that if I became the man in those visions, I would cause suffering on an immense scale. But I promise you; I would sooner die than become that man."

Robert reflected on that for a minute, and then he declared "I believe you, Lord Gregor."

Gregor Clegane grinned and dipped his head. "Thank you for continuing to have such confidence in me, Your Grace."

"After all you have done, I would be a fool not to," Robert Baratheon debated.

The Mountain was obviously pleased to hear that.

The Hound remained silent. He did not seem to share the King's conviction.

At that, Gregor looked his brother in the eye and remarked "Sandor, on the day I was supposed to burn your face, I did not. I defied the will of the gods so that I could be the brother you deserve. I told you I would be there for you. I meant it then and I mean it now. But I need to know now; will you be there for me?"
Sandor Clegane scowled momentarily, and then he scoffed and said "Do you even need to ask? Of course I will. Even if you were a total cunt in another life, you're the greatest brother one could ever hope for in this life, Gregor."

*Certainly better than the ones I have. Then again… the fault may rest with me, not with Stannis or Renly.*

The Mountain smiled and clapped the Hound on the back amiably. In response, Sandor grinned too and patted Gregor on the arm lightly.

Seeing the way the two Clegane brothers interacted with each other impressed Robert. He lamented on how poor his relationships with his own brothers were. *Perhaps I could mend things with Stannis and make some more time for Renly.*

"The gods may have intended for you to be mortal enemies," Robert contended, "But you are not, despite their greatest attempts. So for that, I say fuck them."

"Aye; fuck them, Your Grace," Gregor Clegane coincided.

"Fuck them very much," Sandor added in.

The three men got a good long laugh at that. *It's always nice when men are not afraid to swear in front of their king.*
Steady Preparations

Chapter Notes

Note: Well, here's the first of the two time-skips. Be warned; this chapter has some inconsistent pacing. Sometimes it discusses certain events in great detail, and sometimes it jumps between events constantly. In any case, I hope this update provides sufficient clarity on what all happens during the Great Summer in this universe, particularly in how Gregor helps prepare for the Long Night.

The very next day, the king and the leaders of the Royal Army rose early to break their fast and strike their tents at first light. The Stormlords were the first to leave. The Reachmen and the Riverlords followed soon after. The Westerlords took their time, as they had less distance to travel. The last to depart were the Northmen, and the Sun was still not halfway over the eastern horizon when they vanished from sight of Casterly Rock. All those present who belonged to the Legion without Banners went with them.

After bidding his family a fond farewell, Lord Gregor Clegane and the Legionnaires began the long march north. On the way, they had to call upon the Lord of the Crossing for the use of his bridge again.

As Gregor had predicted, the majority of House Frey (including the Late Lord himself) held no ill will towards House Clegane for Ser Ryman's death. It had been an accident (or so Gregor had them believe), and the Mountain's "atonement" of one hundred golden dragons seemed to please Lord Walder more than his eldest grandson ever did.

Just as they did when they first came south, the Legionnaires and the Northmen had endure Lord Walder's "hospitality" for another night. In the early morning, they resumed their heading. This time, a number of the residents of the Twins accompanied them. This group was led by Ser Stevron Frey, and among its members were his grandson Edwyn and his half-brothers Danwell, Jammos, and Perwyn. They went to Gregor and informed him of their desire to join his forces.

Despite being the largest house in the realm, so far no Frey had entered the Legion without Banners. Part of Gregor still wanted the entire family to perish in misery, but he was not of a mind to deprive himself of potential allies. Plus, if he refused them, Lord Walder would most certainly have taken it as a slight. Aside from that, Gregor believed that some of the Freys had to be honorable, despite the horrid atrocities they had committed in another life.

A full turn of the moon elapsed between the moments when Lord Eddard Stark, Lord Gregor Clegane, and their companies left Lannisport and when they arrived back at Moat Cailin. Once they got there, the Northmen continued onward, but the Legionnaires regrouped with their colleagues.

Brynden Tully had managed the Legion's reserve forces well in the Mountain's absence. The damage inflicted by the small insurrection by the Ironborn Legionnaires had been minimal, thankfully. In fact, most of the Ironborn stationed at the moat had stayed loyal to the Legion. Only about a quarter of them had rebelled, and most of those had been put to the sword. The rest were locked in the dungeons, awaiting Lord Gregor's judgement.
After order had been restored, Ser Brynden proposed that the remaining three-quarters of the Ironborn Legionnaires be confined to their quarters. That was done for everyone's safety (including their own). Nearly all of the Ironborn voluntarily consented to that idea, and they kept to their rooms for the following months. When word of Lord Balon's surrender reached the moat, the Blackfish allowed them freedom of the moat again.

Once Lord Gregor's forces settled down at Moat Cailin, he assembled his secret council in their meeting chambers again. He permitted Lothor Brune and Willas Tyrell a few minutes to get acquainted with Brynden Tully and Lyn Corbray, and vice versa. After that, they started to discuss business.

Gregor apprised Ser Brynden and Ser Lyn of the gathering in the Main Hall of Clegane's Keep, as well as everything that had been covered there at length. Naturally, the Riverlord and the Valeman were just as shocked and perplexed as everyone else had been when they were informed of the terrifying crisis that would touch Westeros in little more than a decade. But they were not afraid. They were two of the most fearless men Gregor knew. They were confident that they would survive the Long Night, especially since Gregor and the king were already taking measures to overcome it.

When the meeting ended, Gregor retreated to his solar at the top of the Lord's Tower. Dacey was playing with Rickard in their quarters, so the Mountain had some time to himself. He sat at his desk and made notes on a large piece of parchment. On the left side, he wrote a list of the things that had incited the most turmoil in the Known World during the original franchise. On the right side, he wrote a list of the things he had done to avoid or alter each of them in this universe.

Unsurprisingly, many of his bullet points pertained to the War of the Five Kings.

Mainly, there was the legitimacy of Queen Cersei's children. That issue had been handled. King Robert's firstborn son, Crown Prince Jasper Baratheon, was black of hair and blue-eyed. So long as Cersei's children had that feature, Gregor could rest assured that Robert's seed went into making them. With Jaime now gone from King's Landing and away from his sister, that was all but ascertained.

Therefore, neither Stannis nor Renly would make a claim for the throne, and in the unlikely event they still did, Eddard would definitely not support either of them. Hence, there would be no need for Robb to call his bannermen or for them to declare him their king.

Lord Jon Arryn's line was now secure, as well. Gregor had guaranteed that when he arranged the death of Petyr Baelish. Not only would Littlefinger not coerce Lysa Arryn into poisoning her husband, but she was also able to provide him with more heirs.

In his first life, when he was but a fan of the series, Gregor had wondered if Sweetrobin was actually Littlefinger's bastard son. After all, Lord Jon made seven attempts at siring a child on Lady Lysa, and the only one she could produce was a halfwit weakling? Very unusual for two of the strongest lines in the Seven Kingdoms, especially since Robin looked little like either of them.

Furthermore, Gregor had believed that Petyr Baelish may have been directly responsible for Lysa's miscarriages and stillbirths in the original series. Granted, he was not entirely certain how Baelish could have pulled that off. He had been in the Vale during her early losses, and she had been in King's Landing with her husband. Of course, that did not entail that he could not communicate with her through raven or rider. Perhaps he had written to her, and his letters had instructed her to terminate Lord Jon's unborn children, ideally by tripping and falling on her abdomen or by taking moon tea in secret. After all, as unstable as Lysa was in the books and show, there was no other valid explanation as to why she was incapable of having more than one child. The fact that she was
able to birth one at all proved she was not infertile.

Now that Lysa had successfully birthed a daughter, Gregor was convinced of the merit of his theory regarding Littlefinger's influence on her. In addition to that, Gregor was certain Lysa's daughter was indeed Lord Jon's; he had seen her at the tourney of Lannisport. Lady Alyssa Arryn had her mother's face, but she also had the hair and build of her father.

If Lysa could produce one child in this new timeline, she could certainly birth another.

Since Robert now had a trueborn heir of his own, the War of the Five Kings would at most be the War of the Two Kings. But Gregor had resolve that dilemma during Grejoy's rebellion, when he persuaded the king to send Balon Greyjoy to the Wall.

On that note, Gregor wondered if Balon would end up at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. If so, it would have been both poetic and amusingly ironic, as Eastwatch was under command of Cotter Pyke. Gregor could not help but snicker at the thought of the former Lord Paramount of the Iron Islands serving under a bastard from the Islands.

In any case, Balon had no means of rising up against the crown again. Additionally, his brother Euron had been killed, his brother Aeron was being held prisoner in Casterly Rock, and his sons had been taken as wards of the throne. Apart from his brother Victarion, the only other member of House Greyjoy who had total freedom of the land was his daughter Asha, and Gregor was not concerned that she would be a problem. It was unlikely that all the Ironmen would willingly follow a woman into battle.

What truly mattered was that the lordship of Pyke had been granted to Victarion Greyjoy, and the Iron Captain supported the concept of a unified Westeros. Gregor could count on him to keep the peace between the Iron Islands and the mainland. He would not be so rash as to declare himself king of the Islands or anything else.

Of course, the whole war truly came about as a result of Robert Baratheon's death. He was destined to die hunting a boar, but Gregor had even managed to avert that disaster.

In his youth, Robert Baratheon had been a man of indulgence. He loved to eat, drink, and whore greatly. When he had been a young lord with no immediate responsibility, such behavior was deemed acceptable. As king, he was expected to show some restraint. Alas, in the original universe, he did not even know the meaning of the word.

Whereas in this one, he evidently did. After hearing that fake speech about Lyanna's dying wish, the king had changed. Very much for the better. While he had already been strong in body, he became strong in mind and will overtime, too.

He drank sparingly. Rarely was he ever drunk anymore, and whenever he was, it was only in the late evening, when he had turned in for the night. He may have gained half a stone or even a full one since he took the throne, but he compensated for that by keeping active in the training yard. So while he was a little fatter, he was by no means lazy. Gregor had confirmed that himself during the tourney at Lannisport.

The issue of his many bastards had also been remedied. According to the reports from Lord Varys, the king occasionally flirted with the maids and the serving girls of the Red Keep. He even snuck in a mild grope every now and then. Be that as it may, the only woman whose bed he had shared was his wife. In spite of his devious nature, he had remained faithful to Cersei Lannister.

As far as Gregor knew, the only bastard Robert currently had was Mya Stone, and she had been
conceived whilst her father was being fostered by Lord Jon Arryn. She had never set foot in King's Landing. She had never been outside the Vale. As long as she remained at the Eyrie, Cersei was pleased.

Robert had been very careful with the royal treasury as well. He did not throw tourneys at every opportunity. Nor did he waste money on selfish or aimless pursuits. He was very mindful with how the crown's finances were spent. In fact, it had managed to grow in wealth since the days of Aerys.

Most of all, Robert genuinely cared for the people of Westeros. He was far worthier of their love and adoration than his predecessor had ever been. Even Gregor was beginning to believe that the stag was what was best for the country, not the Targaryens.

But Gregor had never been one to make premature conclusions hastily. In both his lives, he would evaluate a scenario from every possible angle before reaching a verdict. In this instance, he had come to believe that the Baratheons and the Targaryens were equally qualified to rule the Seven Kingdoms. Nonetheless, only one house could be the country's ruling family, but he could not officially decide which for at least another ten years.

These were just a few of the many notes Gregor made. When he finished his list, he reviewed it thoroughly, and he made a gratifying discovery. It appeared as though he had successfully evaded all the events that were primarily responsible for bringing about the War of the Five Kings.

That was good. Extremely good, actually. With the looming threat of the Long Night, the Westerosi could not afford to waste any time fighting amongst themselves. The War of the Five Kings was ultimately resolved, but the outcome was totally and utterly undesirable. In fact, when the last book ended, Gregor honestly did not think there was anything left in the Seven Kingdoms that was actually worth saving from the Others.

Boltons in control of the North, Freys in control of the Riverlands, an unscrupulous murderer in control of the Vale, the Stormlands vacant of a liege lord, the Crownlands ruled by a female Aerys, the Iron Islands ruled by a one-eyed Aerys, the Westerlands still relatively untouched, the Reach occupied by selfish, power-hungry egomaniacs, Dorne occupied by backstabbing bastards… Gregor would almost have preferred to see all of Westeros obliterated than to have it ruled by the likes of such disreputable people.

The only thing that prevented him from actually believing that was the small amount of lingering hope that the Starks and the Targaryens would rise up and set the country to rights. In the show, they had at least begun to do that. But he did not know what happened after Jon was hailed as the king of the North and Daenerys finally set sail across the Narrow Sea.

Even though Westeros was finally united in this universe, Gregor knew it was still far from safe. The Long Night would be far more dangerous than any character could ever hope to be.

Gregor wished he could have lived long enough in his previous life to find out how the series ended. He was certain the Citadel would be involved somehow, otherwise Samwell's entire arc was pointless. As such, he thought about contacting the Conclave and addressing this matter directly. He hoped they would be willing to cooperate with him.

If they were not, then so be it, Gregor decided. He and everyone else in the realm would face the harshness of the Long Night through other means.

On the back of that same piece of parchment, Gregor made a list of predicaments that would crop up before or during the Long Night, along with a list of potential solutions to lessen or solve them. Again, he was extremely meticulous. Not wanting to overlook anything, he went over the entire
sequence of events that led up to the Long Night, and he contemplated on all the possible ways he could intervene.

Once his list was complete, Gregor committed it to memory. Then he picked it up, walked over to the hearth, and placed it atop the burning logs. He eyed the parchment as it caught fire along the edges. Soon, the flames engulfed it, and before very long, it was reduced to a small pile of ash.

It would not do if anyone else found that parchment and learnt of the Westeros that could have been. Especially since that was the Westeros that would have been.

A couple weeks later, the white raven finally arrived, signaling the end of spring and the start of summer. That was when Gregor set into motion his plans to prepare Westeros for the Long Night.

He started by writing a letter to the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, who happened to be his wife's uncle. In the letter, he addressed two topics.

The first was the promise that the Watch could soon expect a number of new recruits, many of them willing volunteers. Hopefully, more than a few of them would be decent swordsmen, as well. Doubtlessly that would be met with much appreciation; it was practically common knowledge that the Wall was desperately undermanned.

The second related to a certain aspect of black brothers' oath, specifically how they were sworn to protect and guard the realms of men, and how the Free Folk – or wildlings, as they were called – happened to be a realm of men. They simply resided on the wrong side of the Wall. Gregor used that as the basis of his argument that an alliance should be made between the people of the Seven Kingdoms and those who lived north of them.

He did not include many details about the alliance or how it would be formed. Truthfully, Gregor himself was not entirely certain how it would be formed, or if it actually could be. He did not mention that, obviously. As it happened, the full extent of what Gregor wished to tell Lord Jeor could not fit on a single piece of paper. Essentially, all he said was that Lord Eddard and King Robert had given him the authority to open up negotiations with Mance Rayder. He also wished to meet with Lord Jeor in person to discuss the matter in greater detail. Lastly, he asked them to attempt to capture a wildling alive, and that their meeting wait until after they had done so. Once the letter was composed, he sent it out by raven.

Gregor had known from the start that it would be difficult – practically impossible, even – to convince the Night's Watch to make peace with Free Folk. But he had to try all the same. If he did not, it would mean another war. This war was even less desirable than the War of the Five Kings, seeing as every casualty of it would become another soldier of the Night King's army.

Less than a week later, a raven flew in from Castle Black. It carried Lord Jeor's response.

As Gregor suspected, the Lord Commander was very skeptical at the idea of forging an alliance with the Free Folk. Fortunately, he was not totally averse to it. It happened that he thought the way Gregor did: why have as an enemy one who could be an ally instead?

The Old Bear agreed to meet with Gregor face-to-face, and he would have a wildling prisoner beforehand. In his letter, he revealed that he had been planning to send a party of rangers north of the Wall to deal with a small host of wildling raiders. Initially, their mission had been to exterminate the raiders. However, at Lord Gregor's behest, they now had orders to capture at least one of the wildlings alive. As soon as the rangers returned, their Lord Commander would write Gregor again.
Surely enough, a fortnight passed, and then Gregor received another raven from the Wall. The Lord Commander apprised him that the rangers had managed to take five of the eight raiders alive. Right then, they were all being held in the ice cells at Castle Black. They could not hold the wildlings indefinitely, and Lord Jeor's duty to the Watch inhibited from going south. Therefore, the Old Bear bade the Mountain to come north as soon as possible.

Gregor did just that. Immediately after reading that missive, he assembled a group of Legionnaires at the stables. Within the hour, they left through the northern gates on horseback. Naturally, Gregor's wife was among them. He also brought his son, figuring Lord Jeor would like the chance to meet his grandnephew.

After riding for several days, the company reached the Wall. This was the very first time Gregor actually saw it in real life. Words could not sufficiently describe the awe he felt when his eyes fell upon the immense structure. Never mind the fact it was not even the tallest edifice in the Known World; it still had to be the most breathtaking. Gregor was so impressed that he almost did not mind the intense cold that appeared when he neared the Wall.

When the Legionnaires were within sight of Castle Black, they signaled their coming, and the gates were opened to them. They swiftly piled into the fortress' courtyard. There they were greeted by the Lord Steward, Bowen Marsh.

As the stableboys helped the Legionnaires with their mounts, Gregor heard the sound of steel clashing nearby. He gazed around and saw that a number of new recruits were being drilled by Ser Alliser Thorne in the training yard. Ser Alliser soon noticed Gregor was looking at him. To his credit, he did not sneer. But he did not smile, either. Still, a look of indifference was better than what most got from the bitter knight.

Ser Alliser was undoubtedly aware that Gregor Clegane had been in the Westerlander forces that had seized King's Landing at the end of Robert's Rebellion. However, he must also have known that it was Gregor who had ensured that the civilian casualties of the Sack were kept at a minimal. That was likely why he did not flash a hostile glare in his direction.

After their horses were stabled, Gregor Clegane asked to see Lord Jeor Mormont. He was swiftly led to the Lord Commander's Tower by Ser Jaremy Rykker. Dacey and Rickard accompanied them. Everyone else remained out in the courtyard.

When they arrived in the Lord Commander's chambers, they found him speaking with Maester Aemon and the First Ranger, Benjen Stark. When he saw the Mountain, Lord Jeor moved to dismiss his black brothers, but Gregor bade him not to. He declared that he preferred them to be present during his meeting with the Lord Commander.

Once the chambers were clear of everyone except the Old Bear, the First Ranger, and the ancient Targaryen, Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey sat at the table with them. It was then that Dacey showed off her son to her uncle and. As Gregor forecasted, Lord Jeor was delighted to meet Rickard Clegane. He commended his niece for producing such a stout heir.

The Old Bear was nearing his sixtieth name day, so he was older than both of Gregor's parents. Unlike Lord Tarrence and Lady Daliah, however, Lord Jeor was not a grandparent. But he was holding out hope that he would be one soon. Recently, his son had written him that he had gotten married again, and this time, it was to a Dornish princess (who apparently hated to be addressed as such). Since they had been in attendance at Jorah and Nymeria's wedding ceremony, Gregor and Dacey could verify that information.

Lord Jeor had expected his son to take another Northern girl as his bride, but he had no qualms
about a Dornishwoman being the new Lady of Bear Island. His predecessor, Lord Commander Qorgyle, had been a Dornishman, and the two of them had gotten on quite well.

As far as Gregor knew, Jorah and Nymeria were not trying for children yet. But there was no question that sooner or later, they would. Lord Jeor seemed to share his conviction.

After Lord Jeor was properly introduced to his grandnephew, Aemon asked for a chance to hold Rickard as well. At first, Dacey was a little hesitant, considering the elderly man was blind. But her husband assured her that the former Targaryen knew what he was doing. At that, she gave in.

The young Clegane boy seemed strangely at ease in Aemon's arms. Dacey and Benjen helped the ancient maester hold Rickard properly. At one point, their eyes met, but they quickly looked away right after.

Gregor remembered Dacey once mentioned that her mother had considered a marriage contract between her and Benjen before he joined the Watch. Lady Maege never had the opportunity to approach Lord Rickard Stark on the issue. Still, it was possible that Benjen was aware of the prospect, just as Dacey was.

Maybe that was why he had joined the Watch. Or one of the reasons why, at any rate. It could not have been the only one. Gregor did not think of Benjen as someone who would resolve his problems by running away from them. Given his mysterious whereabouts throughout the majority of the original series, he was definitely someone who ran towards his problems.

While Aemon fawned over little Rickard, Gregor and Dacey turned back to Lord Jeor and Benjen. They proceeded to explain why they were at the Wall. Logically, Gregor led the conversation, and he included nearly everything that had been discussed in the Main Hall of Clegane's Keep. He even told them the truth about the country's probable impending doom.

Back in the Westerlands, Gregor had convinced King Robert and the Lords Paramount to go public with the news of the Long Night sometime in the future. They did not wish to incite a panic by informing their vassals and the smallfolk straightaway. First, they would allow the people to enjoy a period of serenity and opulence. Ideally, this period would last the first five years of the Great Summer. Then they would inform the public. That would give them five more years to fully comprehend and acknowledge that the Others were returning to the world.

Although the smallfolk and most of the lesser lords and landed knights were currently unaware of the approaching Long Night, they were still able to help prepare for it in their own way. They had been instructed by their liege lords to fortify their homes and store an additional ration of their crops at each harvest. This would ensure that they would be better protected and adequately supplied throughout the whole next winter.

In spite of the temporary "nondisclosure agreement" Gregor had established between the other thirty-one people he had told of the Long Night, he had chosen to be forward with the three men in the Lord Commander's chambers.

All three of them reacted just as Gregor predicted they would.

As Northmen, Lord Jeor and Benjen almost readily believed in Gregor's claims of the White Walkers. Of course, the Northmen also had the greatest feuds with the Free Folk, but Jeor Mormont was not one to lament on old grievances, and Benjen Stark had a firm grasp on the priorities of the world.

Aemon Targaryen did not reply right away. He needed a few minutes to reflect on everything he
had heard. After sitting for a time in motionless silence, he lightly ran his frail fingers through the dark mop of hair on Rickard Clegane's head, and then he gave a short speech on visions and prophecies.

In it, he mentioned the prophecy his great-grandnephew Prince Rhaegar Targaryen had consulted him about. The one about the Three-Headed Dragon and the ending of all life. That prophecy was the very thing that had led to the demise of House Targaryen. While most called Rhaegar a fool for putting so much stock in a myth, Aemon had considered the possibility that the Silver Prince was actually wiser than anyone could have fathomed.

He ended his soliloquy by stating that due to the evidence provided by Lord Gregor's visions, he was now indisputably certain that the Long Night would indeed come again. He also agreed that there was no way to prevent it, but much could be done to prepare for it. That included uniting with the Free Folk.

Gregor was pleased he had won the trust and the friendship of Lord Commander Jeor, Maester Aemon, and Benjen. They carried a great deal of authority in the Watch, and they were greatly respected by their brothers in black. In that regard, they would prove invaluable allies to Gregor.

Once the conversation ended, Gregor asked to see the wildling prisoners. While Dacey stayed with Maester Aemon and Rickard in the Lord Commander's chambers, Benjen and Lord Jeor led Gregor down to the courtyard. There the Mountain and the Old Bear waited whilst Benjen gathered some of his rangers and went off to the ice cells.

All five wildlings were swiftly brought out. Their hands and feet were bound, but they were struggling angrily. The eldest of them could not have been more than three and twenty. Three were male; two female. One of the men and one of the women could have been siblings, based on their similarity in physique and appearance.

Gregor watched as the five captives were brought before him. They immediately took notice of his height, and it seemed to startle them. But they were not intimidated. Gregor did not expect them to be, given the land they had come from.

One of them made a remark along the lines of "So there ARE giants on this side of the Wall."

His companions chuckled at that before they were silenced by the watchmen who restrained them. Jeor Mormont then looked to Lord Gregor and asked what he wanted with the prisoners.

To the vast surprise of everyone there (especially the wildlings themselves), Gregor proclaimed that he wished for them to be set free.

That command confused everyone there, and it angered Alliser Thorne. The Crownlander knight claimed that two of their brothers had died bringing these Free Folk back, and he declared that letting the prisoners live was an insult enough to their comrades' memory. Letting them go was an outrage.

Gregor calmly assured Thorne and the others present that he was not being inconsiderate or hasty. He debated that these five wildlings would serve a greater purpose than vengeance. Since Lord Commander Mormont was aware of Gregor's goal to bring the Free Folk south of the wall, he ensured that the Mountain's order was obeyed. The five prisoners were promptly released from their bounds.

As the tunnel to the Wall was opened up, Gregor approached the five wildlings and said that he
had a message for them to deliver. Normally, they did not take orders from "kneelers," but since he had given them back their freedom, they chose to listen.

He told them to go back to their "King-beyond-the-Wall" and tell him that Moat Cailin was in need of a bard. Specifically, one who was "able" to carry any tune. He advised them to hurry, as it was a "long night" without music, and there were hardly any "others" who could keep his mind occupied. He instructed them to use those exact words.

The vagueness of the message baffled them, but they agreed to convey it. After committing it to memory, they turned to the Wall and sprinted into the tunnel at its base. Once they were all through, the gate slammed shut behind them.

At this point, there was nothing further Gregor could do to mend the relationship between the Night's Watch and the Free Folk. All he could do was wait for those five wildlings to find Mance Rayder and hope that Mance understood the hidden meaning of that message.

Gregor and the rest of the Legionnaires departed from Castle Black that same day. Before they left, Gregor bade the watchmen to have some faith in what he had done. Their Lord Commander and First Ranger did; there was no reason they could not.

Of course, the alliance with the Free Folk was merely the first of Gregor's preparations against the Long Night. When he and his colleagues returned to Moat Cailin, he shifted his focus to some of the other ones.

He thought on the truce and possible treaty with the Targaryens. At the present, that affair was mostly out of his hands. Be that as it may, the plan to recover Viserys and Daenerys was already underway. A small fleet of ships under the mutual command of Lord Monford Velaryon and Ser Davos Seaworth had sailed across the Narrow Sea to locate the two surviving children of the Mad King.

King Robert had given explicit orders that the Targaryens were not to be killed or harmed. Instead, they would be taken into protective custody. That was certain to gain the stag king some degree of support from the Targaryen loyalists. There was also the matter of the Targaryens' "advantage," which was currently unknown to everyone but Gregor.

Until Viserys and Daenerys were found, Gregor would not partake in that affair. He would instead concentrate on issues closer to home.

There was one particular matter that was quite close to home. That was the matter of House Bolton. Since the events leading up to House Stark's downfall had been averted, Lord Roose would have no opportunity to betray his liege lord. Thus, it was likely that he would remain loyal to Lord Eddard, in spite of his ever-present desire for dominance of the North. Gregor decided to keep a watchful eye on Roose Bolton, but he would not move against the Leech Lord unless he acquired some concrete proof that House Bolton was plotting against the Starks.

Even so, Gregor had no intention of extending that same courtesy to Roose's bastard son. Ramsey's fate had been sealed long ago.

The Mountain was willing to give just about any person in the series a chance of redemption. So far, Amory Lorch, Pycelle, and Petyr Baelish had been his only three exceptions. But he planned to make a fourth exception for Ramsey Snow. He was determined not to allow that inhuman monster to torment the realm. The same would go for his redolent servant, Reek.

In the books, Roose had made an argument that perhaps it was Reek who had corrupted Ramsey
and not the other way around. While that may have sounded more plausible, Gregor was not going to risk finding out the hard way if it was wrong. He was going to kill both master and servant.

But not right away. He would have to wait for the most ideal occasion, and he would have to find the right people for the job. He could not use any of his Legionnaires, not even those on his council. Ramsey was still a child, after all, and officially, the Legion without Banners did not harm children.

Perhaps the Free Folk would be useful in that regard.

In any case, Gregor was not in any tremendous rush to have Ramsey killed. He just had to make sure the deed was done before Domeric Bolton made the mistake of seeking out his baseborn half-brother.

On the subject of family disputes, Gregor thought greatly on the predicament surrounding the future of the largest house in the country.

Stevron and the other Freys who had enlisted in the Legion managed to demonstrate their usefulness quite often. Whatever their assignment, they performed diligently, and they represented their house with honor, integrity, and valor. There was the possibility that they were simply the pick of the litter, but even so, that was enough to appease Gregor and the other Leigonnaires.

Before very long, more Freys joined the Legion's ranks. A few others voluntarily entered the Night's Watch. Ser Theo Frey even took up the vacancy in Robert's Kingsguard after Jaime Lannister was dismissed.

Gregor was amazed by just how much good the Freys were actually be capable of doing. He felt as though he had severely underestimated them. Most of them, at least. There was one he was certain he had been correct about all along.

House Frey may have been on the road to regaining its honor, but its patriarch was long overdue for retirement. However, for all his many flaws, Lord Walder was the only person who was maintaining the order of his house. Once he breathed his last, his progeny would likely be fighting and killing one another for lordship of the Twins.

While that prospect would have thrilled Gregor once, he was determined to avert it now. All he had to do was ensure that Ser Stevron had enough support to dissuade any challengers and uphold his ascension to the lordship of the Crossing.

As an officer of the Legion without Banners, Stevron already had plenty of support. In fact, Gregor doubted he would need any more than that. Since the Legion answered directly to the Mountain, who answered directly to the King, Ser Stevron would essentially have the backing of Robert himself. Gregor doubted any Frey would be so bold as to defy the will of the king.

Now that Stevron had all the support he would require, Gregor wondered on how he could assist him in replacing his lord father. He thought on the fact that Walder was past eight. No one would question the sudden death of an old man, but Gregor had given Eddard Stark his word that Lord Walder would not be assassinated. Furthermore, he knew Walder would not be kind enough to die on his own anytime soon.

As such, Gregor set his mind to finding a nonviolent and subtle technique to removing Lord Walder from power and installing Stevron in his place. Obviously, the old weasel would not step down voluntarily. He could not be forced to do so, either.
The only ways a son could succeed his father whilst the latter was still living was if the father joined the Night's Watch (just as Lord Jeor had), or if the father became incapacitated somehow.

Walder was too old and too proud to take the black, but... there were plenty of ways a man of eighty could be deemed unfit to lead his house. Gregor elected to think on these ways for a while. All the same, he would not decide on one until he was confident in both its success and security.

A few months after Gregor visited the Wall, a bard appeared in Moat Cailin. No one could say for certain who this bard was or where he came from. He just showed up and offered Gregor his services.

Only the Mountain realized these "services" were not his talents with a harp.

Gregor invited the minstrel up to his solar under the premise of discussing a contract with him.

Once the door to the solar was locked and the area was deemed secure, the bard dropped his act. It was then that Gregor Clegane and Mance Rayder met face-to-face.

Of course, Gregor had seen through the King-beyond-the-Wall's disguise right away. Then again, the farce was never meant to fool the Mountain.

Mance admitted that he had been highly skeptical about answering Gregor's summons. For all he knew, it could have simply been a trap meant to lure him south and face King Robert's justice. No one could fault him for developing that theory.

When Gregor asked Mance what ultimately encouraged him to give the meeting a chance anyway, the former watchman stated that since Gregor had spared five of his people, he felt partly indebted to him. He also quoted the words of House Clegane of Moat Cailin: All Are Welcome. He debated that even the Free Folk counted as "all." Most of all, there was the content of the message Gregor had sent him. The Mountain's references to the Long Night and the Others had convinced Mance that Gregor was not misleading or deceiving him.

In any case, Gregor was pleased the King-beyond-the-Wall had chosen to hear him out. That marked the completion of the first of many steps in the long process of bringing the Free Folk south. The second step was discussed at that meeting.

Again, Gregor provided the elaborate account of his "visions," and how one of them had warned him of the Long Night. Mance seemed to believe that story almost without question. That was not surprising, seeing as he himself had forecasted the Long Night through lessons learned from timeless tales and myths.

Mance did not deny Gregor's accusation that he was scheming to bring the entirety of the Free Folk south of the Wall. If he did not return from this meeting, he claimed they would still march without him. Only they would be less organized and more desperate. And they would have much less to lose.

Shortly after that, Gregor confessed he did not desire a war any more than Mance did. Be that as it may, he was hoping to give the Free Folk the safety and protection that had been provided to all the Westerosi who lived south of the Wall. The solution he was looking forward was the one that involved the least amount of bloodshed.

It was then that Gregor revealed that he desired to establish diplomatic relations with the Free Folk. In this endeavor, he had the support of Lord Eddard Stark, Lord Commander Jeor Mormont, and King Robert Baratheon. The three men would allow Gregor to bring the wildlings south, but only
under the condition that he could ensure that they would be able to coexist with the residents of the Seven Kingdoms.

Gregor explicitly clarified what was expected of the Free Folk once they relocated south. Firstly, they would not have to kneel to Robert or any other man. They would not have to fight in any conflicts or disputes. For those that wished to live separately from society, certain tracts of land would be designated for them. Ideally, they could live on the hundred miles of the Gift. For those that were willing to live alongside the "kneelers," they would be provided ample housing.

Regardless of where they went, the wildlings were expected to abide by the same standards as the people of the Seven Kingdoms. They could not steal, rape, or kill. If they wished to, they could enter the services of a lord or a landed knight in exchange for gold, food, and shelter. Gregor would not protest if they thought to join the Legion. He would actually welcome any who came to him.

Mance thought long and hard on Gregor's proposal. He was impressed that the Mountain had accounted for virtually every detail. Clearly, he cared just as much for the well-being of the Free Folk as Mance himself did. He was also very much aware of the consequences of leaving them north of the Wall.

In the end, the King-beyond-the-Wall decided to accept Gregor Clegane's proposal.

That moment denoted the beginning of step three.

Since there were so many who lived north of the Wall, and due to the eight-thousand-year rivalry between the Free Folk and the Seven Kingdoms, Mance would not be sending all of them south right away. Gregor agreed with him that it would be wiser and more practical to bring a small group of select individuals down at first. Once the people of the Seven Kingdoms became accustomed to their presence, larger, more diverse groups of wildlings could be sent overtime.

At the end of the meeting, Mance told Gregor that he would head back north and gather the leaders of the Free Folk clans together. He would tell them of the Mountain's arrangement. There was little doubt some of them would question its plausibility. Some would question Mance's motives just for negotiating with a "kneeler" in the first place. It was his belief that most of them would look past the means and focus more on the ends.

Once he won them over, he would select which among them would be the first to go south. He would compose that group carefully, prudently, and heedfully.

Mance would bring this group to Craster's Keep in exactly four months. He beseeched Gregor to ride out to the Keep at that same date, as regardless of who he picked, the Free Folk would want to meet the man who was bargaining for their lives at the risk of his own.

As long as he did not have to go inside Craster's house, Gregor was content with having the keep as their meeting site. Apart from that, he would have liked the opportunity to encounter the wildling immigrants and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses directly.

After Mance left Moat Cailin, Gregor wrote to Winterfell, King's Landing, and Castle Black, informing Lord Eddard, King Robert, and Lord Commander Jeor that he had successfully negotiated what could have been constituted as a treaty with Mance Rayder. He told them of the plan to bring the wildlings south in incremental measures, and he asked them for clearance to go ahead with this plan.

All three men promptly wrote back, verifying that the Mountain could proceed with this endeavor. However, they were still unwilling to allow Mance Rayder himself to settle in the Seven
Kingdoms. For the present, he was still seen as a deserter and a rebel to the Watch. Even so, they would allow the negotiations with Mance to go on, as they were for the greater good.

Near the beginning of 290 A.C., Gregor, Dacey, Smalljon Umber, and a party of Legionnaires – most of them Northmen – rode north of the wall. The Watch had supplied a team of half a-dozen rangers to escort them all the way to Craster's Keep.

Although Westeros was in the midst of summer, it felt almost as cold as a Northern winter in this part of the country. Gregor was clad in two lairs of thick leather and double-knit wool, but the chill was still very much detectable.

However, Gregor's primary concern was not for himself. It was for the one who rode beside him.

All throughout the ride to Craster's, Gregor's gaze constantly drifted to Dacey. A couple months prior, she had fallen with child again. The bump in her abdomen was not yet noticeable, but it was there all the same.

Gregor knew that Dacey was a capable fighter even when pregnant. Still, he could not be spared the worries typical of a caring husband and expectant father. Nevertheless, he had reluctantly granted her pleas to accompany him north of the wall.

It took them nearly a week to reach Craster's Keep. Mance and his countrymen were already assembled there when they arrived. To be precise, they were on the outskirts of the keep, as Craster had been a very gracious host. Gregor had expected as much.

On the plus side, Craster had declared his property neutral ground. He announced that if there was any fighting on it, no one – be they Night's Watch, Legionnaire, or Free Folk – would be welcome there ever again.

Some angry glances and insults were exchanged between the watchmen and the wildlings, but no weapons were drawn. The Legionnaires had no conflict with either party, so they were able to maintain the peace.

It was then that Gregor met the wildlings Mance had chosen to be the first to immigrate to the Seven Kingdoms. To his surprise and delight, Tormund Giantsbane was one of them.

Gregor took some time to briefly but thoroughly interview each of the Free Folk. Some refused to answer his questions at first, but when he claimed that their very lives depended on their level of cooperation, they were much more compliant then.

Ultimately, the Mountain decided that each and every wildling in this group was ready for integration into the Seven Kingdoms. In fact, they were probably the most ideal picks to represent the entire Free Folk. That was a very hopeful sign.

Gregor chose to bring this group south straightaway. Before they headed back to the Wall, he told Mance to pay another visit to Moat Cailin in two months. By then, the Mountain would have determined whether or not the moat's other occupants could tolerate the Free Folk enough to live with them.

If it did not work, they would not give up on the immigration plan. They would simply try settling the first group of wildlings somewhere more remote and wait a while.

If did work… then in four more months, Mance was to have a second group of wildlings assembled at Craster's Keep, and Gregor would meet them there once more.
Gregor had notified the residents of Moat Cailin in advance of his pact with the Free Folk. Naturally, many of them had questioned it, but after everything their lord had done for them, the vast majority were willing to give his proposal a chance.

Initially, having wildlings at Moat Cailin proved to be quite a challenge indeed. The first couple of weeks involved a number of fights and disagreements. No one was killed, but there were more than a few who were seriously wounded. Thankfully, Maester Kennick managed to treat them all before infection set in.

The top officers of the Legion decided to set an example for their comrades. They frequently sparred with the Free Folk in the training yard and shared meat and mead with them in the Great Hall. Gregor even established a seat for the Free Folk on his private council, which Tormund was appointed to.

Two months after the first meeting at Craster's, Mance returned to Moat Cailin as a bard. Gregor informed him that was so far a success, and he bade him to assemble a second group of Free Folk with all due haste.

Another two months later, Mance did just that. Gregor rode north to Craster's once more, and he examined the King-beyond-the-Wall's newest choices for immigration. This group was slightly bigger and broader, but the Mountain gave each of them his approval. All of them were swiftly led south.

This process went on for the next five years. Every four months, the population north of the Wall decreased by a certain amount, and the population south of it increased just as much. The composition of each group of wildlings varied in size, nature, and overall status, but one thing they all shared was a desire for survival. As long as they did not ruthlessly murder others in this endeavor, that was enough for Gregor.

Not wishing to overcrowd Moat Cailin, Gregor had petitioned the Northern lords for possible sites to settle the Free Folk on. Most were unwilling to yield as much as an acre to the wildlings, but some of the more forgiving and good-natured among them agreed to set aside some tracts of land.

By the end of the fifth year of the Great Summer, wildlings camps could be found throughout a significant part of the North. Some of those camps even hosted lifelong residents of the Seven Kingdoms.

More than half of the Free Folk still resided on the other side of the Wall, but at the rate they were being incorporated into the Seven Kingdoms, most – if not all – of them would be on the right side by the time the next winter began.

Since the North was the largest of the Seven Kingdoms, no one was concerned that there would not be enough space for both the wildlings and the Northmen. Given how empty and desolate the North had seemed beforehand, insufficient land would not be an issue.

However, some had been concerned that there would not be enough food to go around. They were proven wrong. The Free Folk had survived the eons by hunting alone. They had ways of growing crops in even the harshest of weather conditions. Using a method similar to the glass gardens of Winterfell, they managed to sow their own crops. With the assistance of the Legion without Banners, the Free Folk even managed to open their own market and enter trade relations with the other regions of Westeros.

A lot of people had suspected that the Free Folk would merely be a danger to them or a waste of space and food.
The Free Folk were a danger indeed, but only to those who crossed them. And they were by no means a waste of space and food.

Gregor found they could be rather useful. Useful in ways that the Legionnaires could not be (or could not afford to be).

For instance, they were able to help Gregor resolve the issue of Ramsey Snow.

Two years, Gregor summoned a dozen of the most bloodthirsty wildlings to his solar, claiming he had an assignment for them. As long as it involved killing something, they were happy to oblige.

Once they were all together, Gregor told them that their objective was to murder a young baseborn boy. That took them by surprise. Not because they had any reservations about slaying a child, but because it was uncharacteristic of the Mountain.

Then he told them what Ramsey was and what he would grow up to be. Even the Thenns were appalled by Gregor's description of him. They accepted this job with no hesitation.

Their objective was simple: they had to kill Ramsey subtly and without being seen. Once he was dead, they were to find a way to frame his foul-smelling servant, Reek, for his death. A few of those twelve were experts at manipulation and deception, so this secondary goal was doable for them.

The dozen wildling assassins departed in the direction of the Dreadfort and its adjoining villages in the early morning. They returned to Moat Cailin three days later. A few of them were spattered with blood, but most of it was not theirs.

They said nothing to Gregor; the leader of the team merely gave him a slight nod, which was all the confirmation the Mountain needed.

Sure enough, later that week, Gregor overheard two Legionnaires gossiping near the armory. One was telling the other that he had heard somewhere how Lord Roose Bolton had gone into a great rage over the death of a young boy on his lands. The alleged perpetrator of the crime – a man who smelt as though he had never bathed in his life – had been literally torn to pieces at Bolton's command. Gregor could only smile at the news.

Another instance when the Free Folk demonstrated their usefulness occurred in the fourth year of the Great Summer. This time, they helped Gregor in the affair surrounding the line of succession of the Twins.

When they first relocated south of the Wall, the wildlings had brought a number of herbs and other ingredients that were key to the art of alchemy. A person trained in that field could use those ingredients to craft medicines, poisons, sedatives, stimulants, and all manner of potions.

With the aid of a pair of experienced alchemists, Gregor was able to concoct a draught that functioned similarly to a certain drug he had once used as a CIA agent in his first life. That particular drug triggered a stroke in the one who ingested it. The stroke was not fatal, but the victim would be rendered indefinitely catatonic.

Once the draught was perfected, Gregor sought out Ser Stevron Frey and told him of the draught's effects. Lord Walder Frey's eighty-fifth nameday was approaching soon. The Mountain gave Ser Stevron the idea to attend his father's celebration and quietly slip him the draught.

Ser Stevron was stunned by the suggestion, but only for a moment. He was quick to go along with it after that.
A fortnight before Walder Frey turned five and eighty, Ser Stevron left for the Crossing with a party of his father's retainers and his fellow Legionnaires.

On the day of Lord Walder's eighty-fifth nameday, nothing especially exciting or noteworthy happened at Moat Cailin.

The day after, something did.

In the afternoon, a raven flew in. It carried a missive which was stamped with the symbol of the Twins. The missive contained a proclamation that House Frey's lord had gone into what could only be described as a shock-induced coma. There was no indication of what had triggered the attack, and Walder Frey showed no signs of recovery. As such, his son and heir, Ser Stevron, had assumed the position as head of their house.

Several days later, another letter arrived from King's Landing. This one was a declaration confirming the removal of the catatonic Walder Frey from power and the subsequent installing of Stevron Frey as the new lord of the Crossing.

As Gregor had hoped, there was no feuding over lordship of the Twins. Ser Stevron Frey still had the full support of the Legion without Banners, and many of his half-brothers and kin already preferred to have him as their leader over anyone else, including themselves.

Soon after, Stevron sent Gregor another message, saying that he would likely not return to Moat Cailin, as the Twins were in dire need of proper organization. Gregor wrote back that he understood, and he bade Lord Stevron the best of luck in bringing his house to order.

Gregor was not concerned that Stevron Frey would be unable to establish stability amongst his house. He was just glad Lord Walder was no longer in control. That old weasel had infested the world with enough of his seed. Now there would be more room for other children.

That was rather fortunate, as a lot of couples had been busy lately. That included House Mormont and both branches of House Clegane. Gregor made sure to keep track of all the children who were born in the Great Summer, especially those of them that belonged to the families he was close to.

The first member of the post-Greyjoy's Rebellion generation was Arya Stark. She was born shortly after Balon yielded his crown to Robert.

A few months later, Lady Selyse Baratheon bore her lord husband a daughter, named Shireen.

In the middle of 290 A.C., Lady Dacey gave birth to her second child. This one was another son, whom she and her husband named Alyver after Gregor's paternal grandfather.

That same year, Catelyn Stark bore her husband another son named Brandon, and Queen Cersei birthed a black-haired daughter named Joanna.

Additionally, both Obara Martell and Nymeria Martell both fell with child, much to the glee of their father and husbands (and Gregor's, incidentally).

Obara gave birth in the first month of 291 A.C. She and Sandor had a daughter named Tyta.

Nymeria gave birth two months later. She gave Lord Jorah a son named Edwyle.

In early 292 A.C., Lysa Tully had her second child and first son. She named the child Robin, and he was by all accounts a healthy boy. An ideal heir for Lord Jon.
In late 292 A.C., Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey were graced by their third child and first girl. They gave their daughter the name Vallory, and she quickly became the joy of Moat Cailin.

Prince Oberyn Martell had not grown idle. Ellaria Sand provided her paramour with two more daughters: Dorea in 291 A.C. and Loreza in 293 A.C.

Both of these girls had been aunts from the moment of birth. Not long after, they became aunts again.

Near the end of 293 A.C., Nymeria produced a daughter named Jeyne for Jorah.

At the start of 294 A.C., Obara gave Sandor a son named Mors.

In the latter-half of 294 A.C., Queen Cersei gave birth to twin girls – Myrcella and Cassana.

It seemed that every year, Gregor's family – meaning both his blood relatives and the Legion without Banners – got larger.

Alas, at one point, it got a little smaller.

For the first year following Greyjoy's Rebellion, Victarion Greyjoy had been searching for an ideal wife. Despite Gregor's suggestion that he marry a woman from another region of Westeros, Victarion debated that the Islands were not quite ready for that form of diplomacy just yet. He would arrange for his own heir to wed outside his family's domain, but he himself would take an Ironwoman for his bride.

By the start of the next year, Victarion was courting Gysella Goodbrother, the second of Lord Gorold Goodbrother's twelve daughters. Less than a year after that, a drowned priest saw them wedded by the harbor in Moat Cailin.

Shortly after Gregor and Dacey were blessed with their daughter Vallory, Gysella was expecting a bundle of her own. That was when her lord husband approached Gregor on a personal matter.

As much as Victarion genuinely loved Moat Cailin and the people who occupied it, he wished for his children to be born at Pyke. Furthermore, he believed he had been absent from the Iron Islands long enough. It was time for him to properly take up his place as the Lord Paramount of the Islands, and he could not do that from the mainland.

Gregor completely understood Victarion's obligation to return to Pyke. He wished him the best of luck in his duties as the liege lord of the Ironborn, and he hoped Gysella would provide him numerous strong sons and daughters. The Iron Captain was greatly touched by those words, and he made a vow that if his first child was a boy, he would name the lad after the Mountain.

With Victarion gone, the Iron Islands had no representative on Gregor's council. But the vacancy was taken up fairly quickly. Oddly enough, it was filled by Maron Greyjoy.

Although Maron had come to the moat as a hostage, he had adapted to his captivity rather well. No one treated him unfairly or unkindly. He was allowed everything except the ability to travel outside the grounds of the moat alone. Victarion had taken the time to educate his nephew on the morals and principles of the Legion without Banners. Maron had been extremely resentful of his uncle and those lessons at first, but he eventually came to firmly grasp and appreciate them.

Gregor could actually see the change in Maron overtime. That was the type of change Victarion had undergone when he first joined the Legion.
By the time Victarion became a married man, Gregor had petitioned King Robert to release Maron from his role as a hostage. After looking over the Mountain's basis for this request, Robert Baratheon agreed to give Maron back his freedom. Not long after, Maron was given entry to the Legion without Banners.

Maron had been there when Victarion Greyjoy left the moat. He had watched as his uncle sailed down the Cut aboard the *Iron Victory* with his aunt. They had waved to him, and he had waved back.

Although Maron was already free to go home, he had chosen to stay at Moat Cailin by his own volition. That was when Gregor approached him with the offer to join his secret council. Maron accepted almost immediately.

In the middle of 293 A.C., Gregor received a raven from Pyke. He was informed that Lady Gysella Greyjoy had given her lord husband a son, and, true to his word, Victarion had named his heir Gregor.

So many new lives were coming in to the world. The majority of them would never have even existed in the original universe. Upon realizing that, Gregor felt a quaint sense of self-satisfaction.

The middle of 294 A.C. marked the halfway point of the Great Summer. It would not be long before the King and the Lords Paramount made the coming of the Long Night common knowledge. They had decided on a specific date when they would come forward; it would be the first day of the seventh month of that year.

Gregor spent much of the week leading up to that date in his solar. He was trying to think of a way to minimize the fallout of the Long Night being made public. There would be turmoil, obviously. His job was to ensure it did not devolve into anarchy and chaos. The people had to know; they couldn't not know about the Long Night. But some of them would be unwilling to listen or refuse to listen altogether. Gregor's job was to ensure that as many people as possible admitted to and comprehended the truth, and they do that as soon as possible. The sooner they faced reality, the better things would be for them.

While he was in the midst of his brooding, Gregor was visited by Polliver. The tall man with the black beard held out a piece of rolled-up paper and told his master "Message for you, Ser."

As Gregor took the parchment from his man-at-arms, he asked "Where from?"

"Well, there was no raven, Ser," Polliver disclosed, "A rider came up the Causeway. He dropped it off."

"A rider from the south?" Gregor muttered, a little perplexed.

The nearest house south of Moat Cailin was House Reed. After that, the closest house was located in the Riverlands, and that was over a fortnight's journey by horse.

Gregor shrugged off his bewilderment, opened the parchment, and read it.

Then he read it again, as he thought he had misread it the first time.

He had not. Every word was just the same the second time around.

Without looking up from the parchment, Gregor announced "Polliver… we're about to have a visitor. A rather unexpected visitor at that."
"Ser?" Polliver uttered, raising an eyebrow.

"I can't explain now," Gregor proclaimed, "Just… keep me apprised if any crannogmen come within sight of the gates."

"As you say," Polliver avowed. He then turned and exited the solar, leaving the Mountain alone once more.

Gregor watched Polliver leave, and then he closed his door and leaned against the adjoining wall. As he did, he looked down at the parchment in his hand, and he let out a deep sigh.

Currently, he already had plenty of problems to worry about. He had had the privilege of choosing to solve most of those problems himself. He had not asked for this newest problem. Nonetheless, it seemed as though he was stuck with it.

There was a saying in the North: If you take a wolf pup away from its mother, the she-wolf will always try to reclaim her child, even at the risk of her own well-being.

According to the message, Gregor would soon find out just how true that saying really was.
Note: I have received complaints about the story's apparent lack of "conflict" recently, particularly with regards to how the Northmen and the Free Folk seemed so readily willing and coexist with each other in the last chapter. While I can understand these people's viewpoint of the situation, I wish to assure them and the rest of you that the Long Night will not be the only danger in this story.

Remember, this is a series where things go wrong when one least expects them to. I have plans for something of that sort to happen before very long. Something that could probably even rival the Red Wedding in terms of tragedy and shock (I say "probably" because I don't want to give myself too much credit).

Oh, and if I gave you the impression that Mance has already won the support of ALL the wildlings, I apologize for that. When I address him as King-beyone-the-Wall in the previous chapter, I only do so because Mance styles himself as such. I am aware at this point in time, he has not yet gathered all the Free Folk together. Although it took him until the events of the series to win over nearly every wildling to his cause, I believe he must have already made great progress by the end of Greyjoy's Rebellion. So, for the sake of argument, let's continue to use that assumption.

Lastly, a few certain individuals were vocally displeased with how the last chapter was formatted (no dialogue, very concise summary of certain events, and such). For those of you who did not like that approach, I ask you to bear with me just one more time. After this update, all future chapters will return to the previous format, in which characters talk and a more elaborate description of events is provided. This chapter will be a fair deal shorter than several of the ones preceding it, in any case.

Another turn of the moon elapsed.

Then, one day in the early morning, a small party of thirteen approached Moat Cailin from the south. The group was composed of a dozen men and one woman. Lord Gregor Clegane himself greeted them at the gate, as he had been expecting them.

The men were evidently crannogmen. They were relatively short, especially when compared to the average Northmen. They wore hooded cloaks that draped their shoulders like shrouds, and instead of swords, they carried tridents and nets.

The woman was taller than any of her twelve male companions. Gregor knew why; she was no crannogwoman.

She was clad in a cloak as well. The hood was drawn up so that it concealed her face in shadow. While they were outside, neither she nor the twelve men removed their hoods.

Gregor bade them welcome to the moat, and he escorted them up to his solar.
Once they were there, the thirteen new arrivals pulled back their hoods and revealed their faces.

The Mountain's attention immediately went to the woman.

She had changed.

For one thing, she was taller and more curvaceous. But those changes were natural. Some of the others were not.

Her hair was dyed blond. Her once grey irises were now hazel. Her cheeks were dotted with freckles. Her face had somehow been molded so that it appeared smaller.

Only her dearest friends and her immediate family would recognize her up close. Anyone else would have not the faintest inkling that she was a wolf in sheep's clothing.

But she was still a wolf. A brown-haired, grey-eyed, pale-skinned, long-faced wolf. One day, she would appear as such again.

Those changes to her complexion were all reversible; none of them were permanent. For the present, however, they would have to remain. That was the only way to keep her safe. And the only way to keep the one she loved most in the world safe and nearby at the same time.

The present situation had been the result of Ashara Dayne's ingenious thinking.

When she saw how desperately Lyanna Stark yearned for her son, Lady Ashara had devised an elaborate plan to bring her and Jon together. This plan would not involve revealing to the world that Lyanna was still alive or exposing Jon's true identity.

Strictly speaking, the concept was simple. Lyanna would travel to Moat Cailin in disguise under the pretense of a commoner looking for work. Subsequently, Eddard Stark would send his "bastard" nephew to Moat Cailin to be fostered by House Clegane.

Gregor's job was to have Jon serve as his squire, and to have Lyanna serve as a maid. To be precise, she would be Jon's personal maid.

Changing Lyanna's appearance and giving her a new identity had been the easy part. The hard part had been to convince Lord Eddard to collaborate with them. That was not only hard, but also rather time-consuming.

Since Greywater Watch had no rookery, the only means to communicate with House Reed was through riders. Lord Howland had had Lady Ashara's plan delivered to Winterfell just a few weeks after its inception. The message had been written in a type of riddle-based code, just in case it was somehow intercepted by another party.

At first, Lord Eddard had refused to even entertain considering this plan, for fear of what could happen to his sister or her son if they were discovered. Although he had dispatched that response very soon, it had taken the rider a few more weeks to return to Greywater Watch.

This was why it had taken seven years to bring Ashara's scheme to fruition. Most of that time was spent exchanging pieces of a written argument between Lord Eddard and Princess Lyanna. He was determined not to accept that extremely risky plan; she was equally determined to persuade him to accept it.

Lyanna ultimately won the argument when she pleaded to her brother to hear her as a fellow parent. She pointed out that if Eddard was somehow separated from Robb, Sansa, Arya, or Bran, he
would do everything in his power to reunite with them, even at great personal risk. When Ned was unable to deny any of that, he finally gave in.

Fortunately, Jon Snow himself did not protest when he first learned of this proposal. As a matter of fact, he was ecstatic at the thought of going to Moat Cailin and meeting the famous Lord Gregor Clegane. Gregor's deeds were well-known at Winterfell, especially by the children, highborn or otherwise. As it happened, Robb and Arya Stark were apparently a little jealous that their cousin would be the first of them who got to meet the Mountain.

Gregor Clegane had not been informed of this matter until after Eddard had conceded to his sister's request. That was the day when that one rider arrived with that fateful letter.

After getting over his initial shock over Lyanna's coming to Moat Cailin, Gregor was quick to go along with Ashara Dayne's ploy. He almost wished he had thought of it first. He felt he could have; he had to admit it was very meticulously and cleverly devised.

He was pleased with the notion of having Jon Snow as his squire. Willas Tyrell had been his squire since the tourney at Lannisport, but while he had performed his duties superbly, he had celebrated his eighteenth nameday that year. He was getting a little too old to continue squiring. As the future lord to a Great House, he had an image of dignity and respectability to uphold in his adulthood.

The heir to Highgarden would continue serving on Gregor's secret council, but Jon Snow would replace him as the Mountain's squire.

Meanwhile, the arrangement between Lyanna and Jon had been very specifically detailed: she would be his maid and nothing more. To protect him, she would not tell him who she was or how she was related to him. Even if he swore he would never tell anyone else, she could not risk anyone else finding out the truth. Of course, Varys already knew the truth, and he would continue to keep it secret, but the Spider was not the only person in Westeros with spies.

Despite these conditions, Lyanna had no intention of withholding the truth from Jon forever. All that mattered was that she was close to him; that was all she wanted. Plus, with this arrangement, he would at least be familiar with her, and it would be a whole lot easier for him to grasp the truth when she finally came forward to him.

Jon Snow arrived at Moat Cailin later that same day. He was escorted there by a score of his uncle's men-at-arms. Gregor welcomed him at the northern gate and showed him to his room.

Jon's quarters were in the middle of the Lord's Tower. Gregor and Dacey's bedchamber was located five floors above him. Vallory was still in the nursery on the floor below her parents' room, whilst Rickard and Alyver shared a room on the next highest floor.

The Lord's Tower was typically reserved for House Clegane and their most prominent retainers. Despite being labelled a bastard, Jon Snow was still recognized as the son of a Stark. Due to that and the fact that he was Gregor's new squire, he was given a private room in the Lord's Tower.

Lyanna was in Jon's room when he and Lord Gregor got there. When she finally saw her son after eleven years of estrangement, she was awed. He had grown so much. He looked so much like her (before she had modified her appearance, at any rate).

She felt an overwhelming desire to rush forward and embrace her son. For his sake and hers, she did not. She merely greeted him with a smile, a light dip of her head, and a practiced muttering of "m'lord."
He thanked her for making him feel welcome and proceeded to get settled.

Gregor decided to leave them alone for a time. He figured he may as well let them bond, even if they could only do so as master and servant.

He walked away from that bedroom with a deep-seated feeling of relief. So far, Lady Ashara's scheme had been executed perfectly and without any unexpected complications. As long as Lyanna could keep up this mummer's farce as a maid, there would be no need for Gregor to worry that she or Jon would ever be placed in grave danger.

A couple months after Rhaegar Targaryen's second wife and third child arrived at Moat Cailin, Gregor had his next name day. That year, he turned nine and twenty years old. Nine and twenty. He had never lived to that age in his first life.

Gregory Welch had been twenty-eight years and seven months old when that terrorist suspect shot him in the back. He had served the Central Intelligence Agency faithfully for six of those years, and he had accomplished many great deeds in the span of those six years.

Gregor Clegane was still proud of what he had managed to do as a federal agent of the United States. Be that as it may, he was far prouder of what he had achieved as a Westerosi.

Gregory Welch may have done a fantastic job of protecting his country, but his occupation had left him with very little time for personal life. Because of that, he had never known the joys of having a family of his own. He had never married. He had never had children. He had even been single at the time of his death.

Gregor Clegane was able to execute his duty to the Seven Kingdoms and start a family at the same time. He had been married for eight years, and he was a father of three. Dacey, Rickard, Alyver, and Vallory meant more to him than anything else in either world. They were his primary source of everyday inspiration; they motivated him to continue working towards making Westeros a better place for all.

On the subject of bettering Westeros, Gregor had been contemplating various ways he could use his knowledge from his first life to benefit the Seven Kingdoms. He had already enhanced the architectural aspect by introducing cement and concrete, and he had invested gunpowder in the wartime effort.

During the Great Summer, he wondered how else he could enrich Westeros' culture. Then it dawned on him: why not do so through speech?

CIA Agents were often encouraged to learn a second language. Gregory Welch could speak three. Apart from English, he was fluent in both Spanish and Italian. He had learned both in college. They proved especially useful in his assignments that involved investigating drug cartels and the mafia.

Obviously, no one spoke Spanish or Italian in this world. As such, there had been no opportunity for Gregor to use either of them. All the same, he could still remember how to read, write, and speak in both without error.

That gave him a distinct advantage. He could use both languages as a secret code. All he had to do was sort out his most trustworthy allies and teach them one or both dialects. Then he would be able to communicate with them without risk of being overheard.

After pondering on the issue extensively, Gregor decided he would teach Spanish to the officers of the Legion without Banners, and he would teach Italian to his family members and closest allies.
Unsurprisingly, everyone who was made aware of one or both of those languages was stunned. They were under the impression that Gregor had composed those languages on his own. Luckily, he managed to convince them otherwise. He claimed that he had discovered a set of scrolls aboard Euron Greyjoy's vessel, and that these "scrolls" had been plundered from two long-gone civilizations from beyond Essos. The scrolls contained an extensive catalogue of those kingdoms' respective languages, as well as a comprehensive manual of how to translate both of them to the Common Tongue.

To properly "preserve" the languages, he claimed to have taken sole custody of those scrolls, and he would honor the memory of the ancient civilizations by reviving their languages and utilizing them as secret codes. His retainers and subordinates had been in high favor of that idea.

Ever since the start of the Great Summer, Gregor had been teaching Spanish to hundreds of people and Italian to dozens. After five years, most of them could speak them rather well. None of them had fully mastered either language, but they showed tremendous promise. As such, there was definite hope that some of them would manage to master Spanish, Italian, or both.

While he educated his family, friends, and allies, Gregor Clegane considered learning yet another language. That would be quite useful if he ever had need to sail across the Narrow Sea. After looking over his options, he concluded that High Valyrian seemed to be the most ideal.

Thus, Gregor made it his goal to learn the old dialect of the Targaryens. That objective proved to be challenging, but doable all the same. His progress learning High Valyrian was gradual; it was far harder to understand than Italian or Spanish. Fortunately, Maester Kennick and a few of the more cultured Legionnaires were able to guide and assist him.

Despite all this time focused on language skills, Gregor did not spend the entirety of his day developing new forms of communication with others. In fact, that only occupied a minor part of his typical day. The rest involved training with swords, conversing with his lieutenants, more covert meetings to discuss the fate of Westeros, and similar topics.

One of these topics was the main relationships throughout the nine regions of Westeros, especially the ones that involved his family.

A few more months after Gregor celebrated his twenty-ninth nameday, he received a raven from Casterly Rock. It brought news of a certain wedding. This wedding was significant in that it made Gregor kin to the Great House of the Westerlands.

Earlier that week, Tyrion Lannister and Ellyn Clegane had been joined together in the sept of Casterly Rock. Their betrothal had lasted a full five years, as they had decided to wait until Ellyn turned eight and ten.

Normally, Tywin Lannister would have had the two of them joined as soon as possible. However, due to certain circumstances, he had allowed them that half-decade wait.

Ever since Ellyn returned Brightroar to House Lannister and Gregor convinced Jaime to retake his place as the heir to Casterly Rock, Lord Tywin had been much more thoughtful and amenable of the Cleganes. Gregor was still certain the Lion Lord would use Ellyn as a political hostage, but at least now, he would treat her with some amount of kindness. As harsh, unforgiving, and immoral as Tywin could be, he did not become cruel without provocation. Long as Ellyn behaved – and Gregor had little doubt she would – she was in no danger.

Gregor wished he could have attended his sister's wedding, but his duties in the North impeded his availability. Sandor managed to attend, though. In fact, he was the one who sent the letter. He
provided his brother with a lengthy account of what had happened.

The cloaking part had been an interesting spectacle. By now, Ellyn was over six feet tall, whereas Tyrion was slightly closer to four than five. In order for him to drape his house cloak around her shoulders, she had to kneel down in a relaxed pose. Luckily, she had done that willingly and happily, much to Tyrion's relief. She had spared him a great deal of embarrassment, which he was grateful for.

The feast had been seven courses long with an occasional minstrel playing a few songs. Unsurprisingly, "The Rains of Castamere" had been a recurrent number. Only Tywin Lannister would play such a song at a wedding feast.

At Tyrion's insistence, they had skipped over the bedding ceremony. Gregor was pleased by that. He did not like the thought of a bunch of strange men publicly stripping his sister down and then groping and fondling her while they carried her to be bedded by her husband.

According to what Sandor told him, Ellyn was now tall and strong enough that she could lift almost any man she faced. With that in mind, Tyrion would be no challenge.

While the bedding ceremony had been called off, the bedding itself had not. Sandor could verify that; he and Obara had the misfortune of being given the guest bedroom right next to the bedding chamber. He had heard everything – everything – that went on in the adjoining room. Even he and Obara had never been THAT loud. Worse yet, Obara seemed engrossed in listening.

Sandor was glad they had not brought Tyta and Mors with them to the Rock. Still, the Hound had gotten no sleep that night. Apparently, neither did Tyrion or Ellyn.

When he encountered Tyrion and Ellyn at breakfast the following morning, they seemed rather smitten with each other. Evidently, she had been looking forward to and enjoyed the previous night just as much as Tyrion had. It must have helped that Ellyn had spent much of the last five years travelling between Clegane's Keep and Casterly Rock. That had enabled her and Tyrion to get much closer to each other.

In any case, Gregor was pleased to discover that his sister was now happily married. He knew Tyrion would do everything within his power to keep her safe from everything and everyone who could ever mean her harm, including his lord father.

Alas, the joyous period following Ellyn's wedding did not last as long as Gregor hoped it would. Not a fortnight later, another raven reached Moat Cailin. This one's words were as dark as its wings.

Lord Tarrence Clegane's palsy had gotten consistently worse over the course of the past five years. It had encompassed his legs as well as his arms, and it had continued to spread throughout more of his body. At the start of that same year, it had reached his head.

Just the other day, he had suffered what Gregor would have called a cerebral hemorrhage in his first life. In this universe, it was simply referred to as bleeding of the brain.

Whatever one called it, it was what finally killed Lord Tarrence Clegane.

Even after reading the letter four times, Gregor could not believe it. His father was dead.

A short memorial service had been held for Lord Tarrence. It was a private affair; only the Cleganes of Clegane's Keep had been in attendance. Tyrion had come as a sign of respect for his
wife and his late father-by-law. Lady Daliah had been quite appreciative of that act of kindheartedness.

Gregor was the only member of his family that had been unable to attend. His mother and siblings did not fault him for being unavailable, but he still felt guilty for not being able to help lay his father down to rest.

After the funeral, Sandor had renewed House Clegane's oath of fealty to Lord Tywin and King Robert. He was no longer the heir to Clegane's Keep; he was now the lord of it.

Like his family in the south, Gregor mourned deeply for his father. However, he could not afford to lament on his death for too long. Or, at least, he could not make it the sole occupier of his thoughts. Much work remained to be done to prepare Westeros for the Long Night. That was still the Mountain's primary responsibility.

By this point in time, around ten thousand wildlings had been brought south of the Wall. Every four months, more of them arrived in the Seven Kingdoms.

The wildlings were no longer confined to the North. Using his connections throughout Westeros, Gregor had managed to arrange for many of them to locate to other parts of the Seven Kingdoms.

Some of the more aggressive wildlings had settled in parts of the Vale. They got along rather well with the mountain clans of the region.

Some of the more peaceable wildlings had settled in parts of the Riverlands. They mostly resided along the Trident. Under Lord Stevron's command, House Frey had been very accommodating of the Free Folk.

Some of the more prolific wildlings had settled in parts of the Reach. They had shared their farming and hunting techniques with a great number of the natives, which enabled the locals to be even more productive than before.

It required great deal of time, patience, coercion, initiative, debate, and tolerance, but Gregor finally managed to establish some form of lasting peace between the Free Folk and the inhabitants of the Seven Kingdoms.

Every now and then, there were still a few isolated incidents between the wildlings and a certain lord. Gregor took charge of mediating in those disputes. Usually, he managed to offer a solution that most of the involved parties were content with. Of course, he could never please everyone, but what mattered was that the conflict was always put down without any lasting damage.

There were still over ninety thousand wildlings in the lands north of the Wall. Of those, Mance Rayder had sway over perhaps thirty or forty thousand. Fortunately, he was continuously working towards winning over more of them. With every new party that was successfully sent south, more of the Free Folk were induced to join Mance's cause.

Gregor would leave the burden of bringing the wildlings to the Seven Kingdoms up to Mance. The Mountain's job in that regard would only be to care for and monitor the Free Folk once they were there.

Relations between the Free Folk and the residents of the Seven Kingdoms gradually improved overtime. By the latter half of 294 A.C., they were more or less stable.

That was when Gregor decided it would be most ideal to tell the public the true reason for bringing the Free Folk into their domain. He sent a message to each of the King and each of the Lords
Paramount with the suggestion that they break the news, and each of them wrote back their agreement.

At the end of 294 A.C., news of the Long Night was announced throughout the realm.

Gregor could not predict how every person in Westeros would react, but he could imagine how they would take the news. As it happened, the average person's actual reaction was not very different from the expected reaction. There was shock. There was disbelief. There was terror. There was fear. There was skepticism. Most of all, there was fanaticism.

Many had refused to believe that the Others were actually going to return to the world.

There were a few individuals who suspected that this announcement was merely a ploy designed by the Mountain and the Great Families to ensure the smallfolk's loyalty. Then the wildlings claimed that they believed in the credibility of the announcement. The Free Folk had no reason to mislead them in this regard, so the theory that the announcement was a hoax had died very quickly.

Once its credibility was generally accepted by all, there was nationwide panic. Many wished to fortify themselves in their homes or relocate to someplace further south. There were several who even considered sailing across the Narrow Sea. At one point, the people were so frantic that they nearly turned on each other.

Luckily, under the guidance of Lord Gregor Clegane, King Robert Baratheon, and the other eight Lords Paramount, the country was saved from a tumultuous wave of chaos. Ironically, the Free Folk proved to be quite useful in that process. They were able to assure the smallfolk, the landed knights, and the noble lords alike that they all have excellent chances of surviving the Long Night. Their prior experience north of the Wall provided ample credits to those claims.

That reassurance was what primarily enabled Gregor, the King, and the Great Lords to restore peace and order throughout the realm. In turn, relations between the Free Folk and the Seven Kingdoms took a sharp turn for the better.

Indeed, now that there was a form of lasting peace between the two civilizations, everyone could focus properly on taking additional measures to prepare against the Long Night.

For the last five years, Lord Stannis Baratheon had seen to the mining of dragonglass on Dragonstone. Several crates of the compound had been transported to the Wall to be forged into daggers, swords, arrowheads, and spearheads.

Already, Lord Stannis had provided the Night's Watch with enough dragonglass to properly arm each and every one of the black brothers.

That in itself said something, as the Watch was about five times larger than it had been during Greyjoy's Rebellion. It had grown from six hundred in number to approximately three thousand.

The King had followed Gregor's recommendation of providing certain incentives in effort to convince more people to enlist in the Watch. As a result, men from all over the country had voluntarily taken the black for the sake of their loved ones. With some convincing from Gregor Clegane, Jeor Mormont, and Mance Rayder, many of the wildlings were persuaded to join the Watch, too. There were even a handful of Essosi who joined their ranks.

With all these new black brothers, the Watch was able to reopen several of their abandoned fortresses. Castle Black, Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, and the Shadow Tower were no longer the only occupied castles along the Wall. Now Westwatch-by-the-Bridge, Greyguard, Icemark, Deep Lake,
Greenguard, Long Barrow, Oakenshield, and Sable Hall were adequately manned and defended, as well.

The Torches, Rimegate, Stonedoor, Woodswatch-by-the-Pool, Sentinel Stand, Hoarfrost Hill, Queensgate, and the Nightfort were still closed, but it was hoped that they would be reopened by 300 A.C. Based on the Watch's projected rate of recruits, that could very well be the case.

Supplying the Wall with weapons and men was just one of the.

Trade agreements had been established between Westeros and Essos. In the event that the Seven Kingdoms ran out of food during the next winter, they would have to ensure more provisions were brought in from across the Narrow Sea. It would not do for them to survive the onslaught of White Walkers just for them to perish of starvation.

Furthermore, the bonds between the nine regions of Westeros continued to grow stronger, mainly through marriage. It seemed that every other month, a landed knight, minor lord, or noble lord from was getting wed to a highborn lady from another part of the country.

There was one match in particular that surprised even Gregor.

After some long, ponderous meditation, Tywin Lannister had decided to setup a match between Jaime and a highborn lady from outside the Westerlands. That alone may have astonished many. What really stunned Gregor was who Lord Tywin chose for his heir. He had selected Lynesse Hightower.

Since all the daughters of the current Great Lords were too young for Jaime, Tywin had to resort to picking a woman from a noble house. Gregor could understand why he chose a woman from the Reach, and why he chose that specific house, but why Lynesse?

Then again, of Lord Leyton Hightower's six daughters, the only other one who was still unwed was Malora, but she was likely too old for Jaime. Plus, she still carried the moniker Mad Malora, and considering what Jaime had done to the last person who had been labeled "Mad" by others… just the thought was disconcerting.

At any rate, Jaime Lannister and Lynesse Hightower were wed near the start of 295 A.C. Their wedding was much grander than the one between Tyrion and Ellyn, but the bride and groom were notably less taken with each other this time. Indeed, there was little love between the Kingslayer and the Oldtown girl. He had only married at the insistence of his lord father, and she was more interested in the benefits that she could gain from this union.

Fortunately, Jaime was not as exploitable or easy to coerce as Lord Jorah Mormont would have been. He kept his wife finely clothed, sheltered, and provided for, but he did not go out of his way to please her. He encouraged her to count her blessings and cherish each one.

Whatever the case, this marriage could not have been any worse that Jaime fucking his sister.

Additionally, Gregor had little doubt that House Lannister would not suffer the same fate as House Mormont had in the original universe. He was gladdened by the knowledge that Jaime was more assertive than the man who was supposed to have been Lynesse's husband original. Of course, Lord Jorah was by no means a pushover, but he had been hopelessly misled in his failed attempts to appease Lynesse.

It was quite fortunate that he had fallen in love with Nymeria Martell in this universe. The Dornishwoman was nowhere near as demanding as the Reachwoman, and she was far easier to
please. In fact, all she ever asked of her lord husband was that he let her fight alongside him in everything. Having seen her in battle and knowing what she was capable of, Lord Jorah coincided to that simple request.

Although House Mormont's honor had been spared, there were still some quarrels from the original universe that required Gregor's mediation.

The biggest example of these disputes came about in 296 A.C., when House Whitehill of Highpoint threatened to go to war with House Forrester of Ironrath. This had been precipitated by how Asher Forrester had lain with Gwyn Whitehill and claimed her maidenhead. Even though she had gone to Asher's bed willingly, her father Lord Ludd had been quick to call it rape.

The Forresters were sworn to Deepwood Motte, and the Whitehills were sworn to the Dreadfort. However, neither Galbart Glover nor Roose Bolton were eager to get involved in this matter. Even Lord Eddard Stark himself would not intervene. All of them were just allowing the two houses to resolve the conflict amongst themselves.

Lord Gregor Clegane, however, was more than willing to intercede. He, Dacey, and a whole platoon of Legionnaires made for the wolfswood as soon as they heard of Lord Whitehill's threat to declare war.

They arrived at Ironrath just in time. Lord Ludd was there; he had been "negotiating" with the Forresters. He had given Lord Gregor Forrester an ultimatum: either banish Asher from Westeros, or he would rally his forces and march on Ironrath.

Fortunately, Gregor Clegane stepped in before Lord Forrester had to make his decision. That was when he took over the talks, and the negotiating went much more smoothly from there.

Lord Gregor Forrester and his kin were gracious hosts, just as Gregor expected them to be.

Meanwhile, Lord Ludd Whitehill was every bit as pompous, irritating, unpleasant, obstinate, and insufferably rude as he had been in the video game.

Of course, Gregor was not limited to a set of dialogue options like in the game. That was very fortunate, as he thought most of those options were pathetically submissive, especially when compared to what he would have preferred to have said in the Forresters' position.

Truthfully, Gregor had not cared very much for the video game to begin with. He had been a bit of a casual gamer in his first life. Most of his experiences involved products by Bethesda, Valve, Ubisoft, and Electronic Arts. He had played a few Telltale games, as well. He thoroughly enjoyed their Walking Dead and Wolf Among Us games. But he despised their Game of Thrones game.

One reviewer had called it "a masochist's wet dream." While Gregor felt that was an accurate description, he preferred to call it "a torturous, unrewarding heap of fuck-trash."

But that was just his opinion. Season 2 of the game was rumored to be in development. Alas, he had not lived long enough to see it released. Even so, He was certain it could not have been any worse than the first game, especially since House Whitehill had lost the protection of House Bolton at the end of Season 6 in the show. They were all but doomed to fall.

Aside from that, Gregor had to admit that for all its numerous flaws, Season 1 of the game did have its redeeming moments. Mainly stabbing Britt to death and kicking him off the Wall, beating and blinding Gryff Whitehill, shoving a longsword through Harys' mouth, and beheading Ludd Whitehill.
Sitting at the meeting table across from Ludd, Gregor would have loved to behead him for real. He had the means, the opportunity, and the privilege to do so. He could do it just as stoically and emotionlessly as that cunt Ramsay had murdered Ethan Forrester.

All he had to do was approach Ludd, draw Summit, swing it through the air, and then his ugly melon of a head would roll across the ground. Later, when Ned Stark wished to know what happened, the Mountain could just claim that Lord Whitehill posed a direct threat to the security of Westeros, and he had merely eliminated that threat accordingly.

Nonetheless, Gregor was still determined not to make any unnecessary enemies. In addition to that, since Gwyn Whitehill was a reasonable person, Gregor was certain one of her brothers had to be somewhat reasonable, as well. Obviously Gryff was not. Karl was already long dead, and Ebbert was studying to become a maester. Hopefully Torrhen was more decent than his father and younger brother.

When Ludd was finished ranting about how Asher had "dishonored" his daughter, Lord Gregor Forrester had his chance to defend his son. The Mountain listened attentively to both men, but the Lord of Ironrath was plainly the more rational of the two.

To avoid confusion, only the Lord of Ironrath was called "Gregor." The Lord of Moat Cailin was simply referred to as "The Mountain" when both men were in the same room.

Lord Forrester revealed that Asher was willing to marry Gwyn to lay any questions of honor to rest. Asher was there, and he confirmed his father's claims; he was not opposed to wedding Gwyn. Gwyn herself had attended, as well, and she did not protest Lord Gregor Forrester's proposal. She actually seemed in favor of it.

Apparently, Lord Whitehill thought his family was too good to be associated with a member of House Forrester in that way. He would only be content with Asher being deported from the Seven Kingdoms or with Forrester blood on his blade.

The Mountain would allow him neither.

As the King's Master of Order, the Mountain's authority superseded that of either lord. As such, he decreed that no one would be banished and no one would declare war on another house without his consent. He was, however, partial to Lord Forrester's proposal of wedding Asher to Gwyn.

Asher and Gwyn themselves were delighted by that prospect, and Lord Forrester was pleased to consider any course of action that did not involve bloodshed.

Ludd was the only individual there who disapproved of that suggestion. He seemed adamant that unless Asher was sent away, he would march against House Forrester.

Now it was the Mountain's turn to give Ludd an ultimatum: he could either accept his proposal of marrying Gwyn to Asher, or he could go ahead with his declaration of war. But if he chose the latter, the Mountain informed him that the Legion without Banners would join the fighting on the Forresters' side.

The Mountain felt a type of vicious satisfaction at watching the smug grin on Ludd Whitehill's face be hastily replaced by a horrified grimace. Lord Gregor Forrester seemed just as startled as Ludd, but when he grasped the fact that the Mountain was on his side, a grin came across his face. As for Asher, he merely smirked. Gwyn looked nearly as nervous as her father.

Ultimately, Ludd Whitehill grudgingly agreed to Lord Gregor Clegane's terms, much to Asher and
Gwyn's delight and Lord Forrester's relief. However, he refused to have any part in financing the wedding. The Mountain was content with that. Since the proposal had been his, he offered to pay for it out of his own pocket. That was quite doable, as Moat Cailin's treasury was practically overflowing with gold.

Three weeks later, Asher Forrester and Gwyn Whitehill were married before the heart tree of Ironrath. Galbart Glover, master of Deepwood Motte, conducted the ceremony. Ludd had elected not attend, so Torrhen Whitehill came in his father's place to give Gwyn away. He did not seem averse in any way to the concept of his sister marrying a Forrester.

That was a sign that the Mountain had not been overly optimistic about Ludd Whitehill's thirdborn son.

The Mountain and the top officers of the Legion without Banners had been invited to the wedding, and the Mountain had gladly accepted.

When Asher and Gywn took their vows before the heart tree, no one there could question that they meant every word they said. They were smitten with one another.

During the feast, Lord Gregor Forrester raised two different toasts. The first was to this grand step that was being taken to repair the old rivalry between House Forrester and House Whitehill. Indeed, Gregor Clegane felt they were a regular Romeo and Juliet. Hopefully, they would not have the same ending as Romeo and Juliet (even though it was in this world, where people literally dropped dead all the time).

The second toast was to Lord Gregor Clegane and the Legion without Banners. The Mountain was surprised to be singled out in such a way, but he said nothing when the Lord of Ironrath made this announcement. Lord Gregor Forrester declared that he and his owned the Mountain a great debt, as without him the union between Asher and Gwyn would never have been possible.

The Mountain humbly accepted that honor, and he did not deny the truth of Lord Gregor's allegation.

Immediately after the feast, Asher and Gwyn retreated to the bedchamber. Although there were no bedding ceremonies in the North, one look at the lustful gaze exchanged between the bride and groom, and there was little doubt that their marriage would be very much consummated that very night.

Gregor Clegane and his Legionnaires returned to Moat Cailin later that night. On the ride back, Gregor wondered how long it would be before Asher and Gwyn became parents. He guessed not too much time would pass before they had their first child. After all, it seemed just about everyone else was having babes these days. More of them, in some cases.

For instance, Lady Catelyn Stark gave her lord husband a third son in early 295 A.C. He was named Rickon, a variant of Rickard, after Lord Eddard's late father.

That same year, Lysa Arryn gave birth to her third child, a daughter named Donella.

In the final month of 295, A.C. Nymeria Mormont gave Lord Jorah another daughter named Alys.

In the first month of 296 A.C., Dacey had her and Gregor's fourth child. This one was a boy they named Larys.

Later that same year, Obara Clegane gave Sandor a second son named Dermot, and Nymeria birthed her and Jorah's third girl, whom they named Bessa.
Queen Cersei Baratheon had her final child, a son whom she and Robert named Tommen, in 297 A.C. Like his elder brother and sisters, he possessed black hair and blue eyes.

For the latter half of the Great Summer, House Lannister was as busy as any other family.

For each year following her marriage to Jaime, Lynesse Lannister birthed one child. All three were girls, whom she and Jaime named Merian, Eryn, and Selina.

Gregor could imagine that Tywin Lannister was at least a little furious that his firstborn son still did not have a male heir after three attempts. Jaime probably did not care which gender his children were, and Lynesse was most likely indifferent one way or another.

In early 298 A.C., Tyrion and Ellyn were blessed with their first child. They had a healthy baby boy named Duncan. Like all children of Clegane descent, he was larger than normal at birth. Fortunately, Ellyn had a far easier time birthing her son than Dacey or Obara had birthing their own children. At first, Tyrion had simply been overjoyed that his son had not been born a dwarf. After that relief set in, he was happy just to have a child of his own.

Gregor was ecstatic for both his sister and Tyrion. They were two of the best people he knew; they deserved to find happiness with each other and with their newborn son.

Near the start of 299 A.C., Dacey had her and Gregor's fifth and final child. They had another boy, and they decided to call him Torrhen after the King who Knelt.

Shortly before Torrhen Clegane entered the world, Gregor received news from across the Narrow Sea.

Lord Monford Velaryon and Ser Davos Seaworth's forces had finally caught up with Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen. They had intercepted the Mad King's two younger children in Pentos. They were staying at the estate of Illyrio Mopatis.

Magister Illyrio had the means to keep the Targaryen children in and the Westerosi soldiers out indefinitely. Fortunately, Lord Varys had apprised him of the Royal Army's intentions beforehand. When the Magister was assured that the prince and princess would not be harmed, he allowed Lord Monford, Ser Davos, and a fraction of their forces entrance to his home.

They had spent the next week explaining their presence in Essos. They revealed that although they had been ordered to locate the Targaryens, they were not going to force them to travel anywhere with them. Essentially, Viserys and Daenerys could continue to travel as they had before. But there were a couple of conditions. Firstly, they could not come to Westeros just yet, and secondly, they had to have a large, heavily-armed Westerosi escort with them everywhere they went. King Robert had been very adamant on both of those terms.

At the end of the week, Lord Monford and Ser Davos sent back a thorough report of their first encounter with the Targaryen children. Basically, Viserys Targaryen had been exceptionally difficult to work with, but Daenerys Targaryen was more than willing to hear them out. The prince was clearly the Mad King's son; the princess was not-so clearly the Mad King's daughter. In any case, the Royal Fleet had successfully established contact with the Targaryen children.

Lord Monford, Ser Davos, and the majority of their ships were back in the Seven Kingdoms by year's end. They left behind a company of one hundred men – made up of warriors from all over Westeros – to protect, guard, and supervise Viserys and Daenerys' activities at all times. Naturally, Viserys had protested, but he had little choice but to comply with Robert's orders. Daenerys, on the other hand, welcomed the Westerosi soldiers. From her point of view, they would be able to
protect her from everything, including her brother.

Once more, Gregor was pleased. So far, all his measures and objectives to prepare Westeros for its darkest hour were coming along very nicely. Nearly everything had gone according to plan. At this rate, Westeros would very soon be fully prepared against any type of threat to its balance of harmony. He managed to achieve this goal in the middle of 299 A.C.

That was fortunate indeed, as winter was coming.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: the ending of the Great Summer. The Long Night still won't come about for quite a few more chapters, but the threat of it will be rapidly approaching.
It was cold. Painstakingly cold, actually. He thanked the gods for gloves, otherwise his hands would have gone numb long before now.

Normally the cold did not bother him. Three years on the Wall had accustomed him to it.

But there was something about THIS cold that perturbed him. It chilled more than his body. It seemed to disquiet his peace of mind, as well.

*I am not looking forward to the next winter. Then again, who is?*

As unsettling and frigid as his surroundings were, Whalen took comfort in the knowledge that he was not alone.

He was in the company of half a dozen others. Like them, they were all mounted on sturdy horses.

Including he, only five of those seven were dressed in black.

Gared rode at the head of the party. He was the eldest of them, and he had been on the Wall for forty years, longer than the other four Watchmen combined. One could see his services had taken a toll on him. He had lost both his ears, three of his toes, and the little finger of his left hand to the cold. But what truly mattered was that he was the survivor of far more than a hundred ranges.

Behind him was Ser Waymar Royce, the "leader" of the company. He had been a black brother for little more than a few months. Even so, he had insisted on taking command of a ranging, due to his knightly status and highborn birth. For whatever reason, Lord Commander Mormont had decided to grant the young Valeman's request.

The wildlings were next. Only one of them, Leathers, was in black. He had been among the first of the Free Folk who had chosen to enlist in the Watch. Frenya rode directly beside him. Although women were forbidden from taking the black, she and some of the other spearwives could still be helpful in their own ways.

Will was next. A fellow native of the Riverlands, and an excellent tracker, as well. He was considered laconic and normally kept to himself, but whenever he spoke, he never wasted words.

Ser Myles Manwoody came up after. He had his arms wrapped tightly around his upper body. The climate seemed to agree with him least out of all of them. Considering his homeland, that was unsurprising. How the Dornishman could endure these temperatures was a bit of a mystery. *He must count himself fortunate he is only here temporarily.*

Ser Whalen Frey was positioned at the very back. His job was to remain alert and be heedful of the environment. No easy task, given where they were. Even so, he did not utter a word of complaint. He just kept his eyes and ears open for the slightest abnormality.

It had been ten hours since they left Castle Black. Or maybe nine. It was hard to keep track of time out here. *I just know it hasn't been eight.*

The Sun was freshly emerged in the east when they set out. Now it was just barely visible over the western horizon. The Wall was still within their line of sight, but just barely.

They had stopped once for the midday meal and twice to water the horses. In all that time, they had
exchanged very little dialogue. Other than the occasional call of a bird or snap of a tree branch, there had been practically no noise whatsoever.

Having grown up in the most overcrowded holdfast in the Seven Kingdoms, Whalen typically always welcomed some peace and quiet. However, this much silence north of the Wall was quite unusual. The Riverlander tried to enjoy it, but he found it disturbed him as much as the cold did, if not more so.

Ser Myles finally broke the silence with a question: "Have we much farther to travel?"

Leathers gazed around them and disclosed "Another day. No longer."

Ser Waymar peered over his shoulder and stated mockingly "Are you in a hurry?"

"No," the Dornishman mumbled in annoyance, "I just wish to ascertain that we'll arrive on time."

"They'll be there, Ser Myles," Frenya insisted, "Trust me; they have no place better to be."

"I do," Myles grimly murmured. He spoke so softly that only Whalen and Will could hear him.

"You'll be back at Moat Cailin soon enough, ser," Will told the Dornishmen in effort to reassure him.

*Yes, and with half a thousand wildlings for company instead of us.*

Myles attempted a grin in Will's direction and gave him a nod of understanding.

The group proceeded in relative silence again. Before too long, Gared gestured for everyone to halt. Once they did, he announced "We should make camp here."

"I will decide when we make camp, Gared," Waymar Royce haughtily declared, "We still have some amount of daylight left. So long as we do, we must take advantage of it."

"How far can you expect us to travel in three minutes?" Leathers wryly muttered.

"Every minute we move today is a minute less we'll have to traverse tomorrow," Waymar debated.

"I would have to agree," Will conceded.

"I can see why one would," Ser Myles thought aloud, "But one could also debate that every minute we move today is simply a minute less we'll have to rest for tonight."

"Besides, who's to say we would actually have less distance to cross tomorrow?" Frenya contended, "Do you expect us to get back to the Wall by the next sundown?"

"If we make good time, yes," Waymar Royce pronounced.

"Don't overestimate us or yourself, milord," Gared cautioned the Valeman, "We're already over fifty miles north of Castle Black, and we have at least another twenty to go before we reach our destination."

"Apart from that, we'll be going back with a far larger crowd," Ser Whalen finally spoke up, "And unlike those present, not all of them will have horses."

"He has a point," Leathers avowed, looking to the youngest knight, "And as you yourself said, we are not in any rush to return."
Waymar Royce was a little indignant that most of the party was protesting his command. Nevertheless, Whalen could tell that he was more than a little fatigued, just like the rest of them. *Men are generally more agreeable when they're tired. Or maybe they're less stubborn. I suppose it depends on the man.*

Ultimately, Ser Waymar let out a deep sigh and professed "Very well. The Mountain and the Old Bear gave us five days, anyway. We can spare a few extra minutes of respite."

That decision was received much more favorably than his most previous one.

They made camp in a small clearing. It was surrounded on three sides by ironwood trees. It did not do much in the way of shelter, but it kept out the wind and provided adequate protection from the creatures of the forest.

Once camp was assembled, Will and Frenya went to hunt, Leathers tended to the horses, and Gared and Ser Myles made a fire.

Whalen stood guard at the open end of the clearing. Just as he had done on the ride north, he kept his eyes open for anything out of the ordinary.

Waymar stood nearby, studying a map of the lands north of the Wall. The map was old and lightly damaged in parts, but it was a reasonably accurate depiction of the northernmost part of Westeros.

As he looked over the map, he made some notes on the group's progress. Whalen heard him faintly mutter to himself "This could still set us back. We'll have to go faster tomorrow."

"We'll make it back to the Wall on time, Ser Waymar," Whalen told him assuredly.

The Valeman looked over at the Riverman. He grimaced and uttered irately "'On time' is not my goal, Ser Whalen. We can do better than 'on time.' I intend to do better."

"As you say," Whalen commented bluntly. He waited until he turned back around to roll his eyes. *And to think I came to the Wall to avoid his type.*

In actuality, that was not his only reason for taking the black. He had also done it for a more selfless reason.

Ser Whalen Frey was aware that Ser Waymar Royce had enlisted in the watch was that he wished to earn a name for himself on his own, as he believe he came from a house with too many heirs.

*If one could call two older brothers too many heirs.* Waymar Royce was the thirdborn son of Lord Bronze Yohn Royce of Runestone. As of yet, his elder brothers Andar and Robar were unmarried and did not have any heirs of their own.

Strictly speaking, Ser Waymar was the fourth in his house's line of succession. Had he been a less tactful man, Whalen Frey would have chided the Valeman to be grateful that he was a third son.

Whalen Frey had the misfortune of being a fourteenth son. Worse yet, his elder brothers had made him an uncle dozens of times collectively, and several of his nephews had made him a granduncle. So Whalen's chances of gaining lordship of the Twins had always been next to nonexistent.

Furthermore, if Waymar Royce was so determined to make a name for himself, Whalen could not help but wonder why he had not joined the Legion without Banners instead. Unlike the Watch, the Legion was a temporary service. At the very least, he would have had the option to look elsewhere if being a Legionnaire had not agreed with him. Whereas at the Wall, he would have to continue
serving, whether the black agreed with him or not.

It happened that Ser Myles Manwoody was fourth in his family's line of succession, as well. His elder brother Dagos was the current lord of Kingsgrave, and Lord Dagos had two sons, Myles' nephews Mors and Dickon. Be that as it may, Ser Myles had not been compelled to leave his home entirely. He fully intended to return to Kingsgrave someday and see his nephews give him grandnephews. Maybe he would also give them some cousins.

Then it occurred to Ser Whalen; perhaps Waymar actually had given the Legion some consideration, but he had ultimately decided on the Night's Watch. Whalen Frey had made that very decision himself; it was not hard to fathom that others had made it, too.

Will and Frenya returned a few minutes later with some squirrels and rabbits. Whalen would have preferred deer, but he was glad just to have some meat. Up here, no one could afford to be finicky.

Once the fire was made, Will and Frenya gave the squirrels and rabbits to Gared. He proceeded to skin them, placed them on a spit, and roasted them over the flames. The smell of cooking meat soon permeated the air.

About ten minutes later, the party had their supper. They stayed around the fire to keep themselves and the food warm. Ser Whalen sat between Ser Myles and Frenya.

Leathers and Will had brought some additional provisions from Castle Black. They passed around a bowl of greens and some slices of bread.

Whalen helped himself to a rabbit leg, a handful of lettuce, and a couple slices of rye.

The leg was seared on the outside and bloody on the inside. It could have used a pinch of spice, too. The heat was far more pleasing than the taste. The lettuce was cool and crisp, but it had wilted a bit. The bread had been baked fresh that morning, and it had been wrapped properly, but the climate had rendered it a little brittle. It was difficult to chew.

*I suppose this is still better than what they served at the Twins.*

It took Ser Whalen a total of five minutes to eat. As he wiped his fingers clean of crumbs and grease, he looked to the man at his left. Ser Myles Manwoody was huddled closer to the flames than anyone else. Despite being dressed in three layers of warm clothing, the environment did not agree with him at all.

"Are you alright, Ser Myles?" Whalen queried in concern.

The Dornishman said nothing at first. He did not even look in the Riverman's direction. Then he mumbled crossly "This is the last time I volunteer for escort duty."

Ser Waymar scoffed at that and murmured derisively "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I'm not here for adventure," Ser Myles snapped, "I'm here for the good of the realm."

"As are the rest of us," Will muttered.

"Yet you don't wish to keep doing that good," Leathers pointed out to the knight of Kingsgrave.

"I can still do things for the good of the realm in the south," Myles Manwoody debated.

*Unlike some people here.*
Ser Myles was there for the same reason as the rest of them: he had volunteered. However, his role as a volunteer was not for life, as Ser Myles had not taken the oaths of the Night's Watch. He was merely there as a representative of the Legion without Banners.

Ser Myles Manwoody had been a member of Oberyn Martell’s entourage when the prince came north to join the Legion. Ser Myles had enlisted in their ranks alongside the Red Viper. They had been Legionnaires for the past thirteen years.

Lord Gregor Clegane had struck an agreement with the Night's Watch and the Free Folk. Thrice each year, he would arrange for a large number of wildlings to be relocated south of the Wall. The wildlings would be handpicked by Mance Rayder, and they would be inspected by Lord Commander Mormont at Castle Black. Once they were cleared, they would take up residence somewhere in the Seven Kingdoms.

That was the purpose of Ser Whalen's current venture beyond the Wall. He and his six companions had been dispatched to intercept the newest band of wildling immigrants and lead them all the way back to Castle Black. In total, this was the thirtieth occasion in which this dangerous errand was undertaken.

For the very first occasion, Lord Gregor had come himself with a great troupe of Legionnaires and Watchmen alike.

On every subsequent occasion, Lord Gregor had been preoccupied with the affairs of the rest of the realm. Due to his inability to come and meet the wildlings before they were moved south, he had sent at least one other Legionnaire in his place.

Originally, the number of Legionnaires and Watchmen had been quite large, and the number of wildlings had been quite small. Now it was the other way around. These days, the number of wildlings per trip was at least five times greater than the number of Watchmen and Legionnaires put together.

Ser Whalen Frey knew this was not because the Legion or the Watch lacked for manpower. As it happened, both organizations now had over five thousand members each. They could have spared a few more people to be sent beyond the Wall.

The true reason for cutting back on their numbers was because in recent years, the regions north of the Wall had become considerably safer to traverse. The number of raids by the Free Folk had dropped significantly, and the only ones among them who tried to pass the Wall were those of them who were admitted through its gates.

In the early days, some of the more savage wildlings had tried to prevent their countrymen from abandoning their lands. With the combined forces of the Legion, the Watch, and the migratory Free Folk, the threat posed by these aggressors was quickly purged. Nowadays, the most hostile wildlings tended to keep their distance from the Legionnaires, the Watchmen, and the southern-bound wildlings.

As such, five black brothers, one veteran Legionnaire, and a reformed spearwife were deemed enough for this assignment.

This was Ser Myles Manwoody's fourth trip beyond the Wall. Based on his claims, it would also be his last.

Ser Whalen found that queer. Although he was aware that the Dornish sun could burn one's skin even in winter, Ser Myles Manwoody had adapted to life in the North fairly quickly. In fact, based
on the way he talked of his prior experiences north of the Wall, he had been able to tolerate and overcome the hardships of the inhospitable weather on those three occasions rather easily.

*Perhaps he too has noticed this new type of cold.*

That was the best explanation Ser Whalen Frey could think of. It made the most logical sense, after all. The Great Summer would be coming to an end very soon, and during the changing of the seasons, even the land of eternal winter witnessed a great drop in temperature.

"When we get back, you're free to do whatever you please," Ser Waymar Royce contended, "For now, I need you focused on the mission."

"I'm always focused," Ser Myles Manwoody proclaimed, rubbing his hands over the campfire, "It happens I can focus on two objectives at once."

"What matters to me is that you can remain focused on the one," Ser Waymar murmured drily.

"I can, ser," Ser Myles crossly repeated.

Just then, Frenya got up off the ground, walked around Ser Whalen, and knelt beside Ser Myles. She bore a devious grin and uttered suggestively "You know, fire is not the only means of keeping warm, ser. There are… other ways."

South of the Wall, if any woman other than a tavern whore had been that direct, she would have shocked every person around her. Southron ladies generally preferred to be subtle. Whereas here… subtlety was cast aside in favor of directness.

Ser Myles was a little surprised by how forward Frenya had propositioned him, but he quickly adapted a wicked smirk and responded with "Well, I would be pleased if you would share with me this 'other way.'"

Whalen had to suppress the urge to laugh at his candidness. *Only the Dornish…*

Ser Whalen Frey observed Frenya and Ser Myles Manwoody as they retreated to a more secluded part of the clearing. When they got there, he quickly averted his gaze. He had no desire to continue watching them then.

"I hadn't noticed there was anything between them," Gared muttered plainly.

"Well, you don't have to be attracted to someone to fuck them," Waymar Royce argued.

"That is true," Leathers commented, "Some of my people fuck as often and as casually as they eat or piss."

"Then perhaps my father was a wildling," Ser Whalen jested.

Gared, Waymar Royce, and Leathers got a good laugh at that. Will stayed silent, as he normally did.

"Perhaps she'll want a turn with one of us later," Gared conjectured. By his voice, he did not sound very hopeful of his chances of being "one of us." That statement sounded more an empty remark than an actual proposal.

"I believe our oaths would complicate matters," Whalen Frey.

"Half the Watch would disagree with you," Waymar Royce slyly uttered.
"Indeed," Leathers conceded, "Just because you got these black garbs, don't mean you have to keep your cock in 'em."

"Yes, but before I wore black, I took another oath in a sept," Ser Whalen revealed, "I am a married man."

"So am I," Waymar Royce said sardonically. "We all are. We're married to our duty."

"With mistress for our honor," Gared added in, echoing Benjen Stark's philosophy.

"You know what I mean," Whalen Frey murmured in annoyance, "My wife may be in the Riverlands hundreds of miles to the south. Even so, as long as she lives, I shall lay with no other woman."

Ser Waymar scoffed and cheekily uttered "Look at that; a Frey who takes his vows seriously."

"There is such a thing, boy," Whalen Frey remarked, putting a spiteful emphasis on that final word.

Waymar Royce scowled at the slight, and he challenged the elder knight with "Care to repeat that?"

"Alright, enough!" Will abruptly interjected.

At the quiet ranger's sudden outburst, a wave of silence rapidly passed over the clearing. The only sounds that could be heard were the light moans produced by Frenya and Ser Myles Manwoody from their private little corner.

"I'm certain Frenya would fuck any of us, long as she's willing," Will stated frankly, "If any of you lot want a go with her after Ser Myles, then ask her. But as you said, Ser Waymar, we need to remain focused on our quest. So focused I shall remain. I'll take the first watch."

At that, he picked up his sword, attached it to his belt, and sauntered to the entrance of the clearing. The other four black brothers kept their eyes on him as he moved further away.

Just before he stopped walking, Ser Waymar Royce shrugged and mumbled in acknowledgment "Certainly, Will."

He's just as nervous as the rest of us. Small wonder.

After a brief pause, Waymar Royce looked to the others and pronounced "We should settle down soon. I'll check on the horses before I turn in."

That was likely just an excuse to get away from the others.

Ser Whalen did not doubt that Ser Waymar would somehow try to make him pay for calling him "boy." He was not especially worried, though. He saw no reason to be afraid of a knight half his age, even if said knight was higher born and in common of this company.

By this point, Gared, Leathers, and Ser Whalen Frey were the only ones who were gathered around the fire. Gared concentrated on keeping his hands and feet (or what remained of them) warm.

After a couple minutes, Leathers rose to his feet, stepped over to where Whalen was seated, and sat down beside him.

As he got comfortable in this new position, he looked to the Frey knight and asked rhetorically "Do you miss your wife, Ser Whalen?"
"Very much," Whalen replied honestly.

Holding his open palms near the embers of the campfire, Leathers bade the younger man "Tell me about her."

Whalen Frey turned to wildling and uttered inquisitively "What possible interest would you have in that?"

"I like to know the people I work with," Leathers elucidated, "It's my belief you don't truly know a man until you know his family, too."

Ser Whalen chuckled a bit and claimed "It would take far longer than the night to tell you about my family."

"So I've heard," Leathers said with a smirk, "But your wife would suffice."

*That's a much more reasonable request.*

"Very well," Whalen coincided. He paused for a moment to add another log to the fire, and then he began with "Her name is Sylwa. She was born a Paege of Serpentine. She's the daughter of Ser Halmon Paege, the house's master. On that note, it happens that my elder full brother Jammos is married to her elder sister Sallei. But my wedding came first. We were wed at the Twins in late 286 A.C."

"Had you met her before that day?" Leathers inquired.

"Once," Whalen recounted, "When she and her sister visited the Twins at my father's request. No words were exchanged between us. She barely even took note of me."

"I assume she made up for that on your wedding night?" the wildling cockily muttered.

"Oh, she did," the Riverman humorously affirmed, "For the entirety of the bedding ceremony, I felt as though I were the Lord of the Crossing."

"Any children?" Leathers enquired.

"Of course," Whalen chided, as though that was the stupidest question he had ever heard, "I come from the most productive family in the country. Nearly all my elder brothers have at least one child. The only exceptions are my half-brothers Luceon and Danwell. One's a septon in King's Landing; the other has a wife who's suffered many miscarriages and stillbirths. But other than them, nearly every grown son of my father has progeny of his own."

"How many do you have?" Leathers asked

"Two," Whalen expounded, "My son Hoster has seen twelve namedays, and my daughter Merianne has seen eleven namedays."

"Where are they now?" Leathers queried.

"At Serpentine with their mother," Whalen answered him, "Before I came north, I had Sylwa return to her ancestral home. I felt she and the children would be safer there than they'd be at the Twins."

"Because it was so overcrowded?" Leathers assumed.

"That, and I didn't trust my kin with her," Ser Whalen proclaimed, "While I may believe in the
sacredness of wedding vows, some of my brothers are not so faithful. In fact, before our betrothals were drawn up, Jammos had mentioned that he hoped he would get Sylwa instead of Sallei."

"Then I understand your concerns," Leathers professed.

The two men sat in silence for about thirty seconds, and then the wildling black brother said to the Frey knight "If you do not mind my asking… why did you leave them?"

Whalen scowled at that statement, but he did not let it provoke an angry response out of him. Leathers had merely chosen his words poorly. He could imagine what the elder man meant to ask.

Whalen Frey shifted his attention back to the fire and sincerely replied with "To protect them."

"From what?" Leathers said inquisitively.

"Two things," Ser Whalen told him, "First, from destitution. A large house requires a large treasury, and given how large my father made House Frey, there was a chance our treasury will eventually run dry. The benefits King Robert offered to the family of any man who voluntarily joined the Watch were quite appealing. Spent with caution, the money my wife and children received is enough to sustain the three of them for many years."

"Was Ser Halmon unwilling to support them at Serpentine?" Leathers contended.

"No, he welcomed them happily," Whalen Frey explicated, "But I was not about to force his grandchildren onto him without giving him something in return. No man tries to utterly abandon his responsibilities at the feet of his father-by-law."

"No man with a thimble of self-respect, you mean," Leathers disputed. As the younger man nodded his head, the wildling inquired "And the second thing you wish to protect them from?"

Ser Whalen Frey gradually turned to the wildling and softly told him "The very thing your people are running from."

That one sentence spoke plenty on its own. Leathers seemed to be content with it, at any rate. He did not ask for any clarification. *Thank the Gods for that; the last thing we need is to talk about that dreaded event.*

"Then I respect your reason for taking the black," Leathers disclosed, "I myself have a number of similar reasons for doing so. I have a list, in fact."

"A list?" Whalen said, intrigued.

"It is a list of the names of my sons and grandsons," Leathers clarified.

_Ah, that makes sense._

"I am here for all of them," Leathers stated, "Just as you are here for your wife and young ones."

*Well, then we have more in common than I dared to think.*

Strangely, that thought made Ser Whalen feel a little more at ease.

"Have they settled close to the Wall?" Whalen queried.

"Yes, they're at a camp near the top of the Gift, just outside of Mole's Town," Leathers informed him.
"Do you keep in contact with them?" Whalen said in interest.

"I try to," Leathers revealed, "Neither they nor I can write, so letters are not an option. So they ride up to the Wall to visit every once in a while. They never stay long, but I cherish those visits."

"You should," Ser Whalen declared, "I would love to have my own family call upon me. Alas, the North is too inhospitable for them."

"Because of the cold?" Leathers assumed.

"Mainly," Whalen confirmed.

"Soon enough the whole rest of the country will be just as inhospitable," the elder man pointed out.

"I realize that," Whalen asserted.

The two black brothers sat in quietness for a couple minutes. Then Whalen turned to look at Leathers and noticed an uneasy expression across his face. He asked "What ails you?"

Leathers continued staring at the fire, but he heard the knight's question. He solemnly answered with "I was among the first of the Free Folk to ally with Mance. I was one of the first of my people who moved south of the Wall, and I was the first of them to dress in black. Somehow, I cannot cast aside the notion that I may be one of the first to perish, as well."

Whalen could comprehend that anxious thought. A few times over the past three years, he had wondered it, as well. Still, he had hoped it would not be addressed that night.

"If we are not careful, any one of us could be the first," Whalen debated.

"We'll just have to be more careful then," Gared commented from the side. I almost forgot he was here.

"Indeed," was all Leathers said in response.

By now, Frenya and Ser Myles Manwoody had finished warming each other up. As they got redressed in their outermost layers of clothing, they stumbled back over to the campfire. It would seem Ser Myles has managed to overcome his distaste for this climate. Indeed, the Dornishman appeared much less averse to the cold than he had been earlier. Truthfully, Ser Whalen was, too.

Waymar Royce returned to the clearing soon after. He declared that it was about the hour when they should get to bed.

Ser Whalen drew the third watch of the night after Will and Ser Myles. The Dornishman woke him shortly before midnight and went to sleep almost immediately after.

As he made his rounds around the clearing, Ser Whalen found his mind wandering back to the talk he had had with Leathers. Specifically, he thought about three people who had been mentioned in that conversation.

The night he left the Riverlands, Ser Whalen had shared a passionate evening with his wife. True to his word, he had not laid a hand on another woman since then. Still, he loved and longed for her tremendously.

His son Hoster had been named in honor of his liege lord, Hoster Tully of Riverrun. Hoster Frey was currently serving as a squire to his uncle, Ser Damon Paege. Earlier that year, Ser Damon had
written Ser Whalen to tell him about his son's achievements. Whalen had been pleased to discover that his son was performing magnificently.

His daughter Merianne had been more precious to him than anyone else in his life. She was still a little girl, but her father knew she would be a woman soon. He hoped her mother and grandfather would be able to arrange a good marriage for her. Once, he had considered approaching Lord Hoster Tully on the possibility of a match between Merianne and his heir. Ser Whalen did not believe the Lord of Riverrun would actually accept the suggestion, but he figured it never hurt to ask.

Then Ser Edmure had to go and marry Balon Greyjoy's daughter, Lady Asha Greyjoy. At first, that union had shocked the Riverlords. Even so, the match had not been made without due cause. Apparently, its purpose had been to resolve the age-old hostilities between the Riverlands and the Iron Islands.

So far, it appeared to be well on the way to accomplishing that goal. Lady Asha captained her own vessel, the Black Wind. After they were wed, Ser Edmure did not force his wife to relinquish her command. On the contrary, he encouraged her to hold onto it, which she did. At the beckoning of her uncle, Lord Victarion, Asha had used the Black Wind to improve trade agreements with the Riverlords and improve security along the coast.

Recently, Whalen had heard somewhere that Ser Edmure and Lady Asha were expecting their first child. Regardless of whether their firstborn would be male or female, this babe would be the first one born from a willing union of a Riverman and an Ironwoman in over three hundred years.

Whalen had to admit; this marriage was far more advantageous for the Riverlands and the rest of Westeros than a marriage between Riverrun and the Twins ever would have been. Aside from that, Ser Edmure was around twenty years older than Merianne Frey. Ser Whalen's own father had been even older than his lady mother Alyssa Blackwood, but he did not wish for his daughter to suffer such a fate.

As long as his wife and children were secure and happy, Ser Whalen Frey would be content. Part of him constantly regretted leaving them behind. But a greater part of him knew that he would be able to do far more at the Wall to keep them safe than he could do south of it. A lifetime of service to the Watch was worth the knowledge that his loved ones would be protected.

Perhaps sometime after the Long Night was over, he could travel to Serpentine and visit them, if only for a short while.

If I live that long, that is…

When that thought entered his mind, Ser Whalen Frey's eyes drifted down to the dagger on his belt. It was made of the obsidian mined from Dragonstone. Lord Commander Mormont had decreed that every person who went north of the Wall was required to carry one such weapon.

Ever since he arrived at the Wall, Ser Whalen had carried a dragonglass blade on his person at all times. So far, he had never had cause to use it. But he knew that sooner or later, he would have to.

If Lord Gregor Clegane is to be believed – and I see no reason why he should not – the Great Summer is in its last year. But it is still summer, and it will be for a few more months. I suppose we should be thankful for that much. Because once summer ends…

He instinctively placed his hand over the hilt of his obsidian dagger. He did not draw the blade, but he kept his fingers wrapped around it firmly. Somehow, just touching this weapon brought him
some relief.

*Until the next spring, I'm always keeping this thing within reach of me.*

At one in the morning, he woke up Frenya so she could take the next watch, and then he swiftly retired to his bed. He slept soundly for the rest of the night.

It was still dark when Ser Waymar Royce had everyone awoken. The crack of dawn did not arrive until after they broke their fast. Ser Whalen could see the sun rising in the distance when the group finally set out again.

Their journey took them past Craster's Keep. The incestuous old man and his daughter-wives were nowhere to be seen. That was unusual; normally some of the girls were always out in the yard, tending to the animals or the crops.

*Perhaps they are simply waiting for us and the other wildlings to leave the area. From what I've heard, Craster is not very partial to crowds.*

In the late afternoon, the seven companions came within a mile of their destination. Once more, Ser Waymar instructed them to halt.

"Will, Leathers, Frenya, proceed," the Valeman ordered, "Gared, Ser Myles, Ser Whalen, and I shall remain here until you return."

The tracker and the two members of the Free Folk promptly climbed off their mounts and continued onward on foot. Although Frenya and Leathers stayed near each other, Will kept about ten feet of space from the spearwife and the wildling in black. This was done so that they could cover more ground and ensure that at least one of them would have a chance to retreat in the event of an ambush or a similar hindrance.

The main reason Frenya and Leathers had come along in the first place was for diplomatic reasons. Some of the previous bands of migratory wildlings had been reluctant or skeptical to cooperate with the Night's Watch or the Legion without Banners. To reassure their qualms, Lord Commander Mormont had elected to include at least one black brother wildling and one spearwife in each escort party. He figured that their presence in the escort party would encourage the new arrivals to comply. So far, that ploy had worked without fail.

Since the wildlings were supposed to be assembled less than a mile away, Whalen Frey expected the others to return within an hour.

It took them close to two hours to get back. By then, the sun had nearly set. When the others finally came, they came running.

Whalen spotted two figures sprinting towards them. When they were close enough, he saw that they were Frenya and Will. By the time they regrouped with their companions, both were panting and gasping for air.

Ser Whalen gazed down at them in worry and concern. Gared and Ser Myles seemed similarly disconcerted.

As usual, Ser Waymar Royce was indifferent. He simply trotted forward a bit and asked "Did you find the wildlings?"

After regaining his breath, Will answered with "We found them alright. But someone else found them first."
"What do you mean?" Ser Myles enquired.

Frenya slowly gazed around at the four mounted men and said quietly "They're dead. They're all dead."

Whalen felt a chill run down his spine. Waymar Royce appeared a little perplexed, but he remained composed. "All five hundred?"

"Can't say," Will frankly murmured, "We only saw enough parts to make about fifty."

'Parts?'

Gared echoed Ser Whalen's thought: "Parts?"

Will restlessly elaborated with "Arms and legs torn from their sockets. Heads pulled off their necks. Bodies mangled like mincemeat. Those are some of the least terrible things we saw."

"What happened to those people…" Frenya mumbled nervously, "Even Thenns wouldn't do that."

As disturbed and perplexed as Whalen felt at that moment, he managed to find his voice long enough to ask "Where's Leathers?"

"He stayed behind with the bodies," Will expounded. He turned to Ser Waymar and added in "He assumed you would wish to see them, ser."

"He assumed correctly," Waymar Royce stated with a grin. He looked around at the other five and announced "Let us press on."

"We should turn around," Gared hastily advised.

"And go back to the Wall emptyhanded?" Ser Waymar countered.

"Better than not going back at all," Frenya argued.

"But you said you only saw fifty bodies," Whalen Frey pointed out, "Perhaps some of the other four hundred and fifty wildlings are still in the area."

"If so, we should look for them," Myles Manwoody proposed, "Whatever killed those fifty could certainly kill them, too."

"It could also kill us," Gared sharply retorted.

"Only if we allow it to," Waymar Royce cheekily disputed. He glared down at Will and Frenya and uttered demandingly "Get back on your mounts. We are going to see those mangled remains. Then we will search for the other wildlings."

Will and Frenya grudgingly obeyed the directive. Once they were ahorse, the group headed north. Ser Whalen took the reins of Leathers' horse and led it alongside his.

Ten minutes later, they reached the intended spot of the rendezvous.

Leathers was nowhere to be seen. Neither were the wildlings. As far as Ser Whalen could see, no one else was there, alive or dead.

"Your dead men seemed to have moved," Waymar Royce scoffed mockingly.
"I know what we saw," Will insisted, "I never saw anything like it."

"Could someone have moved them?" Ser Myles theorized.

"Not possible," Frenya countered, "Look around you; there's no blood. When we first came, there was so much red that a blizzard could not have covered it all."

"If someone did move them, they did a remarkable job of cleaning up," Whalen Frey wryly commented.

"Perhaps this is the wrong place," Waymar Royce hypothesized.

"No, I recognize these trees, ser," Will asserted firmly, "This is the exact spot where we found them."

"Then why is Leathers not here?" Ser Waymar queried.

No one could provide a suitable answer to that question straightaway.

After thirty seconds of silence, Gared proclaimed "I say once more; we must get back to the Wall."

"Do the dead frighten you?" Waymar Royce murmured scathingly. Not bothering to wait a response, he declared "Until we find Leathers or the wildlings, we are not going anywhere."

How did this idiot boy ever become a knight?

Despite this antagonistic thought, Whalen Frey was just as curious as Ser Waymar to find out what became of the wildlings. In addition to that, he was not about to leave Leathers behind without at least looking for him.

Ser Whalen and the others climbed off their horses and spread out.

Will climbed a tree to get a better vantage point. Ser Waymar got out his map, and Gared paced the perimeter of the vicinity.

Frenya squatted down in the middle of the area and gazed down at the ground. Every now and then, she ran her hand over the snow and poked at it with her spear. Then she rubbed her chin and went "Hmmm…"

"Something caught your interest?" Whalen Frey presumed, a little intrigued.

"The ground seems… different somehow," Frenya apprised him, "When we got here, it was rough and flat. Now it's softer and more uneven."

"Peculiar," Ser Whalen commented, rubbing his temple, "I wonder what could have caused that."

"Your guess is as good as mine, ser," Frenya admitted.

"I'm more interested in the whereabouts of the wildlings," Ser Myles Manwoody commented from a few feet away, "What do you suppose happened to them?"

"I do not know," Frenya pronounced, "But whoever took them could not be far from here."

"Whoever took them also took the time to cover their tracks," Whalen noted, "Other than the ones we've made, there's not a single footprint anywhere."
"Then who are we dealing with?" Myles inquired.

*Or what?*

"We shall find out soon enough," Waymar Royce proclaimed without looking up from his map, "And I promise you; we'll find the other wildlings, as well."

"I certainly hope so," Myles Manwoody thought aloud, "I would hate to displease Lord Gregor by returning to Moat Cailin with no one."

_He's rather determined to see the entirety of this mission out. He's just as devoted to the Legion as the rest of us are to the Watch._

Ten minutes passed without anything noteworthy happening. Then, they heard Whalen call out from above "I can see someone approaching from the northeast!"

At that, the five people on the ground turned in that direction. Sure enough, they saw a figure moving towards them. The figure moved gradually and with a limp, but it never paused or faltered. Initially, they could only make out the figure's silhouette. As it came closer, they realized that its head was covered by a hood. They also noticed that its attire was black, and it was carrying a sword in its right hand.

"It's Leathers!" Myles Manwoody declared. _So it is._

"Looks as though he's been wounded," Frenya noted.

"Gared, investigate," Waymar ordered the oldest member of their company.

The veteran ranger cautiously advanced forward. When he was ten feet away, he stopped and muttered "Leathers? What happened? Where did you go? Where are the wildlings? Are you well?"

The black brother wildling did not stop nor give reply to any of Gared's questions. He just continued shuffling forward without uttering a sound.

Gared turned back to the others and commented "He seems to have lost his tongue."

"Something must be amiss," Frenya noted.

"Quite amiss," Ser Myles conceded.

Waymar looked up at Will and asked "Do you see anyone or anything else?"

"No, ser," Will responded, "Far as I can see, we're alone."

Just then, Leathers stopped walking. At this point, he was standing a mere three feet away from Gared. He was almost directly behind him, as well.

Whalen Frey realized right at that moment that Leathers' head had been tilted forward this entire time. As such, his head had been fully concealed from the others.

Very slowly, he brought his head up. It seemed to take him an entire minute to move it a bare inch.

Eventually, he was standing up straight. That was when his face was visible to the others.

The first thing Whalen Frey noticed was Leathers' eyes. Last night, he could have sworn Leathers' irises were a shad of dark green.
Right now, they were a very bright blue. Even from twenty feet away, they seemed hollow and empty.

As if by reflex, Ser Whalen Frey took a step back.

A moment later, Leathers reached out with his left arm and seized Gared by the top of his head. The veteran ranger grunted as he was grabbed. Before he could make any effort to struggle or fight back, Leathers raised his right arm and swung his sword through the air before him.

Immediately after, Gared's body crumped onto the ground. His head remained n Leathers' hand for a few seconds, and then Leathers tossed it forward. It rolled a bit before stopping near the feet of Ser Waymar Royce.

"What in the name of the gods?!" Waymar shouted in shock, recoiling in disgust and horror. He glared at the wildling in black and demanded furiously "Leathers, explain yourself!"

"That's not Leathers," Frenya softly professed, gripping her spear in both hands.

"She's right," Whalen whispered. He reached for his obsidian dagger and drew it swiftly, "It's one of… them."

At that, Ser Waymar Royce grinned and wielded his sword. It was made of dragonglass, as well. He gripped it in both hands and stepped forward. As he held his blade aloft, he taunted the figure that had once been Leathers with "Come at me, then."

The wight was quick to answer his challenge. It came forward and slowly lifted its own sword, which was still dripping with Gared's blood. With every step it got closer, Ser Waymar raised his weapon higher into the air. From what Whalen could see, the wight was totally vulnerable and it making no attempt to defend itself.

Just before Ser Waymar could deliver the first blow, a hand broke through the surface of the snow. It emerged just inches from where Ser Waymar was standing. Its appearance was so sudden and so alarming that everyone jumped in surprise.

The hand reached out and seized Ser Waymar by the ankle. He tried to pull himself free, but it gripped him tightly. Ser Whalen rushed forward to help. He took his dragonglass dagger and plunged it into the back of hand.

The effect was almost immediate. Upon contact with the obsidian, the hand released Ser Waymar, and it shattered a mere few seconds later.

Ser Whalen would have felt proud, but he discovered the dagger had done more damage than he intended it to. The tip of the blade had pierced Ser Waymar's right foot.

The Valeman shouted in pain and mumbled angrily "You bloody fool!"

Oh, fuck; you must be kidding me.

Meanwhile, the wight formerly known as Leathers was nearly upon him. Luckily, Ser Myles Manwoody managed to intercept it before it reached Ser Waymar. He roughly forced it onto the ground, and while it was recovering, he got out his own dragonglass dagger and stabbed the wight in the neck.

The Leathers wight unleashed a shrill shriek and convulsed violently on the ground. Seconds later, it shattered just as the hand did.
Whalen Frey and Frenya hurried to help Waymar Royce back onto his feet.

"Orders, ser?" Frenya requested as she wrapped his right arm over her shoulders.

"We will depart from this area immediately," Waymar Royce announced.

This time, not even Myles Manwoody argued with him. While Ser Myles may have been determined to locate the rest of the wildlings, the Dornishman was not prepared to go to this much trouble to locate them. The way Ser Whalen saw the scenario, if any of the five hundred would-be immigrants had survived this onslaught, they were long-gone from the area.

"Will, climb down from there!" Ser Waymar yelled. "We're leaving!"

"Aye, ser," Will avowed. The tracker hurriedly made his way back down the tree. He was very nimble and graceful in his movements. Whalen thought he seemed better composed than any of them. Probably because he was spared the horror of seeing Leathers up close.

The moment Will reached the ground, the group had more company. This company was just as unexpected, and far more unwanted.

Thirty wights burst from the snow in half as many seconds. Simultaneously, more of them appeared from behind trees and large rocks. Before Whalen and the others could even register what was happening, they were practically surrounded.

"To arms!" Waymar Royce yelled.

Straightaway, the five remaining companions got out all their dragonglass weapons. Ser Myles Manwoody had two daggers, Ser Whalen Frey had a sword and a dagger, Frenya had her spear, Ser Waymar had his sword, and Will only had a dagger.

"Take them down," Waymar muttered through gritted teeth.

The next minute saw a flurry of activity.

Whalen Frey rushed towards the nearest wight and thrust his sword into his chest. Not even waiting to watch it shatter, he turned to the next wight and slashed at its throat with his dagger. Both were nothing but dust in seconds.

He managed to catch glimpses of his colleagues' performance in the battle. Ser Myles Manwoody was quite handy with his two daggers. He was maneuvering with the agility of a feline and the accuracy of a maester. Frenya successfully dodged and avoided every blow that was thrown her way. She only used her spear when she could afford to stand still for longer than a split-second. Due to his wound, Ser Waymar Royce was unable to balance his weight on his right foot, so he was forced to remain standing in one spot. Even so, he made short work of any wight that came to close to him.

Will lacked one advantage Ser Whalen and the other three possessed: he was not within spitting distance of them. The others would have helped him, but there were too many wights between them and him. The tracker tried desperately to fend off a growing stream of attackers, but he was quickly overwhelmed. Whalen could only watch helplessly as the wights seized him from all sides and stabbed him repeatedly. His scream was almost as terrible as Leathers’ death rattle.

Shortly after they lost Will, Ser Whalen realized that the horde of wights was not getting any smaller. He had lost count of how many they had killed, but it had to be more than thirty. Even so, their numbers only seemed to get larger every second. They were no longer sprouting from the
ground, but they were appearing from the sides, as if out of nowhere.

*We're fighting a losing battle.*

"If we stay here much longer, we'll be overrun!" Whalen declared.

"He's right!" Ser Myles coincided, sparring with three wights at once, "We must withdraw!"

Ser Waymar was preoccupied in a duel with a particularly large wight. Once his foe was vanquished, he nodded and proclaimed "Our only hope is to reach the horses! Concentrate on clearing a path to them!"

Subsequently, he, Frenya, and Ser Whalen combined their efforts on breaking through the line of wights to the south. Ser Myles covered them from the north. The going was gradual, but with every second, they came closer to the horses.

*It's damn good we tied them to trees beforehand. Otherwise they'd be long gone by now.*

Indeed, while the wights paid no mind to the horses, the beasts were struggling desperately to break free and get as far away from the scene as possible.

Mere moments before, Ser Myles Manwoody encountered three wights. One was armed with a spear, one with an axe, and one with a scythe. He managed to bring down the scythe-wielder and the axe-wielder at once, but the spear-wielder managed to strike first.

Ser Myles screamed as the spear impaled his lower chest. He angrily shoved one of his obsidian daggers into the spear-wielder's eye, and the wight disintegrated.

Ser Myles dropped his other dagger and pulled the spear out of his abdomen. He groaned and collapsed onto his knees.

Before Ser Whalen could try to aid the Dornishman, the mob was upon him. In the span of three seconds, Myles Manwoody was stabbed in no less than a dozen places, including the chest cavity, his right arm, his left leg, and his throat.

By the time Ser Myles hit the ground, Frenya and Ser Waymar Royce had reached the horses. Frenya mounted hers first. As Ser Waymar climbed onto his, he looked back to Whalen Frey and shouted "Come on!"

Ser Whalen pushed through the crowd and sprinted to where his two surviving companions were. Over a dozen wights followed close behind.

"Just go!" Whalen Frey beckoned the other two, "I'll catch up to you!"

Waymar Royce was quick to follow that suggestion. He turned his horse to the south and urged it in that direction. Frenya, however, proved to be the more dedicated of the two. She took the reins of her horse and forced it to put itself between Ser Whalen and the mass of wights. She continued to fight them back from horseback. This bold action gave the Frey knight enough time to jump onto his own horse.

Just as Ser Whalen had his feet secured in their stirrups, Frenya's horse whinnied and reared on its hind legs. The spearwife was vaulted from her saddle and landed flat on her back.

"Frenya!" Ser Whalen shouted worriedly.
Thinking quickly, he directed his horse towards the wildling woman and leaned down with his arm extended. Frenya reached out with her own arm as his came closer. She managed to grab his hand, but before he could pull her up, another huge wight reached her, swinging a mace.

A split-second later, Whalen Frey had Frenya's blood all over his face. The wight with the mace had all but smashed her head in.

A moment later, Ser Whalen felt three very potent emotions, all which were the direct result of watching Frenya's death. The first was shock at how sudden it had been. The second was grief that it had occurred. The third was rage at how brutal it was.

Whalen Frey turned to the wight with the mace and hacked at its head with his dragonglass sword. Like all the other defeated wights, it screeched and shattered.

Ser Whalen was not content with that. He had just seen five of his associates murdered. He would make these monsters pay for what they had done.

With his dagger in one hand, his sword in the other, and no thought of his own safety, Ser Whalen charged towards the mass of wights. He heatedly yelled "Come and get me, you bastards!"

Almost straightaway, the first wight reached him. He thrust his dagger into his forehead. A moment later, another wight approached his horse. He responded by driving his sword into the space beneath its neck.

For the next several minutes, Whalen continued this routine. He killed every wight that came within reach of him.

Before long, he was jabbed in the thigh. He managed to kill the wight who wounded him, but soon after, he was slashed across his leg. For every five wights he destroyed, he received an injury from another of them.

Most of those injuries were minor. Then one managed to stab him in the center of his chest. That was when Ser Whalen's endurance gave out. He dropped his weapons and fell off his horse onto the ground.

As the crowd of wights closed in around him, Whalen struggled to remain conscious. As his undead foes bore into him, Whalen thought not of the pain or the hopelessness of his current setting, but of his family.

*Sylwa… Hoster… Merianne… forgive me.*

He thought they would ultimately stab him to death, but they did not. They simply carved him up until he was too weak to fight back. After that, they relented and stepped away from him.

A few seconds later, a figure clad in grey came forward. He was dead, no question of that. But unlike the wights, he still had flesh attached to his bones.

*The Others…*

There was no doubt of that in Ser Whalen's mind. The being before him had to be an Other.

The Other knelt beside the knight and stared in the eyes. Whalen Frey tried to look away, but his gaze was fixated on this malevolent entity before him.

After a time, the Other slowly extended his arm and placed his hand to Ser Whalen's forehead. He
held it there for as long as the Frey drew breath.

Whalen Frey felt his entire body go completely numb. He could not feel his arms, his legs, his head, or even his multiple injuries. After a time, all he could feel was the cold.
Before he had enlisted in the Night's Watch, Ser Waymar Royce and his father Lord Yohn had been hosted at Winterfell by Lord Eddard Stark. They had been guests of the Starks for under a turn of the moon. That was more than enough time for the occupants to get to know the Valemen.

Waymar Royce was every bit as brilliant, upright, and skillful as his sire. However, he was notably lacking of the gallantry and humility Bronze Yohn Royce was known for. Unlike the Lord of Runestone, Ser Waymar did not exhibit common courtesy towards those he considered lesser to him. His cocky grin and pretentious attitude routinely conveyed an air of arrogance and smugness.

Jon Snow doubted he would ever see Ser Waymar again after the latter headed north to the Wall. But he did. And how he's changed.

The man being brought forth by Desmond and Alyn was a shadow of his former self. There was no trace of haughtiness or conceit anywhere in his countenance. A crazed look was in his eyes. His gait was uneven, his posture was sloppy, his appearance was disheveled, his clothing was ragged and greasy.

Sansa had thought him handsome. If she could see him now, I wonder what she'd say.

Most of all, when he first came to the North, Waymar Royce claimed to fear nothing.

At a glance, Jon could tell he was scared now. Not only was he afraid; he was making no effort to hide his fear.

Desmond and Alyn led Ser Waymar to the ironwood stump and stopped there. Even though Waymar's hands were tied tightly behind his back, they continued to hold on to his arms to ensure he would not try to flee. Standing on the other side of the stump was Lord Eddard Stark, or Uncle Ned, as Jon was accustomed to calling him.

Waymar Royce and Uncle Ned made eye contact, and for a few seconds, neither spoke. Then the young Valeman said softly and unsteadily "I know why we're here, Lord Eddard. I am sorry it had to come to this."

"I am sorry, as well, my boy," Eddard Stark muttered in a genuinely apologetic tone, "But you know what must happen now."

"I do," Waymar Royce spoke candidly, "And I am ready. But before I die, there is something I must tell you."

"What would that be?" Lord Eddard inquired.

Ser Waymar did not reply straightaway. He stared blankly at the ground for a few seconds. Then he tried to talk. Jon saw his mouth move, but he could not hear the words that came out of them. Apparently, neither could Uncle Ned.

"Speak up, if you please," the Lord of Winterfell requested.

Waymar Royce seemed to have lost his voice. Despite his best efforts, all he could manage was an
inaudible whisper. Lord Eddard had to bring his ear over to the young knight's mouth to coherently discern what he was saying.

Jon watched this exchange from several feet away. He stood with his cousins and his friends in silence. Or at least he was silent.

"He seems wrought with apprehension," Rick perceived.

"You would be, too, if you were on the brink of death," Robb contended.

"I don't believe it is death that bothers him," Sam noted, ever the observant one.

A few minutes later, Eddard Stark moved his head away from Waymar Royce's. Jon noticed he seemed a little perturbed.

"You are certain of all this?" Uncle Ned asked.

Ser Waymar meekly nodded his head. Jon could faintly hear him say: "I saw them. Soon enough, you'll all see them, too. You must prepare, my lord. It is not too late for you and yours."

Now it was Lord Eddard's turn to nod his head. "Have you anything more to say?"

"No," Waymar Royce declared, "Only that I should have died with my companions. Instead I ran like a coward."

"Perhaps you did," Eddard Stark debated, "Even so, you may have redeemed your actions and given their deaths meaning just now."

Waymar could only shrug. It was a skeptical type of shrug, as though he did not know whether he agreed with that statement or not.

A moment later, he beckoned Uncle Ned "Be on with it, my lord. While part of me still desires not to die at all, this is a far preferable fate to the one that claimed my companions."

"As you wish," Lord Eddard said in acknowledgment.

Waymar Royce got to his knees and placed his head over the stump. Although he showed no signs of resistance, Desmond and Alyn kept their hands pressed against his back in case Ser Waymar decided he actually wished to live.

He proceeded to remove his gloves and given them to Jory Cassel, the captain of the household guard. Theon brought forth the greatsword Ice. The ringing of Valyrian steel could be heard all over the square as the blade was drawn from its scabbard.

As Eddard Stark placed the tip of the, Waymar Royce turned his head and uttered quietly "I ask of you a simple favor, my lord. When you send my bones back to Runestone, please do not tell my lord father that I died a deserter."

"Your father will hear no word of your disgrace from me," Eddard Stark asserted the young knight. Meaning Lord Royce might hear of it from someone else.

That thought did not seem to cross Ser Waymar's mind, as he appeared strangely content at receiving that assurance.

Bran was at Jon's side. As Eddard Stark sentenced Waymar Royce to die in the name of King
Robert, the bastard of Winterfell whispered to his cousin "Don't look away. Your father will know if you do."

Sure enough, the younger boy did not attempt to avert his eyes from Uncle Ned and Ser Waymar. Samwell was tempted to look away. A year ago, he would have. Somehow, he willed himself not to.

Once Lord Eddard finished passing the sentence, he carried it out. With one swift movement, he lifted Ice high into the air and brought it down. In one motion, Waymar Royce's head was severed from his body. Blood spouted from the stump of his neck for a few seconds, but it slowly reduced to a smooth trickle. His head rolled on the ground a bit and came to a halt near Theon's feet. What do you know? Sam didn't even vomit.

After sheathing Ice and returning it to Martyn Cassel, Jory's father and the master-at-arms of Winterfell, Theon picked up Waymar's head by the hair and gazed into his still-open eyes. Then he smirked and muttered "I find him more agreeable this way."

Jasper scowled. "Have you no respect for the dead?"

"Certainly," Theon cheekily murmured, dropping the head, "The same respect they showed others when they lived."

"Ass," Jon mumbled under his breath.

It took a minute to wrap up Ser Waymar's body in a length of cloth. After it was loaded onto the back of a horse, the company set out.

"Ser Waymar died bravely," Robb proclaimed at the beginning of the ride.

Bravely? Jon countered with "No, it was not courage. You could see it in his eyes. He did not accept his fate simply because he was not afraid of dying. He accepted it because he was afraid of living."

"Afraid of living?" Theon muttered, seemingly amused, "Whoever heard of such a thing?"

"Such is possible," Rick debated.

"Indeed," Sam agreed.

Robb paid those remarks no mind.

"Father?" Jon heard Bran call out to Lord Eddard. The Lord of Winterfell had been riding at the head of the party. Bran was a little further back with the Cassels. Uncle Ned reined his horse back a few paces so that it trotted alongside his second son's pony.

While Eddard Stark conversed with Bran, Jon Snow was at the head of the company with the older boys. Including him, there were six of them.

Theon Greyjoy was the oldest, and something of an oddball. He had seen his twentieth nameday, and he was the only one of the group who had lain with a woman. But that could change soon.

Theon had come to Winterfell at age ten as a hostage. He was one of many children who had to pay for their fathers' crimes. In the aftermath of Greyjoy's Rebellion, Theon was being held on the mainland to guarantee the Ironborn's good behavior. Too bad this condition of 'good behavior' did not apply to Theon, as well.
Much had changed in the ten years since then. As of now, Theon was no longer a prisoner. Even so, he had remained a resident of Winterfell. He was being fostered there at the request of Theon's uncle, Lord Victarion Greyjoy, the Lord Paramount of the Iron Islands.

The next oldest in the group was Samwell Tarly. Sam was the elder son and heir to Randyll Tarly of Horn Horn. Of course, there was still some debate as to whether he would remain Lord Randyll's heir. If ever there was a man who was not his father's son...

Unlike his stern and ruthless father, Samwell Tarly was a timid, plump, and cowardly person. Lord Randyll had attempted many times – often through excessive or outlandish means – to toughen up his son. Despite his best efforts, all of them had failed miserably.

Eventually, Lord Randyll's patience reached its end. He considered sending Samwell to the Wall so that his second son, Dickon, could be his heir instead. Fortunately, Lord Gregor Clegane had approached him at the tourney at Lannisport. After some discussion, Lord Randyll agreed to send his son to Moat Cailin when he was older. However, before Samwell rode north, his father rigidly told him that the Legion without Banners would be his very last chance. If he let Lord Gregor down, the Wall would be the only place left for him.

So far, the Legion had worked out well for Samwell Tarly. While he was poor as a swordsman and warrior, no one could deny his intelligence. He was an invaluable source of information to men twice or thrice his age. He had been a personal notary to Lord Gregor Clegane for the last four years.

For the last five, Jon had been Lord Gregor's personal squire, so he and Samwell saw a lot of each other. Jon saw Sam as his best friend. Under his direction and Lord Gregor's patient guidance, Sam had overcome his reluctance to wield a sword. While his skills still left much to be desired, he could at least defend himself when the situation called for it. He had also lost at least thirty pounds. He was still fatter than most boys his age, but at least his fat was balanced with some muscle now.

Mounted on the destrier beside Jon was Rickard Clegane, the heir to Moat Cailin. They liked to call him "Rick." At twelve namedays, Rickard was the youngest of the six. Nevertheless, he was also the largest and the strongest of them, as well. Obviously that was the direct result of the fact that his parents were the tallest man and the tallest woman in the whole of the Seven Kingdoms. Excluding the giants, of course. It happened that Rickard was also the only one among them that had been born in the North.

Although his father was the commander of the Legion without Banners, and his mother was one of their captains, Rickard was not a recognized Legionnaire. He was still too young to even be a squire. Even so, in addition to teaching him in the ways of running a holdfast, Lord Gregor was training him in the ways of leading an army, as well. Someday, he intended for Rickard to succeed him as the Legion's commanding officer. In spite of his youth, Rickard was shaping out to be a very promising ruler. All the same, he was hoping he would not have to inherit the responsibilities of Moat Cailin and the Legion for many more years. If I were him, I'd feel proud. After all, he'll have much more to inherit than any of us. Excluding His Grace, of course.

Jasper Baratheon, the Crown Prince of Westeros, was the next youngest. Two years back, the King had decided to educate his son on the ways of war and diplomacy. He could have done this through lecture and references to the past, but one could only learn so much through history. King Robert wished Jasper to learn these matters through direct experiences.

Of course, the Royal Army had not been mobilized since Greyjoy's Rebellion. The Legion without Banners, however, was active every day of the year, and Lord Gregor Clegane was perhaps the
best military leader in the country.

Like Rick, Jasper was not old enough to be a full-fledged Legionnaire. However, he was tempted to enlist in the organization when he reached his sixteenth nameday. For the present, he was squiring for his uncle Renly, who had joined the Legion a couple years earlier. Allard Seaworth was currently preoccupied with business across the Narrow Sea, so Renly had replaced Allard as the Stormlands' representative on Lord Gregor's secret council. Whether Renly would remain on the council would depend on Allard's willingness to fully relinquish the position when he returned from Essos.

Lastly, there was Robb Stark, Jon's cousin and the heir to Winterfell and the North. Robb was only a few months older than Jon, but he stood to gain very much when his lord father passed on. He took after his mother, Lady Catelyn, in appearance, but he took after Lord Eddard in everything else. He was the future of the North. *He's the future... and what am I?*

Jon was the product of a free union between Brandon Stark and Ashara Dayne. Since they had not been wed during his conception or his birth, he was stuck with the unfortunate label of "Snow," the name of bastards of the North.

There were times when Jon rued being baseborn. After all, Brandon Stark had been the elder brother of Lord Eddard. Had Brandon married Lady Ashara before he died, Jon would have been the rightful lord of Winterfell when he was born.

Despite these occasional feelings of envy, Jon was usually fairly content with his baseborn status. Since he stood to gain no titles or lands, he had liberty to do as he pleased with his life. Furthermore, his Uncle Ned and Aunt Cat had always done right by him. They had loved him and raised him as one of their own children. He thought of his cousins more as siblings, just as they did of him.

Although he was a bastard, he had made plenty of trueborn acquaintances at both Winterfell and Moat Cailin. He and the five young men around him composed a very tight circle of friends.

There was only one thing about this circle that bothered Jon Snow. Each of the others had distinguished himself in some way. Theon was the best archer. Samwell was the best reader. Robb was the best lancer. Jasper was the best rider. Rickard was the best leader.

Jon was more than fair in all five of those fields, but he was never the best at anything. *Except being a bastard. And maybe the sword, were it not for Rick.*

He was determined to stand out in a similar way. Someday, he would indeed stand out. Even he did not know how just yet. And even if he did know... he likely would not have believed it.

By now, Lord Eddard had finished talking with Bran. After riding in silence for a while, Robb gazed over his shoulder and queried "Father, what did Ser Waymar tell you?"

Uncle Ned slowly turned his head towards his firstborn. Then he uttered stiffly "You heard what he said."

"Not all of it," Jon Snow debated, "There was something he said which only you heard."

"If I was to tell you it was simply the ravings of a madman?" Eddard presumed.

"With all due respect, we would not believe you, my lord," Samwell stated, "If it was mere ravings, you would not have looked so astonished when you moved away from Ser Waymar."
Jon smiled. *I can always rely on Sam to back me up.*

"Sam has a point," Jasper conceded. He then scoffed and muttered jokingly "I could order you to tell us, my lord."

**But he won't. He wouldn't abuse his authority so blatantly.**

Uncle Ned must have known that. Even so, a rare grin came to his normally grim face. It faded after a few seconds, and he let out a slow sigh. *Looks like we've convinced him to share his words.* As their horses continued along the trail, Lord Eddard looked around at Jon and the other boys, and he pronounced "As some of you may know, it is nearly that time of the year when a number of the wildlings immigrate to the Seven Kingdoms."

"Yes, I recall my lord father mentioned that shortly before I left Moat Cailin," Rickard Clegane affirmed.

Eddard Stark nodded at that, and he continued with "Just before he fled the Wall, Ser Waymar went north of it. He was leading the escort group that was meant to bring the wildlings south."

"'Meant to?" Samwell noted, "They didn't succeed?"

"No," Eddard disclosed, "His party was ambushed. Ser Waymar was the only survivor."

Jon and the other boys were alarmed to discover this. Rickard Clegane looked over at the Lord of Winterfell and stated anxiously "One of the Legionnaires was in that party, my lord. Ser Myles Manwoody."

Eddard Stark lightly shook his head and revealed "He fought valiantly. Alas, he did not make it. From Ser Waymar's description, he and the rest of their group were all slaughtered."

Rickard seemed dismayed. Jon could understand why; Ser Myles Manwoody had been at Moat Cailin longer than either of them. He was a great man.

"By whom, my lord?" Jasper inquired.

For a moment, Uncle Ned hesitated. He tentatively resumed with "It was not the wildlings that were supposed to relocate to the North; they were. Nor was it any of the other Free Folk."

"Then who was it?" Robb queried curiously.

Again, Eddard did not reply right away. His silence spoke volumes, however.

"My lord," Samwell uttered uneasily, "Was it… the Others?"

Jon and his friends collectively looked to the Warden of the North, eagerly awaiting an answer to that question. Ultimately, Eddard Stark gazed around at the younger men and muttered plainly "It was."

The color drained from Sam's face. Jasper and Rickard's eyes widened in shock. Theon tried to look cocky, but Jon could tell he was as startled as any of them. Robb merely grimaced edgily.

"The Others… are here now?" Theon asked rhetorically.

*It would appear so.*

"But it's still summer," Jasper pointed out.
"Winter is coming," Robb reminded the prince.

Lord Eddard nodded in approval and repeated "Winter is coming."

An atmosphere of restlessness passed over the group. That was not the result of discovering that the Long Night was soon to occur. Truthfully, they had known for a while that the Long Night's arrival was imminent. As it happened, all of Westeros had known that for the last five years. But no one would have expected the Others to return in summertime.

*But they're here now. And how long will the rest of us be?*

"My father must be told immediately," Jasper firmly proclaimed.

"Perhaps we should inform my father first," Rickard suggested.

Jasper seemed bemused by that idea. "The person with the most power should always be given dire news first before anyone else. Your father does not have Seven Kingdoms to manage."

"Have you forgotten what my father *does* for this country?" Rickard snapped, a little irate, "If not for him, we would never have been prepared for the Others in the first place."

"There is no need to argue, lads," Eddard told the massive boy and the prince to assure them, "When get back to Winterfell, I will write both Lord Gregor and the King. That way, they will both be told of this matter at the same time."

*But the raven would reach Moat Cailin first, wouldn't it?*

Jon did not give voice to that thought. He did not wish to incite another disagreement between Rick and Jasper. Fortunately, both of this friends appeared satisfied with Lord Stark's proposal, and they dropped the subject.

*That's damn good. With the Long Night approaching, we'll soon have enough conflict to worry about without causing any amongst ourselves.*

Jory Cassel had ridden ahead a bit to scout the way. When Jon turned to his front, he noticed Jory had halted near the bridge. His horse was whinnying and threatening to vault him from the saddle. With great difficulty, Jory managed to calm her.

"Trouble, Jory?" Uncle Ned asked the captain of his guard when the rest of the group reached him.

"Can't say, my lord," Jory responded, looking to Lord Eddard. He gestured to the space in front of them and beckoned them "Look at that."

On the path was the body of a stag. Part of one at least. Its entire lower body was missing. The head, the front legs, and the upper half of its torso were all that remained, and they had been mangled viciously. Uncle Ned chose to investigate.

"A mountain lion?" Theon conjectured.

"There are no mountain lions in these woods," Eddard proclaimed.

"Where's the rest of it?" Robb wondered aloud.

"Looks as though it's been dragged off," Martyn Cassel perceived, pointing out the trail of blood that was smeared across the ground. It led off into the woods.
"Whatever took it may come back for the rest," Samwell muttered worriedly, "Maybe we should move on."

"We could," Jasper contended, "Or… we could take a closer look."

In the end, they chose the latter course of action. Eddard, the Cassels, and the boys dismounted and followed the trail of blood into the woods.

The trail ended by a small brook. There they found the lower half of the deer. They also found the creature that had dragged it off.

A massive wolf was lying by the stream. It was gnawing on the remnants of one of the legs.

At the sight of the huge wolf, Rickard and Theon promptly drew their swords. Jon, Robb, and Jasper placed their hands on the hilt of theirs, but they did not draw them just yet. Samwell backed away a bit. As for Bran… the youngest boy eyed the beast inquisitively.

Before long, the wolf noticed them. Other than a menacing snarl and hostile glare, it made no move towards them. It was too engrossed with feasting on its kill.

"It's a freak!" Theon exclaimed.

"No," Robb countered, "It's a direwolf."

"There are no direwolves south of the Wall," Jory murmured.

"A few years ago, there were no giants or wargs south of the Wall, either," Rickard Clegane professed, "Now we have the likes of Mag the Mighty and Varamyr Sixskins living along the White Knife."

Next thing we know, there will be mountain lions in these woods.

"But we control the influx of beings from the lands beyond the Wall," Jasper Baratheon contended, "I doubt anyone would have allowed a direwolf to cross over."

"He could have slipped through," Martyn Cassel theorized.

"She," Samwell Tarly corrected.

"Hmm?" the master-at-arms uttered in puzzlement.

"That's a female," Sam announced, pointing towards the wolf.

Jon and a few of the others followed his finger, and their eyes fell across the direwolf's underside. Sure enough, the beast's lower belly was protruding conspicuously. She's pregnant.

"Not only is there a direwolf on this side of the Wall," Samwell observed, "There will soon be several."

"Or maybe not," Jory countered. He drew his sword and began to walk towards the direwolf.

"Wait!" Bran interceded, stepping in front of his father's captain of the guards. Jory paused long enough for the small boy to turn to Lord Eddard and say "Father, must we kill her?"

"It would be best, Bran," Uncle Ned proclaimed, "We cannot allow a direwolf to roam free in our domain."
“Then we could take her back with us,” Bran proposed.

Theon and Jasper chuckled at the absurdity of that statement. Samwell seemed very averse to it. Robb raised an eyebrow, as though he thought it intriguing. Jon found it worth some consideration.

“You saw what she did to that stag,” Samwell recalled, “She’d do it to a man just as easily.”

“We could find a warg to tame her,” Rickard proposed.

“Unless the warg is ready to devote the remainder of the direwolf’s life to this endeavor, I would not place too much faith in that idea,” Theon muttered.

“That aside, what would we do once she gives birth?” Jasper enquired.

“The pups could be domesticated,” Robb suggested.

*Now that’s a thought.*

“No one has ever trained direwolves,” Martyn Cassel commented.

“Probably because no one has ever tried,” Jon Snow contended. He turned to his uncle and told him “My lord, your house’s sigil is the direwolf. Could it be possible we were meant to find this beast?”

“That could indeed be possible,” Samwell coincided, “The Tullys have plenty of trout, the Tyrells grow the greatest roses, the Arryns have gyrfalcons, the Lannisters used to hold caged lions, the Baratheons catch many stags, the Martells keep their vipers, and Targaryens had their dragons. Why can’t the Starks have their direwolves?”

“Now that you mention it, I’m still waiting for my uncle to snag us a pet kraken,” Theon japed cockily.

Jon rolled his eyes and muttered *“Mantén la boca cerrada, tonto.”* (Keep your mouth closed, fool.)

Samwell and Jasper scoffed at that remark. Although Theon could not understand what had been said, he could tell some slight was being made at his expense. He glared at Jon and mumbled “I do not take insult from a bastard.”

Jon smirked and retorted with *“No, ma tuo padre prende ordini da uno.”* (No, but your father takes orders from one.)

Rickard chortled at that. Theon fumed angrily, but he did not lose his temper. He just looked away. *It appears I’ve won this round.*

During Greyjoy’s Rebellion, Lord Gregor Clegane had found records of two long-gone civilizations among the bounty of Euron Greyjoy’s *Silence*. He had taken steps to revive the languages of those civilizations. He did so by using them as codes. Every member of the Legion without Banners was taught Spanish, and each of the Mountain’s friends and allies was taught Italian.

Samwell was Gregor’s notary and Jasper was Renly Baratheon’s squire. As such, both of them knew Spanish. As Lord Gregor’s eldest son and heir, Rickard knew Italian.

Jon had the distinct privilege of knowing both dialects, as he was both Gregor’s squire and his ward.

On a few occasions, he had taught Robb a bit of each language, but never more than the basics.
Theon, however, did not know a word of either. Jon was more than happy to take advantage of that.

"With the proper rearing, the direwolf pups can be brought to heel," Samwell contended.

"I will train and feed them myself," Bran swore to his father.

"So will I," Robb promised.

Lord Eddard stood thinking for a minute. Then he folded his arms and declared "If you can bring the mother to me without harming her or yourselves, I will consent to taking her back to Winterfell."

Clearly, Uncle Ned expected them to give up straightaway. But the boys were more determined than he gave them credit for.

When Jory and Martyn started to approach the direwolf, she snapped her fangs violently at the two men.

Strangely, when Jon and his cousins approached her, she did not so much as grunt. When they were within ten feet of her, she switched her focus from her pretty to them. She eyed them not in suspicion, but in perplexity.

Bran was the first to reach her. He slowly reached his hand out and stroked her behind the ears. Her muzzle was covered with chucks of fur and fresh blood, but when she opened her mouth, she did not move to bite Bran's arm off. Instead, she licked at his face playfully, causing the young boy to laugh.

"Incredible," Jasper murmured in amazement.

Five minutes later, they were all back on their horses, and they were following the road back to Winterfell once more. The direwolf padded alongside Robb and Bran's mounts. Jon found his gaze wandering to her every now and then.

At one point, Jon Snow told his uncle appreciatively "Thank you, my lord."

Eddard smiled at his nephew and stated "Consider it my gift to you,"

"Since it's today of all days, I suppose that'd be appropriate," Jon muttered slyly.

Although Jon and his five friends were close, they were not usually all in the same place at once. Most of the time, Robb and Theon were at Winterfell, and Rickard and Samwell were at Moat Cailin. Jon and Prince Jasper were the only ones who alternated between the two fortresses frequently.

Still, on special occasions, the six of them came together. Today was one such occasion. It happened to be Jon's nameday.

Most bastards were not afforded nameday celebrations. Jon did not have that misfortune. Then again, he did not wholly regard it as a misfortune. As anyone who knew him could tell, he was not one for pomp and ceremony. Every year before, he had chosen to celebrate his nameday quietly with only his family and his dearest friends. However, Aunt Catelyn had insisted on throwing him a celebration this year. Since it was his sixteenth nameday, Jon had given in to his aunt's wishes.

The other lads had jested that since Jon would be a man grown today, perhaps he would become a man in the more "physical" sense of the word.
Theon and Robb had been surprised when Jon confessed to them that he had yet to lay with a woman. They claimed that they had always assumed he may have slept with Myrna.

Just the thought of that was appalling to Jon. Myrna was old enough to be his mother. As it happened, she acted like his mother, as well.

Ever since Jon came to Moat Cailin, Myrna had been his maid. His own maid; she served him and no one else. For the duration of his stay at the moat, she had waited on him night and day, tending to his every need. She was perhaps the closest thing he ever had to a mother.

For some reason, Myrna never accompanied him to Winterfell. Jon never thought to ask why. He just assumed it was because she was a retainer of Lord Gregor Clegane.

Myrna was one of three people outside of his family that Jon felt he could trust with anything. Samwell were another. The third was Ser Marvyn.

Ser Marvyn had been in the employ of Uncle Ned ever since the end of Robert's Rebellion. Jon did not know very much about him, only that he was from the Reach. Since Sam was a native of the Reach, Jon had asked him if he could tell where the old knight had originated from. The most Samwell could discern was that Marvyn was an Oldtown man. He may have even been a distant relative of Lord Leyton Hightower.

Ever since he came north, Ser Marvyn's primary duty had been as Jon's bodyguard. For the last fifteen years, the old knight had loyally followed and protected the baseborn boy. Whenever Jon travelled to Moat Cailin, Ser Marvyn went with him, even though he had sworn his sword to Winterfell. In fact, he went everywhere with Jon. He had even attended Ser Waymar Royce's execution. But he had given Jon some space so that he could mingle with his friends.

Despite his age, Marvyn's experience had not faded with time. That much Jon knew; he had seen him in combat firsthand. There were maybe three or four men in the Seven Kingdoms who could match his skills with a blade. Just having the old knight nearby made him feel safe.

There were times when Jon felt Ser Marvyn's services were wasted on him. After all, why would anyone task such a fantastic swordsman with a chore as menial as watching over a bastard?

On the other hand, Jon supposed he should not question his good fortune. What matters is that I have people who actually care for me. Some bastards don't even have people.

When they got back to Winterfell, Lord Eddard went to find Maester Luwin so he could write King Robert and Lord Gregor. Jory went with him. Robb, Bran, and Martyn Cassel led the pregnant direwolf to the kennels. Jasper helped Harwin and Hullen stable the horses. Rickard assisted Alyn and Desmond with moving Waymar Royce's body.

Jon, Sam, and Theon were left on their own.

Jon had been eager to get back, but not because of his nameday celebration. That would not be for a few more hours, anyway.

"Well, I have business to do," he announced to no one in particular.

"Oh, is that her name now?" Theon wryly uttered.

Jon glared at the Ironborn and muttered "Vete a la mierda." (Fuck off).

Samwell chuckled as Theon sneered. Jon just smiled and sauntered away from the scene. As he
left, he called over his shoulder "Oh, and while you're at it… vai a inferni." (Go to the hells)

A few minutes later, Jon arrived at the broken tower. Ser Marvyn had accompanied him, but he bade the old knight to remain at the base of the foundation. Once Marvyn agreed, Jon made his way to the entrance of the building, forced it open, and climbed up the ancient stairs.

Jon knew that the broken tower was an ideal meeting place. Especially for those who wished to be left alone. And gods know, I want to be left alone. With her.

When he got to the top room, it appeared to be deserted. Then he heard her voice. "You're late."

He spotted her laying on a makeshift bed of furs in the corner. He grinned and recalled "You said you'd wait for me."

"So I did," she conceded. She beckoned him over, and once he reached her, she asked expectantly "Well?"

Jon shrugged and said "Well… Theon and Robb think we should go ahead with it."

"They have good sense," she perceived, "Tell me; what do you think?"

Jon stood thinking for about a minute. Finally, he smirked and "You're right. They do have sense."

At that, he dropped down beside her on the pile of furs. Then he took her in his arms and pulled her into a passionate kiss. From her touch, he could tell she was quite pleased with his choice.

When they came apart, she told him "It's about time. Where I come from, boys younger than you have done the deed."

Jon grinned at her and held her close. He ran one of his hands through her flowing red hair. He said to her "Well, I will not keep you yearning any longer. Still, I know that in most affairs, good things come to those who wait."

She scoffed, kissed him again, and declared "You know nothing, Jon Snow."

...

As far back as she could reminisce, Daenerys Targaryen had spent most of her life running.

When she was fresh from the womb, she and Viserys had been forced to run away from their homeland. Their entire family had been massacred by the Usurper. The two of them were the only survivors.

Since arriving in Essos, they had run from one Free City to another. Braavos. Norvos. Lys. Myr. They tried to seek refuge in each place they visited, but every time they tried to settle down, the Usurper's hired knives managed to track them down.

Once that happened, they had to pack up and run. Sometimes they had not even enough time to pack up. As such, they often had to leave behind some precious objects that could have been sold for a bit of gold. So every time they ran, they ended up a little poorer than before.

They had run from sellswords. They had run from bounty hunters. They had run from slavers. They had run from all manner of thieves and cutthroats.

There were times when Dany wished she could have run from Viserys, as well. But he was her
only true ally in the world. Apart from that, even if she tried to run from him, he would have found her eventually. And once he did… the thought did not bear reflection. \textit{Never wake the dragon. Do not 	extit{ever} wake the dragon.}

A couple years ago, they had come to Pentos. There they had sought asylum with Magister Illyrio Mopatis. Unlike most of their prior "hosts," the cheesemonger did not charge them for their lodgings. He provided them food, shelter, and clothing out of his own pocket. Fortunately for the Targaryens, he had a very large pocket. \textit{Almost as large as his actual pockets.} So, unless he chose to throw them out (which was not pleasant to mediate on, but always possible), Illyrio would be able to keep Dany and her brother as his guests indefinitely.

For a time, it seemed as though they had finally found a haven from their worries.

Then one morning, Dany awoke to find an army at Illyrio's gates. There were thousands of soldiers. The colors, types, and designs of their banners, armor, and weapons varied, but none of them had the look of an Essosi. Indeed, they had all hailed from the same land as her and Viserys.

Magister Illyrio let the army in voluntarily. At first, she assumed he did this because his household guard was hopelessly outnumbered or because he was worried that they would destroy his manse.

She later found out that Magister Illyrio had actually been expecting the Westerosi. But he had not double-crossed her or her brother. From what Dany could gather, he was on no one's side and everyone's side at the same time.

To Daenerys' relief, the Usurper had lifted the price on the Targaryens' heads. He still had people searching for them, but for a different reason.

When Dany learned this reason, she realized that the things she had been running from were trivial compared to the true greatest threat to the Known World.

Growing up, Dany's knowledge on the history of Westeros was shabby at best. Most of what she knew of it was what she heard from her brother. Although it was at least eight thousand years old, Viserys only considered everything from the time of Aegon's Landing – meaning the past three hundred years – to be of any interest. Before then, the country had been a land of lawless savages who murdered, raped, and stole from each other as they pleased. Or so Viserys had claimed.

Dany had sometimes questioned the validity of the things her brother told her, but recently, she had come to wonder if he had ever made a single completely truthful statement in his life.

When the Westerosi forces arrived in Illyrio's estate, Daenerys, Viserys, and the magister had sat down with their commanders. One of them was Ser Davos Seaworth, a former smuggler who had been knighted by Lord Stannis Baratheon. Daenerys was aware that Stannis was the Usurper's brother, and that he was the current Lord of Dragonstone, which was the Targaryen ancestral home. Viserys had angrily claimed that the Onion Knight insulted them with his very presence.

The other commander was Monford Velaryon, Lord of Driftmark. Dany knew the Velaryons were distant relations of the Targaryens, and they had been their loyal vassals all the way up until the very end of the Rebellion. After that, they – along with every other house in the Seven Kingdoms – had bent the knee to Robert.

Luckily, Viserys harbored no ill will towards Lord Monford for bowing to the Usurper. He had acted in the best interests of his hose, after all. Viserys must have thought that Lord Monford, Ser Davos, and all their men meant to turn their cloaks and support the Targaryens instead.
Dany did not dare to hope for so much. Thus, she was less disappointed than her brother when she found out why the Westerosi forces had come for them.

Lord Monford and Ser Davos revealed that they were not there to help restore the Targaryens to the Iron Throne. They were not preparing to bring them back to Westeros, either. Not yet, they claimed. Why not yet?

They discovered that the Usurper did not want them dead. Instead, he had been advised to seek an alliance with the Targaryens. Both Viserys and his sister thought that queer.

What could we possibly offer him? There is literally nothing more we could give than the clothes off our backs.

They learned this alliance had initially been the suggestion of one Gregor Clegane. That name came up many times throughout the conversation.

Viserys had once told her of Gregor Clegane. He was known as the Mountain That Rides. He was an enormous monster in human skin who butchered women and children for his own amusement. It had been he who murdered their niece and nephew Rhaenys and Aegon, as well as their goodsister Elia Martell.

According to Lord Monford and Ser Davos, that was by no means true. Well, it was more half-true. Gregor Clegane was a massive man, but he was benevolent by nature. In actuality, he had saved Princess Elia, and Rhaenys and Aegon had been butchered by another knight named Amory Lorch. Furthermore, the Mountain had killed Lorch on the spot for committing that atrocity.

By the end of that conversation, Dany had an entirely different view of Gregor Clegane from the one her brother had put in her head. He was originally a vassal to Lord Tywin Lannister of Casterly Rock, who had caused the Sack of King's Landing. Now he was a vassal to Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell. Stark had been made the Mountain the lord of Moat Cailin, an ancient fortress which separated the North from the rest of the Seven Kingdoms.

The Mountain also had a seat on the Usurper's Small Council. A new title had been created just for him. He was Robert's Master of Order. By occupying that position, he was charged with maintaining stability and diplomatic ties all throughout the realm. So far, he had done a commendable job fulfilling this duty.

He had not done it alone, however. A decade and a-half ago, he had formed an organization known as the Legion without Banners. Dany had heard talk of the Legion throughout her lifetime. However, the extent of her knowledge was the gossip she and her brother had picked up in the marketplace and taverns (as well as the occasional brothel).

Davos Seaworth and Monford Velaryon were able to provide a much more elaborate description of the Legion without Banners. They depicted it as the most diverse, most cooperative, and most prestigious organization that anyone of modern day had ever seen. It had achieved a level of unity and brotherhood that the sellsword companies of Essos could only dream of attaining. In fact, quite a few natives of Essos had travelled across the Narrow Sea to enlist in the Legion's ranks.

Ser Davos revealed that his second son, Allard, was one of the Legion's top officers. Allard was among the soldiers that had accompanied his father and Lord Monford to Pentos. When Daenerys and Viserys asked (more demanded in his case) to know more about the Legion without Banners, Allard was summoned to the table.

He only had good things to say about the Legion and its commander. In his mind, there were very
few men alive as honorable as Lord Gregor Clegane. The man had established order and peace all throughout the nine regions of Westeros. He had even succeeded in forming a pact between the Free Folk and the inhabitants of the Seven Kingdoms. Because of his great deeds, Westeros now flourished in a way that it had never done under the reign of the Targaryens.

Viserys was not pleased with that observation. Dany, on the other hand, was intrigued. Even without her brother's influencing words, she had been convinced that Westeros would suffer, decline, and ultimately collapse without a Targaryen ruler. In that regard, it appeared she was as wrong as her brother. From all accounts, Robert Baratheon was a just ruler with a wise council backing him. I dare not say that near Viserys, though.

Despite all these positive change Gregor Clegane had inflicted upon Westeros, there was one major issue that had yet to be resolved. Interestingly, this issue had not yet struck the land. Even so, it had been made aware publicly four years earlier.

Allard Seaworth claimed that this issue was the very reason he, his father, Lord Monford, and the Westerosi units had sought out Viserys and his sister.

That was when they addressed Lord Gregor's revelation of the Long Night.

At first, Viserys had laughed dismissively at the concept that the Others would soon return to the world. Dany had been tempted to laugh, too. But the more she listened to Allard, the less inclined she felt to scoff at his words. After enough time elapsed, even Viserys was beginning to believe in the credibility of Allard's testimony.

The whole of Westeros had already accepted the truth that the Long Night would occur sometime in the next few years. Now Viserys and Daenerys shared their conviction. Still, the thought was rather disquieting.

I miss the days when our biggest concern was finding safety from the Usurper.

Dany and her brother was still perplexed as to what Gregor Clegane wanted with them. Allard Seaworth confessed that even he and the other top Legionnaires did not know. Allard was one of a privileged few who knew that Lord Gregor claimed the Targaryens had a certain "advantage" that no one else in the Known World possessed. For whatever reason, the Mountain was currently withholding the specifics of this "advantage" from everyone else. He had claimed that the Targaryens were not aware of this advantage, and they did not even possess it just yet.

I'd be surprised if we had an advantage over anyone.

Still, Dany felt a little comforted. Even if it turned out that this advantage did not truly exist, it had saved her and her brother from being murdered in their sleep. For that, she was grateful to Gregor Clegane.

After the explanation was finished, Allard, Ser Davos, and Lord Monford asked the Targaryens if they were willing to work in conjunction with King Robert. Fortunately for everyone there, Viserys had one of his rare rational moments of coherent thought, and he agreed to collaborate with the Westerosi envoys.

Dany was certain he was secretly plotting to overthrow Robert Baratheon. But naturally, she did not mention that to anyone else.

Shortly after this agreement was struck, Ser Davos, Lord Monford, and the majority of the Westerosi forces had departed from Pentos and sailed back across the Narrow Sea. Dany longed to
go with them, but for the present, it appeared as though her place was still in the east.

One hundred of the soldiers had stayed behind in Pentos to guard Viserys and Daenerys (and to keep a close eye on them, doubtlessly). They had ample coin to pay Illyrio Mopatis for lodgings, and they had brought their own provisions. Since they were essentially fending for themselves, the magister was more than willing to accommodate the Westerosi.

Nearly one full year had passed since then. She and Viserys were still no closer to finding out what Robert Baratheon planned to do with them, no closer to returning home, and no closer to learning what this supposed "advantage" of theirs was.

Viserys and Daenerys were not confined to Illyrio's manse. So long as they were accompanied by the hundred Westerosi soldiers, they were free to go anywhere they pleased. Still, they had chosen to remain with the magister, as they had no true friends anywhere else on this side of the Narrow Sea.

Daenerys was content to stand by and wait until their advantage made itself known. Be that as it may, Viserys was determined to have something to show for their stay in Essos before they returned to the Seven Kingdoms. Dany knew he was scheming to amass an army of his own.

He was hoping to assemble this army quietly and without notice. Of course, since Robert's soldiers had them under tight scrutiny, his options were quite limited. Every time he tried to contact a group of soldiers that may have fought for him, his efforts were intruded upon by their guards.

The guards were actually willing to aid Viserys in this endeavor, as they debated that Westeros would need every warrior it could find in the hardships to come. Viserys was reluctant to accept that type of help from them, but even he was not such a fool as to turn away such an offer.

Viserys could expect none of the Westerosi to give him their swords, either. Less than half of the hundred had fought on the side of the Targaryens during the Rebellion, and the majority of those were loyal to the stags now. They were not likely to turn their cloaks a second time.

While Viserys busied himself with searching for his own forces, Dany passed her time by learning more about their homeland. Several of the soldiers were rather accommodating in that regard, as well.

Of the hundred soldiers that had stayed behind with Dany and her brother, twenty of them were members of the Legion without Banners. While most of their guards at least tried to be chivalrous, Dany found she preferred the company of the Legionnaires.

On a late morning in the middle of 299 A.C., Dany stood on the balcony of her bedroom. She stared off into the west, off into the direction of her homeland. She did this at least once every day. She paid especial attention to the Narrow Sea. She liked to imagine sailing across that vast expanse of water until she found land again.

Unlike her power-hungry brother, Dany did not desire the crown. She would have settled for a small holdfast and a handful of servants. Perhaps once we return, the Usurper could grant us Dragonstone. She doubted King Robert would do so willingly, but maybe Gregor Clegane could convince him to allow the Targaryens their ancestral home. If the Mountain was able to persuade him to allow wildlings to come south of the Wall, it should be relatively simple for him to speak on our behalf.

Daenerys was brought out of her reverie by voices. They came from the courtyard beneath her window. She leaned out, peered downward, and spotted six of the Westerosi conversing with each
other on the ground below. She had taken the time to learn the names and faces of each of her guards. After a few seconds, she recognized these six as Ser Bonifer Hasty, Ser Malcolm Branfield, Eddison Tollett, Alysane Mormont, Ser Perwyn Frey, and Chiswyck.

*Legionnaires, all.*

Daenerys decided to call upon them. She swiftly left her bedchamber and made her way down to the courtyard. She walked hurriedly yet elegantly, as she was accustomed to moving.

Malcolm Branfield was the first one to notice her. He smiled politely, gave a small nod, and said in acknowledgement "Good morning to you, my lady."

"Good morning, Ser Malcolm," Dany returned with a grin.

One-by-one, the other five Legionnaires turned to the Targaryen girl and bade her a fine morning, which she returned cordially.

The six of them were crowded around a stone bench. Perwyn Frey and Eddison Tollett were seated on the ground by the base of the bench, Ser Bonifer Hasty and Chiswyck sat on the surface of the bench, Alysane Mormont was standing with one foot resting on the bench, and Ser Malcolm Branfield was leaning against the back of the bench.

When Dany reached them, Alysane removed her foot, and Ser Bonifer and Chiswyck scooted off to the sides to make room for her. Dany happily accepted the spot in the center of the bench.

"I hope I did not interrupt anything," she stated humbly.

"Not at all," Ser Perwyn assured her, "We were merely chatting."

"'Chatting?'" Dany uttered, unfamiliar with that expression.

"A term coined by our commander," Ser Bonifer enlightened her, "It refers to speaking casually on various subjects."

"Oh, alright," Dany avowed. *I should add that to list of the Mountain's accomplishments.* She decided to address that topic. "Construction materials, weapons, languages, songs, alliances… and now speech. Is there anything Lord Gregor has *not* tried his hand at?"

"These must be something," Perwyn Frey contended, "But I could not venture to guess it."

"Maybe because he's already contributed to every area that's worth contributing to," Chiswyck hypothesized.

"At any rate, Lord Gregor has all but revolutionized the modern world as we know it," Eddison Tollett murmured, "He's done more than any of us could ever hope to do. Or at least what I could do."

Dany chuckled at that. Eddison Tollett had been daubed Dolorous Edd by his colleagues. That was a direct result of his very dour and pessimistic sense of humor. Although he seemed to possess very low self-esteem, Dany appreciated the remarks he made. Like as not, they often made her grin.

"This past year, I've heard very much about Gregor Clegane," Daenerys thought aloud, "I know of him as a lord, as a general, as an inventor, and as a diplomat. However, I've yet to know of him as a man. Tell me; what is he like as a man?"
"For starters, he's a giant among men," Dolorous Edd expounded, "The rest of us are mere dwarves next to him."

"So he really is as tall as I've heard?" Dany presumed.

"Oh, yes," Perwyn Frey muttered with a smile, "My lady, he is as tall as Magister Illyrio is wide."

Dany and the others burst out laughing at that observation. After a few seconds, Malcolm commented jokingly "I'm not certain he is that tall, Perwyn."

More chuckles were produced. Still, he must be tall. Anyone with eyes could clearly see how morbidly obese Magister Illyrio Mopatis was. If he stopped eating, Westeros might have enough food to get through the next winter.

Then she remembered what the next winter would be like. She quickly purged the thought of it from her mind, and she elected to return to the original subject of the conversation. She gazed around at the Legionnaires and said inquisitively "How well do you know the Mountain? Personally, I mean."

"First and foremost, he's committed to his cause," Bonifer Hasty perceived.

"Which is?" Dany enquired.

"The endurance and prosperity of Westeros," Ser Malcolm clarified.

"Far as I know, that's been a lifelong goal of his," Chiswyck proclaimed. He would know; he's been a retainer of the Mountain longer than most others. Dany was aware that Chiswyck had been a man-at-arms to Gregor Clegane since before the Legion without Banners was formed.

"And he has already accomplished very much in the way of his goal," Dolorous Edd claimed.

"Under his direction, the realm has thrived like never before," Alysane Mormont professed, "Pardon me for saying this, my lady, but I believe the Mountain has done more for Westeros than any of the Targaryen kings ever did."

"So I've heard," Dany uttered candidly. Viserys would have raged at that statement. Daenerys was a little more openminded and objective than her brother. At the very least, the Mountain did a fine job cleaning up the mess my father made. Just then, another thought occurred to her. She mentioned it to the Legionnaires: "If the Mountain is so good for the realm and so beloved by its people, could it be possibly that he might someday come to rule the Seven Kingdoms on his own?"

"Gods, no," refuted Ser Malcolm, "Lord Gregor may have the love of the smallfolk and many knights and lords, but love does not equal support."

"Aside from that, Lord Gregor has made it quite clear he has no desire to sit the Iron Throne himself," Perwyn Frey disclosed, "He is content to be a noble lord of the North."

"Yet already, he is lauded as a hero out of the legend," Dany noted, "And he is not even dead."

"There are some heroes who needn't die before the world praises their names," Alysane contended.

"Doubt anyone will praise mine even after I'm gone," Edd mumbled grimly.

"I'll praise it, Edd," Dany kindly assured the Valeman.
Eddison Tollett gave her a coy grin and remarked "I thank you for that, my lady."

She smiled back and patted him on the back gently. After sitting back up, she stated "Since Gregor Clegane is a lord, I assume he must have heirs. Does he?"

"Yes," Alysane Mormont affirmed, "It happens he has five. His oldest son Rickard is twelve. His second son Alyver is nine. His daughter Vallory is seven. His third son Larys is three. His fourth son Torrhen was born just a few turns of the moon ago."

Daenerys was impressed that Alysane knew all that. "You took the time to learn all their names and ages?"

The She-Bear snickered and pronounced "I would not be a very good aunt if I did not."

That caught Dany's interest. "'Aunt?"

"His daughter is my niece and his sons are my nephews," Alysane apprised her, "My elder sister Dacey is Lord Gregor's lady wife."

Daenerys raised an eyebrow in astonishment. One really does learn something knew each day.

"I'm surprise you didn't know that, my lady," Perwyn Frey commented.

"I knew the Mountain was wed to some Northwoman," Dany declared, "But I was never told her name or what house she was from."

"Now you know both," Edd bluntly remarked.

Dany lightly nodded her head. She gazed around at the others and inquired "Do any of you have children?"

"I have a son and a daughter," Alysane proudly declared, "They're at Bear Island with the rest of my family. My mother and younger sisters are caring for them in my absence."

"And your husband?" Dany said curiously.

The She-Bear gave a smirk and muttered slyly "When did I ever say anything about a husband?"

"Then your children are baseborn?" Daenerys assumed.

"Oh, no," Alysane replied. She donned a very wicked grin and pronounced "There is a custom on Bear Island. When unwed women wish to have children, they go hunting for bears. But not to kill them." Dany quickly realized what the female Legionnaire was implying. She muttered in bewilderment "You… mated with a bear?"

"Bears, most likely," Alysane expounded cheekily, "I can't say for certain that the same one fathered both my son and my daughter."

"And… all the Mormont women do this?" Dany queried.

"Not all," Alysane claimed, "My mother did, though. My father was a bear. So was Dacey's. And Lyra's. And Jorelle's. And even Lyanna's. Five daughters my mother Lady Maege whelped, and all our sires are skulking about in some cave."
For a minute, Dany stared blankly at the She-Bear. She could not tell whether Alysane was being truthful or feeding her an elaborate hoax. She asked no one in particular "Is she serious?"

"I find it best not to ask that question, my lady," Dolorous Edd Tollett advised her.

Yes. Now that I think on it, I would rather not know.

"Oh, well; I can think of plenty unions worse than a woman and a bear," Malcolm Branfield remarked.

So can I. Namely one between brother and sister, if my family is any indication.

"So Alysane is a mother," Dany acknowledged, looking around at the men, "What of the rest of you? Are there any fathers here?"

"I may have a bastard or two somewhere in the Seven Kingdoms," Chiswyck suggested, "And maybe one in Pentos, if we're here long enough."

"Most of my elder half-brothers have children," Perwyn Frey illuminated, "And even one of my younger full ones, Benfrey. As of yet, I do not. That mightn't change. If you ask me, my lady, there are enough Freys in the world."

"Not enough good ones," Edd drearily uttered. He quickly turned to Perwyn and added "If you mind my saying."

"I do not mind," Perwyn asserted, scoffing, "Because you're correct, Edd. For every three or four Freys that are born into the world, there is maybe one good one."

Just like that old saying about how the gods would flip a coin at the birth of each Targaryen.

"With my father's brood, the odds are even worse," Perwyn heatedly went on, "Lord Walder spent nearly all his time fathering children and almost no time being a father. Because of that, there was always discord and strive in our house. Luckily, my father had the decency to die a couple years ago. Before that, he was in a coma. Since then, my half-brother Stevron took over lordship of the Crossing, and he is running the Twins far better than the Late Lord Frey ever did."

Daenerys was stunned. By the expressions on their faces, so were the other Legionnaires. She had never seen a man talk with such disdain about his own sire. Certainly, she had rarely heard anyone say a kind thing about King Aerys II, but Viserys had never spoken ill of their father.

Perywn soon noted the startled looks the others were giving him, particularly Dany. He told her "I've made you uncomfortable. I apologize, my lady."

"You needn't apologize, ser," she reassured him, "It is not always pleasant to speak one's mind, but at times, it must be done."

"True," Eddison Tollett concurred. He leaned back against the sold leg of the bench and stated "I suppose it's my turn."

"Go on, Edd," Dany beckoned him.

"Very well," the Valeman conceded, "No sons. No daughters. No bastards. No wife. No prospective matches. My love life couldn't be any more pitiful if I took the black."

Chiswyck, Ser Perwyn, and Alysane snickered a bit. Dany patted Edd on the back sympathetically.
Maybe a family is what can finally make him happy. It would certainly bring happiness into my life.

"You next, Ser Malcolm," Dany requested.

Malcolm Branfield nodded and professed "Like Ser Perwyn, I’ve become an uncle several times. My sister Elissa has six children. Whereas I have never married, and I do not intend to. The Branfield line will die with me."

"And that does not bother you?" Dany asked rhetorically.

"No," Ser Malcolm proclaimed, "My house was sworn to the Crownlands, so it fought for your father during the Rebellion. My father and siblings died for their devotion to the Mad King. Elissa lived because she had married into the North a few years beforehand. The only reason I too was spared was because I bent the knee before it was too late."

"I am deeply sorry for all you've lost," Dany sincerely told him, placing a hand on his shoulder, "You and your family were loyal vassals of my family, and you were rewarded for that loyalty with death and destruction. I know what it is like to lose almost everyone close to you."

Malcolm smiled thankfully, placed his hand atop hers, and stated "You have done nothing that requires my forgiveness, my lady. The blame for my family lies with them, as it was their decision to follow King Aerys to the bitter end. And while you may feel my pain, I cannot claim to feel yours. Yours is worse, I am certain. I was never banished from Westeros, nor did my sister ever vent her anger on me."

"I suppose not," was all Daenerys said in response, remembering how Viserys had been less than brotherly to her several times in the past. Those are the types of wounds that never fully heal.

She turned to the man seated next to her and stated "That leaves you, Ser Bonifer."

The middle-aged knight from the Stormlands nodded and muttered "Indeed, my lady."

Daenerys could detect a trace amount of reluctance in his voice. She told him "If the subject unsettles you so, you do not have to discuss it."

"It does not unsettle me, I promise you," Ser Bonifer proclaimed, "It may, however, unsettle you."

"Why is that?" Dany inquired in interest.

"Because it concerns a member of your family," Bonifer Hasty informed her.

Dany was equally parts perplexed and captivated by that revelation "Go on, please."

"As you wish," Ser Bonifer conceded. After a pause, he disclosed "I never wed nor had children. But not because I could not find an ideal woman. It happens that I did. I loved her, and she loved me. Although her status was far higher than my own, I considered arranging a betrothal between her and myself. Alas, I was unable to wed her."

"Why?" Dany inquired.

"Because she wed the king," Bonifer Hasty notified her.

Dany's eyes widened in alarm. "So you mean…?"

The middle-aged knight nodded again and confirmed "The woman was your mother, Queen
Rhaella.

Daenerys was flabbergasted. Nevertheless, she was eager to hear more.

Ser Bonifer indulged her with "Your great-grandfather Aegon V tried to break the Targaryen tradition of marrying brother to sister by taking Betha Blackwood of Raventree as his bride. He intended for his son, your grandfather Jaehaerys II, to do the same by marrying to Celia Tully of the Riverlands. Unfortunately, Jaehaerys and his sister Shaera were smitten with each other. Against their father's wishes, they wed. I had hoped the cycle would end with them, but it did not. When King Jaehaerys announced the betrothal between his son Aerys and his daughter Rhaella, your mother and I were deeply dismayed. But her father was still the king; there was nothing we could do to protest his decree. So we agreed to stop seeing one another."

Again, Bonifer Hasty paused for a few seconds. Then he continued with "I've hardly even looked at another woman since then. After your mother and father's wedding, I decided to devote my life to the Seven instead. I formed my own company known as the Holy Hundred."

"Yes, I know of the Holy Hundred," Daenerys pronounced, "They fight in the name of the Father, the Mother, the Crone, the Warrior, the Smith, the Maiden, and the Stranger."

"Just so," Ser Bonifer affirmed, "We were an independent company for many years. After Greyjoy's Rebellion, I realized that Lord Gregor Clegane was fighting for an even greater cause. So I elected to augment his forces with my own. For the last decade, the Hold Hundred have also been Legionnaires."

"And the realm is all the better for it, I'm certain," Dany debated.

Bonifer smiled gently at that. "Your royal mother meant much to me, my lady. Though I never held her as a man holds a woman, I felt strongly for her. I see her in you. You are more her daughter than Aerys'. For that alone, you have my word; long as I live, no harm will come to you."

Daenerys was touched. She leaned over, lightly kissed the Stormlander on the cheek, and told her gratefully "Thank you, ser."

*I can see it in his eyes. He's speaking truly.* It was details like that which gave Dany hope.

An interval of quietness passed over the vicinity. Dany found her eyes drifting back to the eastern horizon. By now, the Sun was nearly overhead. Like most people, she enjoyed the sunlight. However, she found a certain unique pleasure in it. The heat made her feel warm both inside and out, and no matter how long she was exposed to it, it never burned her skin.

For a brief moment, she wondered what she would do without sunlight. Then it occurred to her… in the not too distant future, everyone in Westeros would be faced with that very predicament.

*Somehow, my mind keeps wandering back to that dreaded event. That is either realism… or paranoia.* She hoped it was not the latter. Paranoia was an offshoot of madness.

Ser Perwyn was the first to see the anxious frown on her face. He inquired "Are you well, my lady?"

Although Dany kept her gaze on the distance, she was able to nod her head in response and ask "How long will it be before the next winter?"

"According to the Citadel and Lord Gregor, this will be our last year of summer," Malcolm Branfield disclosed.
"Then we shall have autumn for about two years," Alysane stated.

"Maybe three, if we are fortunate," Chiswyck offered.

"Then we have at most four years until the Long Night comes?" Dany assumed.


"Will we be ready?" Daenerys said enquiringly.

No one answered at first. Ultimately, Ser Malcolm sighed and observed "We will have to be."

"Don't lose faith," Bonifer Hasty bade the others, "Westeros survived the Long Night once. Now it is stronger than it's ever been in history."

"But so is the Night's King," Chiswyck pointed out.

Perwyn Frey rested his chin on his arm and stared in same direction as Dany. He muttered "I suppose we should count ourselves lucky we're on this side of the Narrow Sea."

"We could for now," Dolorous Edd conceded, "In the end, though, it won't matter."

"That's true," Alysane agreed, "Once the Others have taken over all of Westeros, they'll set their eyes on Essos next. Then Slaver's Bay. Then Ulthos, Sothoryos, and all the rest of the Known World."

*The She-Bear is right. Leagues upon leagues of water will not stop the undead.*

"I wish there was more we could do to prepare for it," Dany muttered under her breath.

"Well, Lord Gregor still believes you and your brother will play a pivotal role in the Long Night," Malcolm Branfield reminded her.

"I have not forgotten, Ser Malcolm," Daenerys commented, "I only wish I knew what this role requires of me. Whatever this 'advantage' Lord Gregor claims my brother and I possess is, it must be extraordinary."

"In time, it will make itself known, my lady," Alysane Mormont reassured her.

Dany nodded at that. *I only hope 'in time' will not be too long.*

Just then, Allard Seaworth entered the vicinity. His eyes dared around the courtyard, as though he was searching for someone. When he spotted Daenerys, he rushed over to where she and the six other Legionnaires were seated.

He stopped before her, dipped his head, and stated "My lady, I must ask that you accompany me to the gate."

"May I ask why?" the dragon girl said inquiringly.

"A woman just turned up there," Allard informed her, "She claims she is here to see you and your brother."

A woman? Viserys had "known" quite a few women in their travels of the Free Cities, but Daenerys had not been very well acquainted with any of them.
"What does she look like?" Ser Perwyn queried.

"She has long hair," Allard disclosed, "It is fair in some parts and dark in others. She is also clad from head to heel in red attire."

"A priestess of R'hllor?" Malcolm Branfield conjectured.

"That is my guess," Allard Seawroth confirmed, "She mumbled something about the Lord of Light when I talked to her."

"Then she is a red priestess," Bonifer Hasty declared.

"What possible business would she have with Viserys and myself?" Dany said in bafflement.

"I asked her that myself," Allard responded, "She refused to supply an answer."

"I say turn her away," Chiswyck suggested.

"I agree," Edd Tollett proclaimed, "You can't trust red priests; they'll burn you soon as aid you."

"I will see her," Daenerys firmly decided. Perhaps this is the advantage.

The blonde girl got up from the bench and stood beside the second son of Davos Seaworth. Allard gestured for his six colleagues to join them. Due to his status in the Legion without Banners, Allard had been given command of the Legionnaires that had remained in Pentos. The other eighty Westerosi soldiers had their own officers.

As the eight of them made their way to the gate, Dany walked alongside Allard Seaworth and asked him "Did this woman tell you anything else? Where she is from? Who she is? Why she is in Pentos?"

"She did say her name," Allard enlightened her, "She calls herself 'Melisandre.'"

Chapter End Notes

Note: I'm certain more than a few of you will be compelled to point out that in the original series, Melisandre had already been with Lady Selyse Baratheon for a few years before the events of Game of Thrones began. I would remind those people that that was still the ORIGINAL universe, where Cersei's children were all bastards. And for those of you who were hoping for something other than Jon/Ygritte, do not despair.
Note: I'm not wholly satisfied with how this chapter turned out. Or rather, I'm not as satisfied as I expected to be upon completing it. Originally, it was going to have a third perspective character, whose section would have involved a significant plot twist involving all the Targaryen characters. I ultimately decided to wait until the next update to include that section. However, the next update might take a while longer.

You see, as we near the end of March, I am facing the last six or seven weeks of my current semester of graduate school. After May 13th, I will be done with academics for good. With that in mind, my primary focus has to be to my studies. Because of that, I have been a little distracted during my writing.

This may just be my stressed and preoccupied mind speaking, but I cannot help but feel that parts of this chapter are extremely rushed or difficult to follow. If so, I apologize. Just know that from this point on, updates are going to be either shorter or more infrequent. Nonetheless, I am not going on a hiatus, and I am not going to become one of those writers who lets their work suffer because of inability to manage their time effectively.

The frog sat on the log, motionless and silent. For the most part. Every now and then, it expanded its jaw and opened its mouth to emanate a loud "ribbit." Apart from that, there was no sound anywhere else in this part of the bog.

She moved towards the log slowly. One hand noiselessly padded through the murky green waters. The other hand gripped her trident firmly. She kept her gaze on her prey. As far as she could see, the frog was convinced it was alone and safe. Not for long.

She swam closer and closer until she was less than a yard away from the green amphibian. It was staring in another direction, so it had yet to notice her. She was not about to give it a chance to. Once she was upon the frog, she abruptly emerged from the waters and thrust her trident forward.

The frog immediately jumped off the log in fright, but its escape attempt made no difference. She easily caught it in midair, impaling it with the center prong of her trident. The frog struggled for a moment, and then it ceased moving altogether.

She smiled in satisfaction at her latest kill. *I'm becoming quite proficient at this.*

"A fine catch, Your Grace," a voice called out from behind.

Princess Rhaenys Targaryen turned to look at Meera Reed, her friend and Lord Howland's daughter. With her were two of her father's soldiers. All three were armed and dressed similarly.

Rhaenys removed the frog from the head of her weapon and brought it over to the crannogmen. Meera took the lifeless amphibian, inspected it, smiled, and dropped it into a large sack she wore on her shoulder. Inside that sack was a large collection of freshly-caught frogs, snakes, and lizard-lions.
"That should be more than enough for today," Meera declared, "What say we return to Greywater Watch?"

"Excellent idea," Rhaenys agreed. We would not wish to risk getting back after the castle departs.

The trek back to Greywater was treacherous. Then again, one could argue that the whole of the Neck was treacherous. At least it was to someone who was unfamiliar with the terrain and the perils it had in store for the unwary.

Fortunately, Rhaenys had spent most of her life in the Neck. It had taken her little time to adapt to the landscape, as she had learnt the ways of the natives in her upbringing. By this point, she was just as capable of enduring the many hardships of the region as the crannogmen were. *No swamp is going to swallow me up anytime soon.*

As she and her companions traversed through the bogs, Rhaenys looked herself over. She was clad in a thin woolen hunting gown, which was absolutely soaked. She was barefoot, as shoes only interfered in swimming. Her fingers and toes were a little wrinkled, and she was covered in small amounts of moss and algae. *No leeches this time, thankfully.* Her skin and hair were tinted a faint shade of green from her time in the bogs. Only her teeth were free of green, as she had not opened her mouth underwater.

She certainly did not look a princess right then. Not that she was complaining. She doubted princesses were afforded this much entertainment or thrill. Apart from that, oftentimes she secretly enjoyed getting dirty. It made her feel wily. *No wrong with a little clean dirty fun.*

Soon enough, they arrived at Greywater Watch. They had returned just in the nick of time. The castle was about to get underway once more. That was one aspect that made it unique; it was always changing its location.

As she, Meera, and the two men of House Reed stepped onto the island that made up the grounds of Greywater, Rhaenys was promptly approached by a tall man in white enameled armor. Even in his later years, Ser Oswell Whent was as vigilant and reliable as ever.

"How went the hunt, Your Grace?" the Riverlander knight inquired.

"Bagged us a fine assortment, ser," Rhaenys informed her protector, gesturing to the sack on Meera's arm, "We'll eat well tonight."

Oswell Whent smiled and remarked "Indeed."

Ser Oswell had initially been against the concept of Rhaenys learning how to forage for food in the style of the crannogmen. That was mostly attributed to how he was somewhat unfit to travel through the bogs, given his age. He was reluctant to have the princess go anywhere without him. It had taken a great deal of reasoning and persuasion from Rhaenys, Lord Howland Reed, and Ser Mark Ryswell to convince the elderly knight that the Targaryen girl would be safe.

As it happened, there was no real need for Rhaenys to learn how to hunt; there were already plenty of excellent hunters at Greywater. The idea had been Rhaenys' originally. She debated it would be in her best interests. If ever she needed to fend for herself, she did not wish to be unversed in the art of hunting. Since the Neck provided adequate shelter in its natural state, she was most interested in locating food in that environment. Plus, anyone could hunt on plains, valleys, forests. It took a truly patient and committed individual to master how to hunt in a swamp.

That was a challenge Rhaenys had eagerly accepted. She was by nature a persistent person, and –
for the present – she had all the time in the world.

"Enjoy your swim?" another voice sardonically inquired.

Rhaenys looked to her side and saw the only other Dornish occupant of Greywater Watch. Her mother's dearest friend and the alleged mother of her younger half-brother. Even in her thirties, Lady Ashara Dayne was a vision of beauty. A *sharp contrast to me at this moment.*

"Very much so," Rhaenys informed the older woman, a sly grin on her face, "You should try it some time, my lady. The marsh water does wonders for your skin."

"So does a bath," Lady Ashara dryly muttered. She stepped closer to the princess and added in "Speaking of which…"

At that, she took Rhaenys by her arm and began to lead her over to the holdfast. Ever the loyal bodyguard, Ser Oswell Whent followed them close behind.

Rhaenys knew where Lady Ashara was taking her. Every time she returned from one of her outings in the bogs, Ashara insisted that she wash up straight after. Rhaenys did not protest, but she did roll her eyes. *Her and her obsession with cleanliness.* It was mostly Rhaenys' cleanliness, to be precise.

"Perhaps we could forgo the bath one of these days?" Rhaenys cheekily suggested.

Ashara Dayne was not amused. "Your Grace, you could remain green if you do not take proper care of your body."

"Is that so?" Rhaenys murmured in slight interest, "Then perhaps I'll consider that. It would make camouflage a little easier."

Ashara Dayne sighed and proclaimed "Your mother would throw a fit if she saw you now."

"Which one?" Rhaenys Targaryen humorously countered.

Truthfully, she did not think either of her mothers would be so displeased with her appearance. She had inherited her devious nature from her birth mother Elia Martell, and her stepmother Lyanna Stark had never cared much for the traditional habits of highborn ladies. Between the first's Dornish broadmindedness and the second's wolf blood, Rhaenys did not believe they would be upset with her for failing to remain spotless on a regular basis. *They might even say I'm still presentable.*

Ashara let out a little scoff, and then she said in a serious tone "Rhae, we may be hidden from the outside world, but you are still a princess. As such, you must adhere to certain standards."

"Very well, my lady," the Targaryen girl coincided, a little grudgingly.

It only took a couple minutes for them to get to Rhaenys' bedchamber. When she got there, she found two maids standing by with pails of steaming water. They must have been waiting for her at Lady Ashara's orders. *I would have had this bath, whether I complied or not.*

Ser Oswell stood vigil outside the door, which Ashara shut and locked. The window to the room was covered, so the women now had total privacy.

One of the maids proceeded to strip Rhaenys out of her filthy, drenched clothing. At the same time, the other maid poured the hot water into the tub and added the usual salts and soaps to it.
Rhaenys shivered as her moist skin was exposed to the damp air of her room. Although the Neck generally exhibited a different climate than the rest of the North, one could still feel a chill at times. Once she was fully naked, her maids helped her into the tub. Relief passed over her as the hot water encompassed her entire body. The water was just a few degrees shy of boiling. But Rhaenys did not mind. She cherished the sensation of soaking in water, no matter how hot it was.

She did not have long to enjoy the feeling, as her maids went to work right away. They each took a brush and scrubbed away vigorously. They were very thorough; they managed to wash every part of her, including the parts she normally kept concealed from others.

Her hair was the hardest to clean. It was soaked from her dip in the marshes, and the subsequent interval above water had allowed it to dry a bit, which rendered it a little brittle. Additionally, tree sap, scum, and several dead insects had gotten tangled in it. Fortunately, her maids were experienced in keeping such hair neat. After brushing it extensively for ten minutes, Rhaenys' flowing locks were as smooth, soft, and straight as they had been before.

The bath water was murky and opaque by the time Rhaenys emerged from the tub. Luckily, it had served its purpose; she was now spotlessly clean. The tint of green had faded from her hair and skin, and her skin was practically glistening. Her maids left her dripping for a few moments while they armed themselves with some fresh towels. After that, they swiftly dried her off. They couldn't even let me do that by myself.

Once Rhaenys was dry, her maids dressed her in a gown of silk and lace. Attire such as this was not often found in the Neck. Lady Ashara had arranged for some Dornish fabrics to be exported to Moat Cailin and delivered to Greywater Watch. She felt the princess would be more comfortable in the apparel of her mother's homeland. Lady Ashara certainly was.

Rhaenys did not wear these formal dresses very often. Whenever she did, it was usually for a special event. Or what passed for a special event in the typically uneventful Greywater Watch. Since Ashara chose her daily attire for her, Rhaenys could always tell when one of these events was going to occur.

As one of her maids fastened her bodice and the other tied up the back, Rhaenys looked to her mother's best friend and enquired "What's the occasion?"

"During your expedition into the swamp, we received a rider," Ashara apprised her, "The missive he delivered has only been seen by Lord Howland. He is reviewing it in his solar as we speak. But once he is finished, he will wish to discuss it with the rest of us."

"Alright," Rhaenys acknowledged, slipping on a pair of soft shoes, "Shall we go to the lounge?"

The elder Dornishwoman nodded in confirmation. Rhaenys followed her out of the bedchamber and into the corridor, where they were rejoined by Ser Oswell. The princess, her guardian, and her sworn shield made their way to the sitting room on the next floor.

Ser Mark Ryswell, Ethan Glover, Theo Wull, and Lady Jyanna Reed were already there. Meera and her younger brother Jojen were also there. They sat with their mother on a bench lined with cushions.

"You look quite beautiful today, Your Grace," Ethan Glover kindly told Rhaenys a few seconds after she entered. Just today, huh?

It had been seven years since she had blossomed into womanhood, and in the time since then, she had been given countless compliments on her astonishing beauty. At first, she would blush redder
than a radish when she received such praise, but now she had come to accept it graciously.

"Thank you, Ethan," Rhaenys said gratefully, flashing a grin, "But I fancy you wouldn't have said so a half-hour ago."

"I should say not," Lady Ashara japed.

Ethan Glover and Mark Ryswell chuckled at that remark.

Rhaenys went to a chair next to the bench Lady Jyanna and her children were on. She spotted Balerion lying at the base of this chair. She grinned and picked him up.

There was once a time when he would have hissed or shown his claws when somebody touched him like that. Well, he was a much younger tom then. Now he was elderly and feeble. He was nearly as old as Rhaenys herself. It was a wonder he had lived so long. Be that as it may, she still adored him every bit as she did when she was a girl.

As the princess sat down with Balerion in her lap, the Lady of Greywater Watch stated "Meera's told me all about how the hunt went today. She says you have nearly perfected the trident and your stealth technique."

"She is too kind," Rhaenys humbly proclaimed, scratching Balerion behind his ears, "Nevertheless, I will admit she is by no means wrong. I finally got the trident to feel like an extension of my arm, and this morning, I was so quiet that there were moments when even I would not have known I was around."

"Then you've learned all there is to learn about the trident and stealth, Your Grace," Meera perceived, "Perhaps we should move on to another topic soon."

"Good idea," Rhaenys concurred. But what to pick? I've already mastered the net, the dagger, climbing trees, making fires, swimming with eyes open, and most forms of hunting. Then it dawned on her: "How about you educate me on poisons next?"

"Poisons?" Meera uttered in mild surprise.

Rhaenys nodded and pronounced "I'm aware that the crannogmen are well-known for coating the tips of their arrows in lethal compounds. These compounds can be far more effective than steel in direct warfare. As you may already know, my mother's family knows quite a bit about poisons. Why do you think my uncle is called 'The Red Viper'?"

"That is a fair point," Meera admitted, rubbing her chin, "If you're genuinely interested in learning about the various poisonous substances of the Neck, I'd be happy to oblige you, Your Grace. All the same, I must warn you; we possess a very wide selection of them."

"I'd have been surprised if you did not," Rhaenys Targaryen commented bluntly, giving Balerion's stomach a light rub, "I am not one to back down from an endeavor simply because it is exhaustive and time-consuming. In fact, I find those qualities endearing in a challenge. I gladly accept your proposition."

Meera grinned at the older girl and told her "Very well. I can teach you most of the poisons of the Neck on my own. However, there are a few exceptionally deadly compounds that even I have yet to master. We would need to speak to my father if you wish to learn about those."

"First we'll handle the basics," Rhaenys suggested, "Once we get to the higher levels, we can ask Lord Howland if he'll be willing to teach us."
"I'd be honored to," came a voice from the entrance to the room.

Rhaenys looked up and saw Lord Howland Reed standing in the doorway. In his hand, he held a folded piece of parchment. She grinned at him, and he returned the grin. Then he grimly muttered "Alas, that will have to wait for a time. Right now, we have matters of greater precedence to contend with."

"How so, my love?" Lady Jyanna asked her husband.

Lord Howland held the piece of parchment in the air and revealed "I have spent the last hour going over this letter. It is actually very short, but the news it contains is most disquieting."

"How do you mean, my lord?" Rhaenys queried in interest.

Howland Reed approached the princess, held out the letter, and bade her "See for yourself, Your Grace."

Rhaenys kept one of her arms around Balerion. She tentatively accepted the missive in her free hand, unfolded it, and looked it over. It was written in the hand of Lord Gregor Clegane. Since Lord Gregor was one of only two men who wrote to Greywater Watch regularly – the other being Lord Eddard Stark – it was fairly easy for Rhaenys to recognize his writing. Rhaenys was always glad to receive a letter from the Mountain.

This missive, however, held shocking and grim news. As she read, she could honestly feel her eyes widening and the atmosphere becoming colder. His unease did not go unnoticed by the other people there.

"What is it, Princess?" Jojen Reed inquired.

Rhaenys did not answer him immediately. She waited until she finished reading the letter, and then she slowly looked up and revealed "The Others have been sighted north of the Wall."

Lady Jyanna and Lady Ashara gasped in alarm. Ethan Glover, Mark Ryswell, and Oswell Whent all bore uneasy countenances. Meera and Jojen seemed a little unsettled, but they did not let their anxiety show too much. Theo Wull was the only one who gave a relatively indifferent reaction.

"Then it's begun," Theo Wull uttered. Count on him to accept the truth first before anyone else.

"So it has," Lord Howland conceded. He moved to the center of the room and announced "The Great Summer is almost over. As the Starks are fond of saying, winter is coming. Now that the white walkers have made their grand entrance, we cannot afford to be caught unprepared."

"As long as we stay in the Neck, we are fixed for provisions, lodgings, and armaments," Oswell Whent pointed out.

"True, Ser Oswell," Howland Reed stated, "But our preparations for the Long Night cannot be limited to our everyday needs. There is much more that must be done before the white ravens are dispatched from the Citadel."

"Such as what?" Ashara Dayne enquired.

"Meera and I must travel to Winterfell soon," Jojen proposed, "Is that not right, Father?"

Lord Howland nodded and disclosed "Much of the Neck remains to be secured, so I cannot afford to leave Greywater just yet. You and your sister will go in my stead."
"As you command, my lord," Meera assured her lord father.

Rhaenys noted Meera was speaking simply out of obligation. Jojen, however, seemed to carry some hidden ulterior motive. *He must be eager to visit the Starks.*

"Is there anything the rest of us can do, my lord?" Mark Ryswell offered.

"As far as the world is concerned, the rest of you are supposed to be dead," Howland Reed remarked.

"A small setback, my lord," Oswell Whent slyly muttered, "We can simply become someone else."

Lady Jyanna seemed perplexed. "I beg your pardon, ser?"

Rhaenys realized what her sworn shield was implying. That gave her an idea of her own. "Ser Oswell may be on to something. Lyanna Stark used to be in hiding here. Now she is living as the maid Myrna for my younger brother. Lyanna was far better known in the North than any of us. If she could successfully disguise herself to blend into that region, the rest of us could do so easily."

"Perhaps," Ethan Glover concurred, "But where would we go?"

"Moat Cailin, of course," Rhaenys declared, "The one location where no person in this country is ever made to feel out of place."

By their facial expressions, the others were beginning to see the appeal in this suggestion. *Some of them, anyway.*

"And who among us would travel there, Your Grace?" Theo Wull queried.

Rhaenys smiled and answered with "Why, all of us."

"All?" Ashara Dayne repeated, a little astounded.

"Yes," Rhaenys confirmed, "You, I, Ser Mark, Ser Oswell, Ethan, and Theo."

"Is that wise, Your Grace?" Lady Ashara uttered nervously.

Rhaenys continued grinning. She then rose to her feet, gently set Balerion down on her chair, and proclaimed "I would have thought you'd approve, Lady Ashara. After all, it was thanks to you that my second brother was reunited with his mother. I stand an even lesser chance of being recognized, as I was only three when I last appeared in public. There are few in the world who would recognize me at a glance. Fewer if I was in disguise."

She paused for a moment so that Lady Ashara could reflect on that argument. Then she added in "Aside from that, I believe the six of us have been away from the world long enough. It is past time we reentered the great game."

"I must agree with the princess on that point," Mark Ryswell declared.

"So must I," Theo Wull debated.

Ethan Glover and Oswell Whent muttered their agreement, too. Lady Ashara initially seemed somewhat dismayed that even Rhaenys' sworn shield was in favor of this risky plan. In spite of that, even the elder Dornishwoman could not deny anything the princess had said.

"Very well," Ashara ultimately remarked, "Wherever we go, the most important thing is that we
stay together. And as much as I have enjoyed this stay in the Neck, a change of scenery would be welcome."

"I do not fault you for thinking so, my lady," Howland Reed candidly murmured, "Life in a swamp is not for everyone."

"Well, I've developed a fondness for it, my lord," Rhaenys said cheekily.

"So I have noticed, Your Grace," Howland Reed commented, giving a slight smile.

"But..." Ashara Dayne added in, turning to the ward of Greywater, "I worry for your safety, Rhae. If you are discovered, you could be killed. Or worse."

"A couple years ago, that may have been the case," Rhaenys contended, "Now, I am not so certain. Seeing as how the Usurper gave orders for my aunt and uncle to be captured alive and unharmed, I do not believe he would be so quick to order my death. Anyway, he still believes me to be dead. So long as my cover is not compromised, I will be in no immediate danger."

No more than everyone else in the country current is.

Ashara thought on that for a minute. Then she sighed and proclaimed "If you truly wish to leave, I will not protest. I am sworn not only to protect, but also to obey you. The decision is yours to make."

"Then I wish to go," Rhaenys announced, "We will accomplish nothing by staying here. Whereas we can accomplish plenty by leaving here."

"So be it," Ashara avowed.

Rhaenys Targaryen smiled at the elder woman.

As much as she enjoyed her stay in the Neck, she was looking forward to travelling to Moat Cailin. This will be a fine time to test all I've learned about camouflage. In addition to that, there were two people at the moat whom she was particularly looking forward to meeting.

The first was Willas Tyrell. The heir to Highgarden had been a member of the Legion without Banners for the entirety of the Great Summer. For the first half, he had been squire to Lod Gregor Clegane. Now he served as the Reach's representative on the Mountain's secret council. By all accounts, he was a good man.

That was important to Rhaenys, as Lord Gregor had suggested forging a betrothal between her and Lord Willas.

Lord Willas was only partly aware of the betrothal; all he knew was that the Mountain had a prospective match in mind for him. He had yet to discover who the woman was, but at Lord Gregor's request, Willas had agreed not to consider any other matches until he found out who she was.

From what Rhaenys heard of Will Tyrell, he would make a fine lord and a great husband someday. Even so, she wished to meet the man before he became her husband.

The other person Rhaenys desired to meet was Lord Gregor's current squire, the supposed bastard of the late Brandon Stark and Lady Ashara. Rhaenys was one of the few in the country who knew the truth of Jon Snow's heritage. He was not a bastard, nor was he a Stark on his father's side. Instead, his mother was a wolf, and his father was a dragon. The same dragon that sired Rhaenys.
Even more so than Willas Tyrell, Rhaenys Targaryen was greatly anticipating her reunion with her half-brother.

*It is past time the dragons were brought back together.*

…

He cut to the right. Then he cut to the left. Then he delivered an overhand strike. His opponent deflected all three blows before any of them struck home.

"Very good," Ser Garlan Tyrell remarked. He returned to his original position and beckoned him "Again."

He backed up a pace and examined his opponent closely. *Come on; he must have some weakness.* A moment later, he thought he spotted one. Garlan's right shoulder was undefended. He focused on that region of the Reachman's body, raised his sword, rushed forward…

…and fell right into the trap. Garlan casually dodged the blow, parried it with his longsword, and struck his adversary behind the knee. He groaned and stumbled for a few feet. But he recovered quickly and moved to deliver a retaliatory strike. This time, he almost caught Garlan off his guard. He enjoyed seeing the momentary expression of astonishment on the Reachman's face.

The two of them crossed blades for nearly an entire minute before Garlan managed to deliver a nonlethal blow to the Dornishman's side. The blow was by no means so powerful that he was unable to continue fighting, but the rule was "first to hit flesh wins the round." As such, he conceded defeat.

"You're getting better, Edgar," Garlan stated approvingly. He sheathed his sword and extended his arm.

Edgar Sand accepted the Reachman's hand and shook it firmly. He knew Ser Garlan was sincerely praising his skills. He was not the type to mock people, subtly or directly.

"Shall we go again later?" Edgar suggested as he slid his own sword into its scabbard.

"I can think of no reason why not," Ser Garlan proclaimed.

"I can, perhaps," a sultry voice remarked from off to the side of the yard. The owner of the voice was Princess Arianne Martell, Edgar's cousin, the heiress to Sunspear… and, quite possibly, Ser Garlan's intended.

Arianne had been observing the sparring from a chair positioned along the wall of the yard. She had been accompanied by her brothers Quentyn and Trystane and their cousin Tyene Sand, who were also sitting. Ihtos was there, too, but he was standing. *Never forget Ihtos. He's always nearby.*

Edgar could not miss the lusty gaze Arianne was giving Garlan. That alone was enough to tell him what "reason" she believed he and the Reachman might have had for not having another duel that night. Obviously, the reason would impact Ser Garlan's availability, not Edgar's.

"Maybe *after,*" Edgar cockily muttered, flashing a devious grin at Ser Garlan, who flushed furiously.
The idea to wed the future Princess of Sunspear to the second son of Highgarden had originally been Lord Gregor Clegane's. Sometime after Greyjoy's Rebellion, he had passed the recommendation along to Lord Mace Tyrell and Prince Doran Martell.

Twenty years ago, this match would have been tossed aside the instant it was proposed. But many things are possible in modern Westeros that were not in the past. After some thoughtful meditation, the Lord Paramounts of the Reach and Dorne had agreed to entertain the suggestion. Garlan Tyrell had consequentially come to Sunspear a few months earlier.

Ever since he arrived in Dorne, Ser Garlan had made an honest effort to get to know Arianne. She had made an effort to know him in turn, only hers involved a type of familiarity on a more "corporeal" level. Despite his apparent discomfort, Garlan did not ignore Arianne's advances. He could charm her in his own way, but he was not much of a flirter. One would think skirts were more threatening to him than swords.

Although Edgar could tell Arianne was attracted to the son of Highgarden, he was also aware that she was not so eager to fuck Garlan as she appeared to be. If she was, they would have shared a bed long ago. For the present, she was only testing the Reachman to have some fun with him and to see how strong his resolve was. Thus far, Garlan had not given in to her, meaning he could not be enticed easily. That must please Arianne. To her, the ones who resist are always the most appealing.

Garlan has spent much of his time with Edgar, as well. Both men were formidable warriors. Of course, we've yet to determine who's the more formidable. A sort of friendly competition had developed between them. In the last several weeks, they had taught each other plenty in the fighting styles of their respective homelands. This very afternoon, Garlan had drilled Edgar in an advanced confrontational tactic that had originated in the Reach. The tactic was difficult to learn and harder to master, but Edgar was a determined and persistent man. Arianne is not the only one who enjoys a challenge. Soon enough, Edgar would have his turn to knock Ser Garlan on his ass.

Edgar won these bouts almost as often as Garlan did. The Reachman was a few years older, and he was more experienced in actual combat. Those were the two primary advantages he had over Edgar. That, and his birth.

"We'll discuss this later," Garlan Tyrell frankly pronounced, ready to change the subject, "I, in the meantime, am famished."

"Here, here," Quentyn Martell voiced agreement.

"Luncheon should be ready by now," Tyene proclaimed, rising from her chair, "Let us adjourn to the dining hall."

No one had any objection to that.

Edgar Sand and Garlan Tyrell took a moment to wipe their brows. They had worked up a bit of a sweat in the training yard.

The Reachman was notably perspiring much more than Edgar was. That came as no shock. The only people who felt at ease in the Dornish climate were the Dornishmen themselves. It generally took years for a foreigner to become accustomed to the sweltering heat.

Edgar had not been born in Dorne, but he had lived there for most of his life. In his opinion, he had adapted to the climate rather well. It is never too hot for me. In fact, the only times he sweated were when he exerted himself, such as this instance when he sparred with Garlan Tyrell. As far
back as he could remember, he had never once broken a sweat due to heat. Even his cousins, who had been born in Dorne and raised in Dorne their entire lives, could not make that claim.

Once Edgar and Ser Garlan had wiped themselves of perspiration, they regrouped with the Sand Snake and Uncle Doran's children. The six of them hastily made their way to the dining hall. Ihtos went with them.

Arianne and Garlan walked at the front of the group. Edgar noticed the two of them were holding hands as they walked. That struck his interest. Lovers don't hold hands. But 'sweethearts' do. Potential ones, at any rate. That was a term he did not use sparingly, particularly when it concerned his own family.

In spite of how she teased him, it was clear that Arianne respected Ser Garlan. He evidently respected her, too. Edgar had heard of how the Reach was regarded as the heart of chivalry, and Garlan demonstrated that quality very well. That must be why he's called 'The Gallant.'

They reached the dining hall a few minutes later. Uncle Doran and Aunt Elia were already there. As usual, Areo Hotah, House Nymeros Martell's Norvosi captain of the guard, stood at his post behind Uncle Doran.

In the last few years, Prince Doran Martell had contracted a debilitating case of gout. It had rendered him nearly incapable of standing and walking independently, and as a result, he had been confined to a portable chair. Yet even when seated, he spoke with power in his voice, and he was still a figure to be both admired and feared.

There was only one other person in the dining hall. It was Caleotte, the maester in service to Prince Doran's household. That was quaint. Normally the maester ate the midday meal in his office below the rookery. The only times he made an exception were when he had pertinent news to share. That can either mean goodwill or trouble. He was inclined to believe the latter, given the uneasy expression on Maester Caleotte's face.

Arianne released Ser Garlan's hand long enough to approach her father and place a kiss on his cheek. Quentyn and Trystane gave no kiss, but they smiled warmly at their sire. Edgar, Tyene, Ser Garlan, and Ihtos each tilted their heads to Doran Martell in respect.

As the head of the family, Prince Doran sat in the middle of the dais. Aunt Elia sat to his left, and Arianne sat to his right. Garlan sat on the other side of her, and Quentyn and Trystane took the two adjoining seats. Ihtos stood by the wall next to Areo.

Edgar Sand sat in his usual seat beside Aunt Elia. Even though he was baseborn, his aunt and uncle insisted on giving him a high place on the dais. That was irregular, even by Dornish custom.

Edgar was the fifth child and only male of Oberyn Martell's nine bastards. Of his eight sisters, Tyene was the only one who was in Dorne at this time. Her mother was a septa. By her apparel, one would think she was in training to become one, too. She normally long, loose-fitting robes that covered the entirety of her body. Edgar was not so foolish as to classify that as modesty. In Tyene's mind, longer garments meant more places to conceal her vast array of daggers. Areo Hotah must have noticed that, as well. Whenever Tyene wore an outfit that bared her arms and legs, the captain of the guard was generally more serene and at ease. Most men would be pleased because of what is there, not what isn't.

Obara and Nymeria had both been legitimized by King Robert. The first was married to Lord Sandor Clegane and a mother of three children; the second was married to Lord Jorah Mormont and a mother of four. For the last decade, they had been the Ladies of Clegane's Keep and Bear
Island respectively.

Sarella was unaccounted for at present, but Edgar could imagine where she was. She had often spoken of her wish to travel to Oldtown and infiltrate the Citadel in effort to become Westeros' first female maester. Edgar would have bet his longsword that she had done just that.

Elia, Obella, Dorea, and Loreza all had the same mother, Ellaria Sand, the baseborn daughter of Lord Harmen Uller. Prince Oberyn was one of the captains of the Legion without Banners, and he was Dorne's representative on Lord Gregor's secret council. For those reasons, he could typically be found in Moat Cailin these days. His paramour and their four girls were living there with him. Elia was nearly old enough to be a Legionnaire.

Edgar had thought about going north to join the Legion on a few occasions, but his family had dissuaded him. Aunt Elia had been especially averse to that concept. Then again, Edgar should have expected that. For whatever reason, his whereabouts and well-being were always one of her foremost concerns.

Aunt Elia had been heavily involved in Edgar's upbringing and education. She was like the mother he never had. Edgar never understood why his aunt seemed so deeply invested in his life. If he were to guess, it was probably because he may have reminded her of her late son, Prince Aegon Targaryen. That was definitely a plausible explanation. Perhaps the only plausible one.

After all, Aunt Elia mourned for her late daughter Rhaenys every day. While she grieved for Aegon, too, she did not seem nearly as miserable when she thought of him. Edgar was under the impression that she only missed him the way a parent misses an estranged child, not a deceased one.

Edgar had concluded that either Elia Martell loved her daughter more than her son (which was quite unlikely), or she had found some type of solace in caring for Edgar. He may have been something of a replacement son for her. That made him feel quaintly proud of himself. Even if I never marry, at least I managed to make one woman happy.

As soon as everyone was seated, the servants brought out the midday meal. Everyone ate in silence for the first few minutes. Then Edgar looked to his left. Tyene was sitting beside him. Seated on the other side of the Sand Snake was Maester Caleotte.

"So, what is new in the world today, maester?" he stated inquisitively.

Caleotte turned to Edgar and gazed at him with an eyebrow raised. He seemed bewildered. "I am afraid I do not quite understand the question, Master Edgar."

"I assumed you had some information you wished to present to us," Edgar clarified, "Whenever you join us for luncheon, that is normally the reason."

"Rather perceptive of you to notice that," Elia complimented her nephew, patting him on the back. He smiled at that praise.

"Quite so," Caleotte remarked. He wiped his mouth with his napkin and pronounced "As it happens, you are not premature in your assumption, young master. There are indeed some items of business that need to be addressed."

"He has already reviewed these items with me, Edgar," Uncle Doran revealed, "He and I agreed that it would be in the best interests of you and every other individual in this room if you were told straightaway."
"Well, by all means, go ahead, Father," Arianne beckoned Prince Doran, "We're listening."

She spoke for everyone there. Edgar and everyone else in the dining hall continued eating, but they each gave the maester their attention.

"I received two ravens in the late morning," Caleotte apprised them, "One was from Oldtown; the other from King's Landing. I will discuss the one from the Conclave first."

"Anything amiss at the Citadel?" Tyene presumed.

"No," Caleotte proclaimed, "But my colleagues are growing restless. They have noticed a bit of a drop in countrywide temperature, and the days are gradually becoming shorter. They do not believe it will be long before autumn is upon the Seven Kingdoms."

"Then we should enjoy these last few months of summer," Quentyn wryly proposed.

"Yes, we should," Trystane concurred, seeming a little anxious, "They could be the last of any summer that some of us will ever see."

"Don't think that way, Trys," Arianne gently advised her brother, "Fretting never did anyone any good."

No, but it oftentimes proved a useful motivator for one's survival instinct.

"What of the other letter, maester?" Garlan Tyrell enquired, "What word did King Robert send?"

Caleotte waited a few seconds before he responded with "There was an incident in the North."

"What manner of incident?" Edgar asked.

"A little over a fortnight ago, a party of Watchmen was dispatched to the lands north of the Wall," Doran began for the maester, "Their objective was to bring a company of five hundred wildlings back south with them."

"So far, none of those wildlings set foot in the Seven Kingdoms, and they likely never will," Caleotte went on, "Only one of the Watchmen made it back, and he died soon after. But not before telling the world what happened to his companions and their charges."

"Were they attacked?" Quentyn presumed.

"Yes," Doran Martell confirmed. He gazed around the dais in utter silence, and then he quietly added in "By the Others."

Eleven years ago, if someone made a declaration such as that in Dorne, they would most likely have been laughed at or ridiculed. Back then, the Dornish had hardly even acknowledged the presence of the Others in ancient history. Nowadays, every Dornishman and Dornishwoman had not only admitted to the existence of the Others, but they had also fully grasped the truth that the Long Night would return to Westeros. Thus, everyone in the dining hall reacted accordingly.

Arianne placed a hand over her mouth, Tyene winced, Quentyn went pale, Trystane looked deathly scared, Garlan became agitated, and Aunt Elia frowned distressfully. Edgar merely looked down at his plate and pushed it away. Suddenly I'm not so hungry.

Arianne had a similar line of thought. She muttered in a slightly sharp tone "This could not have waited until after we ate?"
"This was the only time of the day when I knew all of you would be in the same place," Uncle Doran enlightened his daughter to justify the setting. *Excluding dinner. But that would have the same outcome as this, only there would be a lot more people assembled than the present company.*

"You could have summoned us, my prince," Garlan Tyrell pointed out.

"Yes, but some of you tend to ignore my summons," Uncle Doran mumbled, his gaze alternating between Arianne and Tyene. The heiress to Dorne and the false septa did nothing to refute that silent accusation, mostly because it was true.

"Apart from that, I doubt there is ever a truly opportune time to announce that the potential end of the world is imminent," Aunt Elia professed.

"That is a good argument, Aunt Elia," Quentyn coincided. "Yes, it is. But we had to hear of this at some point. At the end of the day, I suppose sooner is better.

"So… what are we to do?" Tyene Sand queried.

"Just what we've been doing," Doran professed, "Stockpiling our resources, strengthening our soldiers, building up our arsenals, and establishing better connections with the rest of Westeros. If the Others invade, Dorne will be the last to fall, but it will fall just the same as everywhere else. I have no intention of seeing all my work destroyed by creatures that have been dead for eons."

"Nor do I, Father," Arianne asserted, placing a soft hand on Uncle Doran's shoulder. He slowly turned to his eldest child. He made eye contact with her, and he gave her a smile, which she merrily returned. Her frustration from earlier had all but dissipated. The atmosphere of the room at large appeared to have lessened, as well. *For now, at least. Once realization sits in, it may not be so easy for some of us to remain so composed.*

Doran Martell then turned to his left and pronounced "Edgar, after the meal is finished, please go to my solar. I must speak with you in private."

"As you command, my prince," Edgar Sand acknowledged with a dip of his head.

Despite the loss of his appetite, Edgar managed to swallow a few more mouthfuls of food. After that, he asked to be excused, and Uncle Doran readily granted his request. So Edgar swiftly left the dining hall. When he stepped out, Ihtos joined him.

Although Ihtos was employed as a guard for all of House Martell, he generally favored Edgar over everyone else. The helmed swordsman was never more than twenty or thirty yards away, and he always drew his sword or threatened to draw it at the slightest possibility of harm to Edgar's well-being. He wondered if Aunt Elia had a hand in that. Maybe she had asked Ihtos to keep an extra careful eye on her nephew.

Or maybe I'm not just her favorite. It was equally likely that Ihtos did not actually have a personal interest in Edgar Sand; perhaps he just happened to protect the baseborn boy more often than anyone else at Sunspear.

Soon, Edgar Sand and Ihtos arrived at Prince Doran's solar. Once they stepped inside, Ihtos began walking along the walls, stopping every now and then to examine them. Edgar stood in the center of the room, watching the guard curiously. "What are you doing, Ihtos?"

The helmed swordsman did not reply. He just kept pacing the perimeter of the room and studying the walls closely. Edgar had come to expect little more than silence from Ihtos most of the time. Normally, the only people he routinely spoke with were Uncle Doran, Aunt Elia, Maester Caleotte, and – on rare occasions – Areo Hotah. Even with them, he never wasted words.
Around fifteen minutes later, the two men had company. Uncle Doran was rolled into the solar by Aunt Elia. Aro Hotah entered behind them, along with Maester Caleotte. I was not expecting this.

"By 'private,' you meant…?" Edgar Sand said drily.

"I never said I would speak to you alone," Doran informed his nephew, "Nor did I intend to. I simply planned for us to converse without the threat of eavesdroppers."

"The walls are free of holes, my prince," Ihtos proclaimed, "We will not be overheard."

"You are certain?" Doran enquired.

"Absolutely," Ihtos assured him, confidence detectable in his voice.

"Very good," Prince Doran muttered approvingly, "Stand by the entrance."

Ihtos nodded and went over to the door, which he closed and locked. He also placed a length of cloth at the base of the door and stood with his back to the keyhole. The windows in the solar had been tightly shut, and even the flue to the fireplace had been barred. This seems a little extreme for a private audience.

Once the room was fully secure, Edgar turned to Prince Doran with his arms folded and queried "What is this about, Uncle?"

"We have something of great import to tell you," the Prince of Sunspear revealed.

So I gathered. Edgar kept his arms folded and remarked "You have my undivided attention."

There was a brief interval of quietness in the solar, and then Uncle Doran opened the discussion with a rhetorical question: "You are familiar with the Sack of King's Landing?"

"I am," Edgar told him straightforwardly.

"What all do you know of it?" Doran queried in interest.

Edgar Sand apprised him with the following: "It marked the end of Aerys Targaryen's reign, as Ser Jaime Lannister stabbed the Mad King in the back. From what I heard, Grand Maester Pycelle helped the invading Westerlander forces gain entrance to the city, but he died an accidental death during the Sack. The city was also taken with surprisingly few civilian casualties, which was primarily due to the leadership of Lord Gregor Clegane. And, of course, Aunt Elia lost her children that day. If not for Lord Gregor, she would have lost her own life, as well."

Uncle Doran sat in silence during Edgar's summary of the Sack. He kept his hands folded together and watched the boy closely. When Edgar was finished, the Prince of Dorne pronounced "You are correct in all accounts," Uncle Doran pronounced. Except one."

Edgar was perplexed. I know my history well. Unless Maester Caleotte's lessons were flawed. "Which one, my prince?"

It was Aunt Elia who answered this time. She stepped forward beside her brother and illuminated "I did lose my children. But I did not lose them that day. Nor did I lose them in the way everyone believes I did."

"How so?" Edgar Sand asked in interest.

"Contrary to popular belief, Lord Gregor Clegane was not too late to save my babes," Elia informed
him, "He arrived just in time to stop Ser Amory Lorch from murdering them. Right there in front of me, he disarmed and killed Ser Amory like the pig he was. After that, Lord Gregor had his men-at-arms escort me and my children out of the Red Keep to safety."

Now Edgar was downright baffled. He recounted "Their bodies were presented to King Robert afterward."

"Those were not them," Maester Caleotte revealed, "They were two children of the smallfolk that had been killed during the Sack."

Decoys? This whole conversation was one surprise after another. Edgar presumed "Lord Gregor knowingly deceived the King?"

"Yes," Aunt Elia confirmed, "He did so at tremendous risk to himself, just to save my daughter and my son."

Edgar was stunned. I knew the Mountain was bold and daring, but even by his standards, a deed such as that is impressive. Another thought abruptly occurred to the male Sand Snake. "If he saved them, where are they?"

"We are getting to that," Aunt Elia professed. After a pause, she continued with "As you know, after the Sack of King's Landing, Robert Baratheon tasked Lord Gregor with taking me back to my homeland. We returned to Dorne by way of sea. Just before our vessel departed, the Mountain managed to smuggle Rhaenys and Aegon on board."

Edgar narrowed his eyes and observed in intrigue "So they came back with you."

"Of course," Elia affirmed, seeming a little hurt for some reason, "At the time, they had nowhere else to go. I'd never abandon my children. I apologize if I gave you that impression."

"That's not what I meant," Edgar reassured his aunt, "What I meant was… you still haven't answer my previous question. Where are Princess Rhaenys and Prince Aegon?"

No one gave him an answer straightaway. Prince Doran and Princess Elia looked to each other and maintained eye contact for a tense minute. Finally, they turned away to each other and back to Edgar Sand.

Uncle Doran then raised his right arm and held it out to his sister. She took his hand in hers, and she pulled him up. It was arduous for him to even get to his feet, but with great difficulty, he managed to stand up and face his nephew at equal height.

Aunt Elia kept her hands on her brother's arm to prevent him from collapsing or stumbling. Once he was balanced on his feet, Prince Doran proclaimed "What we are about to tell you is something we have wanted you to know for the longest time. I pray that once you've been told, you will understand why we kept it secret."

"Go on, I beseech you," Edgar all but pleaded. It must be momentous if he is going to the trouble of getting up to tell me.

Doran Martell indulged him with "After King Robert claimed King's Landing, the Targaryen influence was virtually gone from the Seven Kingdoms. Even so, there were already a great many Targaryen sympathizers in the world. Many of them were natives of Dorne, given Elia's marriage to Rhaegar Targaryen. For that reason and others, we sought to keep Rhaenys and Aegon out of harm's way."
Elia continued with: "After how coldly Robert Baratheon reacted to the 'deaths' of my children, we decided that the world would have to continue to believe that Rhaenys and Aegon were dead. That was the only way we could guarantee their survival. So we arranged for them to disappear."

"Disappear?" Edgar Sand repeated. He did not like the sound of that.

"For lack of a better term, young master," Caleotte elaborated, "We merely gave them the opportunity to begin a new life. As an additional precaution, Princess Elia's children were separated from each other."

"Rhaenys was sent north," Doran expounded, before Edgar could ask another question, "The head of a reclusive Northern house offered to foster her at his family's castle. That is where she has been for the last sixteen years. We have heard little from her or her protectors since then, but by all accounts, she is safe and happy."

Edgar lightly nodded his head to show that he understood. After that, he enquired "And Aegon?"

Truthfully, he had already developed a theory of his own about what became of Elia Martell's youngest child. But he did not put much faith in this theory. It was far too outlandish to be true. *There is no way in the Seven Hells it can be true. No way whatsoever.* Still, part of him was not so certain of that.

"Aegon's situation was… quite different," Caleotte notified him, "Princess Elia insisted on keeping him near her. So in place of a new home, he was given a new name. Along with a new identity."

"Instead of my son, he was passed off as my nephew," Princess Elia anxiously revealed.

"Her bastard nephew," Doran hastily added in.

Edgar had kept his arms folded this entire time. But right then, they listlessly fell to his sides. His jaw had dropped open, as well. He found himself unable to blink, breath, or move. So great was the shock he felt at that time that he had lost control of all voluntary movement. It was a miracle he managed to avoid fainting.

*No… this… this is impossible. Isn't it?*

Eventually, he found his voice. He stammered "You… you mean to tell me…"

"There are no male Sand Snakes," Doran Martell notified him, "You are not Edgar Sand, only son to Oberyn Martell. You are Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of his Name, the rightful King of Westeros."

At that moment, Aegon could not have cared less if he was the supreme dictator of the entire Known World. He was already far too shocked by the knowledge of his true name. All his life he had wondered who he was, where he came from, who had birthed him.

Now he finally knew, and he had not been prepared for the truth at all. Never in his life had he felt so overwhelmed by anything. Even the news of the Long Night approaching had not astounded him to this degree. *I feel as though I'm losing my wits. This must be what madness feels like. Could this be how Aerys went mad? How... my grandfather went mad?*

Aegon Targaryen tried not to reflect on that. He diverted his focus to the people in front of him.

He gradually turned towards Elia Martell… to his mother. Everything made complete sense now. He had not been a substitute for her son. He had been her son all along.
He could see in her eyes that she was undergoing many mixed emotions, probably more than Aegon himself was undergoing. The two emotions he primarily saw were joy and apprehension. Joy at Aegon finally learning the truth of his heritage… and apprehension at how he would react, especially towards her.

On one hand, Aegon wished to scream and curse. For sixteen years, he had been constantly misled and deceived. Everything he thought he knew was a fraud. His whole life was a sham. The realization of that made him question if he could trust in anything or anyone ever again.

On the other hand, he was alive. Had it not been for all those lies, he might have died before he even had his first memory of the world. Furthermore, his family had done all this because they loved him. He had never wanted for anything, he had been raised in a pleasant environment, and he had been given a wonderful home, all thanks to the Martells.

It took over five minutes for Aegon to even begin to sort out his feelings. After those five minutes, he was still very conflicted, but at the very least, he knew what he had to do next.

He marched forward to his mother and embraced her warmly. As if by reflex, Princess Elia Martell released her brother's arm and wrapped hers around her son tightly. She began to weep in happiness. Aegon felt he might have wept, too.

Aegon did not know how long he and Mother stood locked in that embrace. However long it was, it was still too short. *Far too short to make up for the last sixteen years.*

Ultimately, the two of them did come apart, even though they were both extremely reluctant to do so. Once that happened, Prince Doran remarked "I know you must have questions."

"More than even I can count," Aegon Targaryen conceded, "The main one is this: why are you telling me all this now?"

No one answered him straightaway. Then Princess Elia – no, Mother – began to explain "At first, when you were still a babe, we decided we would not inform you of this until one of two events occurred. The first was your Uncle Viserys and Aunt Daenerys' return from across the Narrow Sea. The second was Robert Baratheon's death."

"So far, neither has transpired," Aegon pointed out.

"We know," Uncle Doran proclaimed, "You see, dear nephew, after Greyjoy's Rebellion, we added a third event to our brief list of constraints."

Aegon only needed a few seconds to realize what this "third event" was. "The arrival of the Others?"

"Correct, Your Grace," Maester Caleotte contended. It felt queer to be addressed that way. *I suppose I'm going to hear a lot of that from now on. In private, anyway.* "As you are aware, Lord Gregor Clegane convinced King Robert to make peace with your uncle and your aunt. According to the letters we've received from Prince Oberyn, Lord Gregor believes the Targaryens will be instrumental in getting Westeros through the Long Night."

"Instrumental in what capacity?" Aegon inquired.
"As of yet, Lord Gregor has not clarified that point," Doran Martell professed, "He has even implied that the Targaryens themselves are likely unaware of the role they will play. Nevertheless, he places a great deal of stock in them, and that is sufficient for us. To us, the Mountain's word is as good as law."

*Coming from a man who typically questions everything he is told, that is saying quite a bit.*

"I'm still a little bewildered," Aegon declared, "How does knowing who I truly am relate to the return of the Others?"

"It relates to it in the simple fact that you are a Targaryen," Maester Caleotte apprised him, "Based on what we have learned from Lord Gregor Clegane, you and the other members of your father's family are destined to save the Seven Kingdoms from eternal winter."

"Yes, but alone or together?" Aegon said inquisitively, "That's an important detail."

"Most likely, you would be together," Doran Martell supposed, "We surmised that long ago."

"For that reason, you and I are to go north," Mother abruptly claimed.

Aegon looked to her, perplexed. "We are?"

"Not now, but soon," she clarified with a small grin, "Before we go anywhere, the proper arrangements will have to made. We'll get into those later. All you need to know is this: by year's end, you and your siblings will be reunited."

Aegon would have smiled. But one particular word in that last statement stopped him. "Did you say 'siblings'? I thought Rhaenys was my only sibling."

"On my side of the family, she is," Mother illuminated, "But there are some things about your Father that are not common knowledge."

Yet again, Aegon was lost in confusion.

"My boy, let there be no more secrets between us," Doran Martell sternly announced. He turned towards the man by the door and beckoned him "Ser Arthur, come forward."

*Did he just call Ihtos 'Ser Arthur'?* For a moment, he assumed he misheard his uncle. Then, he saw that he had not. The guard known as Ihtos approached the others and stopped in front of Aegon. Then he slowly brought his hands up and removed his helm. For the very first time, Aegon saw his face.

He recognized that face from books. Its owner was Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, deadliest of Aerys II Targaryen's Kingsguard.

Upon this discovery, Aegon did not feel stunned, flabbergasted, or in awe. Instead… he felt a quaint desire to laugh. *This whole day is just one goddamn surprise after another.*
Note: Five more weeks. Then I'm done with graduate school forever. In the meantime, updates will still be shorter and spaced a little farther apart than usual. But they aren't stopping! I just hope my anxious mindset hasn't impacted my writing prowess.

Originally, I planned for this section to be Viserys' perspective (hence why I wished to include it in the previous chapter, with the other two Targaryens). After giving it some thought… I concluded that I would rather not write a section from HIS point of view. Not yet, in any case. I'm certain Viserys must have had an occasional rational thought, but not many. I may have a section from his perspective in the future, but if I do, it will be very short.

Anyway, I decided to have this chapter be from the point of view of another prominent character in Pentos. It will mostly be another buildup chapter, but it will have a significant breakthrough, too. As well as an unexpected twist.

By the way, I'm willing to bet several of you will have questions by the end of this chapter. If so, feel free to share your questions with me, and I assure you they will all be answered in time. I just ask of you one favor: do not make any premature assumptions.

The Red Woman was a curious individual. That much, Allard learned straightaway. She was curious in both senses of the word. She made it her business to know as much as possible, and she incited fascination out of nearly everyone she encountered. Additionally, there was something about her that captured one's interest.

*An enigma is what she is.*

Nevertheless, from the moment he met her, Allard became inexplicably anxious around Melisandre. He was not alone in that regard. *Judging by how my colleagues react to her presence, I am far from the only person she unsettles.*

When Melisandre first arrived at the manse, Allard had heavily considered turning her away. Since she claimed to be there for the Targaryens, he had decided to leave the choice up to Viserys and Daenerys. He did not speak a word of protest when they agreed to see the priestess.

Of course, even if Allard had not consulted them first, it was not his place to dictate who was or was not allowed entry to the manse. That prerogative was Magister Illyrio's, and the magister had opened the gates for the Red Woman with hardly any hesitation.

Still, Allard Seaworth did not trust the priestess. There were few people he did trust, but fewer that he innately distrusted. Melisandre was one such individual. In Allard's mind, it was doubtful that she had travelled all the way from Asshai simply to enter the services of a deposed prince and princess. No one would do that. *Not unless they expect to receive something in return.*

Allard was convinced Melisandre had an ulterior motive for seeking out the Targaryens. Whatever
it was, he was determined to uncover it.

After the Red Woman was welcomed into the manse, Allard Seaworth decided to assign two of his comrades from the Seven Kingdoms to accompany her everywhere. More specifically, he would assign several pairs of them to follow her at different times of the day. Essentially, they would watch her in shifts, alternating every few hours. That arrangement would minimize the chance that Melisandre got too close to any one of his colleagues. At least one member of each of those pairs was a fellow Legionnaire.

Allard had told Melisandre that his comrades would be with her to ensure her safety. Melisandre politely declined the escort at first, but Allard insisted.

While Melisandre appeared grateful for the gesture, it was unlikely she truly was. In fact, Allard would not have been surprised if she saw straight through this mummer's farce of "chaperoning" her. Strangely, though, she never said a word against it.

A fortnight had elapsed since Melisandre came to the manse. Nothing of particular note had occurred during that interval. At the end of each day, Allard spoke with each of the Westerosi soldiers that had been with Melisandre anytime earlier.

Their reports were always quite concise, yet never very informative. The Red Woman ate three meals a day, went on walks around the courtyard, used the privy every once in a while, and read the occasional book in the library. *Just like the rest of us.*

There was, however, one thing Melisandre did that did not conform to everyman behavior. Four times a day or more, she perched herself in a chair before the fireplace in the manse's study and stared into the flames. Whenever she did this, she went into a type of trance for at least twenty minutes, but never longer than an hour. Once she went into that trance, it was very difficult to bring her out of it.

Allard Seaworth and the other Westerosi were aware that followers of R'hllor believed they could receive wisdom or knowledge of the future by gazing into flames. A few of Melisandre's escorts had asked her what she had seen, and her answers were always very vague and undescriptive.

Personally, Allard greatly questioned the plausibility of using fires as a buffer for information. He thought fires should only be used for keeping warm and lighting up dark rooms, and he thought information should be gathered through conventional means, such as research or spies. *She must be getting something out of the flames that the rest of us are not.*

Melisandre did not spend all of the past two weeks by herself. She had been with Viserys and Daenerys for a fair portion of that time frame. Despite the Red Woman's attempts to converse with them in private, Allard ensured that three or more Westerosi were always present whenever the three of them were together.

At first, the Targaryens' talks with the Red Woman were – for the most part – limited to a detailed recollection of the events of their lives. Melisandre spoke of how she had become a servant to the Lord of Light, and Viserys and Daenerys had spoken of their lifelong struggle for survival. Viserys had a tendency to be dramatic at times, but Daenerys never embellished anything.

According to what his colleagues told him, Viserys was evidently bored and somewhat disinterested in these talks. He seemed far more interested in getting to know the Red Woman through more "corporeal" means. *I'd wager my spot on the secret council he is not the only one.* Daenerys, however, was always eager to learn more of the world. She was as interested in getting to know the priestess as the other way around.
Sometimes Melisandre spoke with the Westerosi soldiers instead. Apparently, she was interested to learn of their background, too. At Allard's bidding, they indulged her. By the second week's end, she had interacted with all one hundred of them at least once. Including Allard himself. He did not have much to boast about; only that he was the second son of Lord Stannis Baratheon's right-hand man, and he was a top officer of the Legion without Banners. Nevertheless, that seemed to intrigue the Red Woman.

Other than being raised in Asshai and sold to the temple of the Lord of Light at a young age, there was nothing especially remarkable about Melisandre. But Allard knew better than to judge someone at a glance. *If there is one thing I've learned from Father, it is that it's folly to evaluate another person by appearance only.*

Allard Seaworth was under orders to keep the Seven Kingdoms up to date on the status of the Targaryens. He would send a missive to Lord Gregor Clegane whenever there was a major development concerning Viserys and Daenerys. He had yet to inform his commander about Melisandre's arrival. He had elected to wait until she instigated some form of breakthrough. In the first fourteen days of her stay in Pentos, nothing of the sort had come about.

On the morning of the fifteenth day, Allard was in his quarters. He was sitting at his desk, going over a list of the Westerosi soldiers' stores when someone knocked at the door.

"Enter!" Allard called out. As he gazed up from his papers, the door opened to reveal Ser Bonifer Hasty. Allard grinned and muttered "Hello, Ser Bonifer."

"Good morning, Allard," the middle-aged knight bade him. Allard noticed he seemed a little restless.

"Is anything wrong?" the younger man queried.

"At this moment, the Red Woman is with the Queen's children," Bonifer Hasty informed him. *Hardly anything new.*

Allard just nodded and inquired "Who watches them at this time?"

"Rupert Brax, Gerold Dayne, and Hugh Beesbury," Ser Bonifer disclosed.

*Three guards; none of them Legionnaires.* That was queer. Regardless of the time of day, one member of the Legion without Banners was always with Melisandre. "And from the Legion?"

"I was the Legionnaire on duty," the elder Stormlander admitted.

Allard Seaworth leaned back in his seat and remarked "I assume you have a good reason for not being with the priestess right now."

"I do," Ser Bonifer Hasty affirmed, "She asked to see you."

Allard was surprised. "Me? Why me?"

"She would not divulge that information," Bonifer confessed, "She just bade me to find you and bring you to her. By her tone, it was urgent."

"Very well," Allard Seaworth conceded. He rose from his chair, grabbed his sword off its rack, fastened it to his belt, and instructed the older man "Take me to the Red Woman."

Five minutes later, they reached Melisandre's bedchamber. The priestess was there, and so were
Viserys Targaryen, Daenerys Targaryen, Rupert Brax, Gerold Dayne, and Hugh Beesbury.

As far as Allard was aware, this was the first time the Red Woman had invited anyone into her room. Allard had agreed to give her privacy and solitude in her own quarters. Her guards had always remained at the entrance; they had never been allowed through the threshold. At nighttime, just before she turned in, she locked the door tightly. Allard wondered why she was so wary. No one there would dare harm her; she was a guest of the manse, and to harm a guest was to violate all the laws of gods and men. *Could it be possible she is harboring a secret? If so… perhaps that is why she summoned me.*

Predictably, Melisandre was standing in front of a brazier, staring longingly into its flames. Rupert, Gerold, and Hugh were leaning against parts of the wall. Viserys and Daenerys were seated at a table off to the side of the room.

When the second son of Ser Davos Seaworth stepped inside, Melisandre looked towards the entrance of the room. She gave a friendly grin and said "Good morrow to you, Master Allard."

"My lady," Allard Seaworth rejoined, dipping his head respectfully. Bonifer Hasty entered the room alongside him. Allard flashed a glimpse at his colleague, and then he turned back to the priestess of R'hllor. "Ser Bonifer claims you wished to see me."

"Yes," Melisandre confirmed, taking a step closer to the Legionnaire officer. After a pause, she declared "The time has come that I explain my purpose for coming."

Initially, Allard was taken aback by the forwardness of that statement. Up until this point, every single thing the Red Woman said or did had been ambiguous in nature. Be that as it may, when the meaning of that statement sank in, Allard was not displeased. *It is past time we addressed this issue.*

"As you say, my lady," Allard mumbled, giving a light nod.

He expected the priestess to begin her explanation straightaway. But when Allard gestured for her to speak, she did not open her mouth. Instead, she folded her hands together and shook her head slightly.

"You misunderstand," Melisandre proclaimed. She gestured to the two people seated at the table and added "I only wish to explain my purpose to *them*."

Now Allard was perplexed. By their facial expressions, so were Bonifer, Hugh, Gerold, and Rupert.

Seeing their confusion, Melisandre provided some clarity: "What I mean is I would prefer to confer with Prince Viserys and Princess Daenerys alone. Alas, it has been made clear that you will not permit us to speak in private. So, to appease all of us, I would ask that as few parties as possible be present during my account."

"How few, my lady?" Allard enquired.

"Myself, the Targaryens, and one other," Melisandre pronounced. She looked Allard in the eye and told him "I would like that one to be you."

Allard was more fascinated than he was bewildered by that claim. "May I ask why?"

"Because of all the Westerosi in this manse, you carry the most authority and influence," the priestess contended, "You may come from a small, recently-founded house, which was created by..."
a former criminal. In spite of that, you have made a name for yourself in the Legion without Banners. Although only twenty Legionnaires are among the hundred Westerosi soldiers who reside in this manse, it is not difficult to see that even the eighty non-Legionnaires respect you and your position.”

*She is remarkably perceptive.*

Allard could not deny anything the Red Woman just said. He was not happy she had called his father as a criminal, but at least she used the term "former criminal." Apart from that, Ser Davos Seaworth took pride in his experience as a smuggler.

Melisandre was also correct in how the other Westerosi viewed Allard Seaworth. Although he was only meant to be the leader of the Legionnaire members of the hundred, the others had chosen to appoint him as their unofficial leader a few months ago.

That spoke volumes of how much faith they had in him. Some of the other Westerosi had already been hardened veterans even before Robert's Rebellion. In those days, Allard's greatest accomplishments had amounted to assisting his father with moving contraband around the Seven Kingdoms. All the same, he had done very much to repair the Seven Kingdoms in the aftermath of the Rebellion.

Allard had accepted the role as the tentative commander of the hundred Westerosi in Pentos, and he had performed this responsibility superbly thus far. Still, it was not a duty that he coveted. He had never vied for power. Principally because as he grew up, he never expected to have very much of it, even after his father was made a landed knight. That viewpoint was commonly known as "the outlook of the second son." *Dale's the one who'll be leading House Seaworth after Father passes on. He's much better suited to the task than I.*

He never voiced these qualms, as it would not do for a leader to openly question his own competence in front of his subordinates. *These men have faith in me. For their sake, I should, too.*

Despite being named leader, Allard was always considerate of the other ninety-nine soldiers' feelings. He looked around the room and asked "Does anyone have any objections to Lady Melisandre's request?"

Gerold Dayne, Hugh Beesbury, Rupert Brax, and Bonifer Hasty collectively shook their heads. One or two of them quietly murmured "No."

Allard nodded again, folded his arms, and instructed his colleagues "Wait out in the corridor. Make certain no one interrupts or disturbs us."

The other four men swiftly filed out of the bedchamber. On the way out, Hugh bowed a bit, Rupert nodded his head, Gerold gave a salute, and Ser Bonifer murmured "Take care, my lord."

*I'm no lord. I'm no knight, either. I'm just the man the Red Woman requested.*

That distinction by itself would turn out to be much more meaningful than Allard Seaworth gave it credit for.

Once the other soldiers were out of the room, Allard shut the door and bolted it at Melisandre's behest. She also had him place a length of cloth at the base of the door so that even the slightest sound could not pass through the crack. *I would never have guessed she was this secretive.* Allard did not think it a coincidence that there were no windows in this bedchamber. *She must've seen to that, as well.*
When the bedchamber was deemed secure, Melisandre led Allard over to the table and beckoned him "Sit, if you please."

Allard sat down beside Daenerys. He gave her a benign grin, which she returned. Viserys was on the other side of Dany, and Allard avoided making eye contact with him. Without even looking, he could imagine the ever-present scowl on the older Targaryen's face.

Melisandre took the remaining chair between him and Viserys. After giving her a minute to get comfortable, Allard folded his arms again and stated "You may begin at your leisure, my lady."

Melisandre opened with a question. A question directed at the Targaryens: "Are you aware, my prince and princess, that your family were followers of R'hllor in the days of Valyria?"

"Of course we are," Viserys bluntly replied. Right. And 'of course' you are a proper gentleman to your sister.

"I do remember learning that somewhere, my lady," Daenerys claimed. At least she sounds believable.

"Then you would know that your family thrived in the days when they worshipped the Lord of Light," Melisandre proclaimed.

"Yet the red priests were unable to save Valyria from the Doom," Viserys rigidly pointed out.

"The Doom was a natural disaster," Allard Seaworth countered, "There was nothing anyone could have done to prevent it."

"Not so, Master Seaworth," Melisandre proclaimed, "My brothers and sisters of the faith saw the Doom before it occurred. They warned the people of Valyria that it was coming. A certain prudent few chose to listen and fled. All other occupants of Valyria foolishly dismissed the Lord of Light's warning. Their deaths were the result of their own ignorance."

"How can you be certain of this, my lady?" Allard inquired.

"Because the people of Valyria who trusted in R'hllor lived," the Red Woman claimed, "On the eve of the Doom, all the red priests in Valyria disappeared overnight. They, along with those who heard them out, were the only ones who lived to see a whole civilization crumble."

"That is rather unfortunate," Daenerys uttered softly, "But why are you telling us this?"

"Because it is paramount that you heed my counsel," Melisandre declared, "You must not ignore it or idly cast it aside. It could mean the end of everything if you do."

That successfully captured my attention. Evidently, it had also gotten Daenerys', and even Viserys seemed genuinely interested now.

"Go on," Viserys goaded her.

Melisandre folded her hands beneath the long sleeves of her robes, and she stated "You have been told that when the Long Night comes, the Targaryens will have a unique advantage over the White Walkers."


"I suppose you believe you are the advantage?" Viserys wryly presumed. Let us hope not. All most
red priests are good for is predicting events, and we already have a forecaster in Lord Gregor. What we need now is strength or power.

Melisandre firmly responded with "I am not the advantage, but I will guide you on the right path towards claiming that advantage."

"Guide us how?" Daenerys inquired.

"The Lord of Light knows and sees all," the priestess pronounced, "It is through him that I will do so."

I assumed as much. Allard sat up in his seat and murmured "Tell me, my lady. Was it the Lord of Light who directed you to Pentos in the first place?"

"Yes," Melisandre revealed, "In ordinary times, R'hllor only reveals the events of the immediate future. But soon after word of the Long Night's forthcoming arrival reached Essos, he began to show us glimpses of events that would not occur for several years, as well."

"Then you must know plenty about the Long Night already," Daenerys supposed.

"That would depend upon what you view as 'plentiful,'" Melisandre perceived.

"Well, to begin… can you tell us when the Others will appear?" Allard Seaworth conjectured.

Melisandre slowly turned her head towards the Stormlander and said quietly "They already have."

Allard could physically feel his eyes widening. He also heard Daenerys gasp and Viserys quaver in his chair. The Legionnaire lieutenant gradually leaned closer to the Red Woman and muttered in shock "What?"

"Mere days before I came to Pentos, R'hllor gave me another vision," Melisandre revealed, "In it, I saw seven figures surrounded by a growing crowd. Everywhere the crowd went, it spread a wave of terror and devastation. Six of those seven figures were consumed in the wake of destruction, and the seventh one only lived long enough to perish peaceably."

"Is this supposed to meant something?" Viserys muttered irately.

Allard already managed to determine the meaning of that vision. He observed "The Night's Watch sent a group of rangers north of the Wall, and a single black brother returned. Not long after, he deserted his post and was subsequently executed, but not before he alerted the people of the Seven Kingdoms on what he ran from. In any case, his fate was much more merciful than the one which claimed his companions."

The Red Woman seemed mildly impressed. "You make a fine interpreter, Master Seaworth."

"Thank you, I suppose," Allard stated candidly, "To be honest, I was actually hoping I was wrong."

"Soon enough, you will have proof that you were not," Melisandre claimed.

"How so?" Allard inquired, intrigued.

"It has been over a fortnight since the Others ambushed that unfortunate party," the priestess illuminated, "By now, word of their arrival has surely been passed throughout all of Westeros. It will not be long before you and your comrades receive this grim news."

Allard could not dispute that. If the Others truly had returned to the world, he knew Lord Gregor
Allard Seaworth was not looking forward to that missive. It would mark the last legitimately tranquil moment of his life until the Long Night ended. He sighed deeply, rubbed his temples with his hands, and muttered "Gods help us."

"There is only one true god, Allard," Melisandre said in a voice that brokered no argument.

Nevertheless, Allard furrowed his brow and muttered crossly "For you, perhaps. For myself, there are seven."

"I would caution you to turn away from those pagan gods," Melisandre suggested. And if I were a less tactful man, I would caution you to consider the consequences of calling them pagans.

"As I recall, you are here to advise them," Allard Seaworth muttered bitterly, looking over at Viserys and Daenerys, "Not me. I respect that you follow the Lord of Light. Please respect that I follow the Seven."

"I could not do so in good conscience," the priestess declared intransigently.

Allard resisted the desire to scowl. "That mindset will not gain you many friends or allies, my lady."

"I am not concerned with making friends or allies," Melisandre stoically claimed, "I am more concerned with curing the ignorant of their misguided beliefs."

"Such extremist behavior is frowned upon where I live," Allard professed, "In the Seven Kingdoms, we do not force others to follow any religion against their will."

"Yet you do force them to follow whoever sits the Iron Throne," Melisandre pointed out.

"That is a different matter entirely," Allard debated.

"Is it?" Melisandre disputed, "Men are loyal to the one known as their king not because they chose to be, but because the alternative is death or exile. I see no reason why religion cannot be imposed upon them in a similar fashion."

Allard frowned and murmured in an impatient tone "My lady, this talk of religion is getting us nowhere. I would like to remain focused on our original topic of discussion."

"I assure you, this is very much related to that topic," Melisandre remarked.

Allard scoffed and queried "How?"

"In another life, you would have been a fellow servant of R'hllor," Melisandre straightforwardly expounded.

Allard stared at her blankly for a few seconds. Then he spat heatedly "What in the Seven Hells are you talking about?"

"The Lord of Light does not just tell us the possible future," Melisandre claimed, "He also reveals what could have been. During my stay, I grew curious about you, and I beseeched my Lord to tell me more of you. I was intrigued to discover that under different circumstances, you and your brothers would have exchanged your Seven for R'hllor."
"And I suppose you would have been the one to persuade us to convert?" Allard asked rhetorically.

"Indeed," the Red Woman alleged, "You would have been reluctant to do so at first, but you would have given in soon enough. Your father, however, would only have claimed to embrace the Lord of Light. He would never have changed his faith willingly."

That does not surprise me. Father grew up in a city where it was commonplace to worship the Seven. I remember he used to pray to them whenever he went smuggling.

Allard folded his arms again and mumbled "I find it unlikely that the Lord of Light would consider me and my family important enough to give you an entire vision about us."

"As I said afore, R'hllor sees and knows all," Melisandre repeated.

"My lady, with all due respect, you could claim you saw anything in one of your fires," Allard contended, "Unless you are able to provide some evidence to support yourself, there is no concrete reason why we should put so much stock in your words."

"It is evidence you desire?" the Red Woman drily uttered. When Allard nodded his head, she proclaimed "Then evidence I shall give you."

At that, Allard allowed himself a satisfied his smirk vanished when the priestess told him "This brings me to why I summoned you to this chamber. You are not at this table simply because you required one of your hundred to stand witness for my meeting with the Targaryens. There is another reason – a more important and more exceptional reason – why I asked you here, Master Allard."

"What reason is that?" Allard Seaworth inquired.

"Unlike your ninety-nine compatriots, you are in contact with the most dangerous man alive," Melisandre disclosed, "You serve directly under him, as well."

Allard raised an eyebrow and assumed "You mean Lord Gregor Clegane?"

"Yes," the Red Woman affirmed, "That man is perhaps the greatest threat to the modern world."

In response, Allard bristled and tightened his fists. He snapped angrily "How dare you."

Melisandre stated serenely "I would advise you not to lose your temper, Master Allard."

"Then I would advise you to be mindful of the way you speak of the Mountain," Allard mumbled through gritted teeth. "Lord Gregor Clegane has unified a country that had always been broken since the days of the First Men. What have you ever done that could possibly compare?"

"A person's greatness is not determined solely by their deeds," Melisandre plainly observed, "Gregor Clegane has established stability throughout the Seven Kingdoms; I do not deny that. But this stability will not last. He who made it will also be the cause of its undoing."

Normally, Allard could remain levelheaded and composed in nearly every situation. But he would not tolerate anyone slandering the Mountain's name as the Red Woman just had. His right hand closed around the hilt of his sword, and he muttered curiously "Explain what you mean. If you value your tongue, I'd suggest you chose your words very carefully."

Melisandre did not seem intimidated in the slightest. Not on the surface, at any rate. Regardless, she held a hand up and declared "Stay your hand and I will tell you."
Allard removed his hand from his sword and placed it back on the surface of the table. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Daenerys exhale slowly and tensely. She must have been holding her breath for the last twenty seconds. *I may have frightened her. If so, I should apologize to her later.*

"Continue," Allard stated in a more relaxed tone.

Melisandre proclaimed "*It is not my intent to condemn the Mountain. In another life, he may have been a terrible man. But not in this one. In this world, he is a good man. I know, because only a good man could have accomplished the things he has.*"

Allard grinned and nodded his head at that. *As it happens, I helped him accomplish some of those deeds.*

"But…” Melisandre hastily resumed, "There are times when goodness can produce disaster. There is such a thing as a man who is too good."

"That is true," Allard concurred, "*King Baelor Targaryen was one such man. He fasted daily so that his people could have more to eat. He ended up starving himself to death.*"

"*It was more his blind devotion to the Seven that killed him,*" Melisandre contended. *How did I know she would say that?* The Red Woman then remarked *"In the case of Gregor Clegane, his weakness is his desire to protect the innocent."

Allard was more perplexed than astounded by that. He inquired "*How is it a flaw to want to defend the innocent?*

"*Usually, it is not,*" Melisandre pronounced, "*But when one labors under the misapprehension that he can save all the innocent, he risks placing the world in jeopardy.*"

"*When has Lord Gregor ever done that?*" Allard muttered demandingly.

Melisandre answered him with "*Sixteen years ago, when he ensured the survival of Rhaegar Targaryen's children."

Silence passed over the chamber. It was a chilling, unnerving, elongated period of silence. Allard had been rendered almost completely speechless. So had Viserys and Daenerys, by their countenances. All three were staring with their mouths hanging open in shock. Melisandre just sat in her chair with her hands folded, looking as stoic and collected as ever.

After a minute of total inactivity, Allard abruptly jumped to his feet. He drew his sword out of its scabbard and whispered menacingly "*You lying witch…*"

"*I may be a witch,*" Melisandre contended, "*But I did not lie.*"

"*You did,*" Allard refuted, pointing his sword at the Red Woman, "*Prince Rhaegar's children perished at the end of Robert's Rebellion. Lord Gregor was there when they died.*"

"*Yes, that was what he told the world,*" Melisandre admitted, "*But you must not believe everything you are told.*"

"*A lesson anyone who ever listened to you should live by,*" Allard sharply retorted, stepping forward two paces. *Let us see how insolent she is when less a tongue.*

"*Wait!*" Viserys interjected, rising to his feet hastily. Allard turned to the elder Targaryen, who sternly declared "*I would hear what she has to say.*"
"I'd like to know more, too," Daenerys thought aloud, "Maybe she speaks true, Allard. If she does, removing her tongue will not alter history."

"Indeed not, my lady," Allard Seaworth coincided. But for the sake of everyone here, she better not be deceiving us. He gradually sheathed his sword, returned to his seat, and gazed at Melisandre. Secretly, he was beginning to wonder if perhaps she was not feeding them falsehoods after all.

Once Viserys was seated again, the conversation continued. He asked the priestess in a commanding voice "How do you know our brother's children are alive?"

"R'hllor gave me a vision of them," Melisandre revealed, "As it happens, this vision was the very same one which led me to you and your sister."

"Please, tell us what you saw, my lady," Daenerys bade the priestess. She asked a lot more politely than I would have. Certainly, more than her brother would have.

Melisandre elaborated with "The vision came to me over a year ago. It began with six dragons flying together in an open field. After a time, they were attacked by all the other animals in the world, and during the attack, they were separated from one another. Two of the dragons flew across a vast expanse of water, another of them went to the top of the world, and the last three sought shelter in the lands adjacent to the field. After the other animals disbanded, a wave of darkness passed over the land. It consumed everything in its path. Before it could devour all, the dragons reunited, and – working together – they overcame the darkness and expelled it from the world."

Allard whistled in amazement. Viserys and Daenerys appeared partly flabbergasted and partly enthralled. Now, if only this 'advantage' would come to light.

Viserys scoffed and observed "Obviously, Dany and I are the two that traversed the ocean."

"Evidently," Allard drily coincided. So, he's not completely witless.

"It is for that reason that I came to you," Melisandre proclaimed, "You were the closest of the dragons, and according to my vision, you will somehow grow the most in strength."

"Astonishing," Daenerys commented, giving a wide grin. In a strange way, seeing her so happy made Allard feel a little merry. After a momentary pause, the younger Targaryen looked to the Red Woman and inquired "What of the other four dragons?"

"I believe I may know who the one at the top of the world is," Allard thought aloud.

"Who?" Daenerys queried eagerly.

"Your great granduncle, Aemon Targaryen," Allard replied, "The elder brother to your ancestor Aegon the Unlikely."

Viserys seemed equal parts astonished and skeptical. "How do you know that?"

"Lord Gregor mentioned him once," Allard Seaworth disclosed, "He informed me and the others on the secret council that the maester of Castle Black used to be a Targaryen prince before he joined the Night's Watch. He asked us not to tell anyone else of that, but I believe present company can be excepted."

"In any case, you are correct," Melisandre claimed, "Maester Aemon, formerly of House Targaryen, is the last of his generation. He has been on the Wall longer than most men have been
alive. But he is still a dragon in his heart."

Daenerys nodded her head, agreeing with the sentiment. Allard found he agreed with it, too. Dany then inquired in interest "What of the last three dragons? Did they ever get to shelter?"

"They did," Melisandre apprised her and the two men, "After soaring through the skies for a long while, they ultimately found refuge on a mountain. A very tall mountain."

*I don't need to be a master interpreter to know the meaning of that symbol.*

"Who are these last three meant to be?" Viserys enquired.

"Rhaegar's children, of course," Melisandre proclaimed. *Three? Did she miscount?*

"Pardon me, my lady," Daenerys stated, clearly having a similar thought, "Rhaegar only had two children. Rhaenys and Aegon."

"Not so," Melisandre firmly asserted, "There was a third."

"How could that be?" Allard Seaworth wondered, "Elia Martell was incapable of having another babe after Aegon."

"Yes, but her husband's seed was still fertile," Melisandre professed. Before anyone could pose another question, the Red Woman explicated "When the three dragons reached the mountain, two of them landed near a viper. The third, who happened to be the youngest, landed near a wolf."

Allard placed his hand over his mouth and murmured quietly "Lyanna Stark…"

Melisandre nodded approvingly and said "Right again."

Viserys snorted. "So the Stark whore lived long enough to give our brother a bastard."

"Have you no respect for the dead?" Allard stated in disgust.

"Lyanna Stark may not be dead," Melisandre frankly countered, "And her child may not be a bastard, either."

*What the honest fuck?* Allard was beginning to feel overwhelmed by confusion. "My lady, this explanation is starting to raise more questions than it answers."

"I'm afraid your new questions must remain unanswered a while longer, Master Seaworth" Melisandre told him, "The Lord of Light has not yet seen fit to tell me more of Rhaegar's third child. But there is one who may be able to enlighten you."

"Just 'may'?” Allard noted.

"The Mountain That Rides helped Rhaenys and Aegon disappear," Melisandre pointed out, "It would not be unreasonable to assume he did the same for their half-sibling. I cannot say for a certainty that he did anything of the sort. You have the means to determine whether or not he did."

Allard frowned and inquired "Are you asking me to confront my commander on this issue?"

"Not necessarily confront him," Melisandre expounded, "Whenever you next correspond with Lord Gregor, bring up this topic. He may be quite reluctant to address it, but you just may convince him to be straightforward and truthful."
"That is a huge gamble, my lady," Allard Seaworth commented, "Even so… I will try. I can make no promises as to my success, but I will strive to succeed all the same."

"Very good," Melisandre avowed. She seemed rather pleased by that assurance.

There was a lengthy period of quietness in the room. Then Allard looked to the Red Woman and told her "Earliest, you spoke at length of how the Mountain would be responsible for the collapse of his own achievements, namely the stability of Westeros. Just what did you mean by that?"

"Sooner or later, the remaining dragons may attempt to reclaim what was taken from them," Melisandre conjectured, "Doubtless, the possibility of that has occurred to Gregor Clegane. Nonetheless, he refused to let any harm befall Rhaegar's children when they were babes. Now they are grown. If they decide they want the Iron Throne, Lord Gregor's mercy could ultimately turn out to be a grave error."

"I can comprehend your reasoning," Allard Seaworth declared, "But your worries are not entirely justified, my lady. Westeros may have been in a sorry state when the Targaryens were overthrown sixteen years ago, but I doubt there are enough people in the Seven Kingdoms who would actually support the Targaryens if they attempted to return to power."

"You're likely right," Daenerys glumly conceded, "After all, why would they need or want us if Robert Baratheon has done so much more for them than our father ever did?"

"They wouldn't," Viserys proclaimed, folding his arms. Then he smirked, leaned back in his chair, and stated "However, suppose that when we returned to Westeros, we did not go back alone."

"You won't go back alone," Allard contended, "In all likelihood, my colleagues and I will be the ones to take you back."

"Yes, but perhaps you will bring back more than my sister and myself," Viserys supposed.

Allard was intrigued by that remark. Where is he going with this? "Who do you envision would sail back with us?"

"An army of my own making," Viserys smugly declared.

Allard had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. He allowed himself a small grin, and he cheekily murmured "And just where do you imagine this army would come from?"

"Magister Illyrio and I are the process of finding one," Viserys claimed, "I will not say anything beyond that. It is no concern of yours."

"It is, depending on the true purpose of this 'army,'" Allard argued, eyeing Viserys suspiciously.

Viserys chuckled at the accusing glance the Stormlander gave him. He leaned further back in his chair and said scathingly "You probably think I plan to amass an invasion force. Do not be so naïve. When the Long Night comes, the Usurper will need all the help he can get. If I am able to provide some units of my own, he should be grateful."

_I do not think for one moment that you're raising an army for a selfless motive._ Viserys Targaryen was far too ambitious to give up what would have been his. If given the chance, he would seize the Iron Throne and exterminate House Baratheon at the same time. Allard would not allow him the opportunity to do either.

Be that as it may, he was not entirely opposed to the Targaryens marshaling some forces of their
own. Under the right supervision and leadership, the Targaryen's foreign forces could be made to cooperate with the forces of the Seven Kingdoms.

*I wonder who he has in mind. Perhaps a sellsword company or two. Or three. But then again, where would he find the gold?* At this moment, he did not particularly care. Whoever Viserys won over, they would not be going to Westeros without the Legion's consent or the crown's.

Allard folded his arms again and announced "Very well, I will not ask who you intend to recruit to your cause. For now. But make no mistake; you shall not keep me in the dark indefinitely. Until I know who you'll be in league with, I will sanction passage across the Narrow Sea for no one other than the people in this building."

Viserys seemed quite displeased, but he nodded his head and grudgingly muttered "Fine. So be it."

Allard smiled, as he was glad that he could forgo another pointless argument. *That's probably the most reasonable he's ever been.* There were times when Allard found it difficult to believe that Viserys and Daenerys were actually related. He was easily aggravated, extremely impatient, and very unforgiving. She, on the other hand, was intelligent, cautious, clever, and sweet almost to a fault. *For a certainty, they landed on opposite sides of the gods' famous Targaryen coin.*

The bedchamber was immersed in silence once more. After twenty seconds of this silence, Allard Seaworth turned to Melisandre and asked her "Have you anything more to tell us, my lady?"

"At present, I do not," the priestess proclaimed, "But R'hllor will continue giving me visions of the future. I would ask that the three of you make yourselves available at all times of the day."

"As you say," Allard tentatively coincided. Viserys and Daenerys both nodded their heads in agreement.

Melisandre concluded the meeting with this sentence: "Above all, you must remember; the night is dark and full of terrors."

*If you believe that now, wait until the Long Night comes.*

It was not even noon when Allard Seaworth and the Targaryens left the Red Woman's bechamber. Nevertheless, he was unable to get much of anything completed by the time night fell. For the rest of that day, all he could think about was what had been said during their conversation. *That had to be the biggest awakening of my life.*

Finding out that he and his brothers would have forsaken the Seven under different circumstances. Discovering that Rhaegar Targaryen's children were still alive, and that he had three of them. Learning that Lord Gregor Clegane may have had a hand in ensuring their survival. Being told that Lord Gregor's actions could eventually bring ruin to the Seven Kingdoms. Being informed that the Mountain was keeping dark secrets from even his closest allies.

Ultimately, it was the knowledge that the Red Woman knew so much about the world that bothered Allard the most. Not only was she aware of hidden truths of the past, where the present would lead, and what the future would hold, but she also knew of what the world would have been like in another life.

As far as Allard Seaworth knew, red priests were not accustomed to seeing into other worlds. In fact, there was only one person in the Known World who possessed that ability. That was the very
same man that Allard had loyally followed for over thirteen years. The man whose premonition of
the Long Night had enabled the people of Westeros to prepare for it.

When he made this connection, Allard developed a very unnerving theory.

What if the Red Woman knew even more than she let on? What if the Lord of Light gave her more
than just glimpses of the future? What if she was actually receiving elaborate warnings of the
upcoming hardships of the world?

Could it have been possible that the gods had given Lady Melisandre the very same gift they had
given to Lord Gregor Clegane?
Note: My final projects in all three of my classes will be due sometime in the next two weeks. So I'll be concentrating on meeting those deadlines. After that, all I'll have left before I graduate is a final exam in one of my classes. In any case, I won't be able to do more writing until the last week of the month.

In the meantime, here is an update that I hope will tide you over until I return. This chapter is where a lot of story arcs begin to converge, and a number of characters start to come together. This chapter will in large part be an account of how Westeros has developed since Greyjoy's Rebellion (Moat Cailin in particular), but it will not just be a status report. Certain parts of it will be key to the plot development of several subsequent chapters.

"We have arrived, my ladies," Erryk or Arryk – she never could tell which – announced from the other side of the door.

"Very well, Right," Olenna Tyrell murmured. And not a moment too soon. It was getting stuffy in here.

She turned to the other occupants of the carriage. They were her beautiful granddaughter Margaery and Margaery's two trusted handmaidens. They were beautiful, as well. Not as beautiful as Margaery, of course. But they can still turn many a lad's head. They were all young maids, and she had lived longer than the three of them combined. Gods willing, they will all live to an even greater age.

Olenna looked to the girl across from her and stated "Would you care to lead, Lady Mira? It would be most fitting if one native to this land stepped out first."

Mira Forrester gave a sweet smile and declared "I would be honored, my lady."

Olenna could not help but smile back. Mira was always so polite. Of her granddaughter's handmaidens, Olenna preferred her over Sera Durwell. Although Sera's family were distant relatives of the Tyrells, she was also quite reserved and laconic. That was likely a direct result of her "secret."

Nevertheless, Sera was just as competent and capable as the girl from the North. If only she was as resilient, as well.

Ever since they entered the Neck, Sera had been coughing nonstop. She seemed to have taken ill. Before they came up the Causeway, Sera had selflessly offered to travel separately from the others so as not to bother them, but Margaery insisted that she ride with them.

Mira Forrester rose from her seat just as Right opened the door. He offered his hand, and she took it, allowing him to help her out of the carriage.
Left appeared a moment later, and he and his brother aided the Queen of Thorns to rise and exit that birdcage on wheels, as she was fond of calling it.

As soon as she was on the ground, Olenna shuddered a bit. The sudden change in temperature was so noticeable it was startling. *It did not feel so cold when we first entered the Neck.*

"Shall I fetch your shawl, my lady?" Left offered.

*Fool, I'd need more than a shawl.* Olenna did not give voice to that thought; she merely nodded her head.

As Left went to find her shawl, Right assisted Margaery and Sera down from the carriage. When the two of them were on the same level as Olenna and Mira, Sera stumbled. Mira quickly moved to catch her friend before she could trip.

"Thank you," Sera weakly told her friend, before coughing into her arm.

"Anytime," the lady of Ironrath assured her.

Like Olenna, Sera and Margaery seemed to have detected the shift in temperature. They both shivered the instant they touched the ground. Mira, however, did not seem bothered in the least. That was remarkable, considering how she was garmented differently, as well. Olenna wore a constricting gown that only left her face and hands exposed, and Sera and Margaery wore warm woolen cloaks of sheepskin over their flowing dresses. Mira had forgone such apparel in favor of her usual bare-sleeved gown. Despite this, she did not appear affected by the cold, or to have even noticed it.

When Sera stopped coughing, she held herself for warmth and mumbled "It's freezing."

"You'll get used to this, I assure you," Mira proclaimed confidently, "All of you will."

"Do not mistake my meaning, my dear," Olenna Tyrell pronounced, "But I do not expect to be here long enough that I would even need to accustom myself to the climate."

"I can hardly blame you for thinking so, my lady," Mira Forrester drily contended, "The North is not for everyone. Only the hardy and the determined can take to it."

"It happens that I am both," Margaery claimed with a smirk, "It will take more than a slight chill to dissuade me from my duty."

"I never doubted that, my lady," Mira Forrester said sincerely. *Nor did I. A true flower does not yield to frostbite so easily.*

Left returned a minute later. He brought back more than his mistress's shawl. He also brought along the party's travelling companions.

Not long after the company of Reachmen entered the Riverlands, they had encountered another company. This one was from the Westerlands, specifically Casterly Rock. At the head of it were Lord Tyrion Lannister and Lady Ellyn Lannister.

At Olenna's insistence, the three of them had supped together that night. At the table, Lord Tyrion and his wife had revealed they were on their way to visit her brother in the North. Lady Olenna's party was also going North, but for different reasons. Since they were headed in the same direction, Olenna had proposed that they travel together. *Some new faces can always add some excitement to a long and dull journey.*
The following morning, they had merged their parties. The lions had been among the roses since just before they reached the Trident. On the way, Olenna Tyrell discovered that Tyrion and Ellyn Lannister made a rather pleasant couple of travelling companions. As well as a rather pleasant couple in general.

"A little nippy today," the dwarf commented bluntly, reining his courser up beside the Tyrell women. The mare was a special saddle designed to accommodate her master's measurements.

Lady Olenna and her granddaughter had ridden in a carriage all the way from Highgarden. Most highborn ladies generally preferred that method of travel. That was just one more area in which Ellyn Lannister was an exception. She currently rode beside her husband atop a large brown destrier.

If her destination was too far to walk, she always travelled by horse. She claimed to feel much more comfortable in the open on her own mount than seated in a small, cramped compartment. She also japed that she always hit her head on the doorframe of a carriage, anyway. I could believe that. She is taller than Left and Right, and neither of them could ever sit up straight in a carriage.

"Really?" Lady Ellyn stated jokingly, gazing at their surroundings, "I hadn't noticed, my love."

"Neither did I," Mira Forrester proclaimed, though she was only partly jesting. Her skin was the only one free of goose prickles at this time.

Although they had technically been in the North for several days, Mira had informed everyone beforehand that the Neck was not like the rest of her homeland. It was a generally temperate landscape. Sure enough, the climate as they came up the Causeway had actually been favorable to an extent. But after clearing the marshes, warmer clothing became obligatory for those of them who were born outside the North. Which was everyone save for Margaery's favorite handmaiden. It would seem Lady Mira is more naked than the rest of us.

Presently, Lady Olenna and the others were clustered together in the courtyard of Moat Cailin. The moat's stableboys were assisting the riders with their mounts. A pair of them came up to Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn. One offered his hand to Lady Ellyn, but she gently refused it and climbed down from her mount by herself.

When she was on her feet, Ellyn Lannister casually made her way over to her husband's courser. Lord Tyrion was in the midst of climbing off his own mount when his wife crept up behind him, took ahold of him by the arms, and lifted him out of his saddle.

For a moment, Tyrion appeared somewhat startled by this abrupt action. Then he eased down and laughed in amusement. Ellyn chuckled with him as she playfully swung him through the air, embraced him firmly, and set him down on the ground delicately.

Olenna observed this interaction between the two Westerlanders. She was not quite certain what to make of it. On the one hand, they were behaving a little like children. She and Luthor had never been so devious. On the other hand… they were being quite affectionate to each other. She and Luthor had never been so tender in public. Then again, Luthor had been too much of an oaf to properly display such feelings in private, either. At least he was not too much of an oaf to sire children. Then again, he gave me an oaf son and two oaf daughters.

Truthfully, Olenna Tyrell loved her husband and children greatly, but she had always been critical of them. She was critical of everyone, but never to the degree of harshness and cruelty.

While the pair of stableboys led away Lord Tyrion's courser and Lady Ellyn's destrier, a young
woman came to the two spouses. Olenna recognized her as one of Ellyn Lannister's handmaidens. She had not bothered to learn her name, though.

Be that as it may, Olenna did know the name of the small boy the handmaiden was currently holding in her arms. He was Duncan Lannister, the only child of Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn. And perhaps the future Lord of Casterly Rock. Provided the Kingslayer still only has girls.

When she reached her mistress, the handmaiden carefully transferred young Duncan from her arms to his mother's. Lady Ellyn smiled down at her son, who giggled and grinned back.

"He didn't give you any trouble, I assume?" Lord Tyrion asked the handmaiden rhetorically.

"No trouble at all, milord," the handmaiden affirmed giddily, "He slept most of the way."

"Thank you, Greta," Ellyn told her handmaiden appreciatively, "You may go now."

The handmaiden – Greta, apparently – bowed respectfully and went to see to her other duties.

Tyrion Lannister gazed up at his son in his wife's arms and inquired "Do you think he's warm enough?"

"He should be," Ellyn Lannister contended, looking down at Duncan, "I had Greta dress him in two layers of thick clothing this morning. But if you are concerned that that might not be enough, I'll hold him close to my chest."

Tyrion smirked and nodded his head in approval, saying cockily "That always keeps me warm. At night at least."

Ellyn's cheeks flushed red for a moment, but immediately after, she scoffed at her husband's remark. Mira Forrester and Margaery snickered a bit, too.

The Queen of Thorns herself grinned, but not because she was amused by that innuendo. She grinned because she was strangely pleased by how Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn treated each other. They were so tranquil, so spirited, and so loving.

Her grandfather was the kennelmaster of his. Moreover, she is tall enough to match one and one-half of him in height. Yet they have found happiness with one another.

Lady Olenna took that as a sign. If a lion of Casterly Rock could be happily wed to a hound of Clegane's Keep, just about any match in Westeros could produce the same fine results. That included the joining of a wolf and a rose. As it happened, that was precisely why Olenna and Margaery were there in the first place.

Olenna Tyrell was brought out of her momentary meditation when Margaery placed a soft hand on her shoulder. She swiftly turned to face her granddaughter, who was glancing in another direction and told her excitedly "Grandmother, they're here!"

Lady Olenna looked in the same direction as Margaery, and she saw straightaway who "they" were. A small company of people had just entered the vicinity. Among that company were two young men with the same type of hair as Margaery. My, how they've grown.

The Queen of Thorns smiled at her grandsons as they and their associates came nearer. Soon enough, the distance between the two groups was reduced to nothing.

Loras went directly to Margaery. He hugged their sister warmly and placed a kiss on her cheek.
Willas, however, greeted their grandmother first. He dipped his head to her, she dipped hers in response, and then he brought her into a kind embrace.

"It would appear the Reach's bouquet of roses is whole again," Mira Forrester jokingly commented. Olenna allowed herself a scoff. *That girl has more wit than I gave her credit for.*

"Not quite whole, my lady," Loras countered, not unkindly, "Our brother Garlan is in Dorne right now."

That statement incited Olenna to reflect on the current whereabouts of her son's children. One of them was located in a land composed of miles upon miles of sand. The other three were in a land where it snowed year-round. *Neither offers hospitable conditions for a flower to grow or flourish.*

But *Growing Strong* were not House Tyrell's words without reason. *My grandchildren are not pansies. They are roses, and our roses can take root and thrive anywhere.*

"With him down there and three of us up here, Father and Mother must feel rather lonesome," Willas conjectured.

"Actually, they're more worried than lonesome," Margaery informed her brothers, "Father is, at any rate. He was more than a little reluctant for us to make this journey."

"Because of what happened north of the Wall last month?" Loras presumed.

"Just so," Margaery confirmed, "The raven carrying the news of that fiasco reached Highgarden mere days before we were scheduled to set off. Once he read the missive, Father tried to persuade us to consider cancelling our departure. Or postponing it, at the very least."

"Naturally, we were not about to halt our plans simply because your lord father misplaced his nerves," Olenna Tyrell proclaimed adamantly, "Once I convinced him to listen to reason, he agreed to let us go on our way."

"Under the condition that we take with us twice as many guards and servants as we initially intended," Margaery added in.

Willas seemed to be exasperated by that remark, and Loras appeared entertained by it.

"Surely Father does not honestly believe a few more soldiers would make any difference if the Night's King chose to send his forces south," the Knight of Flowers pronounced sardonically.

"No more difference than postponing the trip would have," Willas debated, "If anything, delaying the journey north would have been counterproductive. The threat of the Long Night becomes greater with every passing second. The sooner one gets to the North, the longer they will be there in safety."

"That is precisely why we chose to go north," Tyrion Lannister proclaimed from a few feet away, "Knowing what is awaiting the Seven Kingdoms in the near future, coming to this region now instead of later is much more sensible."

"Well, if you do not mind my asking, why are you here, my lord?" Willas enquired.

"I will tell you later, over a cup of wine," was all the dwarf said in response. *Ah, personal reasons.* In any case, Willas seemed content with that answer.

While the Tyrells had their brief reunion, Lady Ellyn had one of her own. Two of the individuals
that had accompanied Willas and Loras were the tallest man and the tallest woman Olenna had ever seen. They could only have been Gregor Clegane and his lady wife Dacey of House Mormont.

Lady Ellyn handed Duncan to Lord Tyrion so that both of her arms were free. She then moved to embrace her elder brother and sister-by-law. Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey took her in what could have been regarded as a bear hug. *With an actual bear.*

When she first met Ellyn Lannister, Olenna Tyrell had been impressed by her tremendous size. Yet even Lady Ellyn was diminutive next to the elder of her brothers and his wife. Standing next to them, Lady Olenna noted that Lady Dacey stood at least four inches higher than Ellyn, and Lord Gregor was over a full foot taller than his sister.

Olenna could not help but wonder how tall their children would grow to be. In all three of their house's generations and before, every Clegane had been big-boned.

It appeared that attribute would apply to the members of its fourth generation, too. After all, Duncan Lannister was at least a third larger than the average babe, and his father was a dwarf. With Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey… there was no telling how big their brood would ultimately grow to be.

*Years ago, the giants relocated south of the Wall. Soon they may encounter more of their own kind who were born on this side.*

After exchanging pleasantries with Ellyn Lannister, Gregor and Dacey Clegane paid their respects to her husband, as well. They had to kneel to even be close to the same level as him. Fortunately, Lord Tyrion did not seem to be so self-conscious about his stature.

Lord Tyrion was not one for embraces. *Unless it's his wife, of course.* So he simply shook hands with the Mountain and the Bear Islander. At the same time, he managed to hold onto Duncan securely with his left arm.

"And who is this handsome rascal?" Lord Gregor muttered wittily, gesturing to the small boy.

Obviously, that question had been a rhetorical one. Lord Gregor did not actually require an answer. Nevertheless, Lord Tyrion bluntly replied with "Just a little something your dear sister made. With my assistance, that is."

"Well, you both did fabulous work," Lady Dacey perceived, humoring the men.

"We like to think so," Lady Ellyn pronounced candidly.

As far as Olenna Tyrell knew, this was Lord Gregor Clegane's first time seeing his youngest nephew. According to what the Lannisters had told her on their journey north, the Mountain had not been in the Westerlands since a year before Ellyn became pregnant. Even then, he had not been able to visit her at Casterly Rock. He had, however, been able to see her sometime after her wedding. *It's an honorable man who goes to such length to make time for his family.*

When Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey were finished becoming acquainted with their nephew, they both rose back to their full height. The Mountain finally turned his attention to the individuals that had begun their trek in the Reach. He and his lady wife nodded their heads in polite acknowledgment.

"My ladies," Gregor Clegane proclaimed, gazing around at Olenna, Margaery, Mira, and Sera, "On behalf of the Legion without Banners and Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell, I officially welcome you to Moat Cailin and the North."
"In Lady Forrester's case, we welcome you back," Dacey Clegane slyly added in.

Mira Forrester scoffed at the older woman's jape and commented "I thank you for that."

"As do the rest of us," Margaery spoke in a firm and authoritative tone. She had practiced using her "lady's voice" extensively on their way north. She may or may not need it here.

"Indeed," Olenna Tyrell conceded, gazing around at her surroundings, "I had heard Moat Cailin was a ruin. If so, it is the most remarkable ruin I have ever seen."

"Would you care to see more of it, Grandmother?" Willas suggested.

"Perhaps," the Queen of Thorns answered her grandson, "So long as doing so would not consume too much of our time."

Loras was confused. She could tell by the expression on his face. Mace wore that countenance quite often. "Are you in a hurry, Grandmother?"

"No, but I am on an errand," Olenna Tyrell disclosed, "I told Margaery I would take her to see her betrothed as soon as humanly possible. Winterfell is our final destination, not Moat Cailin. Lingering here or anywhere else would cause us a great setback."

"Not so, my lady," a new voice declared.

Olenna could not see who it belonged to or where it originated from. She furrowed her brow and asked sternly "Who said that?"

A plump young man stepped out from the small crowd that had accompanied Lord Gregor into the courtyard. He appeared to become rather nervous at being addressed by the Queen of Thorns directly. That was hardly new. Olenna Tyrell had a talent of making all manners of men shiver. Be that as it may, this man looked as though timidity was second-nature to him.

"Your name, boy?" Olenna queried.

"T-Tarly, if it please you," the lad revealed with a slight stutter.

She recognized the name immediately. Another Reachman. "You must be Lord Randyll's."

"Aye, my lady," the plump man confirmed, standing up straight and speaking with a little more confidence now, "I am Samwell Tarly of Horn Hill, personal notary to Lord Gregor and scribe of the Legion without Banners."

"Then you must have your work cut out for you, young Samwell," Olenna drily observed.

"As you say," Samwell Tarly avowed.

After a short pause, Olenna said inquisitively "Just what did you mean a moment ago? Why would remaining here for any length of time not impede our progress to the heir of Winterfell?"

"Because Robb Stark is not in Winterfell at this time," Samwell apprised her, "He is here."

That took Olenna by surprise. Margery must have been surprised, too, as she stepped forward and stated inquiringly "He is?"

"He arrived two days past," Lord Gregor Clegane disclosed, "We were just as astounded by his arrival as you are. Normally, he gives us some prior notice. In spite of that, he had his reasons for
"What reasons might those be?" Olenna enquired.

"The day before he got in, he made what you would call a last-minute decision," the Mountain recounted, "Essentially, the decision involved how he would make his first impression on you."

"How so?" said Margaery.

It was Lady Dacey who gave response: "He claimed that since his intended was coming all the way to the North to call upon him, he felt obligated to escort her through his lands to his home himself."

Olenna and Margaery were astonished by that revelation. Albeit astonished in a good sense. *I have not even met the boy, and already I begin to like him.*


"If you say so, it must be," Tyrion Lannister interjected, "After all, you of the Reach know all about chivalry,"

That remark yielded a number of snickers from the people in the area.

"So, where is Lord Robb?" Margaery inquired.

"He is preoccupied with a task at the moment," Gregor Clegane pronounced, "But you will see him soon enough, my lady. That much I promise you."

"Very well, my lord," Margaery coincided with a polite grin.

Just then, Sera broke into another loud round of coughing. She looked as though she would collapse. Luckily, Mira caught her before she did.

"Is she alright?" Loras inquired in concern.

"Yes, I… I'm fine," Sera claimed. *Not very convincing.*

"Forgive her," Mira beseeched everyone present, "I believe she has contracted a fever."

"It would appear so," Gregor Clegane muttered in agreement. He turned to his notary and ordered him "Samwell, escort Lady Sera to Maester Kennick's office. Her fever could worsen or spread if left untreated."

"It will be done, my lord," the heir to Horn Hill assured the Mountain. He made his way over to the coughing handmaiden and took her from Mira Forrester. Sera seemed to have difficulty standing, so he gently pulled her arm over his shoulders. After that, he told her softly "This way, my lady."

"Thank you, ser," Sera Durwell said gratefuly, grinning up at him. He flushed and solemnly led her out of the area.

Olenna and the others watched in silence as the two of them left. Once they were gone, Margaery turned to the tallest person there and muttered eagerly "So, Lord Gregor, I believe you mentioned the possibility of giving us a tour of the moat."

"I did," Gregor Clegane affirmed, "Are you still interested in having the tour?"
"By all means, go ahead," Olenna Tyrell bade him, wrapping her shawl around her shoulders, "So long as it culminates in us meeting the heir to Winterfell."

"I shall endeavor to please," Lord Gregor proclaimed, giving the Queen of Thorns a light smile, which she was oddly compelled to return. "He should be finished with his task by then."

Olenna believed him. *I know a man of his word when I see one. Such men are a rarity in these times.*

Over the next few hours, Gregor Clegane gave Olenna Tyrell, Margaery Tyrell, Tyrion Lannister, Ellyn Lannister, and Mira Forrester a very thorough tour of Moat Cailin. They were accompanied by Dacey Clegane, Willas Tyrell, Loras Tyrell, and everyone else who had come to the courtyard with the Mountain.

Moat Cailin was unique in that it had no singular main building. Instead, its structure was composed of a series of towers within and along the walls.

When the moat was first constructed, there had been a total of twenty towers. Overtime, all but three of them had collapsed. Fortunately, in the time since he had gained lordship of the moat, Gregor Clegane had managed to rebuild all seventeen of the fallen towers. He had also refurbished and reinforced the surviving three.

They started the tour at the Gatehouse Tower. One of the original three, it had served as Lord Gregor's main accommodations in the early days of his domain over the moat. Now it was used as a guardhouse and a base for sentries. That was due to the fantastic view the windows on the south wall gave of the Causeway and the bogs adjoining it.

The Armament Tower came next. This was where the bulk of the moat's weapons and armor were kept. The term "arsenal" hardly did it justice. It was a magnificent assortment of tools and equipment from all over the Known World, not just Westeros.

Next there was the Flour Tower. Despite its ridiculous name, it was one of the most. This was where all the moat's provisions were stored. Teams of professional cooks and bakers worked around the clock to keep the moat's vast population fed. The dishes they produced were impressively broad and tasteful. While they were there, Gregor passed around some bread, salt, and wine to Olenna and the others to ensure that they were protected under guest right.

At the northeast corner was the Worship Tower, one of the more intriguing features of the moat. This was where people went to pay homage to their gods. A godswood could be found just to the north of the tower. A sept was found on the first floor, and the higher levels had space set aside for other faiths, including R'hllor, the Lord of Light. This tower was built right by the moat's harbor, so even the Ironborn and other followers of the Drowned God could practice their religion properly.

Ironically, the Drunkard's Tower was the very next one. This was another of the first three, and nowadays it lived up to its name. It had been made into a tavern, where off-duty Legionnaires and the smallfolk could pass their free time with a skin of wine, a mug of beer, or a tankard of ale. Thoros of Myr could be found going back and forth between this tower and the adjoining one frequently.

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At the northeast corner was the Worship Tower, one of the more intriguing features of the moat. This was where people went to pay homage to their gods. A godswood could be found just to the north of the tower. A sept was found on the first floor, and the higher levels had space set aside for other faiths, including R'hllor, the Lord of Light. This tower was built right by the moat's harbor, so even the Ironborn and other followers of the Drowned God could practice their religion properly.

Ironically, the Drunkard's Tower was the very next one. This was another of the first three, and nowadays it lived up to its name. It had been made into a tavern, where off-duty Legionnaires and the smallfolk could pass their free time with a skin of wine, a mug of beer, or a tankard of ale. Thoros of Myr could be found going back and forth between this tower and the adjoining one frequently.

After this, they came to the Banquet Tower. As the name suggested, this was where Lord Gregor feasted his family, his soldiers, and his household. To be precise, it was meant to feast all those who had time to sit down to eat. A passageway had been established to connect it to the Flour Tower, so service was easier to conduct.
They followed that up with the Knowledge Tower. This was Samwell Tarly's favorite, as the library could be found here. This was also where Gregor's spies and intelligence gatherers would convene to report on all the different crises that had emerged throughout Westeros. Maester Kennick's office and the rookery were here, as well. However, the most interesting aspect of this tower was that it contained a secret passageway which led outside the walls of Moat Cailin. It was basically an emergency escape route, which would only be used in the event that the moat's occupants were forced to flee. *Prepared for all possible situations, I see.*

The Captains' Tower was where they went next. Here was where Willas, Oberyn Martell, Brynden Tully, Lyn Corbray, and the other top officers of the Legion without Banners – along with their families and their most trusted deputies – had their lodgings. The Red Viper, the Blackfish, and a few more of the more prominent Legionnaires were there when Olenna visited it. She took the time to exchange pleasantries with them, too.

The Meeting Tower was the smallest, and the second closest to the center (after the Lord's Tower). Lord Gregor also spent the least amount of time at this one. He revealed that this was where he and his lieutenants normally convened to discuss matters of precedence (which were also matters of secrecy). Naturally, he did not disclose or elaborate on any of these "matters."

The Lord's Tower was very remarkable. It was the tallest, and the only one where the entirety of the moat could be seen from the top. Lord Gregor, Lady Dacey, their children, and their household resided there. Olenna was glad they did not end up climbing this tower. Climbing long flights of stairs did not agree with her. Lord Tyrion seemed to think the same of himself.

The Smelting Tower was rather fascinating. This was where all of the moat's mining operations were carried out, as well as where Lord Gregor had several creations of his own – primarily cement and concrete – made all throughout the day. This was also where he had his private stores of black powder kept under lock and key. Olenna had to admire how innovative this one was.

The Pleasure Tower came after. Gregor and Dacey were reluctant to approach this one, and Olenna could understand why. As the name implied, the tower was just a fancy brothel. This had been the last tower to be built, and it was only established as a means to "entertain" unwed Legionnaires or visitors to the moat. The Mountain and the Bear Islander actually thought little and less of whores. All the same, the brothel happened to bring in a fairly large amount of income for House Clegane.

They subsequently went to the Healing Tower. This one was designed similarly to a greenhouse or a botanical garden. Dozens of medicinal herbs were grown in half of the rooms. The other half of the rooms had alchemy labs, where the herbs were mixed and tested to determine their specific effects. Because of this, the Legion's medicinal capabilities had expanded dramatically.

While the Lord's Tower was the tallest, the Infantry Tower was a close second. It was also by far the longest and widest. This was where the common soldiers of the Legion had their accommodations. Nearly four thousand men, women, and their families resided there. Despite the vast number, the living conditions were not too overcrowded.

The Children's Tower was the last of the three original ones. Although the Clegane children had their own nursery below their parents' bedroom in the Lord's Tower, this tower was essentially one giant nursery for all the other children in the moat. This was where on-duty Legionnaires left their children while they were working. They left them in the hands of a great number of highly qualified caretakers. Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey's second son, Alyver, was at the front of the building. He was looking after his younger siblings Vallory, Larys, and Torrhen.

The Artist's Tower was equally parts exotic and soothing. This was where some of the more expressive Legionnaires went to hone their love of the arts in their spare time. Some took up
mummery. Some painted. Some sculpted. Some sang. The whole building was basically a center of discovery and talent.

The Reproach Tower was aptly named. It was the dreariest and least crowded of the towers. This was where criminals, dissidents, traitors, and even defiant Legionnaires were taken to be chastised. While there were no instruments of extreme torture to be seen anywhere, there were plenty of whips, chains, and other unpleasant devices. They did not stay long at this one, thankfully.

The Boarder Tower was yet another building designed to house certain people. However, it was intended to serve as a place of temporary residence. People who were simply visiting the moat or passing through the region were given rooms there. The top floors were set aside for highborn guests. As such, Olenna, Margaery, Mira, Tyrion, Ellyn, and Duncan would be given rooms up there for the duration of their stay.

The Parish Tower did not seem very interesting at first, but it turned out to be curiously complex. There were three small villages on the lands immediately north of Moat Cailin. All of them had been built during Lord Gregor's tenure, and all three were continuing to grow alongside the moat. Since all three were located within the perimeter of the moat's concrete wall, they only had so much room to develop. This tower was devoted to optimizing whatever space was left and ensuring that all three villages benefited from it fairly.

The final tower they visited was the Novice Tower. This was where the Legion's newest recruits were sent when they first arrived at the moat. There they were put through a series of trials designed to test their mental, physical, and intellectual proficiencies. It was an exhaustive and exhausting process, but it effectively determined where each Legionnaire would be most useful in the organization.

In the end, even the Queen of Thorns could not deny that Moat Cailin was an extremely impressive holdfast. Even Highgarden was not so expertly coordinated as the moat on a regular basis. Lord Gregor certainly knows how to make the most of his land.

Despite how rewarding and enlightening this excursion had been, Olenna Tyrell had not forgotten the pledge the Mountain had given her when they began. Luckily, neither had he. After they cleared the Novice Tower, Lord Gregor announced "Now, let us go find the Young Wolf."

"'Young Wolf?'" Margaery noted in mild perplexity.

"That's the moniker he uses for Robb Stark," Dacey informed the younger woman. Well, considering the sigil of House Stark, that would be appropriate. At least it sounds respectful. Some aren't so fortunate to have such a fierce moniker. As I recall, there are some who are fond of calling Mace 'the Fat Flower.'"

A few moments after they left the Novice Tower, Samwell Tarly finally rejoined the company.

"Lady Sera will be fine," he notified them, "Maester Kennick says she does indeed have a fever. She just needs to rest for now."

"Alright," Margaery acknowledged, breathing a sigh of relief, "Thank you for seeing to her needs."

"It was no burden, my lady," Samwell assured her.

Gregor Clegane then stepped up to his notary and asked him "Sam, have you seen Robb?"

The plump boy from Horn Hill thought a moment, and then he proclaimed "Yes, I believe I spotted him by the training yard on my way here."
"Near the training yard or in it?" Dacey Clegane enquired.

"Hard to say, my lady," Samwell admitted, "I suppose there is only one way to find out."

"Quite," the Mountain coincided. He looked around at everyone else in the vicinity and declared "If no one has any objections, we will make for the training yard."

Unsurprisingly, there were no objections. Especially not from Margaery Tyrell or her grandmother. As such, the company swiftly headed for the moat’s training yard.

When they got there, they saw that it was being used. Two young men – grown boys, really – were in the center of the ring. They were in the midst of a fierce duel.

Both duelists wore chainmail over doublets of boiled leather, iron-studded breeches, woolen gloves, spiked boots, and plated greathelms that covered their heads entirely. Each was armed with a bastard sword.

Even before Olenna and her company arrived, they had not been alone. The duel was being observed by several people who stood in various places along the perimeter of the ring. Two of the spectators wore the exact same set of armor as the fighters. One of those two sat on a bench with his arms folded. The other was notably tall, and he stood beside a middle-aged knight whose cheeks were covered with white whiskers.

There were three more men in the area. One of them wore a hauberk, trousers, and a swore at his waist. He was older than the other two men put together. The second man was clad entirely in the white armor of the Kingsguard. The third was dressed rather elegantly, and he had short hair and a close-cropped beard with the distinctive black coloring of the Baratheons. Olenna identified him almost straightaway.

There were two women. One was a little older than Margaery. She had flaming red hair and a physique may have looked more natural on a man. Olenna could not tell if she was highborn or lowborn. Perhaps neither.

The other woman appeared to be a chambermaid. What she was doing there, Olenna could not venture a guess. Then she noted that the maid was sitting by three mounds of what appeared to be fur. Half of her attention was directed at the duel; the other half on the piles of fur. Maybe she is here to ensure that no one in the yard freezes his arse off.

One of the duelists was slightly taller than the other. Both of them were armed with a bastard sword. The taller of them held his in both of his hands. The shorter one only used one hand. While the taller one's attacks were based more on strength, the shorter one's tactics relied more on agility and speed.

Each has his own gifts and his own flaws. I wonder which of them shall triumph.

About three minutes later, Olenna found out. The shorter boy managed to knock the taller boy flat onto his back. Before he could rebound or attempt to counterattack from the ground, his opponent stood above him with his sword pointed directly at his neck.

Everyone in the area watched in tense silence and waited for something to happen.

Ultimately, the boy on the ground let out a frustrated sigh, held one of his hands in the air, and declared glumly "I yield."

The red-haired girl, the maid, and the elderly knight cheered, whilst the Kingsguard and the young
man with the black beard frowned a bit.

The victor of the duel moved his sword away from his victim and offered his free hand in its place. The loser grudgingly accepted the gesture and allowed his bester to pull him back to his feet.

The white-whiskered knight then entered the ring and approached the duelists. When he was close enough that they could touch him with the tips of their swords, he folded his arms and asked both of them "Would you say this was a fair match?"

"More than fair, Ser Rodrik," the shorter one proclaimed.

"Fair as it could be," the taller one disputed.

Judging by the former boy's addressing of the knight, Olenna deduced that he must have been Ser Rodrik Cassel, the master-at-arms of Moat Cailin. Loras had mentioned Ser Rodrik in one of his letters. He claimed the Northerner was a formidable warrior… for a man of his age. Dear Loras, as vain as he is skilled in combat.

Ser Rodrik turned to the taller duelist and queried "Can you tell me what you did wrong, Your Grace?"

Your Grace? Olenna was aware that Crown Prince Jasper Baratheon was being fostered at Moat Cailin. But when she entered the training yard, she had not suspected for a moment that he was one of the duelists. That would explain the presence of the Kingsguard knight and Lord Renly.

"Yes," the taller duelist retorted. He raised up his left arm, took ahold of his helm, and pulled it off. In doing so, he revealed the face of a black-haired, blue-eyed lad of fourteen. He glared down at his headgear in disdain and mumbled "I agreed to wear this damnable helm."

"The helm is the whole point of this exercise," Rodrik Cassel reminded him.

"Well, it is not a very practical point, Ser Rodrik," Prince Jasper contended, turning back to the Northern knight, "The only opening is a thin slit. Would not a helm with genuine eyeholes be more practical?"

"Eyeholes are just big enough for an arrow to sail through," the tallest armored boy professed from the sideline.

"Be that as it may, the slit is inadequate to see properly," Jasper claimed, "So much so that it greatly impairs my field of vision."

"It impairs mine, as well," his as-of-yet unmasked opponent disclosed, "The key is to find a way to compensate for your loss of sight."

"In return for what?" Jasper Baratheon countered, holding up his helm again, "What possible advantage would be worthy of fighting in near-total blindness?"

"The assurance that you will not lose your head," Rodrik Cassel pronounced, "In the heat of battle, men will aim for any part of their enemies which they can reach. Most of them tend to aim for the upper body, the head in particular. If ever you are surrounded by overwhelmingly greater numbers, my prince, you will need all the defenses you could muster. This type of helm will repel the blow of any weapon, be it sword, axe, mace, spearhead or even arrowhead."

Prince Jasper stood in silence for a minute, reflecting over the validity of those points. After that, he stated "While I appreciate the assurance of keeping my head, let us suppose my opponent
catches on to how impenetrable my helm is. Logically, once he realizes that my head is not a vulnerable target, he would simply redirect his focus to another part of me. If I cannot see him clearly, how am I to know where his attack will come from?"

"Once you have mastered seeing as plainly with the helm as you would without it, we will move on to defending yourself with it on," Rodrik Cassel replied.

"We may be at this a while then," Jasper bluntly remarked.

Ser Rodrik Cassel frowned at that and muttered "No one is forcing you to learn these techniques, Your Grace. As I recall, you yourself asked me to teach you alongside these other lads. If the exercises seem unreasonable, you have every right to pull out."

Jasper looked indignant, as though Ser Rodrik had just called him a eunuch. However, he did not lose his temper. He merely smirked and murmured "Stags do not give up so easily, my good ser. If there is one thing I've learned from my royal father, it is that no one ever gets anywhere without trying. You can rest assured; I will continue to try until I succeed."

That seemed to please Ser Rodrik. He grinned at the black-haired boy and stated "I've no doubt you will, Your Grace."

"In any case, Ser Rodrik does not undershoot the importance of having protection for one's head," the largest armored boy contended, "My uncle Sandor did not wear a helm at the Battle of Fair Isle. Look what happened to him."

"An excellent point," the boy who defeated Prince Jasper conceded. Olenna was not yet certain who he was, but she believed she had figured out the largest boy's identity.

Her assumption was proven correct a moment later, when Rodrik Cassel looked up at the boy and proposed "Would you care to go next, Master Rickard?"

"Ordinarily, I would be glad to oblige, Ser Rodrik," Rickard Clegane remarked. He then removed his helm, exposing his youthful yet stout façade. He could not have been older than twelve namedays, but in terms of stature, he was already a man grown. After he took off his helm, Rickard looked towards the entrance of the yard and observed "However, it would seem we have visitors."

He was the first to acknowledge the arrival of Lord Gregor, Lady Olenna, and their companions. The others in the training yard were quick to do the same.

"Indeed we do," Jasper Baratheon concurred. Holding his helm under one arm and his sword in the other, he made his way over the large crowd that had assembled at the mouth of the yard. His uncle Renly, the Kingsguard knight, and Rickard Clegane accompanied him.

When he came near, Olenna saw that Rickard was the fifth tallest person there, after his father, his mother, and his aunt. Right and Left may have been a little taller, but they had not accompanied Olenna on her tour of the moat. Since they were not with her at this time, she could not compare their height to Rickard's.

Olenna Tyrell, Margaery, Mira, Tyrion, Ellyn, and everyone who had made the journey north with them dipped their heads in respect as the Crown Prince approached them.

"There is no need for that here," Jasper Baratheon humbly told them, "In the training yard, we are all equal in status."

_The only place in the realm where you can knock a prince on his arse and everyone jests about it._
Jasper took a moment to introduce the Kingsguard knight. He apprised the newcomers "This is my sworn shield, Ser Arys Oakheart."

*I thought he had the look of a Reachman.* Olenna Tyrell stepped forward and presumed "You are the son of Arwyn Oakheart of Old Oak, are you not?"

"One of her sons, yes," the knight in white confirmed.

Olenna smiled lightly and declared "Lady Arwyn is a close friend of mine."

"I know, Lady Olenna," Ser Arys pronounced, returning the smile, "My lady mother speaks fondly of you quite often."

*And the rest of the time, she is probably telling the secrets I shared with her when we were girls. Is that what you mean to say?* Olenna did not think Arwyn Oakheart would actually tell anyone those secrets. The two of them had been friends since they were younger than Margaery.

Despite Jasper's dismissal of customary royal greetings, Margaery remembered her courtesies. She hastily curtsied and told the black-haired boy "It is an honor to meet you, my prince."

"Likewise, Lady Margaery," Prince Jasper proclaimed cordially.

Olenna and her granddaughter were stunned. *She did not even have a chance to introduce herself yet.*

"How did you-?" Margaery began.

"Permit me this interruption, my lady," Jasper Baratheon politely cut in, "But one look at Willas and Ser Loras, another look at you, and it is not hard to tell you are their sister. Far as I know, they only have one."

Margaery chuckled at that. "You are rather observant, Your Grace."

"When women are involved, he always is," the winner of the duel cheekily proclaimed, "If only he were so observant in the yard. Then he might win a little more often."

Rickard Clegane, Renly Baratheon, and some of Lord Gregor's affiliates laughed at that. Jasper just rolled his eyes and muttered "One of these days, it'll be me helping you off the ground."

"I'll believe that when it actually happens," the triumphant duelist uttered drily. It was here that he finally took off his helm. In doing so, he exposed a mass of dark brown hair, which was fastened in a hairnet. He removed the net and shook his head to let his hair return to its normal length. He appeared to have seen six and ten namedays.

Margaery leaned over to the Queen of Thorns and whispered "Could that be him, Grandmother?"

*He does have the traditional coloring of the Starks. But I remember being told that all of Lord Eddard's sons take after their mother in appearance. Then again, one cannot believe everything one hears.*

"Let us find out directly," Olenna proposed. Margaery nodded compliantly.

The Queen of Thorns and her granddaughter broke off from the rest of their company and walked to the center of the training yard. As they neared the boy with dark brown hair, he bowed his head and greeted them with "Good day, my ladies."
"Good day to you, my lord," Margaery bade him accordingly.

He paused at that, grimaced, and murmured "Forgive me, but I am no lord."

"Not yet," Olenna commented, taking note of his reaction.

"Not ever, most like," the lad refuted gloomily.

At that moment, the red-haired girl crept up behind him and placed her hands on his biceps. He looked back and smiled at her. She smiled back and remarked "Well, you just bested a prince in a contest of skill. That could be a sign of good fortune in your favor."

"Or it could mean that I'm a better swordsman than Jasper," he argued.

"Don't forget; survival of the fittest," she told him, "Only those best suited to enduring the world will come to master it."

"This was one duel, Ygritte," he pointed out, "One duel does not determine my place in the world. Aside from that, I told you I would win the duel. Anyway, you knew I would win just as I knew I would win."

The red-haired girl snickered, placed a kiss on the boy's cheek and chided "You know nothing, Jon Snow."

Ah, so this is not the heir to Winterfell after all. Quite the contrary, Olenna realized that she and Margaery had not been speaking with Eddard Stark's son. They had been speaking with his nephew. His bastard nephew, in fact.

To his credit, he is a little more courteous than the average bastard.

While Olenna's face betrayed no indication of emotion, Margaery's suggested she was a little dismayed.

Jon Snow was quick to notice this. He asked in concern "Are you unwell, my lady?"

"Oh, no, ser," Margaery hastily claimed, "Not at all. When I first saw you, I... I thought you were someone else."

She did not have to clarify who "someone else" was. Evidently, the bastard boy already knew who, as he scoffed and uttered "Think nothing of it, my lady. You are not the first to mistake me for my cousin."

It should come as no surprise that he knew we were looking for Robb Stark. The marriage contract between his cousin and my granddaughter is practically common knowledge in these parts.

"He's much too handsome, anyway," a cocky voice from the side of the yard called out.

Olenna turned in the direction of that voice. The fourth armored boy had just risen from his bench. He was making his way over to the Queen of Thorns, Margaery Tyrell, Jon Snow, and his red-haired flame, Ygritte.

When he was less than three feet from all of them, he stopped, tilted his head slightly, and declared to Margaery "I believe I am the one you wished to see, my lady."

At that, he proceeded to remove his helm. Beneath that headpiece was a head of short auburn hair
and a pale face that had seen sixteen namedays. He held a grim, stoic countenance for about ten seconds. Then he broke into a benign smile and declared in serious tone "Robb Stark, son and heir to Lord Eddard of Winterfell, at your service."

In response, Margaery took two steps forward, grinned at the heir to the North, and announced "Margaery of House Tyrell, only daughter to Lord Mace of Highgarden. I am delighted to make your acquaintance, my lord."

"Much appreciated, my lady," Robb Stark returned genially. He walked up to Margaery and placed a chaste kiss on each of her cheeks. She flushed at first, but then she giggled in pleasant surprise. Robb told her and her grandmother "I hope you enjoy your time in the North. I will do everything in my power to make your stay as comfortable as possible."

"Thank you, my boy," Olenna Tyrell stated gratefully. Margaery merely continued to smile.

*If that smile is any indication, Margaery's stay may turn out to be exceptionally long. Already, we are off to a fine start.*

"Have you been around the moat yet?" Jon Snow queried.

"Yes, Lord Gregor gave us a comprehensive tour," Margaery disclosed.

"Well, I wish to apologize for not presenting myself to you until this moment," Robb Stark said sincerely, "Had I known you would arrive today, I would have been there to greet you myself."

"You needn't explain yourself, my lord," Margaery asserted, "Lord Gregor told us you were busy with a task."

"What a task it was," Olenna commented sarcastically, gazing around the training yard.

"Oh, this isn't what he meant," Robb Stark revealed, "I was seeing to a task, but it involved something more than clashing steel."

"Something a little more mundane than swordplay," Jon Snow claimed, "But even more rewarding."

"What?" Margaery queried in interest.

Neither boy replied straightaway. First they looked to each other, and then Robb asked "Would you really like to know?"

"Absolutely," Margaery avowed.

Robb and Jon simultaneously raised their chins upward and gave a sharp whistle.

Out of the corner of her eye, Olenna Tyrell could see the maid sitting by the three piles of fur. All of a sudden, the piles of fur started… *moving.*

Olenna soon discovered that the piles of fur were not mere piles after all. They were live wolves. The two smaller wolves bounded over to Robb Stark and Jon Snow. Robb's wolf was mostly grey, whereas Jon's was white as fresh-fallen snow. The largest wolf got to her feet, but she stayed near the maid.

"Allow me to introduce Grey Wind," Robb announced, gesturing to the wolf by his side.
"And this is Ghost," Jon pronounced.

Olenna and Margaery watched as Ygritte reached down and scratched Ghost behind his ears. Despite his menacing exterior, he growled like a puppy at this friendly action.

Margaery seemed to get an idea. She took a tentative step closer to Grey Wind and outstretched her hand. The wolf snarled and bore his fangs, causing her to hesitate. Robb knelt beside his wolf and muttered sternly "You be nice to her, understand?"

After that, Grey Wind seemed to settle down. He allowed Margaery to approach him and place her hands on him. She knelt before him and rubbed his muzzle and neck. In response, he licked her hand playfully, eliciting some giggles from her.

This is beyond remarkable. Remarkable or no, it was a definite sign that a wolf and a rose could coexist in happiness.

"They're rather large for their age," Olenna perceived.

"Because they are not ordinary wolves," Jon Snow proclaimed, "They are direwolves."

"Whatever they are, they're amazing," Margaery commented as she continued to pet Grey Wind, "Where did you find them?"

"In the backside of their mother," Ygritte drily replied.

Margaery bit her lip to suppress the urge to laugh. Olenna just shook her head and inquired "And where did you find their mother?"

"In the woods outside of Winterfell," Jon Snow disclosed, "She was heavily pregnant when we first encountered her. She had a litter less than a day after we brought her home."

"So how many wolves do you have now?" Olenna queried.

"Seven," Robb informed her, "Jon, my brothers, my sisters and I each took one of the pups as our own."

"And what of the mother?" Margaery inquired, "Who took responsibility of her?"

"I did, my lady."

Sometime in the last minute, the chambermaid had gotten up and entered the ring of the training yard. The third wolf had accompanied her, and it turned out she was the mother direwolf. That was when Olenna saw just how large the third wolf truly was. She was just a little smaller than a horse. Nevertheless, she seemed remarkably well-trained and civilized.

"And who might you be, my dear?" Olenna inquired curiously

Jon Snow walked over to the young woman and announced "This is Myrna, my personal maid."

Myrna nodded and placed a hand on the mother direwolf's back. She revealed "And this lovely creature is Lyarra."

Chapter End Notes
Note: Some of you are likely wondering what Tyrion and Ellyn are doing in the North in the first place. I will explain that in detail soon enough. They are not there simply because they are visiting with family; I am not so lazy that I chose to just incorporate them without thinking of a practical reason for doing so. Their presence in the North at this point in time will be critical to the main storyline.

Also, some people complained of the notable lack of Gregor in the last four chapters. I assure you this that he and Moat Cailin will appear much more in the next updates than they have in the last four chapters. Also, it will still be a few more chapters before Rhaegar's children reunite at the moat. So don't expect Gregor to make any confessions to the secret council in the immediate future.

Lastly, I am speaking to the one reviewer who keeps requesting for a certain "scenario" to transpire between Gregor, Dacey, and Elia. I'll go ahead and say this: I actually have something of the sort planned in one of my future updates. Just be patient.
Branching Out

Chapter Notes

Note: I survived my first two presentations. They went very well, I am pleased to say. All that is left are a paper due and another presentation on Tuesday, an exam on the following Monday, and then I am finally done with the semester (and academics, as a whole).

Unfortunately, that means there will not be another update until sometime after May 8th. But after that, I will try to go back to updating this story on at least a weekly basis.

Hope you enjoy this chapter. This time, it is from the perspective of an original character.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Banquet Tower was large enough to feast the entirety of Moat Cailin's occupants. The servants and smallfolk who resided in the moat ate on the first three floors. The common soldiers and their families were allotted the next four floors. The sergeants of the Legion without Banners and their families were given the next two floors. Lord Gregor Clegane, his family, his household, his lieutenants, and any honored guests of the moat always feasted in the Great Hall on the top floor.

For as long as he had been in the North, Jasper Baratheon had eaten nearly every meal in the Great Hall. At any normal meal, he would be seated at the dais with Lord Gregor, Lady Dacey, their children, Sylas Vikary, Erryk Ruttiger, Rodrik Cassel, and Maester Kennick. Jon Snow, Samwell Tarly, Beth Cassel, Brynden Tully, Willas Tyrell, Oberyn Martell, Ellaria Sand, the Sand Snakes, Maron Greyjoy, Lyn Corbray, Lothor Brune, his uncle Renly Baratheon, his great uncle Gerion Lannister, his second cousin Joy Hill, Smalljon Umber, Tormund Giantsbane, and Tormund's children (if they bothered to show up) would be seated at a large circular table below the dais.

Ser Arys Oakheart was always present at each meal. But he never sat at the dais or the table. Along with a rotating number of Clegane guards, he always stood by the wall. Specifically, he stood at the wall directly behind Jasper's seat. For as long as the prince sat, the white knight never moved from his post. Jasper had never seen him eat, but he knew Ser Arys must have had his own meals on a lower floor in the Banquet Tower when he was off-duty.

Allard Seaworth would typically be there, as well. But Allard was currently busy across the Narrow Sea, supervising the Mad King's children with ninety-nine of his countrymen. Until he returned, Uncle Renly would be speaking for the Stormlands on Lord Gregor's secret council. If only he took the affairs of the Legion as seriously as Allard. In many areas, Allard was a much better representative, though Renly was an adequate substitute.

There were around a score additional chairs at the dais and the table that were usually empty. They were designated for the moat's highborn visitors.

Seven of those chairs were occupied at present. Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell sat beside each other near the head of the table. Olenna Tyrell was seated beside her eldest grandson Willas. At Lady Margaery's insistence, her handmaidens Mira Forrester and Sera Durwell had been seated close to her. Lastly, Jasper's uncle Tyrion Lannister and his aunt Ellyn Lannister were afforded two
seats on the right side of the dais.

Lady Margaery Tyrell, her grandmother, and her handmaidens were invited to sup with the Cleganes.

As the future Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, Robb had been offered a spot on the dais. He had politely refused, claiming he would prefer to sit beside the woman who would very likely be the future Lady of Winterfell.

As the Crown Prince of Westeros, Jasper was required – forced, more like – to sit on the dais. It would have been unseemly for the heir to the Iron Throne to be seated lower than a noble lord, even if it was in said lord's house. And if said lord has loyally served his liege for the past sixteen years.

So Jasper was always given a seat on the dais. Nevertheless, he would have preferred to have sat at the table. Nearly all his closest friends were at the table. The only one who shared a part of the dais was Rickard Clegane, and Rickard was always on the other end of the dais.

Jasper knew he could have simply requested to be seated closer to Rickard, or better yet, to have Jon and Samwell sit beside him on the dais. But he did not wish to appear displeased with Lord Gregor's accommodations. Nor did he desire to force the Mountain to give out special favors. As such, he chose to stay quiet and not utter a single word of complaint about the seating arrangements.

The seating arrangements were not all bad, in truth. While Jasper was unable to have private conversations with his friends, at least he could have friendly conversations with them from across the room. Oftentimes, these conversations ended up including some of the other people in the Great Hall.

They had one such conversation that night.

During the main course, Willas Tyrell looked up from his place on the table and turned to the right end of the dais, where Tyrion Lannister sat. He called out "So, my lord, about that drink…"

The blond dwarf focused on his attention on the heir to Highgarden. Raising an eyebrow, he queried "What drink?"

"When you arrived earlier today, I asked you why you and Lady Ellyn are in the North," Willas recalled, "You said you would tell me over a cup of wine."

He then picked up his goblet of Arbor gold, held it in the air, and commented "It happens I have a cup now. So do you, as a matter of fact."

*When does he not?* Despite his stature, Tyrion Lannister had a rather great thirst for drink. It was almost as great as his thirst for knowledge. *That is quite advantageous for him. Unlike most drinkers, he knows when to stop drinking.* No matter how much alcohol he consumed, Uncle Tyrion never became full-out inebriated. *As far as I know, anyway.*

"If I might ask, why are you so curious to know of our reason for being in the North?" Aunt Ellyn inquired.

"I am simply curious for curiosity's sake," Willas Tyrell replied. He gazed around the table and muttered "No one ever comes here without reason, even if their reason is something as basic as wanting to see the Legion without Banners in all its glory."
Oddly enough, a great many people have come to Moat Cailin for that exact reason and no other.

"Meaning no disrespect, but that is not what brought us here," Tyrion Lannister bluntly stated.

Ellyn Lannister nodded in agreement and observed "Besides, with word of the Others' return circulating the Seven Kingdoms, I doubt any one would choose to travel this far north just to sightsee."

"Just so, my lady," Samwell Tarly declared from the table below, "Ever since the Night's Watch alerted us of the wight ambush in the haunted forest, many of the moat's residents have decided to relocate to the south. Even before we received that warning, a fair number of them went south in preparation of the next winter. Every day, a few more people leave or consider leaving."

"This close to the end of summer, they cannot be faulted," Oberyn Martell professed.

"Be that as it may, the majority of the Legionnaires are determined to stay here and see the next winter through," Brynden Tully pointed out.

"That is fortunate," Olenna Tyrell remarked, "After the Night's Watch, you are Westeros' secondary line of defense against the White Walkers."

"What you say is true, my lady," Dacey Mormont perceived, "But we are praying daily that the Others do not overcome the Watch. The Night's King and his army will not encounter another formidable adversary until they reach Moat Cailin, and the Legion is only in a position to defend the Neck and everything south of it."

"She is quite correct," Uncle Tyrion agreed, "If the Wall falls, the North will, as well."

"Yet the possibility of that did not discourage you from visiting it, Uncle," Jasper Baratheon noted.

At that statement, most of the heads in the room turned in the prince's direction. A few of them had been engrossed in their supper and had not even been listening to the dialogue. Why is it I'm the only one who gains the notice of a whole room when he speaks? In actuality, he already knew why. It was not because Jasper always had something interesting to say. It was because one day, his word would be regarded as law.

Jasper was used to people dropping everything and giving him their full attention whenever he opened his mouth. Even so, he was not fond of it. Some things are not meant to be heard by all.

"No, dear nephew, it did not," Tyrion said in affirmation, gazing at Jasper from further down the dais.

"Then you're not concerned that the Wall will collapse?" Jasper assumed, leaning forward a bit.

"Unless a sudden heat wave passes over this land, I have no such worries," Uncle Tyrion proclaimed, "It would require the flaming breath of a thousand dragons to melt that structure."

"Tormund's breath might accomplish the same thing," Smalljon Umber japed.

Several people in the room promptly burst into laughter, including Tormund Giantsbane himself. Through his loud guffawing, the wildling uttered cheekily "I'll have you know I clean my teeth at least once every turn of the moon, Smalljon. That's more often than when you bring a woman into your bed."

The heir to Last Hearth scowled, but his grimace vanished almost as quickly as the next round of
laughter began. He chuckled alongside the others.

Although both men were making jokes at the other's expense, Jasper knew it was all in good fun. In fact, ever since Tormund Giantsbane was admitted to the Seven Kingdoms, an unlikely friendship had developed between him and Smalljon Umber.

Since Last Hearth was closer to the Wall than any other holdfast in Westeros, it had historically been one of the most frequent targets of wildling raiders. Because of that, the Umbers had built up a hatred of the Free Folk greater than most other houses.

Nevertheless, Smalljon Umber and Tormund Giantsbane had come to respect and appreciate each other's company. Jasper had seen them drink together, spar together, and pray together. Whenever they were out on assignment, each challenged the other to succeed in his task first. They effectively made their goals a type of friendly competition whilst continuing to do their duties.

Interestingly, they were both in pursuit of the same woman, one Brienne of House Tarth, only child and heiress to Lord Selwyn of Evenfall Hall.

Lady Brienne had come to Moat Cailin about two years ago, at around the same time as Jasper. She had enlisted in the Legion without Banners alongside his uncle Renly. Interestingly, Brienne Tarth could often be found in the same place as Renly Baratheon. Jasper wondered why that was. It could not be because she was attracted to him. She never made anything resembling a romantic gesture towards him. And it certainly could not have been because he was attracted to her. Given the way Renly had interacted with Loras Tyrell ever since the Knight of Flowers joined the Legion, Jasper could tell his uncle's interest was not in women.

Brienne Tarth was an enigma in more ways than one. She was among the tallest women Jasper had ever seen. She was not the absolute tallest; that honor belonged to Lady Dacey Mormont, who stood at slightly over seven feet.

Lady Brienne may be the tallest woman from outside the North. Jasper could not say she was with total certainty. Like Brienne, his Aunt Ellyn was much closer to seven feet than six. At a glance, the two of them were approximately the same height. *I'd need them to stand back-to-back to render a judgement on who's the taller.*

Although Brienne had a similar build to Dacey Mormont and Ellyn Clegane, her façade was much different from theirs. Lady Dacey and Lady Ellyn were undeniably handsome women, but no one could say the same of Lady Brienne. She was plain, dull, and lacking in woman curves. Some of the less tactful occupants of the moat had mockingly daubed her "Brienne the Beauty."

Despite her unappealing appearance, Brienne Tarth was a proficient warrior. She had gotten revenge on all those who scorned her by roughly besting them in the training yard. She had also beaten Ser Loras Tyrell, Lothor Brune, Maron Greyjoy, and many other renowned swordsmen.

Once, she even managed to win a one-on-one bout against Dacey Mormont. *Then again, Lady Dacey had given birth to her fifth child just a fortnight beforehand.*

Her combat prowess was what primarily drew Smalljon Umber and Tormund Giantsbane to Brienne Tarth. The two of them had a friendly rivalry going on to see which of them could woo her first. They had tried to charm her through various means, such as flattery, flirting, chatting, and even dueling.

Thus far, Brienne had not yet returned either man's affections, or even acknowledged them. Be that as it may, both were genuinely interested in winning her favor. As the heir to his house, Smalljon
needed a wife who was tough, sturdy, and strong enough to give him some heirs of his own. Tormund already had four sons and a daughter, but a match between him and Brienne would go a long way to improving relations between the Free Folk and the Stormlands.

*Let’s just hope that if Lady Brienne does pick one of them, the other will accept her decision. Last time two men fought over a woman, my father ended up on the Iron Throne.*

"If the Wall ever does fall, hopefully it will not be until after we get back," Ellyn Clegane wittily murmured.

That remark caught Jasper's interest, along with the interest of everyone else there.

"What do you mean by that, my lady?" Oberyn Martell enquired.

"I am finally providing an answer to Willas' question," Lady Ellyn disclosed, leaning back in her chair, "The main reason Tyrion and I are in the North… is to pay homage to its greatest landmark."

Several people in the Great Hall seemed stunned by that revelation. Jasper was not one of them. *Somehow, I'm not surprised. I might have guessed that that's why they're here. Of all the members of his mother's family, his uncle Tyrion was easily the most adventurous. While Ellyn Clegane was not as outgoing as her husband, she was just as spirited and lively. And every bit as intelligent and cunning.*

"You plan to see the Wall, Ellie?" Lord Gregor Clegane asked his sister rhetorically.

"We're going to see the Wall, Greg," Lady Ellyn corrected her brother, smiling at him, "We're greatly looking forward to it, I might add."

"Indeed, my lady," Ser Rodrik Cassel commented, "Now may not be the best to visit the Wall, though."

"Now is the perfect time to visit it, good ser," Tyrion disputed, "With the threat of the Long Night looming so close, we'll never have a better opportunity to see the Wall than the present."

*Fair argument, I suppose.* Jasper folded his arms and presumed "So that's your purpose for coming North, Uncle? To get a glimpse of the Wall whilst it's available?"

"Not our only purpose," Ellyn pronounced, "We have other affairs to attend to, both before and after we visit the Wall."

"What sort of affairs?" Dacey Mormont inquired.

"Family now; business later," Tyrion responded, "We will accomplish both here at Moat Cailin."

*The family objective is obvious. Aunt Ellyn is here to visit her brother and his family. But the business objective…*

"What do you mean by business?" Gerion Lannister enquired.

Tyrion gave a smile and professed "Before very long, you will not be the only Lannister in the Legion without Banners, Uncle."

That remark intrigued Jasper. It also intrigued the Mountain. Lord Gregor assumed "You wish to enlist?"
"Oh, yes," Tyrion confirmed with a smirk, "Again, with the threat of the Long Night just around
the corner, the world will need people of wit and intellect. Your sister and I easily qualify as such.
We will be of far greater use here at Moat Cailin than we would at Casterly Rock."

"That is true," Gregor contended, returning the smirk, "Truthfully, I've been hoping you would
come here to enlist for a while now."

"Actually, Ellyn and I first considered joining the Legion a long time ago," Tyrion apprised him,
"The only thing stopping us was my father."

Can't say I'm surprised. Jasper was quite aware that his grandfather, Lord Tywin Lannister,
despised his uncle Tyrion just as much as his mother did. Both of them blamed him for the death of
Jasper's grandmother, Lady Joanna Lannister. I've never seen Grandfather smile. Naturally, he
wouldn't care less about other people's happiness, least of all Uncle Tyrion's.

"Do not take this the wrong way, Uncle," Jasper candidly remarked, "But I'd have thought
Grandfather Tywin would have been pleased to see you leave the Rock."

"Oh, he was, Jasper," Tyrion drily muttered, "But for whatever reason, he was quite reluctant to let
me leave with my own family."

By his tone of voice, he must know full well what "whatever reason" actually was.

"He's right," Ellyn pronounced, "It was rather difficult to convince Lord Tywin to permit me to
leave the Rock. It was even harder to convince him to allow us to take Duncan along."

Gerion Lannister rolled his eyes and mumbled "Is he still laboring under the misapprehension that
you're a hostage of the Rock?"

"Apparently, he is," Ellyn perceived, "But he's finally realized that at times, a hound is just as
unpredictable and difficult to control as a lion. Apart from that, I was not about to leave the Rock
without my son."

"Neither was I," Tyrion coincided, "Duncan may have been safer in the south, but at least we
would be assured of his safety by bringing him with us. While my father is more invested in legacy
than family, that does not imply the rest of us should be, as well."

Sometimes I wonder if Uncle Tyrion really is his father's son.

Rickard Clegane grinned lightly and genially declared "Whatever the case, whenever you and Aunt
Ellyn get back from the Wall, both of you will be most welcome here, Uncle Tyrion."

It was quaint to hear Rickard call Tyrion "Uncle," too. Partly because it was totally appropriate for
him to do so. On that note, it was even more appropriate for him to address Lady Ellyn as "Aunt"
than it was for Jasper to.

After all, Rickard's father was the brother to Ellyn Clegane, and Jasper's mother was the sister to
Tyrion Lannister. That meant the heir to the Iron Throne and the heir to Moat Cailin were first
cousins once-removed. Even stranger than that was the fact that Lord Gregor Clegane and King
Robert Baratheon were goodbrothers twice-removed.

Furthermore, both men were uncles to Duncan Lannister, who would quite possibly be the future
Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West.

Another generation or two, and the entire damn population of Westeros might be related to each
Tyrion and Ellyn seemed pleased by Rickard's declaration. The dwarf told his wife's nephew in a candid tone "I've no doubt of that, my boy."

Rickard gave a light nod of his head and returned to his food.

A moment later, Lady Mira Forrester politely called out "If you happen to pass through the wolfswood on your way to the Wall, please give my regards to my family, my lord."

"We plan to stick to the kingsroad for most of our journey, so I cannot guarantee we will go anywhere near the wolfswood," Tyrion thought aloud, "Of course, I have no issue without deviating from preset plans. It is something I am oft one to do."

"Apart from that, House Forrester has been a reliable source of ironwood to the crown and the Westerlands," Lady Ellyn professed, "It would not hurt to tell them in person that we appreciate their services."

Uncle Tyrion nodded in agreement. He turned back to Lady Margaery's handmaiden and told her "I will not make any promises, Lady Mira. Nonetheless, if we have the time, we will call upon your lord father at Ironrath."

Mira Forrester smiled sweetly and stated "For that, I thank you, my lord. I haven't seen him or any other member of my family in over a year. Other than the occasional letter, I have had almost no correspondence with them. It would mean very much to me if someone told them in person that I am thinking of them. And that I am well."

I can relate. If she didn't dread the cold so much, Mother would probably have paid me a visit long ago.

Mira Forrester was seated to Margaery Tyrell's left. Robb was on Margaery's right. He turned to look past his intended and focused on her handmaiden. He said inquisitively "Tell me, Mira; when did you last receive a letter from your family?"

The Northern girl sat thinking for a few seconds, and then she replied with "About a fortnight before we departed from Highgarden."

That must have been six weeks past.

Robb gave a smirk and commented "Then it appears you need to be brought up to date on certain current events."

Mira looked perplexed. "How so, my lord?"

"Exactly three weeks ago, Winterfell received a raven from Ironrath," Robb informed her, "As you likely know already, your lord father organized a betrothal between your brother Rodrik and Lady Elaena of House Glenmore. He sent my lord father that raven to ask for his consent to hold the wedding in the near future."

Mira leaned a little closer and queried "How did Lord Eddard respond?"

Robb smiled again and revealed "He gave Lord Gregor his blessing, along with his congratulations. A date has not yet been set, but I can tell you with certainty that sometime within the next two turns of the moon, Rodrik and Elaena will be wed in Ironrath's godswood."
Mira beamed at that news. *She seems downright ecstatic.* "Thank you for telling me this, my lord."

"It is my pleasure, my lady," the heir to Winterfell asserted.

Like everyone else in the Great Hall, Margaery Tyrell had spent the last minute sitting in silence and observing the exchange of dialogue between her betrothed and her handmaiden. When they were finished talking, Margaery turned to the latter and enquired "Do you think you will attend your brother's nuptials, Mira?"

"Only by your leave, my lady," Mira Forrester responded almost involuntarily, "My duty to you comes first."

Margaery and her grandmother were pleased by the Northern girl's response. The young rose of Highgarden took a moment to wipe her mouth, and then she muttered "I would be glad to give you leave. More than that; I might accompany you."

Margaery took a moment to wipe her mouth, and then she muttered "I would be glad to give you leave. More than that; I might accompany you."

"So would I," Sera Durwell remarked. Samwell had told Jasper how Lady Margaery's other handmaiden had had a fever when she arrived at the moat. *She looks rather well for someone who was sick just a few hours ago.* This was the first time she had opened her mouth to speak, though. She asked no one in particular "How vast is the difference between how weddings are done in the North and how they are done in the rest of Westeros?"

"The difference is merely a change of setting," Jon Snow interjected, "While followers of the New Gods prefer to have their weddings indoors, the followers of the Old Gods proudly hold theirs out in the open. That, my lady, is the quintessential difference."

"And how many weddings have you attended, Snow?" Robb Stark cockily asked his cousin.

"Just as many as you, Stark," Jon Snow retorted. Jasper was just close enough that he could hear Jon add under his breath "And definitely more beddings."

Jasper scoffed. *Ygritte says he knows nothing. What does she know?*

"It looks as though you will not need us to give your family your regards after all, Lady Mira," Aunt Ellyn noted.

"I suppose not, Lady Ellyn," Mira Forrester conceded, "By Lady Margaery's good grace, I will be able to do so myself."

MargaeryTyrell flushed a bit at her handmaiden's praise. Robb seemed mildly amused by her reaction. He leaned over and told her "If you do decide to go to Rodrik Forrester's wedding, my lady, I could join you."

"I would be delighted, my lord," Margaery proclaimed, "It would not inconvenience you?"

"Well, my friend Daryn Hornwood will be joined with Alys Karstark of Karhold in about four weeks," Robb thought aloud, "I was thinking of riding out to Hornwood and standing witness to the ceremony. The date of their wedding may conflict with the one for Rodrik and Elaena's, but that is..."
not very probable. Other than that, I have nothing great scheduled for the next few months."

"Alright then," Margaery conceded, grinning at the heir to Winterfell once more.

As Robb grinned back, Oberyn Martell started to chuckle. His soft laughter gained a number of odd looks, which he paid no mind to. After a minute of chuckles, the Red Viper lounged in his chair and folded his arms. He uttered in amusement "Isn't this remarkable? Everyone is getting married these days."

*That would appear to be the case. At least in the North.*

"Oh, not everyone, my prince," Olenna Tyrell countered. She gradually turned to face the young man seated beside her, and she murmured "I have yet to see *you* drape our house cloak around a lady's shoulders, Willas."

*Willas blushes much like his sister,* Jasper noted the Reachman's reaction to his grandmother's remark. The prince wondered what reason the older man had for going red in the face. Most likely, either he did not enjoy being the center of attention, or he was not eager to converse on this particular topic.

After the pinkish tint faded from Willas Tyrell's cheeks, he casually gazed over at the far wall. He mumbled bluntly "I am… working towards that goal, Grandmother."

"Is that so?" Lady Olenna queried, seeming unconvinced, "Just what progress have you made in accomplishing it?"

"Truthfully… very little," the heir to Highgarden admitted, "But it is not out of disinterest or laziness that I have not looked for one."

"Then why have you not looked?" the Queen of Thorns almost demanded.

"Because…" Willas tentatively began. Before he said another word, he glimpsed over at Lord Gregor Clegane. Jasper noticed the Mountain gave the Reachman a small nod. *What could that mean?*

He got his answer a moment later, when Willas Tyrell let out a sigh and disclosed "Lord Gregor believes he has found the most ideal woman for me. He requested that I not consider any other matches until I met her, and I agreed not to."

Lady Olenna was evidently intrigued. She enquired "Who might this 'perfect bride' be?"

Willa hesitated before straightforwardly replying with "I… do not know."

His grandmother scowled at that. "I beg your pardon?"

"It is a complicated matter, Lady Olenna," Gregor Clegane cut in for his comrade, "The woman I have in mind for your grandson would suit him well, but I have not yet secured her hand for him. Until I do, it would be best if the match was kept anonymous. Because in the event that I am unsuccessful, the outcome could be disastrous. But only if the match had been made public beforehand."

*There is logic in those words. A firm refusal of a marriage contract with the heir of a Great House could be seen as an insult, unless the refuser's identity was not common knowledge.*

Lady Olenna appeared to be having a similar thought, as she eased down a bit. Although she could
see the sense in the Mountain's argument, she still seemed somewhat skeptical about this matter. She asked her eldest grandson "How long ago did you and Lord Gregor first discuss this match?"

"The day we met," Willas told her sincerely.

Olenna was flabbergasted, as well as a little shocked. "You entrusted a man you just met with the future of your house?"

"No, I entrusted a man with a sounder reputation than most," Willas firmly debated, "Even ten years later, I trust Lord Gregor's judgment as much as I ever did. I would also remind you, Grandmother, that it was he who first suggested Robb and Margaery's contract."

*From the look of things, that one will turn out quite well.*

"I will not deny him that," the Queen of Thorns contended, "Even so, I do not appreciate being kept in the dark on anything that directly concerns House Tyrell. I would very much like to know this 'mystery woman.'"

"If it gives you any comfort, Lady Olenna, I intend for Willas to meet her before summer ends," Gregor Clegane professed, "I am simply waiting for the most opportune time. If you are willing to stay in the North until then, I can arrange for you to meet her, too."

Olenna Tyrell thought on that for a minute, and then she nodded and declared "That is acceptable."

"Very good," Lord Gregor commented, glad that he had appeased the Queen of Thorns, "I can all but assure you that you will approve of her."

"I hope I shall, my lord," Olenna Tyrell murmured. A few seconds later, she added in "For your sake."

Jasper was taken aback by those last three words. From the way they were delivered, there was an ominous undertone to them. If he did not know better, he would have supposed that Lady Olenna was trying to be menacing.

He appeared to be the only one in the Great Hall who had that thought, as no one else had stiffened with shock or begun to stare at Olenna Tyrell dumbfoundedly. Even the Mountain was entirely indifferent. *Does he realize what Lady Olenna just insinuated?*

In actuality, Jasper was not wholly certain what Olenna Tyrell had meant by those three words. If her intention was to be hostile, he would not let that go unanswered. But if she had meant that statement only as a harmless comment, he did not wish to wrongly accuse her in public, either.

Fortunately, he had the means to approach this issue tactfully and subtly.

Prince Jasper Baratheon slowly rose to his feet, gazed down at the heir to Highgarden, and asked him "**Willas, ¿su abuela amenazó a lord Gregor?**" (Willas, did your grandmother just threaten Lord Gregor?)

Once more, he became the center of attention. This time, he paid no mind to all the eyes on him. At this moment, the only eyes that interested him were the pair that belonged to Willas Tyrell.

Initially, the Reachman seemed surprised by that question. Then he smirked, lightly shook his head, and proclaimed "**Oh no. Ella simplemente quería que él supiera que estaría de acuerdo con su arreglo, pero ella estará bastante disgustada si no cumple.**" (Oh, no. She simply wanted him to know that she will agree to his arrangement, but she will be quite displeased if he fails to deliver.)
Jasper raised an eyebrow and inquired "¿Está seguro de eso?" (Are you certain of that?)

Willas nodded his head and muttered "Mi abuela sólo amenaza a sus enemigos, y créeme; Ella no considera que lord Gregor era su enemigo." (My grandmother only threatens her enemies, and believe me; she does not regard Lord Gregor was her enemy.)

At that, Jasper abruptly felt his skepticism diminish. It was quickly replaced by the feeling of awkwardness. Perhaps I should have considered that first.

Although only members of the Legion without Banners could speak and understand Spanish, nearly half the people in that room were Legionnaires. As such, half of them had heard Jasper's cynical, premature assumption. In front of all those people, he had drawn unwanted attention to himself and Lady Olenna.

Samwell Tarly must have noticed his discomfort. Just then, he gazed up at the dais and told his friend assuredly "Relájate, Jasper. No eres el primer hombre en interpretar erróneamente el significado de Lady Olenna." (Relax, Jasper. You are not the first man to misinterpret Lady Olenna's meaning.)

Willas Tyrell murmured in agreement "Eso realmente tiende a suceder muy a menudo." (That actually tends to happen quite often.)

Jon Snow said sarcastically "¿Por qué no me sorprende?" (Why does that not surprise me?)

Jasper Baratheon then turned back to Willas Tyrell and told him "En cualquier caso, pido disculpas por este malentendido. Es sólo ... bueno, perdóname por decirlo, Willas, pero su abuela es una mujer muy espinosa." (In any case, I apologize for this misunderstanding. It's just... well, forgive me for saying so, Willas, but your grandmother is a very prickly woman.)

The heir to Highgarden snickered a bit and jokingly pronounced "Ahora ya sabes por qué la llaman 'La Reina de las Espinas.'" (Now you know why they call her 'The Queen of Thorns.')

Jasper, Willas, Jon, Samwell, and several of the Legionnaires shared a short round of laughter in response to that witticism. When the laughter subsided, Jasper swiftly sat back down in his chair.

It was then that he saw that Olenna Tyrell was looking right at him.

"Did something amuse you, Your Grace?" she stated inquisitively.

"I suppose so, my lady," Jasper Baratheon alleged, "But that laughter was not at your expense, I assure you."

"I never suggested it was," Lady Olenna refuted. Jasper noticed she was gazing at him with prying eyes, as though she was scrutinizing him. *It is almost as though she just now realized I was here.*

"Is everything alright, Lady Olenna?" Jasper enquired in concern.

"Everything is fine, my prince," the Queen of Thorns insisted, easing back in her chair, "But while we are on the subject of unions, I am curious to know; who will the next queen of Westeros be?"

Jasper found himself more than a little bewildered. *Well, that topic came out of nowhere.* Despite the suddenness of that question, he merely shrugged and answered with "If I knew, I would tell you, my lady. Alas, I have not the slightest idea. In all honestly, I have not given the matter very much thought."
"At your age, that is to be expected," Olenna Tyrell murmured, "You are young. But no one is young for long. Sooner or later, we all must make choices. I would encourage you to choose wisely."

"You needn't worry on that, my lady," Jasper proclaimed, "Whenever I start searching for a bride, I will not pick hastily or imprudently."

"I am not simply referring to your future queen," Lady Olenna clarified, "I wish to advise you to be mindful of all your decisions. The ability to make good decisions is ideal in any leader. In your situation, it is vital. In time, every decision you make – and I do mean, every decision – will impact the Seven Kingdoms. Whether those decisions will be for the better or for the worse is entirely up to you."

A wave of silence subsequently passed over the room. Jasper took a moment to absorb those words. At first, he took them as sage advice and nothing more.

Then they sank in. That was when he realized the full depth of them.

That was not a pleasant thought. Not in the least.

At this time, Jasper's plate was only half-empty, but he found he had quite suddenly lost his appetite.

He was dimly aware that all eyes were on him yet again. He gave them no notice. Instead, he slowly rose to his feet once more. He placed his hands on the surface of the table, as if to support himself.

"Your Grace?" said his great uncle Gerion Lannister. He sounded worried.

Jasper abruptly lifted his head up, mumbled "Excuse me, if you would," and swiftly departed from the Great Hall. Ser Arys Oakheart promptly followed him out. Everyone else remained behind, likely gaping in bafflement.

Soon enough, Jasper was outside on the balcony of the Banquet Tower. He felt a very sudden unexplained urge to retch. He rushed over to the rafter and stuck his head over it. Nothing came out, but the desire to expel his supper still lingered for a time. Once it disappeared, Jasper rapidly made his way to the stairwell and exited the building. Ser Arys trailed close behind, saying not a word but appearing quite confused.

The heir to the Iron Throne spent much of the next several days meditating on Olenna Tyrell's words. There was wisdom and truth to be found in them, but Jasper had also find a fair amount of apprehension in them.

Crown Prince Jasper Baratheon was destined to rule the Seven Kingdoms. He had never assumed even for a moment that being king would be simple. Nonetheless, he had never fully admitted just how challenging it would be, either. His experience with Lady Olenna had been something of a rude awakening. She had made him fully realize how difficult ruling an entire country would be. As of now, he felt he was hopelessly unprepared to ascend the throne. I cannot possibly take on that much responsibility.

Jasper attempted to continue about his normal everyday routine. He ate three meals a day, he attended lessons with his friends in Maester Kennick's office, he drilled with weapons in the training yard, and he prayed in the sept in the Worship Tower. However, no matter what he did, he could not get Olenna Tyrell's words out of his mind. He began to spend much of his free time alone.

"At your age, that is to be expected," Olenna Tyrell murmured, "You are young. But no one is young for long. Sooner or later, we all must make choices. I would encourage you to choose wisely."

"You needn't worry on that, my lady," Jasper proclaimed, "Whenever I start searching for a bride, I will not pick hastily or imprudently."

"I am not simply referring to your future queen," Lady Olenna clarified, "I wish to advise you to be mindful of all your decisions. The ability to make good decisions is ideal in any leader. In your situation, it is vital. In time, every decision you make – and I do mean, every decision – will impact the Seven Kingdoms. Whether those decisions will be for the better or for the worse is entirely up to you."

A wave of silence subsequently passed over the room. Jasper took a moment to absorb those words. At first, he took them as sage advice and nothing more.

Then they sank in. That was when he realized the full depth of them.

That was not a pleasant thought. Not in the least.

At this time, Jasper's plate was only half-empty, but he found he had quite suddenly lost his appetite.

He was dimly aware that all eyes were on him yet again. He gave them no notice. Instead, he slowly rose to his feet once more. He placed his hands on the surface of the table, as if to support himself.

"Your Grace?" said his great uncle Gerion Lannister. He sounded worried.

Jasper abruptly lifted his head up, mumbled "Excuse me, if you would," and swiftly departed from the Great Hall. Ser Arys Oakheart promptly followed him out. Everyone else remained behind, likely gaping in bafflement.

Soon enough, Jasper was outside on the balcony of the Banquet Tower. He felt a very sudden unexplained urge to retch. He rushed over to the rafter and stuck his head over it. Nothing came out, but the desire to expel his supper still lingered for a time. Once it disappeared, Jasper rapidly made his way to the stairwell and exited the building. Ser Arys trailed close behind, saying not a word but appearing quite confused.

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in his quarters, reflecting on them.

As a result of this newfound fixation, he tried to avoid Lady Olenna Tyrell whenever he could. He still held no ill will towards the Queen of Thorns; he simply did not wish to receive any more of her "insight." Plus, he did not wish to have any more awkward encounters with her.

Fortunately for Jasper, Lady Olenna was only at the moat for another week. After that, she departed for the North with Robb and Margaery. The heir to Winterfell was quite eager to introduce his intended to his parents, and she was just as eager to meet Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn. Jasper was among the small crowd of people who saw their party off. He bade Robb and Margaery a very fond farewell, but he kept his farewell to Lady Olenna brief.

A little later that same day, Uncle Tyrion and Aunt Ellyn left, as well. Jasper saw them and their company off, as well. He bade them to have a safe trip to the Wall. It was somewhat queer that he had to crouch to embrace his uncle and stand on his toes to kiss his aunt on the cheek. All the same, they appreciated these gestures. He even had the chance to hold Duncan in his arms.

Jasper noticed his cousin had the blonde hair and façade of the Lannisters, but the physique and robustness of the Cleganes. *He's a perfect combination of both his parents. I wonder if he's inherited their intellect, as well. If so, he'll grow to be one of the most eligible bachelors in Westeros.*

"Be sure to keep him warm," the prince cautioned his aunt and uncle as he gave Duncan back to the former, "And you better stay warm, too. From now until you reach the Wall, it only gets colder."

"We'll keep that in mind," Uncle Tyrion drily remarked.

At this moment, Aunt Ellyn was playfully tickling Duncan's chin, making him giggle. She smiled at her son in joy, and then she turned to her nephew and told him "You stay warm, too. By the time we return, it may be as cold here as it is on the Wall."

"I'm certain we will manage," Jasper asserted. In a way, this little display of affection between his aunt and her son made Jasper feel warm internally. He held family in very high regard; it was perhaps the most important aspect of everyday life. In his opinion, motherhood really suited Ellyn Clegane. *More so than it suits even my own mother.*

"Well, good luck to you," Jasper Baratheon bade his aunt and uncle.

"And to you, as well," they both said in union. Shortly after that, they headed north.

Lord Gregor Clegane had been present when his sister and her husband left the moat. Jasper was walking through the moat's courtyard when the Mountain intercepted him.

"Are you indisposed at the moment, Your Grace?" Lord Gregor queried.

"No, I have nothing planned for the day, my lord," the prince replied.

"Then I would request that you accompany me to my solar," the Mountain stated.

Normally, whenever someone asked him somewhere, Jasper would have asked what the purpose of the meeting was in advance. However, he knew Gregor Clegane would never waste his time or have an audience with him without reason. So he just nodded and said compliantly "Very well."

Lord Gregor Clegane, Prince Jasper Baratheon, and Ser Arys Oakheart went to the Lord's Tower.
They climbed it all the way to the third highest floor, where Lord Gregor's solar was located. Since Lord Gregor wished for privacy, Jasper ordered Ser Arys to stand guard outside the room. The white knight dutifully obeyed his prince's command.

Once inside the solar, the Mountain offered Jasper a seat in front of his desk, which the prince graciously accepted.

There was a small table beside the desk. On the surface of it were a jug of water, a jug of wine, and a bowl of fruit.

"Would you care for some refreshment?" Lord Gregor proposed as he neared the table.

"A peach, if you please," Jasper beseeched him. They were his favorite.

Gregor Clegane picked a peach from the bowl of fruit and tossed it in Jasper's direction. The prince caught it in one hand almost effortlessly. "Thank you."

The Mountain nodded his head, poured himself a glass of wine, and took his chair on the other side of the desk. After taking a moment to get comfortable, he turned to face Jasper Baratheon. *He looks anxious. I wonder why that is.*

"Why did you wish to see me, my lord?" the Crown Prince inquired.

"I am concerned for you," the massive man revealed, "And so are your friends, as well as the top officers of the Legion."

"Why is that?" Jasper asked in bewilderment.

"These last several days, you have been rather withdrawn," Gregor pointed out, "Ever since that dinner with Lady Olenna, you have spent nearly every moment of your leisure time in your chambers."

"I have?" Jasper murmured, astonished. *I know I recently spent some of my leisure time in seclusion. Could I truly have spent nearly all of it by myself?*

"Yes, you have," Gregor Clegane affirmed, "This past week, Septon Norvin has seen more of you than I have."

"Is it wrong for one to yearn for some solitude?" Jasper disputed.

"No, but it is unusual of you to wish for this much of it," Lord Gregor contended. He sipped his wine, and then he remarked "Is something troubling you, Your Grace? You know you can be straight with me."

*Of course I can.* Had anyone else asked for his thoughts, Jasper would have denied them. He was more than a little reluctant to speak plainly on the topic that was currently occupying his mind. Lord Gregor Clegane, however, could be trusted with even his most intimate secrets.

Ultimately, Jasper released a slow exhale and muttered "Alright, I will be frank with you, my lord."

The Mountain gave a nod of acknowledgment and sat back in his chair.

Jasper took a minute to contemplate how to best begin the discussion. Then he looked to Lord Gregor and opened with "Have you ever had the feeling you do not belong, my lord?"
He was expecting the Mountain to automatically tell him that he had never had such a feeling. After all, Gregor Clegane was among the most admired and charismatic men in the Seven Kingdoms.

The answer Lord Gregor actually gave surprised the prince. He frowned and stared at the surface of his desk for a moment, and then he turned back to Jasper and told him "More often than you could possibly imagine."

Jasper was quite perplexed. He would have asked for clarity, but the Mountain had brought him to the solar to talk about the prince's sorrows, not his own. *I can always ask him what he meant at a later time. Right now, let us not stray too far from our original topic.*

Jasper Baratheon sat up in his chair and murmured "Well, that is the precise feeling I experienced at that dinner."

Lord Gregor raised an eyebrow. "You felt as though you did not belong in the Great Hall?"

"No," said Jasper as he bit into his peach. He chewed a few times and swallowed. "I felt as though I did not belong on the dais."

"Why is that?" Gregor Clegane asked.

Jasper did not reply straightaway. After a brief silence, he informed the huge man "Lady Olenna's words to me. Even though she meant well by them, the impression they left on me was not a positive one."

"Did she demean you?" Lord Gregor presumed.

"No, not at all," Jasper proclaimed, "But all that talk about the importance of making decisions and how the wrong choices can lead to catastrophe… it made me realize just how complex and dangerous being king would actually be."

Gregor offered a small, sympathetic smile and told him gently "I can understand your worries, Your Grace. However, that is precisely what Lady Olenna was trying to tell you. She spoke a fundamental truth. That truth is not easy to embrace, but it is an invaluable one. Far better you learn it now than when you inherit the throne from your father."

"That's just it, my lord," Jasper Baratheon disclosed, taking another bite of his peach, "For the longest time, I've been asking myself whether I truly want the throne, or if I should even have it. Now, I am inclined to believe I may not even be worthy of it."

By the expression on his face, Lord Gregor was stunned. "Did Lady Olenna's words truly discourage you so?"

"No, they just incited me to evaluate my own ability to rule," Jasper pronounced, "That is precisely what I have been doing in my quarters for the last few days."

"And have you reached a conclusion yet?" Gregor Clegane queried in interest.

"Yes," Jasper responded, a note of grimness detectable in his voice, "At this point in time, I can say with total confidence that I will be a lousy king."

The Mountain was astounded by that revelation. He frowned and asked "Since when do you have such low self-esteem, Your Grace?"
"My self-esteem is not the issue, my lord," Jasper claimed, "The issue is reality."

"'Reality?'" Gregor rejoined, "Jasper, ask any person in this fortress their opinion of you, and I can say with certainty that none of them would make the same deduction as the one you just made."

"Then they do not know me as well as they think," Jasper perceived, "And, with all due respect, neither do you."

That remark did not please Lord Gregor. Nevertheless, he did not become cross. He took another swallow of wine and muttered "If there is one aspect of your persona I do know, it is that you are not swayed easily. You are not one to be manipulated or misled by the ideals and views of others. You've always had strong conviction in your own ideals and views. So where is this coming from, Jasper? Why do you suddenly have these qualms?"

"'Suddenly?'" Jasper repeated, as though he had been slighted, "My lord, I have always had these qualms. You are just the first person I have ever spoken to about them."

"I should not have been," Gregor Clegane murmured. He sounds irate. "You should have sought out counsel for these problems long ago, even before you came to Moat Cailin."

"And just who should I have gone to?" Jasper retorted snappily, "Who would have been willing to listen to me fret?"

"Lord Jon Arryn, for one," Lord Gregor debated, "He is as much your advisor as your father's. You could have also sought out Grand Maester Marwyn o Lord Varys. Your uncle Stannis would have heard you out, too. Most of all, you could have asked the King and Queen. They are your parents; it is their responsibility to provide you with guidance."

"My father and mother were too busy ruling to be bothered with my petty troubles," Jasper claimed.

"No good parent ever regards their child's sorrows as 'petty.'" Lord Gregor disputed. His eyes widened momentarily, and then he rubbed his chin and queried "Did you even attempt to ask them?"

Again, Jasper hesitated. He had another bite of peach to delay his answer. After he swallowed, he admitted "No… I did not."

"Therein lies your problem," Gregor Clegane illuminated, "If you are so apprehensive, you should not keep your insecurities hidden away. You must talk about them. That is the only way you can confront and eventually overcome them."

Jasper could not deny that Lord Gregor made a very fine argument. He is absolutely right. I need someone to talk to. Maybe talking will finally cure me of my anxieties.

The prince steadily looked the massive man in the eye and asked him "Would you be willing to hear me out, my lord?"

"You know I would," was all the Mountain said in response.

Jasper Baratheon had never respected Gregor Clegane more than he did at that very moment.

He proceeded to tell the Lord of Moat Cailin of his many reservations about being the future leader of the Seven Kingdoms. Most of his qualms were centered around his capacity to handle the pressures of office. His main argument was that a true leader never doubted himself or his capacity to lead, yet he had doubts about his own ability almost every day.
Nearly all of Jasper's apprehensions were not problems that someone else could solve or help him solve. Only he could solve them, and only on his own. All the same, Lord Gregor managed to pacify many of his worries with sound words of advice. This advice relieved him of a fair amount of stress and self-doubt. It did not provide a solution to all his dilemmas, but it did give him a general idea on where and how he could begin to resolve them.

By the end of that conversation, Jasper felt considerably more confident in himself than he had been when he entered the solar. He still had mixed emotions on the concept of being king, but he suspected those would not vanish anytime soon. In any case, he was much less opposed to it.

There was, however, one subject that Jasper still wished to address. For various reasons, he had never mentioned this particular subject to any other person, as it was a very delicate one. However, he believed he could confide in Lord Gregor. Not only was he wise, empathetic, and reliable, but the Mountain was also quite possibly the only person who could relate to him on this subject.

By now, Jasper had finished his peach. He wiped his fingers clean of juice, and he fiddled around with the pit. As he did this, he muttered inquisitively "Lord Gregor, do you believe in superstitions?"

"Certain superstitions, yes," Gregor Clegane revealed. An appropriate answer from a man who can see into the future and allegedly alter the course of history.

"Would prophecies be among them?" Jasper enquired.

"I suppose," Lord Gregor contended, "It is no secret that I have courted fate many times and emerged victorious. Nevertheless, I cannot triumph over fate every time. Some events are predestined to happen."

Chief among them the Long Night. Jasper rubbed his chin and professed "Well, I have a philosophy I would like to share. You see, these misgivings of mine seem more instinctive than anything. Could they actually be a sign, my lord?"

"A sign of what?" the Mountain queried.

"A sign that the Baratheons were never meant to hold King's Landing," Jasper expounded.

Lord Gregor appeared to be puzzled. "That is a wildly fantastic hypothesis, Your Grace."

"I know it is," Jasper Baratheon admitted, "But consider the series of events that led to my father winning the Iron Throne. He killed Rhaegar Targaryen on the Trident. That victory did not mark him as the better ruler; just the better warrior. Forces loyal to my father may have seized King's Landing in his name, but it was you and my grandfather who commanded those forces. Lastly, he used the fact that his grandmother was a Targaryen to stake his claim to the crown. While his claim may have been legitimate, ours was not the only highborn family the dragons were kin to."

When he made those points, Jasper kept his attention closely on Lord Gregor's face, taking note of any changes in his expression. Based on what he saw, Lord Gregor was beginning to see the validity in his words.

Lord Gregor leaned on his arm and uttered "You make a fascinating argument, Your Grace. While we're speculating, allow me to present you with a hypothetical scenario. If the Baratheons did not possess the Iron Throne, who do you believe would be best-suited to ruling the Seven Kingdoms? In other words, who would you prefer to see in their place?"

I had not given that issue much thought. But I suppose it would merit some contemplation.
Jasper sat in silence for a minute, thinking on several possibilities. *Which family would produce the most ideal rulers for all of Westeros?* Soon, he singled out his most appealing prospects, and he gave voice to them. "Since we are still on the topic of superstitions, did Jon tell you the full story of how we found Lyarra?"

"Just that you picked her up in the woods," Gregor Clegane commented.

"Well, there is a certain detail he left out," the prince recounted, "When we found her, she had just killed a stag. She managed to completely devour half of it before we took her back to Winterfell. Maybe that was another sign."

"Do you think it meant that the Starks will overthrow the Baratheons?" Gregor presumed, disbelief evident in his tone.

"No, Lord Eddard is too honorable to do such a thing," Jasper debated, "All the same, he was just as instrumental to the Rebellion as my father was. The Starks are the oldest family in Westeros. Furthermore, they are just, they are hardy, they are noble, they are fiercely independent, and they are practically immune to corruption."

"I cannot dispute any of that," Gregor Clegane acknowledged, "It is for those same reasons that the Starks would not do well on the Iron Throne. While those attributes have enabled them to magnificently rule the North for millennia, the North has always been an anomaly in Seven Kingdoms. Even with the diversity of the Night's Watch and the Legion without Banners, the North is ruled too differently from the regions south of the Neck. I admit a Stark *could* do well on the Throne, but before that happened, great readjustments would need to be implemented."

Jasper had to admit; Lord Gregor Clegane presented a fine counterargument. Jasper scratched his temple for a moment, and then he proposed "What if *you* were king?"

At that moment, Lord Gregor had been on the verge of taking another swig of wine. He had just touched the rim of his goblet to his lips when Jasper asked that question. Just before he could drink, his eyelids expanded and his countenance was etched in surprise. *Had I waited another second to ask, he might have sprayed that red all over my doublet.*

The Mountain hastily set his goblet back on his desk. Then he chuckled a bit. After that, he folded his arms and stated "I will admit that the notion of being king has its own type of appeal. Alas, I would be grossly unfit for the part."

"Take a look outside and say that again, my lord," Jasper countered. *Does he think I jest? I do not; I am quite serious.*

Gregor Clegane shrugged and stated "What I have accomplished at Moat Cailin with the Legion is remarkable; I will not deny that. But running a holdfast and running an army are not like running a kingdom."

"I'm aware of the differences, my lord," Jasper asserted, "I would remind you that my father was once the Lord of Storm's End, and he led men during the Rebellion. He adapted to the life of a king fairly well. There is no reason you could not do the same."

"The circumstances have some dissimilarities," Gregor pointed out, "Your father was born to be a Lord Paramount. I was born the son of a landed knight. There are some who would say I have already risen higher in the world than I had any right to."

"But the people love you," Jasper Baratheon proclaimed, "And I know you love them."
"It takes much more than love to win a crown," Lord Gregor obstinately muttered, "Jasper, we could sit here all day and argue over how qualified I might be to rule the Seven Kingdoms. All we would do is waste a great deal of precious time. So allow me to save us that time by saying this: I have no intention of being king in this life. Even if your father offered it by his own volition, I would not accept it."

Jasper was perturbed by Lord Gregor's declaration. He knew the Mountain was a persistent man, but now he was being downright inflexible. And I thought I was averse to sitting the Iron Throne.

"I understand, my lord," Jasper patiently remarked, "I apologize if I said anything that unsettled you."

"You did not, Your Grace," Lord Gregor reassured him. He drained the contents of his goblet in one smooth gulp. He wiped his mouth, withheld a belch, and set his goblet back down. After that, his mouth formed a wide grin, and he said humorously "All arguments aside, I doubt the Iron Throne is even large enough to accommodate a man of my… girth."

Almost immediately, Jasper started snickering. It had been two years since he last saw the Iron Throne, but he had seen it enough times that he knew its precise measurements. While Father and Lord Jon could sit in it just fine, and they were slightly taller than the average man. But Lord Gregor is far more than "slightly" taller than most.

Jasper tried to imagine the Mountain sitting in the Iron Throne, and the image in his head was not pleasant. Maybe if he held his breath and did not fidget or move at all. Otherwise, I doubt it could be done.

"Most likely not," Jasper coincided with a sly smile.

At that very instant, there was a knock on the entrance to the solar. The prince and the Mountain simultaneously turned towards it. The latter called out "Come in."

The door opened to reveal Maester Kennick, who hastily stepped inside. He approached the desk and bowed to Jasper and Lord Gregor. Jasper noticed a piece of parchment in his right hand. The maester held the parchment out to his lord and announced "Missive for you, my lord. It is marked 'Priority One.'"

Jasper had been at Moat Cailin long enough to know that "Priority One" meant "for the Mountain's eyes only." Information does not get any more classified than that.

Jasper noticed that the parchment was stamped with a glob of black wax. On the wax was the image of a boat with an onion on the sail. The seal of house Seaworth. That intrigued him. "Why would Ser Davos be writing you, my lord?"

"He isn't, Your Grace," Maester Kennick disclosed, "The raven did not come from the south. It flew in from the east."

"The east?" Gregor murmured in interest. Maester Kennick just nodded.

The only thing east of here is whatever lies across the Narrow Sea. Jasper knew what that meant. We're finally receiving some news from Allard.

Lord Gregor took the parchment, murmured his appreciation, and stated "Wait outside, maester. I may need to send a follow-up letter."

Maester Kennick bowed again and shuffled out of the room, closing the door behind him.
"Would you like me to leave, as well, Lord Gregor?" Jasper inquired.

"No, this should only require a minute or two, Your Grace," the Mountain claimed.

"Very well," Jasper avowed.

After Lord Gregor returned to his seat, he broke the seal on the parchment, smoothed it out, and began to read the contents.

All this talking has left my throat parched.

Jasper rose from his chair and made his way over to the table beside the desk. He filled another goblet with iced water until it was three-quarters full. He topped it off with a little bit of wine. Then he made his way back to his seat.

As the prince enjoyed his drink, he observed Gregor Clegane as he read his missive.

The Mountain spent five minutes reading that paper, and another five rereading it twice. Overtime, his countenance changed. When he started to read, his facial expression had been neutral. After those ten minutes passed, he looked stricken with worry.

Jasper, by contrast, was now composed and calm. My, how our positions have reversed.

He would have scoffed at the irony, had it not been for the fact that Lord Gregor was not usually one to exhibit signs of panic.

"Grave tidings, my lord?" Jasper said inquisitively.

After a tense pause, Lord Gregor gradually looked up from the parchment and murmured "Extremely grave."

He swiftly got out of his chair again and made his way to the lit brazier by the door. He held the parchment up to the flame until the corner of it caught fire. As the flames spread to more of the paper, Gregor moved over to the chamber pot and deposited the burning note into it.

Jasper set his goblet down, stood back up, and cautiously walked across the room to the elder man. He asked "What is it, my lord?"

Gregor Clegane did not answer him right away. He just stared down at the parchment as the flames caused it to blacken and curl up.

Once a small pile of ash was all that remained, Gregor murmured quietly "Jasper, just before the maester brought that letter, you and I were speculating on how Westeros would fare if a house other than yours held the Iron Throne."

"True," Jasper affirmed, uncertain where this was headed, "Why do you mention that?"

"Because I received some very unsettling news from Allard Seaworth," Lord Gregor Clegane apprised him, "Based on his account, there is a very distinct chance that we will need to revisit that scenario soon. Worse yet, we may be forced to do more than mere speculation."

Chapter End Notes
Note: The main purpose of this chapter was to provide some insight on what type of person Robert and Cersei Baratheon's trueborn son really is. I originally intended for the conversation between Gregor and Jasper to be much longer, and to go into even greater depth. Alas, I found myself pressed for time, so I decided to edit it down. Despite that, I will still include the parts I cut out in a future update, so if you were at all dissatisfied with my description of Jasper, just know that his full persona has not yet been uncovered.

By the way, some of you may be inclined to think that Jasper is surprisingly reluctant to inherit the Iron Throne, and, therefore, that he would just willingly give it up if and when the Targaryens try to retake the Seven Kingdoms. Believe me, that is not going to happen. I would never make the resolution of the Baratheon/Targaryen rivalry that simple. I simply wish to establish that Jasper is capable of reasoning, and that under certain conditions, he can be persuaded to relinquish control of his possessions. All the same, he is still willing to fight for his family and what belongs to them.

Anyway, I will see you all again in another two weeks. Good luck to those of you who are still in school (and to those of you who are not, as well).
Chapter Notes

Note: I've done it! I have survived my paper, my project, and my last exam! I will officially be done with academics on Friday. Next time I post an update, I'll be in possession of my Master's Degree.

Now, about the chapter. I intended to introduce the plotline of the Three-Eyed Raven here. Alas, as usual, I ended up incorporating more material than I originally intended. So instead, I'll be accelerating two of this story's more critical plotlines. At first glance, this chapter may seem dull, uneventful and relatively unimportant. But it will be vital to the story arcs centered around the Targaryens and the Long Night.

When she first learned of the North, Catelyn Tully had envisioned a vast, empty expanse of barren land perpetually covered with no less than an inch of snow. When she first travelled to the North as a young bride and mother, she had discovered that while it was indeed enormous, it was by no means a wasteland.

It had snowed the day Catelyn arrived in her husband's homeland. It was only a light flurry, but considering the season, it was a bewildering sight to behold. Had she not seen it with her own eyes, she would never have thought there could actually be snow in the middle of summer.

She hoped that was not a sign of how her marriage would fare. Even if it was, she was determined to keep true to her house's words of Family, Duty, Honor.

A great many things had changed since then. Firstly, the North was not quite as desolate as it once was. In recent years, it had established greater connections with the rest of Westeros. Lord Gregor Clegane and his Legion without Banners had made those connections possible.

Moat Cailin was now regarded as a small city, and it was the sixth largest town in Westeros after King's Landing, Oldtown, Lannisport, Gulltown, and White Harbor. On top of all that, the moat had a more diverse populace than any other settlement in the Seven Kingdoms.

Catelyn herself had only seen the moat once, when her lord husband and his bannerman returned home after Robert's Rebellion. The moat had been little more than a ruin in those days, even though it admittedly served as a sufficient blockade against any southron threats. It had taken the Northmen nearly a week to travel up the narrow road that was the Causeway, so they had taken up shelter in the moat for another day.

The three towers had been large enough to host the entirety of the Northern forces, but most of the men had to lodge with four or five others. Catelyn and Ned were a little more fortunate; they had spent a night in one of the warmer, more private rooms of the Gatehouse Tower. They had Robb sleep between them so he would stay warm. He may have gotten a more peaceful sleep than any of us. If only we all could sleep so peacefully.

Back then, Robb had been only a babe at her breast. Now he was six and ten. My oldest babe is a man grown. In the time since he learned to sit a horse, Robb had revisited the moat several times. Whenever he came back to Winterfell, he always told his parents of his experiences with the
Sometimes Robb went by himself to the moat. Sometimes he went with Theon Greyjoy. Sometimes he went with Jon Snow and Prince Jasper Baratheon. Sometimes he went back with Samwell Tarly and Rickard Clegane. Sometimes he brought a visitor back to Winterfell.

On one occasion, Robb came back with her beloved uncle, Ser Brynden Tully. The Blackfish had proudly regaled Catelyn with tales of his heroic deeds, just as he had done when she was a little girl. Even though she was now a woman grown, those tales still excited her every bit as much as they did back then. To him, I am still 'Little Cat.'

Robb's most previous trip to the moat had occurred within the last turn of the moon. This time, he came back with a whole company of new faces. Among them was a young woman. A young woman who would be my daughter-by-law.

Catelyn Stark was a mother of five children, and she loved all of them unconditionally. Nothing was more important to her than family. That quality had gained her a fair amount of praise from her husband's countrymen. Eddard adored her for it. Perhaps that was what first made him love me.

While she was protective of her children, Catelyn always knew that she would not be able to protect them forever. Even in the early days of motherhood, she was aware of the inevitability that at some point, she would have to arrange a marriage contract for Robb. She would likely have to arrange matches for all her children. But Robb's was the one who mattered the most, as he was Eddard Stark's heir. He is the future of the North.

Catelyn had been intrigued when Uncle Brynden first suggested forging a contract between her son and Lord Mace Tyrell's daughter. She was downright perplexed when she learned that the idea had originally been Lord Gregor Clegane's. Truthfully, she would have preferred for her and Ned to have decided their son's future wife all on their own. Nevertheless, they agreed to give the match with Highgarden some consideration.

Now, Catelyn was glad they had.

When they first met, Margaery Tyrell had left a very benign impression on the Lady of Winterfell. Catelyn had only grown fonder of the lovely rose from the Reach since then.

Margaery was perhaps the embodiment of courtesy and kindness. She was always putting the welfare of others before her own. She always tried very hard to please. Although the contract between her and Robb had not yet been finalized, she was taking it just as seriously as though it already was.

Margaery spent a great deal of time in Robb's company every day. They had gone riding together. They had visited the godswood, where he had shown her how to pray in the style of the North. They took the time to learn of each other's hobbies and interests. Catelyn was reminded of her own courtship. However, in her case, the man who courted her was not the man who ultimately married her. That man was her husband's older brother.

Before long, Margaery began to get on superbly with Robb's siblings, as well. Sansa had the most things in common with her; they were well on the road to becoming best friends. Sansa was still of the age where girls dream of noble princes and massive castles, and Margaery was all too willing to indulge her with such talk.

Arya did not care much for the obligations and duties of being a lady; she was more interested in swordplay and activities that were traditional of men. Fortunately, she and Margaery found
common ground when the latter told her of the deeds of her elder brothers Garlan and Loras.

Bran would often listen in on those accounts; he was just as fascinated with knights as Arya was. Additionally, at Bran's request, Margaery had accompanied him to the Broken Tower so he could show her how high he could scale the exterior. Catelyn had initially been furious when she learned that Bran had been climbing again, but Margaery assured her that Bran only intended to do it the one time. Incidentally, he had made it all the way to the roof of the Broken Tower. *A wolf who is part squirrel; that's what he is.*

As for Catelyn's youngest… within a couple days of meeting her, Rickon treated Margaery as though she was his long-lost third sister. *At this pace, she likely will be soon enough.*

Margaery also became familiar with each member of the household. Maester Luwin. Septon Chayle and Septa Mordane. The steward Vayon Poole. His daughter Jeyne. The master of horse Hullen and his son Harwin. Martyn Cassel. Jory Cassel. All of them took an almost immediate liking to their future lord's intended. *That is as hopeful a sign as any.***

Most of all, Margaery demonstrated how excited she was by the prospect of becoming the future Lady of Winterfell… by taking the time to mingle with the current Lady.

Every day she was at Winterfell, Margaery Tyrell would spend at least one hour in the company of Lady Catelyn Stark. Sometimes they conversed on various affairs, both the ones that concerned them and the ones that did not. Sometimes Margaery simply stood by and observed the elder daughter of Hoster Tully as she carried out her duties. Sometimes Catelyn indulged her with a recount of her experiences in the North. Sometimes Margaery told Catelyn of her views of certain topics, including the ideal marriage. *She has a very realistic mindset for her age. Such realism would be invaluable to the head of this house.*

Margaery was not the only realistic member of her house, Catelyn quickly discovered. Her lady grandmother, Olenna of House Redwyne, had a demeanor that was equal parts sobering and eloquent. Straightaway, Catelyn realized she was not the conventional highborn lady. *Arya would get along quite well with this woman.* Strangely enough, she did.

Olenna Tyrell did not bother with false courtesies. She did not mince her words. She did not speak in riddles. Everything she said and did was completely direct. *Clearly, she is not known as the Queen of Thorns simply because of the sigil of her house.*

It took Catelyn nearly a week to form an opinion of Lady Olenna. Ultimately, she decided that could come to like the Reachwoman. That was mostly due to the fact that Olenna seemed to approve of Robb, and Margaery claimed she would not marry a man her grandmother did not approve of.

Despite her bitter persona, Olenna Tyrell was very close with her grandchildren. *Reportedly, closer to them than she had ever been to her own children.* She had been a mentor to Lord Mace's sons and daughter. Apparently, her guidance was what drove Willas to join the Legion without Banners, Garlan to become a knight, and Loras to do both.

Margaery, however, was her special case. At the first opportunity, Mace Tyrell would have attempted to make his daughter Queen. While Lady Olenna was just as ambitious as her son, she was not so brash as to overshoot their house's bounds. She was more concerned with ensuring that her granddaughter would have a good marriage. She always intended for the marriage to benefit Highgarden in some way, but Margaery's happiness meant more to her than anything.

*I expect this union would benefit us all. After all, if the heir to Winterfell is not good enough for...*
Margaery – if my son isn't good enough for her – who is?

On one occasion, Lady Olenna had asked Catelyn to tell her some intimate details of Robb. Catelyn had been stunned by that request. What stunned her even more was that Olenna offered to tell her some intimate details of Margaery in return. Although she assured Catelyn that nothing especially compromising or embarrassing had to be shared, the Lady of Winterfell was very much reluctant to comply. As politely as she could, Catelyn demanded to know what the point of such disclosure could have been.

Olenna revealed to her that she wished to know if Margaery and Robb were compatible even on the intimate level. She also argued that Catelyn was probably as curious to know as she was. She is not entirely wrong. Furthermore, she contended that this information would ultimately serve Catelyn better, as Margaery would spend the rest of her life in Winterfell if she married Robb. Just as I intended to when I married Eddard.

Eventually, Catelyn agreed to this exchange of private information, but she only did so when Lady Olenna assured her that no one else would know of this discussion.

A fortnight and a-half after Margaery and her grandmother arrived at Winterfell, Robb went down to Hornwood to attend the wedding of Daryn Hornwood, Lord Halys' son and heir, and Alys Karstark, daughter of Lord Rickard of Karhold. Robb planned to be gone for about five days.

While he was away, Ned asked Margaery and her grandmother for a private conversation. He went to Catelyn and asked her to join them. As if by reflex, she conceded to go right away.

A few minutes later, the four of them were gathered in the lord's solar. Lord Eddard took up his usual spot behind the desk. Lady Catelyn sat in a chair by his side. Margaery and Lady Olenna sat opposite them.

Once they were all seated, Ned folded his arms together and opened with a question: "How do you find the hospitality of the North, my ladies?"

"Quite different from the hospitality of the Reach, my lord," Olenna Tyrell bluntly remarked.

"But a pleasant form of 'different,'" Margaery sincerely amended. Catelyn grinned at that.

Ned merely gave a slight nod. He shifted in his seat a bit and muttered inquisitively "Then you have enjoyed your stay here thus far?"

"Very much so, my lord," Margaery proclaimed with a smile.

"It has been most gratifying," Olenna drily murmured. So, at the very least, it was not unpleasant.

"I know you plan to return to Highgarden before too long, Lady Olenna," Eddard told the Queen of Thorns. He then turned to her granddaughter and queried "But do you, Lady Margaery?"

Margaery thought about that question for a few seconds before answering with "I was not making any plans to go back yet, Lord Eddard."

She chooses her words carefully. Just like her grandmother.

Eddard must have noticed that, as well. By his countenance, he had quickly picked up on the implication of those words. He firmly pronounced "You appreciate forwardness. As such, I shall be forward with you right now."
"Forward on what, my lord?" Margaery enquired.

Ned responded with "I know you care deeply for my son. I know he cares deeply for you, as well. Your contentment with one another is very important to me for many reasons. Chief among them is how your relationship with Robb could determine the state of the relationship between the North and the Reach. You already know that, of course. Just as you know what that relationship will require to come to fruition. So now I ask you: could you see yourself by my son's side?"

That is indeed rather forward. Normally, Eddard Stark would approach a subject such as this gradually and with more tact. However, in this particular scenario, being candid was the only option.

Margaery needed a minute to compose her reply. She frequently shifted her gaze between her grandmother, the Lord and Lady of Winterfell, and one of the walls.

Finally, she looked to Eddard and Catelyn, and she began with "Well, I have only known him for about four weeks."

Nearly four weeks longer than Ned and I knew each other.

"Cat and I had known each other for far less time," Eddard gave voice to her thought. He then turned to his wife and extended his hand to her. She grinned and happily placed her own hand in his. After that, Eddard turned back to his front and proclaimed "Even so, we have come a long way since then."

Yes, we have. We've gone much farther than I would have dared to imagine back then.

"I can see that, my lord," Margaery professed. "But you didn't let me finish. I was about to say that I have come to more than care for Robb since I arrived in the North. So has he. By the way he treats me, one could be forgiven for assuming I was already his wife. As such... I would be honored to give merit to those assumptions."

A rare smile came to Ned's face. He presumed "Then you will consent to the contract?"

Margaery lightly nodded and declared "I would be honored to accept."

Catelyn then smiled, too. She told the younger Reachwoman "Oh, no; it is we who are honored by your acceptance."

"I am certain we are all honored somehow," Olenna Tyrell contended. She speaks the truth, I've no doubt.

"Shall we set aside a date?" Eddard proposed.

"Well, once Robb gets back from Hornwood, he and I will be going to Ironrath," Margaery disclosed, "We'll be attending the wedding of Rodrik Forrester and Elaena Glenmore."

"We know; Robb told us of that," Catelyn disclosed. What greater way to prove one's affection than by escorting one's intended to another person's wedding?

"About how long might that take in total?" Eddard enquired.

"Two or three weeks, I suppose," Margaery thought aloud, "Four at the most."

"Then shall we schedule the affair for sometime next month?" Catelyn proposed.
"That would be excellent, my lord," Lady Olenna said approvingly.

"Very good," Eddard muttered in acknowledgment, "Will that be long enough for Lord Mace and Lady Alerie to travel here?"

"I believe it would be," Margaery casually muttered, "But truthfully, I doubt my parents would be able to attend."

"Why is that?" Catelyn queried. *No parent should be denied the ability to witness their child getting married.*

"Firstly, I don't think the cold would suit my father well," Margaery debated. By the exasperated expression on Lady Olenna's face, that statement was quite true. "Apart from that, there are already too many other Tyrells out of the Reach. You see, the news of the Long Night was not very well-received in my homeland. My lord father and lady mother must remain in Highgarden to maintain order in the Reach."

"I understand and respect the sentiment," Eddard Stark mumbled, "As we say, there must always be a Stark in Winterfell."

Under normal circumstances, Catelyn would have advised that they delay the wedding until both the bride and groom's parents were available. But since Lord and Lady Tyrell were remaining in Highgarden to prepare the Reach against the Long Night, their availability would not come about until after the next winter. Eddard was definitely not going to wait that long. For that matter, neither was Catelyn.

Still, the bride would need someone from her family to remove her house cloak from her shoulders. On that note, she would need her house cloak.

"Do you have someone who can give you away, my dear?" Catelyn queried.

"Yes, my brother Willas would be pleased to do so," Margaery apprised her, as though she had read the older woman's mind, "And before you ask, my lady, we brought our house cloak with us."

Catelyn smiled and nodded. *They are rather prudent to think in advance.*

Before another else could speak, there was a knock at the door of the solar. Eddard looked to it and called out "Yes?"

Jory Cassel entered the solar. He muttered sternly "You asked to be informed when Lord Howland Reed's children arrived, my lord."

"I did, Jory," Eddard affirmed. Catelyn was bewildered. *That's the first I'm hearing of this. I hadn't known the Reeds were sending us any wards.*

"They just got in," the captain of the guard illuminated, "Lady Meera and Lord Jojen are requesting an audience with you at your earliest convenience."

"I will be with them momentarily," Eddard Stark declared.

Jory nodded and went back outside. Ned slowly rose to his feet, looked around at his wife and the Reachwomen, and he bade them "If you will excuse me; I must see receive our newest guests."

"Of course, my love," Catelyn said in understanding. Margaery and Lady Olenna merely nodded in agreement.
Eddard gave a grateful grin. He cordially suggested "If you so wish, you may go ahead and begin to plan the wedding. For the moment, I do not believe I am needed in this matter."

Now it was Catelyn who nodded. *Far as history can tell, that has always been the way of weddings. The men propose; the women plan.*

Ned walked over to the entrance of the solar. Jory held the door open for him. Just before Eddard stepped outside, he froze in the doorframe.

Catelyn noticed how abruptly her husband stopped, and she asked "Is something amiss, my lord?"

Ned turned back to the women, smirked, and murmured "It seems you have a visitor of your own."

He then stepped aside, and Grey Wind bounded into the room. He stood by the entrance and sniffed the air for a moment, and then he trotted swiftly over to Margaery.

The typical lady would have shuddered or screamed if a direwolf – even one who was less than two months old – came directly towards her. The day her husband, sons, and nephew brought back a pregnant she-wolf, Catelyn had been startled. Be that as it may, she had quickly overcome her fear when she discovered that the direwolf was docile.

Likewise, it had not taken Margaery Tyrell and her grandmother long to become comfortable around the direwolves. Grey Wind in particular had become rather attached to the young rose of Highgarden. So much so that Robb had decided to leave his loyal beast with her at Winterfell while he was at Hornwood. *Another promising sign, right there.*

After Grey Wind padded over to her, Margaery reached out and scratched him behind the ears. He sat on his hindquarters by her chair and licked at her hand playfully.

"Would you care to pet him, Grandmother?" Margaery asked Lady Olenna.

"I just washed my hands," the Queen of Thorns stiffly replied. Catelyn scoffed at her bluntness.

By now, Lord Eddard Stark had left the solar. He had closed the door on his way out, leaving the three women alone with the direwolf.

Margaery's attention was still principally on Grey tickled him under his muzzle and giggled at his reaction. *I cannot tell which of them is the more adorable.* Catelyn did not have such thoughts often, so that said something of how awed she was by the young Reachwoman's interaction with the wolf.

After observing them for a moment, Catelyn proposed "Would you like to start organizing plans for the wedding?"

Margaery turned back to the woman from the Riverlands and murmured "Certainly, my lady."

Lady Olenna then interjected with "Before we do, there is something I wish to ask you, my dear. Something about the wolves."

*Ned would probably be more helpful in that regard.* Nonetheless, Catelyn agreed to oblige the Queen of Thorns. She inquired "What would you like to know, my lady?"

Olenna Tyrell professed "Each of your children has one direwolf. Your bastard nephew has one, too."
"He also has a name," Catelyn remarked, more sharply than she intended.

"Jon Snow has one, too," Olenna Tyrell drily corrected herself, "As you undoubtedly noticed, the mother direwolf produced a litter of four males and two females. Including your nephew, the current generation of House Stark has four sons and two daughters."

"I know it is more than a coincidence," Catelyn admitted, "Even before they were born, Jon speculated that he and his cousins were meant to have the pups."

"I would have concluded the same," Olenna declared, "However, since the pups bonded to your children and your nephew, by that same logic, would not the mother direwolf have bonded to you, as well?"

Catelyn shrugged and muttered "I see why you would assume she would. Robb and Jon suspected that, as well. Even so, Lyarra and I were not quite as well-matched for each other as her children and mine were. She did not dislike me or anything of the sort; we simply never developed the same connection."

"Peculiar," Margaery thought aloud, "Perhaps only Starks can truly bind themselves to direwolves."

"I thought much the same," Catelyn disclosed, giving a light smile, "But you and Grey Wind get on just fine."

"True," Margaery coincided, smiling back. She will be a Stark by marriage, of course. But then again, I have been one for nearly half my life.

"When we were at Moat Cailin, we saw Lyarra," Lady Olenna recounted, "But only Ghost and Grey Wind were there. One would think she would prefer to stay here in Winterfell, where most of her pups were."

"One would think," Catelyn concurred, "An interesting tale behind that."

"I'd very much like to know this tale," Olenna requested. Margaery nodded her agreement.

Catelyn then explained "Because Jon serves as squire to Lord Gregor Clegane, he spends half his time at Moat Cailin and the other half here. The day they found Lyarra happened to be his sixteenth nameday, so he was at Winterfell to celebrate with his family. Lyarra gave birth the following morning, and Jon and his cousins each had their pick of the litter. He stayed with us for a fortnight so that Lyarra could tend to all her pups. When they were old enough to walk and hunt, Jon went back to Moat Cailin. He planned to bring Ghost – and only Ghost – back with him. Lyarra… well, she 'objected.'"

"Objected how?" Margaery asked.

"When Jon tried to take Ghost out of Winterfell, Lyarra became fiercely protective of him," Catelyn recalled, "She went so far as to threaten to tear someone's arm off. At first, we assumed that was just motherly instinct. Then Samwell Tarly suggested that we bring the other five pups out of Winterfell to see how their mother would react. Unsurprisingly, she protested when any of her pups were taken away. But only in the case of Ghost did she nearly resort to violence. We still don't know why."

"Could it be that direwolves pick favorites?" Margaery hypothesized.

"I wouldn't know," Catelyn responded, "Maybe it was because Ghost was the runt of the litter."
"That would follow," Margaery agreed, "I believe all parents – humans and animals alike – care for the smallest of their brood the most."

"Lord Tywin Lannister would disagree with you, dearest," Olenna slyly countered.

Margaery and Lady Catelyn chuckled a bit. *That cannot be disputed; even in the North, it is well-known that Tywin Lannister despises his youngest child.*

Catelyn then continued her account with "Anyway, Jon was expected to return to Moat Cailin, but he did not wish to leave Ghost behind. It was ultimately decided that the most practical solution was to let Lyarra go along with them. As it happened, all parties involved were pleased with that arrangement."

"That is fortunate," Olenna Tyrell commented. After a pause, she stated "As I mentioned previously, we saw Lyarra whilst we stayed at Moat Cailin. Are you aware that she now has a mistress of her own?"

"Yes," Catelyn responded, "Jon told me that the mother direwolf developed a bond with his maid."

"Myrna, her name was," Lady Olenna remarked.

"Ah, yes," Catelyn remarked with a smile, "Jon speaks almost reverently of Myrna. I imagine she is a wondrous person."

Those statements appeared to intrigue the Queen of Thorns. "So you've never met her?"

"I have not," Catelyn confirmed, "I haven't seen Moat Cailin since the aftermath of Robert's Rebellion, and Myrna never accompanies Jon to Winterfell. As far as I know, she has never left the moat even once in the last five years."

"How interesting…" Lady Olenna muttered quietly. She rubbed her chin, and then she said "One final question, Lady Catelyn. Who was it who gave Lyarra her name? Was it your lord husband?"

_I can see why she would assume that. That was the name of Ned's own mother._ "No. Each of my children and Jon named their own wolves. So I believe it was Myrna who named hers."

"Why do you suppose she gave the mother direwolf the name of your late mother-by-law?" Olenna Tyrell inquired.

"I haven't the slightest idea," Catelyn professed, "But she must have had a reason."

"Oh, I do not doubt that, my lady," Olenna Tyrell conceded. She sat in silence for a few seconds, and then she remarked "You say Jon reveres Myrna. For the sake of my curiosity, how would you describe the exact nature of their relationship? Is she like an elder sister? An older cousin? An aunt? Or is she… like a mother to him?"

Catelyn needed a moment to contemplate an answer. Then she pronounced "Now that I think on that… she is most like a mother to him."

"His true mother is dead, isn't she?" Margaery asked rhetorically.

"Yes," Catelyn disclosed, "Jon's mother was Lady Ashara Dayne of Starfall. His father was Brandon Stark, Eddard's brother and the man I was initially meant to marry. Of course, Brandon's death – along with his father's – was what sparked Robert's Rebellion. After the Rebellion, Eddard went to rescue his sister Lyanna from the Tower of Joy in Dorne. Alas, he was too late; she died in
his arms. Before he left Dorne, Eddard rode to Starfall, as he had heard of Brandon and Ashara's free union, as well as what it had produced. From what I heard, Lady Ashara begged Ned to let Jon stay with her, but he insisted on taking his nephew back to the North."

"And that was what drove her to suicide," Lady Olenna finished.

"Yes, my lady," Catelyn confirmed, a little tensely, "In my mind, that is the only atrocious thing Ned has ever done in his life."

_Depriving a mother of her own child and subsequently inciting her to jump into the sea... there is no excuse for that._

"Does Jon know any of this?" Margaery queried.

"He knows all of it," Catelyn explicated, "In spite of that, he holds no ill will towards Ned."

"He must be a very forgiving person," Olenna contended.

"I like to think so," Catelyn stated, letting out a small sigh, "I have tried my hardest to be a mother to my nephew. I've raised him just as I've raised my own children. In his youth, he regarded me as his mother. Yet these days, I suppose Myrna is the closest thing he'll ever have to one. By the way he speaks of her, one might be led to believe she actually was his mother."

"Indeed," Lady Olenna avowed, folding her arms and speaking in a quiet yet firm tone of voice, "One might be led to believe that."

_She almost speaks as though she does believe it,_ Catelyn noted.

…

The Night's Watch had existed for nearly as long as the Wall had. The black brothers had manned the immense structure ever since it was first erected by Brandon the Builder eight millennia ago.

The Wall itself still stood tall and proud. It had retained all of its magnificence and wonder. The same could not quite be said of the forces that guarded it. While the Watch was once a highly-respected organization, it had slowly fallen into decay since the days of Aegon's Conquest.

By the time the Mad King fell, only a few hundred black brothers were on the Wall, and half of those were simply there to avoid punishment for crimes committed in the south. Only three of the Wall's nineteen fortresses were occupied regularly. The rest had been boarded up and abandoned. Meanwhile, the wildlings who lived north of the Wall only became progressively stronger.

Ten years ago, one would not have been blamed for assuming that the Watch might collapse in the near future.

However, much had changed over the last decade, and with every passing year, the likelihood of that occurrence became more and more unlikely. Fortune reared its head, and the Night's Watch had regained much of its former glory.

That process began when Lord Gregor Clegane of Moat Cailin approached Lord Commander Jeor Mormont and told him of an imminent disaster. This disaster had occurred once before. It was what had led to the construction of the Wall and the establishment of the Watch in the first place.

At first, Lord Jeor did not want to believe Lord Gregor's cautionary message. Who would have? All the same, he could not bring himself to ignore it, either. So he, Benjen Stark, and Maester Aemon
had chosen to hear the Mountain out.

Even by the end of that conversation, Jeor Mormont was uncertain if he could fully trust in Lord Gregor. Still, until he could confirm otherwise, he decided to act upon this warning as though it was completely authentic.

Consequentially, a number of measures were taken to prepare the northern border of the Seven Kingdoms against its upcoming hardships. Several of these measures were quite ambitious, as no one had ever attempted them before.

A tentative truce had been negotiated between the Night's Watch and the Free Folk. Many of the wildlings now fought alongside the black brothers. Thousands more had settled along the Gift or somewhere in the lands south of it. A steady supply of obsidian was transported to the Wall so that dragonglass weapons could be forged. The rate of voluntary enlisters was at an all-time high. Many knights and valiant warriors had taken the black, and nearly every castle on the Wall was adequately manned.

Lord Commander Jeor never would have believed that a dying order could have rejuvenated so superbly in the span of ten years. Once again it was respectable. Once again it was honorable. Once again it was prestigious. Once again it had captured its sense of purpose. He was proud to serve as its commander. Even if the Others were not truly returning to the world, the Watch had come a very long way, and it had achieved a standing it had long ago misplaced. In any case, these preparations will not have been for nothing.

Alas, these preparations would have to serve their intended purpose. It turned out Lord Gregor Clegane's warning did indeed have merit.

A couple months ago, a party of rangers had been dispatched to bring back a group of five hundred wildlings. None of the wildlings made it to the Wall, and only one of the black brothers came back. Ser Waymar Royce. That had been his first time north of the Wall.

Ser Waymar was a promising young knight from a noble house in the Vale. His primary flaw was his arrogance, but all men had their flaws. Lord Jeor did not believe he would have any trouble on his first ranging, and that he would not lose his nerves so easily.

Ser Waymar had not been back at Castle Black three hours before he chose to desert his post. But in those three hours, he had constantly raved about "the rising dead" and other things. While the whole of the Wall was aware that the Long Night was fast approaching, most of the black brothers were inclined to question anything they heard from the mouth of one who is paralyzed by fear.

After Ser Waymar was beheaded by Eddard Stark, the Lord of Winterfell wrote to the Lord Commander and told him the Valeman's last words. In the final minute of his life, he had been sane enough to clearly recount what he had seen in the haunted forest, and he had relayed what he remembered of that experience to the Warden of the North.

There was no point living in denial now. The Others had finally begun to reappear in the world. But this time around, we will be ready for them. We have no intention of going down without a fight.

"How often do you come up here, my lord?"

At this time, Lord Jeor was standing at the top of the Wall. He had spent the last few minutes gazing off to the north, deep in silent meditation. That question brought him back to reality.

He turned to his right, but no one was there. Then he looked down. It was the dwarf.
"If I can, I make an effort to come up here at least once a day," Lord Jeor informed the westerman, "Sometimes, the best I can manage is thrice a week. I may be the leader of the Watch, but I am just as obligated to stand guard on the Wall as the rest of my brothers are."

"You're a busy man," Tyrion Lannister remarked, "The fault is not yours if you haven't the time to do so. What really matters is that you care enough to try."

"Indeed, my lord," Jeor conceded. He turned back to his front and stared off into the distance. A few seconds later, he asked "How was your time at Queensgate?"

"Considerably better than our time at Oakenshield," Lord Tyrion replied, "Iron Emmett is a much more accommodating host than Frostfingers."

"So I have heard," Jeor Mormont murmured drily. "It is a bit of a relief to be rid of him. Even so, I pity those I placed under his command. "Did you make it to Deep Lake?"

"We got so far as to catch a glimpse of it," Tyrion recalled, "Then we turned around and headed back east."

"A shame," Lord Jeor perceived, "Deep Lake is a much fairer castle than this one. Apart from that, Qhorin Halfhand would have been pleased to receive you."

"You're probably right," Tyrion remarked, "I have heard the Halfhand is a typically gracious man. But can you say the same of his second-in-command?"

"You refer to Mors Westford?" Jeor Mormont presumed.

"Yes," Lord Tyrion confirmed, "I understand that his primary task is to hunt down and execute deserters before they traverse the Gift."

*Hence his moniker 'The Butcher.'*

"House Westford is sworn to the Westerlands, is it not?" Jeor asked rhetorically.

"Yes, and no one knows that better than Mors," Tyrion proclaimed frankly, "He served in my father's army during King Robert's Rebellion. Apparently, Mors refused to obey an order concerning one of his bannermen. Whatever the order was, it's the reason he ended up here. So it would not surprise me if he harbors a grudge towards anyone bearing the name Lannister."

"You are not your father, my lord," Jeor Mormont pointed out.

"If I was, I would be two feet taller, a great deal balder, and slightly less ugly," Tyrion cheekily muttered, "And I would have far fewer friends."

Lord Jeor allowed himself a snicker. *Your sense of humor would not be nearly as grand, either.*

Just then, they were joined by a tall man carrying a spear. He greeted them with a nod and a murmur of "Milords."

"Good afternoon, Fornio," Jeor Mormont rejoined.

"Evening, actually, Lord Commander," the ranger apprised him, "I'm here to relieve you."

*Has it been two hours already? How time passes up here.*

"Very well," the Old Bear coincided.
He stepped aside so that Fornio could take his place. Then he turned to Lord Tyrion and said inquisitively "Would you care to accompany me, my lord? Or would you rather remain up here a while longer?"

"I will join you in a moment, Lord Jeor," Tyrion pronounced, "First, though, there is something I have been wanting to do since I got here."

The dwarf then turned to the north and waddled over to the edge of the Wall.

"Careful, milord," Fornio advised him, "Men have slipped and fallen getting that close."

"Do I look so clumsy?" Tyrion uttered wryly.

"No, not at all," Fornio hastily remarked, "Just a word of caution."

"Appreciated, but unnecessary," Tyrion told him.

Tyrion stopped when he was mere inches from the tip of the Wall. Then he reached down and began to unlace his breeches. Before he brought anything out, Jeor and Fornio quickly looked away.

Jeor heard the sounds of water being made and Tyrion whistling as he relieved himself. The Lord Commander and the ranger simply stood by and waited for him to finish. It only took him thirty seconds. Even so, those thirty seconds were rather awkward.

When he was finished, Tyrion refastened his breeches, wiped his hands on his cloak, and turned back to the two watchmen. "There. Now we can go."

Jeor nodded. As Tyrion walked over to him, he looked up at Fornio and instructed him "Keep a heedful eye. Anything could be out there."

"Oh, nothing will get past me, milord," Fornio asserted, smirking, "I know the haunted forest like the back of my father's hand."

Tyrion paused and raised an eyebrow. "I believe the expression is 'the back of my hand.' Meaning your hand, not your sire's."

Fornio shrugged and disputed "What interest would I have in my own hand? How often does one actually look at their own hands?"

"About as often as they study the hands of their parents," Tyrion refuted.

"Oh, in my youth, I saw the back of my father's hand plenty," Fornio disclosed, "If you get my meaning."

_I believe we do. That is quite unfortunate. But some fathers are like that._

"Just do your duty," Jeor Mormont commanded his subordinate.

"I shall, milord," the ranger declared.

Lord Jeor and Lord Tyrion swiftly made their way to the winch elevator. Luckily for them, the cage was already at the top of the Wall, so they did not have to wait.

During the descent to Castle Black, Jeor asked the dwarf "How much longer do you suppose you will remain with us, my lord?"
"Just the night," Tyrion informed him, "On the morrow, we plan to head south."

"Have you enjoyed your time here thus far?" the Old Bear queried.

"On the whole, yes," the Imp responded, "I speak for both myself and my lady wife when I say that."

Jeor gave a nod of acknowledgment. "Where is Lady Ellyn?"

"Down in the training yard," Tyrion replied, "Some of the spearwives challenged her to a bout in the ring."

"Are they fighting her individually or-?" Jeor began.

"Altogether," Tyrion promptly clarified.

"I'd be worried," Jeor mumbled. A moment later, he added in "For them."

"I thought just the same, my lord," Tyrion remarked with a chuckle.

"Your wife reminds me of my sister Maege," Jeor disclosed, "Tall, strapping, and proficient with weapons, yet very womanly in appearance. Lady Ellyn is a touch more civilized, though. Not to mention easier to get along with."

Tyrion laughed again. Of course, I still love Maege, regardless of all that.

Soon enough, they arrived at the bottom of the Wall. The cage door swung open, and Tyrion and Jeor stepped out of it.

As they climbed down the platform, Jeor spotted a tall woman dressed in chainmail and a hauberk. She was armed with a sword and a dagger whose pommel bore the likeness of a hound's head. She was coming directly toward them. At a glance, he recognized her as Lady Ellyn Lannister, formerly of House Clegane.

Tyrion saw her coming, as well. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. When Lady Ellyn reached them, she knelt down to her husband's level and embraced him. Then she released him, returned to her full height, and told Jeor "Good to see you again, Lord Commander."

"Likewise, my lady," the Old Bear proclaimed, "How went the sparring?"

"Child's play," Ellyn cockily remarked, "Those spearwives like to boast, but they can't parry to save their hides. I could have beaten them with Duncan cradled in my left arm."

"I would rather you not test that claim," Tyrion muttered drily.

"I could hold you in my left arm," Ellyn proposed jokingly.

"Now that would just be downright unfair," Tyrion humorously retorted, "The spearwives wouldn't stand a chance. Hells, veteran knights wouldn't stand a chance."

The two spouses shared a laugh at the jape. Jeor resisted the urge to smirk, although he had to admit it was a clever one. The Old Bear might not have looked it, but he had a fairly decent sense of humor. He just kept it concealed in public so that his men would show him ample respect and take him seriously.

"Your lord husband tells me you plan to go back south on the morrow," Jeor proclaimed.
"He told you true, my lord," Lady Ellyn affirmed, "We've already been here for nigh on a moon's turn. A week here, a week at Oakenshield, a week at Queensgate, and a week travelling between the three. Much as we'd like to see the rest of the Wall, we haven't the time or the resources."

"I should say not, my lady," Jeor Mormont concurred, "There are few in history who have managed to traverse the full length of the Wall."

"I suppose we could always try some other time," Tyrion slyly murmured.

"You would be most welcome, if ever you return," Lord Jeor asserted. He spoke the truth. Lords and ladies like Tyrion and Ellyn Lannister were a rarity. I haven't seen a lord so invested in the Night's Watch since Lady Ellyn's brother. After a bit of silence, the Old Bear offered "I would invite you both to dine with me and the officers tonight."

"We would be delighted to accept the invitation, my lord," Tyrion rejoined.

"Quite so," Ellyn coincided. She then wiped the sweat off her brow and muttered "First I will require some time to feed Duncan and wash up. Would you mind waiting to eat for about a half-hour?"

"Not at all," Jeor Mormont replied. Supper will not be for another forty-five minutes anyway.

The Lord Commander and the two Lannisters parted ways there.

Jeor went to his quarters to change out of his armor and into some more comfortable apparel. He donned his boiled leather doublet and trousers. Over that he wore the cloak of the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. Like the rest of his wardrobe, they were all a shade of black.

Jeor's pet raven had been on its perch by the hearth when he entered the bedchamber. After its master finished changing, the bird spread its wings, took to the air, and flew over to Jeor Mormont's shoulder, where it settled. It screeched "Corn. Corn."

"Later," Mormont grumbled. There are times I wonder why I bother keeping this damn bird.

Three-Finger Hobb had prepared a special meal for the officers that night: crab legs. Even with their new connections with the wildling fisherfolk, those were not easy to come by. Somehow, that only made them seem even more of a delicacy.

Soon after, the Lord Commander went to dinner. He always supped with the officers. Among them were Maester Aemon, First Steward Bowen Marsh, First Builder Othell Yarwyck, and First Ranger Benjen Stark, and master-at-arms Ser Alliser Thorne. That night, two more places at the table were set for their guests from the Westerlands.

The meal that night was an eventful one. At the start of it, Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn recounted the highlights of their visits to Oakenshield and Queensgate. That alone took up almost fifteen minutes, not including the raven's occasional interjections of "Corn. Corn" and other random words.

When the Lannisters were done with their recollection, Othell Yarwyck asked them "What will you do now? Are you going to go back to Casterly Rock?"

Since House Yarwyck was vassal to House Lannister, Othell's interest in Tyrion and Ellyn's activities was reasonably well-founded.

"Not just yet," Lady Ellyn revealed, "We will go back eventually. But we decided that we will take
up service with my lord brother at Moat Cailin."

"Joining the Legion without Banners, are you?" Benjen Stark supposed.

"Just so," Tyrion affirmed, "Our minds would be of greatest use in the Legion."

Jeor could not dispute that. I must admit; they are two of the finest minds I have ever met.

"The Watch has great need of sharp minds, too," Bowen Marsh contended, "Did you ever consider employing yours here?"

"I don't think that would go over very well in my case," Ellyn Clegane uttered frankly, "I am very much aware of what happened to Danny Flint."

She did not have to say any more. That was one of the more shameful events in the history of the Watch. A young girl wished to guard the realms of men... and her 'brothers' replied by raping and murdering her.

"I might give it some consideration," Tyrion murmured. He hastily added in "If I was not required to go celibate."

"Yes, neither of us would want that," Lady Ellyn cockily remarked. Everyone but the cheerless Alliser Thorne laughed.

When he was done sniggering, Tyrion murmured "Aside from that, I have a son who has only seen his first nameday. I fully intend to be there for his second nameday. As well as his third, his fourth, his fifth, and at least the next eleven that follow. Some men may be content to sever their family ties for the good of the realm. I could never do such a thing."

"There are not many who can, my lord," Jeor Mormont contended, "I waited until my son Jorah was a man grown to take the black. He was still a lad when I entrusted him with the care of our family sword, our house, and our ancestral home. Almost twenty years have elapsed since then, and never once did I question whether I made the right choice."

I would have liked to have gotten to know my Dornish daughter-by-law and the four children she gave Jorah a little better, however.

"I will keep that in the back of my head, Lord Jeor," Tyrion Lannister proclaimed, "All the same, if I ever do come back here, my stay will likely be a temporary one."

"Fair enough, my lord," Benjen Stark remarked, "You would still be invaluable to us as a temporary advisor."

That appeared to amuse and perplex the dwarf all at once. "What could I possibly advise you on?"

Initially, Benjen said nothing. He just turned the Lord Commander, as though expecting a gesture from him. Mormont actually had arranged something of the sort with him before dinner. When he noticed the younger man's gaze on him, he gave Benjen two solemn nods.

The First Ranger then got out a long roll of parchment and held it out to Lord Tyrion. The dwarf tentatively accepted the parchment in his hand.

"What is this?" he enquired curiously.

"Our plans for countering the threat posed by the Long Night," Benjen revealed, "If you have time
before you leave, my lord, we would be most grateful if you and Lady Ellyn were to look them over and give us your opinion on them."

Tyrion thought on that for a moment, and then he shrugged and set the parchment aside. He stated "Very well. If we have time."

"We would appreciate it, my lord," Maester Aemon murmured quietly, "Other than the people in this room, no one has seen those plans."

And you, dear Aemon, have not seen them at all.

"I am surprised you would trust us with so much," Lady Ellyn noted, "Even if my lord husband and I are two of the best minds in Westeros, we are still only two minds."

"Two minds who happen to have connections to Casterly Rock and Moat Cailin," Jaremy Rykker pointed out.

"Connections we know better than to abuse," Lord Tyrion countered. Before anyone could argue that point, he added in "Be that as it may, we will take a closer look at these plans of yours tonight. But I must say; this seems quite elaborate for defense."

"Oh, those plans are not composed solely of defensive techniques," Mallador Locke pronounced. That seemed to intrigue both Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn. The latter enquired "How else would you prepare the Wall for the fight against the Others?"

"By going beyond the Wall and facing them on their own ground," Jeor Mormont proclaimed. Again, Tyrion raised an eyebrow. "What precisely are you entailing, my lord?"

"In my experiences as the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, when one is up against a foe of indeterminant strength, it would be foolish to allow the enemy to come to them," Mormont professed, "One would generally stand a better chance by being the first to take the offensive instead. This is one such case."

"So, what you're saying is…" Lord Tyrion began. He did not finish that statement, but he did place his hand on the hilt of the dagger on his belt.

The gesture did not go unnoticed by the Old Bear. He realized the implications of it almost straightaway, and he nodded his head, saying in a somber tone "Yes, my lord. We are not going to sit here on our arses and wait for the Night's King to appear at our gate. I aim to take the fight directly to him."

"Fight." The raven quorked, "Him."
Note: I have done it, my friends! I have successfully earned my Master's Degree! Now I am officially done with academics forever. Unless, of course, in ten years or so, I get profusely bored and decide I want to work towards a PhD. But until then, I'm going to concentrate on finding a better job (and my fanfictions, of course).

At any rate, posting this chapter feels much more gratifying than posting several of the most previous updates. Maybe that's just the lingering sense of euphoria brought on by the fact that I am finally out of grad school. Whatever it may be, I feel quaintly proud of this chapter. Enjoy it!

The largest men in the Seven Kingdoms came from House Clegane. The largest women came from House Mormont. Wed one to the other, and the product of their union would likely be taller than either. In theory, at least.

Rickard Clegane, the son of Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey, weighed seventeen pounds when he entered the world. No newborn babe in Westerosi history had ever weighed that much. Nevertheless, he had grown at a slightly smaller rate than one may have expected.

His father had been six feet tall at the age of eleven. Rickard had recently seen his twelfth nameday, yet he stood two inches' shy of six feet. Even so, he was bigger than all of his friends, even the ones who had a few years on him. Maester Kennick claimed it was quite possible that he might ultimately rise higher than even the Mountain himself. *But I've a way to go before I'm there.*

Needless to say, Rickard would need more than a couple feet before he could even begin to hope to match his lord father. He was not a man grown, even if he had the height of one. He still had much to learn about politics, leadership, combat, diplomacy and other critical issues. As it happened, Rickard was a very inquisitive person by nature. As such, he was always willing to learn.

Of the twenty towers in Moat Cailin, Rickard Clegane had unrestricted access to seventeen of them. The Pleasure Tower, the Drunkard's Tower, and the Meeting Tower were the only ones he would ever be denied entry to.

In the eyes of his mother, he was too young to lay with a woman or consume excessive quantities of alcohol. Hence the restrictions on the first two. *Hopefully in a few years, Mother will allow me to visit the Pleasure Tower and the Drunkard's Tower whenever I please.* Rickard was aware that he could have simply snuck into either tower when Lady Dacey was not around. But he respected his mother too much to disobey her so. That aside, Rickard did not have much taste for whores or wine in the first place. He simply did not appreciate being denied the opportunity to sample either.

He did, however, possess a great desire to expand his intelligence. The Knowledge Tower could generally appease his thirst, but the library and Maester Luwin did not hold all the information in the Known World. Then again, no place in the Known World could legitimately claim to hold every piece of worthwhile information. All the same, a particular amount of meaningful, exclusive knowledge could sometimes be acquired in certain places of the world.
The Meeting Tower has to be one of those places. Nothing anyone else said could dissuade Rickard from believing that. The Meeting Tower was, after all, the place where the secret council convened.

For the last fifteen years, Lord Gregor Clegane had handled all the most sensitive affairs of the Legion without Banners with the aid of his secret council. The council was typically composed of twelve Legionnaires. Two of that dozen were Father and Mother. The other ten were representatives from each region of Westeros, including the land north of the Wall.

A total of sixteen people had served on the secret council. Osmund Kettleblack and Garth Hightower had died during Greyjoy’s Rebellion, and they had been replaced by Lothor Brune and Willas Tyrell. Victarion Greyjoy had returned to the Iron Islands to take up his role as the Lord of Pyke, so his nephew Maron Greyjoy had taken his place. Allard Seaworth was currently occupied with business across the Narrow Sea, so Renly Baratheon was temporarily serving on the council in his place.

The secret council was called thus not because the names of its members were meant to be confidential, but because their affairs and the topics of their discussions were kept absolutely classified. It was so clandestine, in fact, that those sixteen people were the only ones who had ever set foot in the main chamber of the Meeting Tower. The only ones so far, that is.

Rickard was aware that Lord Gregor Clegane meant for him to assume command of the Legion without Banners someday. It’s quite likely that day will not be for many years. In spite of that, Rickard was hoping that his father would elect to bring him into his inner circle before that day. After all, how can I be a suitable commander if I am oblivious to the Legion's most delicate activities?

Rickard knew better than to merely ask Father to be included in the meetings. He would no doubt refuse, and were I to insist, he’d give me at least half a dozen reasons why not. Obviously, there was the issue of Rickard's youth. Furthermore, all the members of the secret council were full-fledged Legionnaires, most of them for over a decade. Presently, Rickard was not even old enough to be a Legionnaire-in-training.

For now, all Rickard could do was loiter outside the Meeting Tower whenever the secret council gathered and brood on when his father would finally decide to entrust him with their doings.

That was precisely what he was doing at this time. Incidentally, he had been doing quite a bit of it lately.

Recently, the secret council had been assembled much more frequently than usual. Normally, they only met once a fortnight. Sometimes, even less often than that. However, they had gone to Meeting Tower thrice a week every week for the last month. That was six times their normal rate. Something atypical must be afoot.

Apparently, he was not the only person with that line of thought.

"How long have they been in there?" a voice asked from behind.

He turned to the owner of the voice and saw her standing a few feet away. He answered her with "Around an hour. Maybe two."

"Have you been out here ever since they went inside?" she presumed.

"Just about, my lady," Rickard affirmed.
The young woman smirked and proclaimed, "Rick, I've told you afore; you needn't call me 'my lady.' My given name will suffice."

Rickard shrugged dismissively and stated "As you wish… Rhaella."

Rhaella was a dark-haired maid of nine and ten years. She had been named for the late sister-wife of Mad King Aerys, though her birth had preceded the Queen's death by three or four years. Since that was back when the Targaryens were still in power, that name was by no means out of place.

This Rhaella exhibited the grace and essence of a highborn lady, despite the fact she was of relatively common birth. Her parents had been retainers to House Dayne of Starfall. Her mother was a native of Dorne, but her father had been from somewhere else in the Seven Kingdoms. He had died shortly after she was born, so she had not known much about him or his background. In any case, she tended to favor her mother in appearance; her Dornish heritage was plentifully evident in both her complexion and her skin tone.

Rhaella had arrived at the moat about twenty days earlier. Her party had been a small one; there were only five other people apart from her. One of them was her mother. The other four were a tradesman, a sellsword, an old knight, and a guardsman who had sworn service to the Dornishwomen.

Lord Howland Reed had provided them an escort up the Causeway. Father had been there when they arrived at the southern gate. Naturally, he had been expecting them. It is rare that anyone ventures here without him being aware of it beforehand.

While Rickard had not been present when Lord Gregor received Rhaella and her party, he had seen his father direct the Dornishwomen and their companions around Moat Cailin in the days that followed. Father seemed rather friendly with them. Then again, the Mountain always went out of his way to make all the moat's visitors feel welcome. Still, there was something quaint about his interaction with Rhaella and her mother. Rickard was almost inclined to suspect that his father may have known them even before they came to the moat. But that would be ludicrous. He's only been to Dorne twice since the Targaryens fell from grace, and neither visit was to Starfall.

Rickard had already asked Rhaella and her mother, Shaara, if they had ever been acquainted with his father before they came to the moat. He was surprised by the vagueness of the answers he had received. They did not deny his allegation, but they offered no compelling evidence to support it, either.

Perhaps I am just overthinking Father's ambassadorial mannerisms. Oh, well. If he and Rhaella actually have a history, I'll learn of it in time. If I'm meant to learn any of those precious secrets of his, I suppose he'll share them with me. Someday.

Whatever the case, Rickard was certain there was nothing "intimate" between Father and Rhaella. Not only were their encounters always out in the open and in the company of other people, but the Mountain was not the only Clegane she mingled with.

Rhaella had gotten to know Mother quite a bit, as well. It was not difficult for them to share in each other's interests. They actually had a number of similar interests, such as their combat prowess and their appreciation for other warrior women.

Rhaella also spent some time with Lord Gregor's children. Rickard did not know what could have sparked her intrigue in him and his siblings. After all, he was seven years her junior; his siblings, even younger. Nevertheless, it had not taken them long to come to enjoy her company. Rickard quickly discovered she was a delight to be around.
At this time, when Rhaella met up with Rickard on the exterior of the Meeting Tower, she had not come alone. Two men had been in her company. To be precise, one man and one boy. The man was the knight in Shaara's employ. *Ser Rebinald, I believe that was his name. Why can't I remember his name? It seems he always goes wherever Rhaella goes, and I've seen much of her since she arrived.* Rickard knew the boy's name, though. He would have been a lousy brother if he did not.

The boy stepped forward and humorously observed "You have a talent for wasting time, Rick."

"And I suppose you've passed the day working towards some grand accomplishment, Al," Rickard sarcastically remarked.

Alyver Clegane scoffed at the dryness of that statement. Then he donned a serious expression, folded his arms, and gazed at the outer wall of the Meeting Tower, saying "At least some day, you'll actually be permitted to go inside that building. I have no such assurances."

"Who says you don't?" Rickard countered, "When I'm the lord of the moat, you'll be free to go in there as often as you like."

One facet Alyver shared with his elder brother was a yearning for knowledge, though his was more a sense of childlike curiosity than an actual wish to hone his intelligence. In time, he may come to enjoy learning for the rewards it provides, just as I do.

"I will hold you to your word," Alyver muttered slyly. *Nine namedays old, and he's already a smartass. I don't know whether to be proud or exasperated.*

"Fear not," Rickard asserted, turning towards the entrance of the Meeting Tower, "Someday, we'll both be on the other side of that door."

"You lads are rather young to be so invested in your lord father's doings," Ser Rebinald noted, "A word of advice: you are only young once in your life. You should treasure your youth while it lasts."

"We treasure it plenty, Ser Rebinald," Alyver declared, "Be that as it may, Cleganes grow up faster than other children. In mind as well as body."

"He speaks true," Rickard conceded, "And with the Long Night fast approaching, we cannot afford to squander any time on the frivolities of childhood."

By her countenance, Rhaella seemed impressed with that observation "You may still be boys, but you speak with the wisdom of old men."

"Perhaps you could tell our lord father that, Rhaella," Alyver proposed, only half-joking, "It may sway him to allow us to attend the next meeting of the secret council."

"He'll include us when he sees fit," Rickard hastily declared, "No sooner nor later."

"Your brother has the right of it," Ser Rebinald told the second son of Lord Gregor Clegane.

"I suppose he does," Alyver grudgingly admitted.

Not long after this exchange, the front door of the Meeting Tower swung open and the twelve members of the secret council stepped outside. Most of them went their own ways. Ser Brynden Tully headed towards the Novice Tower to inspect the newest recruits. Tormund Giantsbane and Smalljon Umber went to the training yard for a few rounds of "friendly" sparring. Gerion Lannister
headed off to the Smelting Tower to inspect the yield from the week's mining operations. Lothor Brune and Renly Baratheon headed to the Drunkard's Tower to lounge and have a few drinks (and to ensure that no one there had too much before noon). Maron Greyjoy went to the Worship Tower to give his daily prayer to the Drowned God. Lyn Corbray made for the Pleasure Tower for... predictable reasons.

Gregor Clegane, Dacey Mormont, Willas Tyrell, and Oberyn Martell lingered by the entrance to the Meeting Tower for a couple minutes. It only took the Lord and Lady of Moat Cailin a moment to notice Rickard and Alyver standing nearby. They smiled at their sons and walked over to them.

"Good morning, Father, Mother," Rickard bade his parents.

"Is it still morning?" Mother thought aloud.

" Barely, but yes," Alyver confirmed.

"That is fortunate," Father pronounced, "There is a task I must see to before mid-afternoon."

"Why mid-afternoon?" Rickard queried.

"We're expecting company today," Father apprised him. He then looked around at those who were in the immediate area and declared "Oberyn, Willas, Rhaella, I would speak with you in private sometime before then."

"As you command, my lord," Rhaella avowed. The heir to Highgarden and the Red Viper nodded their acknowledgment.

"If none of you has any objections, I propose we have that talk now," Willas Tyrell recommended.

"At present, I have nothing of greater precedence to do," Oberyn Martell stated.

"Neither do I," Father murmured. He looked to Rhaella and asked "Do you by chance know where your mother is?"

"I believe she is still in the Boarder Tower," the Dornishwoman professed.

Father claimed "This matter concerns her, as well. So let us make a detour to the Boarder Tower. Once we have found Shaara, we shall congregate in a more discrete place."

"Sounds like a plan," Oberyn said wryly. And Father has no shortage of those.

Gregor Clegane, Willas Tyrell, Oberyn Martell, and Rhaella swiftly headed to the southwest towards the Boarder Tower. Ser Rebinald followed close behind, keeping no more than ten feet of space between himself and the Dornishwoman.

Rickard still did not know why Rhaella and her mother were at Moat Cailin in the first place. Of course, these days, people were not required to have a legitimate reason to come to the moat. There were some who visited it for the experience, and some for the simple pleasure of seeing the base of the Legion without Banners.

All the same, the longer Rhaella was at the moat, the more Rickard was induced to think that she had some explicit motivation for coming. Her motivation may be hidden, but it is most certainly there. He was inclined to believe that her purpose had something to do with Willas Tyrell.

The first day Rhaella came to the moat, Father had led both her and Willas up to his solar. Rickard
could not say for a certainty how long they were up there, but it had to have been for at least three hours. When they finally came back down, Rhaella and Willas had spent the rest of the day together. Ever since then, they had gotten progressively more comfortable in each other's presence.

Just then, when they departed from the vicinity, Willas and Rhaella walked side-by-side. At one point, Rickard noticed that he took her hand in his. *I could be wrong, but I would say they were enamored. Or well on the way to it.* Rickard wondered if Willas and Rhaella were falling in love with each other. While it may have been likely, it was quite impossible. Social norms would never permit a union between the heir to a Great House and the daughter of a retainer to a noble house, especially when the former was from the Reach and the latter was from Dorne. *They may get along here, but south of the Neck… not so much.*

It had occurred to Rickard that Rhaella may have had more than one goal when she came to the moat. If so, her secondary objective may have concerned Jon Snow, Father's squire and one of Rickard's closest friends. Rhaella did not spend as much time with Jon as she did with Willas, but she spent enough that Rickard found it noteworthy. He could not guess what interest she may have had in the bastard of Winterfell. Perhaps she was actually more interested in his direwolf Ghost than she was in Jon. She did seem to get along with Myrna well enough, though. *Whatever Rhaella's interest in Jon is, let us hope it is nothing suggestive.* Not only would that complicate her relationship with Willas, but Ygritte might have made her life the Seven Hells.

Once Father, Rhaella, Willas, Prince Oberyn, and Ser Rebinald were gone from the area, Rickard was left alone with Mother and Alyver.

Lady Dacey Clegane looked to her firstborn and cheekily muttered "Are you convinced that if you stand here long enough, your father will let you inside the Meeting Tower sooner?"

"Surely you know me better than that, Mother," Rickard bluntly replied.

"I do know that for the last four weeks, you've waited outside this building every time your father held council," Mother contended, "Every time we've adjourned, I've found you standing in that exact same spot when I exit."

"She is correct," Alyver coincided with a smirk, "You are obsessed, you do realize?"

"Is it wrong of me to harbor an interest in Father's duties?" Rickard irately refuted.

"No," Mother asserted, "Someday, they will be your duties, as well."

"Which is why I am so interested," Rickard revealed.

Mother lightly scoffed. It was not a mocking scoff; it was more an amused one. She then formed a kind expression on his face, stepped closer to her firstborn, and suggested "Rick, what say you and I walk the perimeter of the moat?"

*Well, I have nothing better to do right now.* "Certainly, Mother."

As Rickard moved closer to Lady Dacey Clegane, she turned to Alyver and told him "You're welcome to come along, Al."

"I'd be delighted to, Mother," the second Clegane son stated sincerely, "But I promised Vallory I'd show her the proper way to wield a sword today."

For a moment, their mother appeared a little concerned by the implications of that statement. Alyver told her in assurance "Worry not; it'll be made of wood, not steel."
"All the same, please be careful," Mother cautioned him, "Even with a wooden sword, she could get hurt."

*Says the woman who was swinging a morningstar when other girls her age were playing with dolls.*

"Everything will be fine," Alyver insisted. *He sounds as though he knows what he is doing.* Mother must have thought the same, as she grinned and nodded.

Alyver headed off to the Children's Tower to locate their sister. After that, the woman from Bear Island turned back to her firstborn and proposed "Shall we take that walk?"

Now it was Rickard who grinned and nodded.

Over the course of the subsequent three hours, the heir to Moat Cailin and his lady mother went all around the moat. They spent most of that interval atop the outer walls.

Moat Cailin's design was very different from that of other holdfasts. Instead of having one main edifice with several smaller structures constructed around it, it was composed of twenty towers of relatively equal size. Apart from the Armament Tower, the Banquet Tower, the Lord's Tower, the Meeting Tower, and the Infantry Tower, all the towers of Moat Cailin had at least one side along the outer wall. Furthermore, all the towers were connected to two or more of the other towers by way of both stone walls and catwalks.

By traversing the entire length of the outer wall, one could move between all fifteen of the outward-facing towers without even setting foot on the ground. That was just what Rickard and his mother did.

They started along the Captains' Tower, as it was nearest to the Meeting Tower. From there, they passed through the Smelting Tower, and they went completely around the Pleasure Tower. *Just like we always do.*

They continued westward along the outer wall in what Father would have called a counterclockwise route. Proceeding eastward would have been a clockwise route. Clockwise and counterclockwise were two of the many terms his father had established. *I still wonder what a 'clock' might be.*

There were guards stationed all along the outer wall every twenty feet. None of these guards were Legionnaires; they were all sworn to House Clegane. Every time Lady Dacey Clegane and Rickard walked past them, the sentinels dipped their heads respectfully. Many of them muttered "milady" to Mother, "milord" to Rickard, or both. All who spoke did so with genuine admiration in their tones. Rickard appreciated that; it demonstrated just how highly House Clegane's retainers viewed their lord and his family. *Of course, it is rather difficult not to like the Mountain.*

Gregor Clegane was as good a father as he was a lord and commander, but sometimes his ability to manage all three at once was challenged. There were times when his obligations to the realm and his retainers had to come before those of his family. Rickard did not begrudge his father for that. The Mountain was simply doing what was required and expected of him as a noble lord of the Seven Kingdoms.

Dacey Clegane was often as busy as her lord husband, but her duties as Lady of Moat Cailin included managing the household and raising the Lord's children. As such, she was more often available for Rickard and his siblings. She was the one he normally went to whenever he needed guidance or advice. *This time, it is she who came to me instead.* That generally happened whenever
Dacey wished to discuss an intimate matter with her son.

One of their best ways to bond was by walking around the moat. They did this often. But not just for the exercise and the sights. These walks doubled as talks. As it happened, that was the fundamental purpose of them.

The subjects of their conversations typically varied. Some of the things they talked about that day were the moat's new trade agreement with Qarth, the recent slight decline in the Legion's enlistment rate, and how the marriage contract between Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell had been finalized.

Around midday, they reached the Flour Tower and stopped there for a bite to eat. After that, they continued onwards to the Worship Tower. It was there that the nature of the conversation shifted from casual to personal.

As they passed over Merchants' Block, Lady Dacey turned to her eldest son and asked him "Rickard, did I tell you how your father and I first met?"

"No, he did," Rickard stated plainly.

Mother chuckled at the straightforwardness of his answer. Then she enquired "Do you know what was remarkable about that occasion?"

Rickard thought on that for a minute. He tried to recall all the details Father had told him about when he and Mother had first met. Ultimately, he shrugged and muttered "Off the top of my head… I cannot think of anything particularly remarkable. I do not mean to be rude when I say that, Mother."

"Oh, it is quite alright, Rick," Mother reassured him, "Because you are correct. There was nothing remarkable about it."

Rickard was perplexed. "There wasn't?"

"Well, it did mark the moment when the Legion without Banners gained its first female member," Lady Dacey stated with a smile, "But that would have inevitably happened in any case. I am speaking of what occurred between your father and myself. There was nothing special in the least."

Rickard raised an eyebrow and gazed off to his side. He uttered softly "So, there was nothing passed between you? Nothing at all?"

"There was amity," Mother disclosed, "But that exists between every occupant of Moat Cailin. Even so, that was all there was between Lord Gregor Clegane and me on our first encounter. Your father and I were strictly colleagues."

"And how long did you remain 'strictly colleagues?'" Rickard stated inquiringly.

"The entire rest of that year, and much of the following one," she apprised him, "We gradually grew closer as top officers of the Legion. At some point, we discovered we had chemistry. However, we did not acknowledge that chemistry until our first joint mission to the Vale."

"The one that ended in failure?" Rickard asked rhetorically.

Mother hesitated a moment before she mumbled "Yes… I suppose it was a failure."

Baelish died before you could get him to Harrenhal. Sounds every bit a failure to me. Rickard
noted his mother did not seem so convinced of that.

She continued with "While the mission did not end in success, it did produce some fortunate results. On our way back to the moat, your father and I confessed our true feelings for each other. After we admitted that we were compatible, he suggested we solidify our relationship."

"I assume you accepted?" Rickard muttered.

"I told him I would ask your grandmother for her blessing first," Mother recounted, "Once she gave it, then I accepted. In the time since then, I have never once regretted my decision."

Rickard smiled at that and nodded his head slightly. Then he folded his arms and commented "This is all very fascinating, Mother. Truly it is. But why are you telling me this now?"

*There must be a point to it.*

He found out what it was a moment later. Lady Dacey Clegane notified him "When I first met your father, I thought of him as a fellow warrior and my leader, but nothing more. I swore him my allegiance as a soldier. I never thought I would devote myself to him as a woman. Back then, I had no plans to wed any man. Now, I cannot imagine sharing a bed with anyone else. To me, that is a sign that relationships can be wholly unpredictable. One never knows how they will change or where they will end."

Rickard reflected on those words, and he found he could not argue with any of them. He admitted"That's all very true. There is no way to tell how a relationship turn out. Strangers can become friends. Acquaintances can become lovers. Friends can become enemies."

"And underlings can become leaders," Mother added in. It was here that the full meaning of this lecture was made clear. "You won't always be just my son, Rickard. Before too long, you will be old enough to enter the Legion without Banners. When that day comes, you will also be my soldier. Gods willing, someday you will be my commander."

He could not decide if he was more alarmed or astonished by that statement. He shook his head softly and murmured "You give me too much praise, Mother. How could I ever give you orders?"

"When your father passes on, you will be obliged to," Dacey Clegane reminded him, "Commanding an army and heading a house may appear very different from each other. But they are more alike than you might think. When you are lord of this house, I will no longer be its lady. In the same fashion, when you assume control of the Legion, I will have no official authority over you. I will only be your lieutenant and your advisor."

"No," Rickard firmly disputed, "You'll still be my mother. I'll still be your son. A son should love and respect his mother as a man just as he did in boyhood."

Mother appeared touched by that declaration. She smiled at him, placed two gentle hands on his shoulders, and pulled him into a hug. She whispered "And even when the boy grows into a man, the mother loves him no less, either."

Most adolescents may have been embarrassed to be so affectionate with their mother in public. Rickard was not one of them. When his mother hugged him, he returned the embrace thusly. In his mind, domestic love was the purest form of love; it was not to be scorned or made ridicule of. Aside from that, Rickard and his mother were taller than anyone else in the immediate area. So even if he was not the heir to the moat and she was not its lady, he was not concerned that they would deride him. *They know I am big enough to teach any of them a lesson in manners. And I will,*
When Rickard and his lady mother pulled apart, she looked him in the eye and asked him not unkindly "Rickard, if you were to become lord of Moat Cailin in the near future, would you be reluctant to take up the role?"

"Of course I would," Rickard replied straightforwardly, "I would still do my duty and assume the lordship, but I would be far from pleased to do so. I do not say that simply because I feel I'd be unprepared for the role. It would be a grievous blow to all of us if we were to lose Father."

"Yes, it would be," Mother solemnly concurred.

Rickard suddenly became a little anxious. "Mother, is something wrong with Father? Is that why we are having this discussion?"

"No, your father is fine," Dacey Clegane assured her son, "Aside from near-excessive levels of stress and the occasional migraine, that is."

"I would expect nothing less from a man in his position," Rickard commented drily.

Mother smirked and gave a small nod. Then she put on her "serious" expression, and she said "I know you wish to be included in the secret council meetings. Your father knows, as well."

"I cannot claim to be surprised," Rickard Clegane uttered, "Since you've found me outside the Meeting Tower after each of the council's sessions, my desires were not what you would call 'subtle.'"

"Rick, we knew of your desires even before the last turn of the moon," Mother told him.

The heir to Moat Cailin was stunned. He began "How…?"

"Parents always know such things," Dacey Clegane claimed. *Hardly an original explanation. But a fitting one all the same.* "Your father and I have talked at length on when you should start to attend the secret council meetings."

Now Rickard was pleasantly surprised. He asked hopefully "Do you think I am ready? Or on the verge of 'ready'?"

"We have not reached a verdict just yet," Mother revealed, as though she was discussing a business matter, "If the choice were mine alone, I would bring you into the secret council very soon. Perhaps as soon as our very next meeting. I believe you deserve to be in the know. Alas, your father believes you need more time."

Rickard grimaced a bit. "Would it be impertinent to ask why?"

"Mainly, he wishes for you to focus more on your duties to our house," Lady Dacey Clegane explained, "There is also the fact that you are not yet a member of the Legion. He argues that we should wait another year."

Rickard nodded grimly. *This does not bode well.*

Even if his mother was on his side, he was well-aware that the final decision would ultimately be his father's. After all, Dacey Clegane was Lord Gregor's officer and his lady wife. It was her responsibility to uphold his decisions, just as it was Rickard's to accept them.
Still, it was not a totally lost cause. By his next nameday, he would be old enough to enter the Legion. He could only hope for the position of a squire, but he would still be a part of the organization. After that, he might earn a spot on the secret council.

"Just one full year," Rickard mumbled, "If fortune smiles on me."

"Do not despair just yet, Rick," Dacey advised her son, grinning mischievously, "I have ways of swaying your father's mind."

Rickard stifled the urge to laugh. "I did not need to know that."

Dacey snickered at that. Then she stated "Regardless of what your father decides, I would ask that you be patient."

"I give you my word that I will be," Rickard asserted. *Though I would still much prefer to be in the circle sooner rather than later.*

As though he had spoken those words instead of thought them, Mother looked at her son sympathetically and told him "If it gives you any consolation, your father does not share everything he knows with the secret council. There are certain things he does not tell even me."

"Every person is entitled to a few secrets," Rickard contended casually, "I do not want to join the secret council just so I can be aware of the Legion's private affairs. I want to join so I can be of use to you and Father."

"I never once thought otherwise," Lady Dacey Clegane pronounced, "With the threat of the Long Night approaching, we will need every bit of help we can get. However, you know as well as I do that it is not enough to be prepared for the Long Night."

"Indeed," Rickard conceded, "We must think beyond it, as well."

"Just so," Dacey Clegane confirmed. Next there was an interval of relative quietness in the area. Following that, Dacey bore a wide grin and stated "On the subject of thinking beyond the Long Night, it is not enough for a family to merely survive. It must prosper, as well. Therefore, I have another important question to ask. Have you given any thought to the future of this house?"

"I think about the future of this house all the time," Rickard claimed.

"Is that so?" Dacey uttered tersely, "Then how much thought have you given as to who you'd like to continue the house's future with?"

Rickard quickly realized what she meant. *She wants to know if I have any prospects for the next lady of the moat.*

"Truthfully, I have not given the topic very much thought at all, Mother," he admitted to the woman from Bear Island. *But I probably will, and fairly soon.*

His assumption was correct. Dacey Clegane smiled again and declared "Your father and I are willing to consider any eligible woman for you, so long as she is not a Frey."

*Again, I am not surprised.* While Father always preached fair treatment and equality, Rickard knew that Gregor Clegane did not like most Freys. There were some he could stomach. But not many. "Why all the hostility towards House Frey? I know they've had an unsavory reputation for the last century. But I would say they've begun to regain their honor these last ten years."
"Perhaps they have," Dacey Clegane uttered cockily, "Another three or four generations, and they'll be on the same level as us."

Rickard snickered at her observation. "Very well. No Frey brides."

He could tell Mother was pleased by that.

Rickard leaned back against the wall, rested his hands on the rail support, and thought aloud "It may be too soon to rush to any conclusions, but I believe it would be most advantageous if I were to marry a Northern girl."

"I was hoping you might say that," Dacey Clegane revealed, "I have a number of healthy prospects lined up for you."

*This should be 'mesmerizing.'* As he remained slouched against the Wall, Rickard gazed up at his mother and proclaimed "Alright, Mother. Who have you in mind?"

"Off the top of my head, I can think of at least a dozen highborn girls that would suit you," Mother declared, "Among them, I believe the three most promising ones are Wylla Manderly, Klara Dustin, and Talia Forrester."

Rickard gave three nods of approval. He perceived "Each brings her own rewards. A contract with White Harbor would strengthen our access to the sea. A contract with Barrowtown would improve our relations with the houses of the Barrowlands and the Boltons. A contract with Ironrath would increase our supply of ironwood. Of course, I have never met any of the three girls, but that can easily be remedied by scheduling a trip to each of their ancestral homes. Or they could come to visit me."

"Where would you like to start?" Mother queried.

"Let us not get ahead of ourselves," Rickard requested, "I would like some time to reflect further on the advantages and disadvantages of each match. Then I shall pick which one to pursue first."

"That seems a fair arrangement," Mother conceded, "Take all the time you need to think on this matter. I do not wish to rush you, nor do I intend to. Whoever you marry should be your choice and yours alone. Your father and I had that prerogative; it is only right that you should have it, as well."

"I am most grateful for that, Mother," Rickard said appreciatively.

Rickard would indeed consider all the advantages and disadvantages of marrying each of those three girls, just as he claimed he would. However, while he did not doubt that Wylla Manderly, Klara Dustin, and Talia Forrester would each make a fine wife for some man, he was not especially interested in being that man in the case of any of the three.

Unbeknownst to Mother, Father, and just about everyone else at the moat, Rickard had forged a close bond with another highborn girl of the North. Currently, they were good friends and nothing more. But there was potential for their relationship to grow into something more. Secretly, he was hoping it would grow into something more.

Unfortunately, even if it did, it was unlikely that the two of them could ever be together as husband and wife. For one thing, she was one of the few girls in the Seven Kingdoms whose birth was even higher than Rickard's. Winning the approval of her lord father and lady mother would have been a tremendous challenge in and of itself.

An even greater challenge would have been to win her approval. Rickard was aware that she had
no interest in marriage and children. As a matter of fact, she was almost totally averse to the very concept of being a lady. She much preferred riding horses, hunting game, and sparring with weapons. She even carried her own sword. Her "Needle," as she called it.

*She reminds me very much of Mother. Maybe that's why I enjoy her company so.*

Although it seemed highly improbable that she and Rickard would ever be joined together, as long as there was still the slightest possibility that they could be, he was not going to give up on her. He just felt so comfortable being who he was around her, and she felt the same with him. *That much I know for a certainty.*

*Be that as it may, he was prepared to deal with disappointment. There was a very high probability that he would have to settle for someone else. He had come to terms with that likelihood already. If he had to sacrifice his own happiness for the good of his house and the realm, he was willing to do so. There were more honorable men who had lost much more for lesser causes.*

Near the beginning of the last part of their conversation, Rickard and his mother had stopped walking. They were still atop the section of the outer wall that connected the Flour Tower to the Worship Tower. Whenever they discussed personal topics, they preferred to be standing still. It helped them concentrate better.

They were about to continue walking when a shrill noise broke through the calm atmosphere. It only took Rickard a few seconds to realize that it was the sound of a horn being blown. He listened closely, and it appeared to originate from the southwest. *It's coming from the harbor.*

"Someone's sailing up the Cut," he thought aloud.

"It would seem so," Mother agreed.

"How about we investigate?" he cheerfully proposed. She nodded her approval of the idea.

They reached the harbor just in time to see the gates being opened. A lone vessel passed through them. It appeared to be a Dornish galley. That by itself caught Rickard's fancy. The Dornish had infamously few ships, and each of them was only put to use on special occasions. *What could one be doing this far north?*

Soon enough, the galley pulled into the docks. After that, the gangplank was extended, and four people disembarked. One of them was the ship's captain. The other three appeared to be passengers. Rickard noticed that the captain and two of the passengers were Dornish. The fourth might have been, as well, but it was difficult to tell; he was helmed. *And armed. That's a fine sword he's got there.*

It was then that Rickard and his mother saw that a welcoming party had been assembled on the waterfront. Father was at the head of it. Prince Oberyn Martell, Rhaella, her mother Shaara, and Ser Rebinald were there, as well.

Rickard Clegane and his lady mother watched as Prince Oberyn stepped up to the two passengers who did not wear a helm and embraced them both. Shaara walked over to the helmed individual and embraced him, as well. After that, Ser Rebinald shook that man's hand.

A moment later, Rhaella stepped up to the first two passengers, and the three of them shared an even longer and tighter embrace. It was the type of embrace one might give to an estranged family member. *Perhaps they are family.* Then again, as far as I know, House Martell and the retainers of House Dayne have no immediate kin. *Then again, I am not a professional on Dornish genealogies.*
After the six Dornish people and Ser Rebinald were finished greeting one another, Father approached them. *Evidently, he is officially welcoming the new arrivals to the moat.*

The helmed man shook Father's hand. So did the younger of the unarmed passengers, who was also a man. However, the elder of the unarmed passengers, who was clearly a woman, disregarded the Mountain's hand altogether and embraced him instead. Father was currently standing with his back to Rickard, but based on how his head was inclined, it looked as though the Dornishwoman had induced him to bring his head down to her level. It was almost as though she had kissed him.

*My eyes must be deceiving me.* Father would never be unfaithful to Mother, nor she to him.

Once all the formalities had been dispensed with, Lord Gregor Clegane and Prince Oberyn Martell led the others off the waterfront. They hastily made their way towards the stone staircase along the outer wall. This staircase happened to lead up to the section of the outer wall that Rickard and his mother were standing on top of.

"It looks as though they're headed this way," Rickard pointed out.

"I believe you're right," Lady Dacey Clegane validated.

A minute later, Lord Gregor Clegane and his party ascended to the top of the staircase. Mere moments after stepping onto the outer wall, the Mountain saw his wife and his heir standing a few dozen feet away. He flashed them a smile, and then he and those in his company ambled over to them.

"Afternoon, Father," Rickard bade Lord Gregor Clegane, who nodded in acknowledgment. He then shifted his attention to the three passengers from the Dornish vessel, and he remarked "I presume this is the aforementioned company you were expecting?"

"You assume correctly," Father confirmed. He proceeded to introduce the three newest visitors. He started with the youngest of them, who had to be about five years Rickard's elder. "This is Edgar Sand, the only male of Oberyn Martell's infamous Sand Snakes."

Then he pointed out the armed man with the concealed face and disclosed "This is Ihtos, a freerider in service to House Nymeros Martell."

Finally, he gestured to the woman and declared "And this is Princess Elia Martell, Prince Oberyn's sister."

Although Ihtos appeared less than genial, Edgar Sand and Princess Elia seemed friendly enough.

Father then approached Mother and Rickard and encouraged them to come closer to the new arrivals. He swiftly introduced them, as well.

He placed his hand on his firstborn's shoulder and announced "I would like you all to meet my son and heir, Rickard Clegane."

Remembering his pleasantries, Rickard stepped forward and extended his hand to Ihtos, Edgar Sand, and Princess Elia Martell. He told them in a genuine tone "I am honored to make your acquaintance."

Ihtos shook his hand rather stiffly. Edgar's handshake was a little gentler but just as firm. Elia did not bother with the handshake. Instead, without any warning whatsoever, she rapidly moved closer to Rickard, placed her hands on his cheeks, and kissed him softly on the lips.
The kiss only lasted a split-second, but it caught him off his guard. In effect, Rickard froze in astonishment. He stood absolutely still for about ten seconds before he regained his senses. *I knew the Dornish were more casual about sex and working charms on others than the rest of Westeros. Even so... I did not expect that.* All the same, the kiss was not unpleasant. Princess Elia had a rather enticing kiss for a woman in her early forties.

Mother giggled, moved up beside him, and muttered humorously "Still convinced that you should only consider girls from the North?"

Rickard did not even elect to dignify that with a proper response. He just rolled his eyes, which made his mother giggle even more.

"You must be Lady Cleagne," Edgar Sand conjectured.

"Correct," she avowed.

Father stood behind Mother and pronounced "This is my beautiful wife, Dacey of House Mormont."

"She is beautiful, my lord," Edgar Sand proclaimed, "I will grant you that,"

"Well, I thank you, Edgar," Lady Dacey Clegane muttered, flushing.

Ihtos gave Mother another rough handshake. Again, Edgar's handshake was more delicate, and this time, he placed a chivalrous kiss on Mother's knuckles.

Mother moved to shake Princess Elia's hand, too. This time, it actually looked as though Elia was going to accept the hand. She almost did. But at the very last moment, she sauntered past the taller woman's arm, took a hold of her cheeks, and kissed her full on the lips, too. This kiss lasted longer than a split-second.

Rickard had to bite his tongue to keep himself from laughing. When Princess Elia pulled away, he could not decide whose facial expression was more priceless at that time: Mother's or Father's.

Elia Martell placed her hands on her hips and proclaimed "All this time, I've been under the impression that you were a very lucky woman, Lady Dacey. But it could be that your husband is an even luckier man."

Rickard could no longer resist his urge to laugh. He promptly broke out guffawing. Prince Oberyn, Edgar Sand, Rhaella, and Shaara soon joined in. Before long, Father, Princess Elia, and even Mother began to chuckle a bit, as well.

When the laughter faded away, Gregor Clegane told the three new guests "You must be tired after your voyage. What say I show you to the Border Tower?"

"We would appreciate that, my lord," Edgar Sand stated gratefully.

"Indeed," Ihtos coincided.

"Your quarters have already been prepared for you," Father declared, "Follow me; I'll take you to them."

Lord Gregor Clegane, Prince Oberyn Martell, Princess Elia Martell, Edgar Sand, Rhaella, Shaara, Ihtos, and Ser Rebinald continued along the outer wall. Just before she left, Elia flashed a grin towards Rickard and his mother. It was probably only meant to be a harmless, innocent gesture.
Had someone outside of Dorne made it, it most certainly would have been. *But what would the Dornish know about harmless, innocent gestures?*

Soon, Rickard was left alone with his mother once more. He noticed Mother still seemed half-paralyzed by shock over what had just happened.

Rickard smirked, stepped up to her, and said inquisitively "First time kissing a woman, Mother?"

She gradually turned to face her son and slowly nodded her head. "It was."

"Don't take it so hard," Rickard beckoned her audaciously, "It was my first time, as well."

That was all it took to encourage his mother to overcome her surprise over her introduction to Elia Martell and to instead get another laugh out of it. Rickard decided to join in the laugh. He laughed for three reasons. Firstly, he wished to partake in his mother's amusement. Secondly, he had just had his first intimate experience with a member of the opposite sex. Third and most of all, he felt very relaxed and at ease at that moment. He had not felt so tranquil in quite a while. He wanted to savor that feeling; there was a chance he would not get to experience it again for a very long time.
The Wolfswood looked just as she remembered it. Strong, immense, and somewhat intimidating to gaze upon. *Intimidating, even to those who were born in it.*

As intimidating as it was, the wolfswood also gave its residents a feeling of empowerment. Ironwood grew in abundance there; the healthiest stable supply in all of Westeros. For centuries, House Forrester had held domain over this supply. It had enabled them to develop prestigious connections with other houses, especially in the last ten years.

That was how Mira Forrester had come to serve as handmaiden to Margaery Tyrell. The idea had been her lady mother's originally. Lady Elissa Forrester had debated it would be in the best interests of their house if Mira became acquainted in such a way with the daughter of the Warden of the South.

Lord Gregor Forrester had not been in favor of that idea at first, but he had chosen to trust his wife's judgment. After all, her family was from the Crownlands, so she definitely knew more of southron cultures than he did.

Mira Forrester had travelled to Highgarden by way of the Kingsroad. She had returned by almost the same route, only she had stopped at Winterfell for a few weeks first. Either way, the road to Ironrath was a smooth one. *Seems more peaceful than I remember.*

"Excited, my lady?" Robb Stark enquired.

She turned to the heir to Winterfell and told him "Very much, my lord. I have not seen my ancestral home in nearly two years."

He seemed impressed. "That is longer than the collective lengths of time my siblings and I have ever been away from ours."

She gave a nod of acknowledgment "Have you ever been to the south, my lord?"

"I was born at Riverrun," the Young Wolf revealed, "But I have no memory of my time there. I was still a babe when my parents returned from King Robert's Rebellion. I have not been south of Moat Cailin since then."

"It is well worth the trip," Mira proclaimed, "The North is my home and always will be, but an occasional change of scenery has its appeal."

"I am certain it does," Robb Stark contended. After a short pause, he asked rhetorically "I assume you saw your brother Asher married before you left for the Reach?"

"I did," she affirmed, thinking back on the affair. *That was a bit of a momentous event.* Indeed, it was the first time in a very long while that House Forrester and House Whitehill put aside their rivalry and began to reconcile with one another. "I haven't heard much about him or Gwyn since I went to Highgarden. How are they faring, my lord?"

"They are doing rather well," Robb apprised her, "Their marriage may have only been a means of avoiding a private civil war, but as it turns out, Asher Forrester and Gwyn Whitehill are well-suited for each other."

"That is fortunate," Mira commented. *Hopefully, Rodrik and Elaena will be just as happy.* Lord
Robb and Lady Margaery, as well.

Mira gazed over her shoulder. The carriage that had brought her to Moat Cailin was about two dozen feet behind her. Lady Margaery Tyrell, her grandmother Lady Olenna, and Sera Durwell were sitting comfortably inside that vehicle. Mira, however, had opted to return to Ironrath on horseback. *I intend to see my home before I enter it.* She and the future Warden of the North were riding near the front of their party.

At that moment, Mira's horse halted in its tracks. It reared slightly and whinnied, as if frightened. Mira took ahold of the reins and beckoned her mount "Steady, girl. Steady."

The mare quickly calmed down. A few seconds later, Mira discovered what had startled her. A large mass of grey came bounding out of the trees. It stopped in the middle of the road. Some of the other horses shied away from it. One threatened to throw its rider.

Robb Stark gave a sharp whistle. "Grey Wind, to me!"

The direwolf swiftly padded over to his master. As he approached, Mira saw that a rabbit was trapped in his jaws. Bones and flesh crunched as the beast grinded his teeth on its neck. He gave a menacing snarl to stake his claim on the kill.

When Grey Wind noticed his master and Mira, he eased down. She breathed a sigh of relief. *Even after a moon's turn, he still scares me witless.*

Grey Wind and his packmates were wary of everyone at first. Excluding the Stark children and their bastard cousin, of course. From the moment of birth, the pups had been attached to them. They were more loyal to them than any hound or hawk, and they followed and obeyed their masters and mistresses faithfully. It was as though they were somehow bonded to Lord Eddard's sons, daughters, and nephew.

Every other person in the world had to be mindful of the wolves. At least, until they were convinced that the person meant no harm to the Starks.

Grey Wind had come to accept Margaery and Mira as friendlies of Robb and his family. He was indifferent to Sera, and he still seemed a little suspicious of Lady Olenna. Mira could hardly blame him. *Anyone with any sense would be heedful of the Queen of Thorns.*

Once the horses were again calm, the party continued onward. Grey Wind moved alongside his master, feasting on his prey. Even when gorging, he was vigilant and deadly as ever.

An hour later, they came upon Ironrath. They were received very warmly. The entire household, including Lord and Lady Forrester, had assembled in the courtyard.

Mira smiled at her parents when she spotted them. Naturally, they smiled back. This was the first they had seen of her in two years. At that moment, she realized just how deeply she had missed this place and the people who resided in it.

Mira Forrester remained atop her horse until the whole of the procession was through the gates. Even then, she did not dismount. She waited until Lady Margaery, Lady Olenna, and Sera stepped out of the carriage. Only then did Mira come down from her mount. Lord Robb got off his alongside her.

Together, the five of them approached Father and Mother. Once they were with a few feet of them, Lord Gregor Forrester donned his warmest grin and declared "My lord, my ladies, on behalf of my house, I bid you welcome to Ironrath."
"We are most gratified for your greeting, Lord Gregor," Robb pronounced in his most official tone. *It is they who have been gratified.*

Mira would have stepped forward to greet her parents in a more informal capacity. Before she did so, she looked at Lady Margaery, as though awaiting instruction from her. When the Rose of Highgarden noticed this, she smirked and told her handmaiden "Go right ahead, Mira."

After that, Mira walked up to the Lord and Lady of Ironrath and threw one arm around each of them. In response, Father wrapped her in his left arm; Mother in her right. The three Forresters held each other for a full twenty seconds. No words were spoken, but none needed to be.

When they finally came apart, Mira proceeded to introduce those who had accompanied her through the gate. "Father, Mother, this is Lady Margaery Tyrell of Highgarden, her grandmother Lady Olenna Tyrell née Redwyne, and Sera Durwell, a fellow handmaiden. My honorable ladies of the Reach, these are my parents, Lord Gregor Forrester of Ironrath and his wife, Lady Elissa Forrester née Branfield."

Although she attempted to sound professional, Mira could not help but speak with a heavy note of pride in her voice. No one seemed to hold that against her, fortunately.

Half a dozen handshakes were exchanged between the five named individuals. At one point, Mother humbly stated "You honor us with your presence."

Margaery and Sera accepted the compliment with considerable grace. Lady Olenna also accepted it, but with more conviction. *Modesty is lost on her.*

Robb needed no introductions. *Obviously.* He told Mother and Father "Although we sent a raven informing you of our coming, I realize we were not officially invited to your son's nuptials. As such, I beseech your pardon for any inconveniences we may have caused you."

"I do not give my pardon, as you've done nothing to require forgiveness, my lord," Father asserted, "There will always be room for the Starks at Ironrath."

"Your fealty is very much cherished," Lord Robb pronounced, just as Grey Wind appeared at his side. Father, Mother, and several of the household shuddered at the sight of the fearsome beast, but Robb placed his hand on the wolf's head and said "You have nothing to fear. He does not attack unless provoked."

While that was not a very assuring statement, his words helped everyone there to ease down a bit. Robb did not appear ashamed to have startled anyone, however. *Still nothing that requires forgiveness. Let us hope it remains that way, especially in the case of the direwolf.*

Duncan Tuttle, the castellan of Ironrath, came forward and announced "Chambers have been set aside for all of you. Though I am not certain we can accommodate the wolf; the kennels are packed as they are."

"That is quite alright," Robb disclosed, "Grey Wind will stay with me. If no one's any objections."

"None, my lord," Father proclaimed. *Long as no wolfshit needs to be scraped up off the floors.* After a pause, Lord Gregor Forrester said "I imagine you are all fatigued after your journey. If you wish to retire, Duncan will take you to your quarters."

"Very well," Robb Stark avowed. His female companions did not offer a word of protest.

Duncan then led Robb, Margaery, her handmaidens, and the Queen of Thorns into the main
building. Like the Wolfswood, the holdfast looked just as Mira remembered it, both internally and externally.

Robb was given a private room near Father's solar, which he shared with Grey Wind. Margaery and Lady Olenna had their own rooms, as well. Since space was a little tight due to all the wedding guests, Mira had to share her old room with Sera. *Not that I am complaining.*

As luck would have it, Mira's bedroom was in-between the chambers that had been set aside for the Tyrell women. After ensuring that her Grandmother was settled, Margaery went over to join her handmaidens.

"Are the rooms to your liking, my lady?" Mira inquired when the young rose entered. *More importantly, are they to Lady Olenna's?*

"Oh, yes," Margaery informed her, "Grandmother seems even more comfortable here than at Winterfell. For myself, it is about the same."

Mira was pleased. She knew her ancestral home could never hope to compare to Highgarden, but at least Ironrath had met the Tyrells' standards for comfort and hospitality.

She sat down on her bed, and then she looked to the other girl from the Reach and asked her "What do you think of my home, Sera?"

"As of now, I must agree with Lady Olenna," Sera Durwell remarked, "I've been at Ironrath ten minutes, and already I prefer it to Winterfell."

Mira was alarmed by the conviction in her friend's voice. "I thought you enjoyed our stay at Winterfell."

"I did," Sera claimed, "For the most part. The Starks were gracious hosts; they made me feel more than welcome. Nonetheless, I could have done without Theon Greyjoy making those passes at me."

Mira scoffed. *Oh, that explains her answer.*

"I should have warned you; the man's a shameless flirt," Robb Stark drily commented. Mira turned to the entrance to the bedchamber and saw the Young Wolf standing in the doorframe. It was likely that he had been standing outside the room a little while longer, though. *Let us hope he did not misinterpret Sera's assessment of Winterfell's hospitality.* Grey Wind was not with him at this time.

Sera shrugged and murmured "I would not have minded the flirting if he hadn't sung so much."

Margaery raised an eyebrow and assumed "He sang to you?"

"Yes," Sera affirmed, "One song in particular. I cannot recall the exact words. But the refrain was 'Sera, Sera, storms are brewing in your eyes. Sera, Sera, no time is a good time for good-byes.'"

*I do not recognize that song.* Neither did Margaery, but her intended did. Robb remained standing by the door with his arms folded. He thought aloud "That is one of Lord Gregor's songs."

Sera was baffled. She looked to the lady of Ironrath and stated "I was unaware that your father wrote songs, Mira."

It was all Mira could do to keep from rolling her eyes.

"I believe he means the Mountain," Margaery bluntly enlightened her handmaiden.
"I do, my lady," Robb told his betrothed, "'Sera' is one of many songs Lord Gregor Clegane has composed himself. I am not wholly certain who the Sera in the song is meant to be. Perhaps it is merely a random name that suits the song's rhythm. But I have surmised that the song itself is about separation from an old flame."

"If that's the case, Greyjoy missed the purpose of the song," Sera mumbled crossly, "Otherwise he would have let me be after he sang it for the first time."

"Theon is the type of person who values things more for their appearance than for their meaning," Robb disclosed, "But I cannot have guests of Winterfell harassing other guests. So for your sake and his, I'll speak to Theon when we get back. He will not bother you anymore then."

"Thank you kindly, my lord," Sera stated gratefully.

Robb Stark grinned knowingly. A moment later, Mira thought she heard footsteps out in the corridor. She was not the only one, as Robb leaned out slightly and peered down the hallway. After that, he maintained his grin, looked to Margaery and her handmaidens, and announced "It looks as though we have more company."

Before the girls could ask him what he meant, they found out. Five more people appeared at the entrance of the chamber. They were her elder brother, his wife, her younger brothers, and her younger sister.

As Robb shook hands with all five of them, Mira broke into another smile. Then she promptly rose from her bed and walked over to these five individuals. Halfway there, Ryon ran to her and wrapped his arms around her waist. She tenderly wrapped her arms around his upper back. Ethan and Talia soon approached them; Mira took both of them in a warm embrace, as well. Finally, they were joined by Asher and Gwyn.

The six of them stood locked in their group hug for close to thirty seconds. Someone, it sounded like Ryon, muttered "We missed you so much."

Mira had noted that someone was conspicuously absent from this reunion. When they all came apart, she inquired "Where is Rodrik?"

"Rillwater Crossing," Asher apprised her, "He wanted to escort Elaena and her family here himself."

"Rather admirable of him," Margaery stated approvingly.

"Your kind of gentleman, my lady?" Robb wryly muttered from his position at the door.

Margaery smirked and retorted with "My kind, indeed."

*Given how he went all the way to Moat Cailin just to see her to Winterfell, I am not surprised.*

"Well, it is wonderful to see you all," Mira told her siblings and her sister-by-law, "But I would have thought to see you in the courtyard when we got in."

"Our apologies for not being there," Ethan told her, "We were in the godswood, praying for your safe arrival. And Rodrik's."

"Your prayers are appreciated, but not wholly necessary," Sera remarked, "We met no trouble on our way here."
"Perhaps that was because of our prayers," Talia slyly countered.

Mira giggled and patted Talia on the back proudly. Her little sister may have appeared quiet and meek, but Mira believed that beneath that innocent façade, she already possessed a precocious mind and sharp wits to complement it.

The elder Forrester girl proceeded with another round of introductions: "This is my mistress, Lady Margaery Tyrell, and another of her handmaidens, Sera Durwell. Margaery, Sera, these are my brothers Asher, Ethan, and Ryon, my sister Talia, and Asher's wife Gwyn."

Margaery stepped closer and stated sweetly "It's a pleasure to meet you all."

"Likewise, my lady," Gwyn Forrester said to the young Reachwoman, "Mira writes us very often. She talks of you fondly and at length."

Mira flushed at that revelation, but Margaery seemed flattered by it. She claimed "She also speaks of her family with nothing but praise. Now that I finally meet you all, I see why."

"Thank you, my lady," Ryon murmured quietly. He can be so adorable when he tries to be formal.

After a bit of silence, Ethan stated "We would be delighted to stay around and know you a little better, but Mother needs us to assist her in preparing for Rodrik's wedding."

"The grand event is tomorrow, after all," Talia added in.

"That's right; we got here just in time," Mira conceded, "Can I be of help in any way?"

"No, you needn't worry yourself," Gwyn disclosed, "Lady Elissa has everything under control. The arrangements are on a very tight schedule. The slightest alteration, even if beneficial, could disrupt everything."

Well, we cannot have that. Mother would be frantic if anything went wrong. Mira shrugged and stated "Then I suppose I will be here, if you decide you need me."

"We'll still see you at dinner, right?" Ryon said hopefully.

"Of course," Mira assured her youngest brother.

Soon after, Ryon, Talia, Ethan, Gwyn, and Asher left the bedchamber. Right before he stepped back out into the hallway, Asher turned back and stated sardonically "Oh, by the way, Mira, you'll be interested to know that a certain party will be making an appearance at the feast."

Mira was intrigued by that statement and the undertone it was delivered with. "Is that right? Who might it be?"

Asher cockily uttered "I will only say this: his type makes you want to cling to your skin."

That alone was enough to tip Mira off. She raised an eyebrow and presumed "Dom?"

"Yes, our good friend Dom is attending," Asher muttered cheekily.

Mira did not know whether to smile or grimace. "I was unaware that he was invited."

"Officially, he wasn't," Ethan called out from the corridor, "Apparently, his lord father wished to convey his congratulations, and a raven was not sufficient to do so. As such, he chose to send his son instead."
"That was what they claimed, at least," Talia remarked, "Truthfully, I believe the idea to come was actually Dom's."

"So do I," Asher professed. He then smirked, glimpsed over at Mira, and murmured amusingly "Furthermore, I don't think the wedding is all he is coming for."

Mira's cheeks went a slight pink, making her elder brother chuckle. She dreamily gazed at the wall and remarked in a very blunt tone "Thank you for notifying me. You may go now."

Asher continued scoffing as he exited the bedchamber. Robb remained standing at the door and watched Asher, his wife, and the three Forrester children walk away. Once they were gone, Margaery commented "You have a lovely family, Mira."

"Thank you, my lady," Mira Forrester said appreciatively. "Though lovely is not what I'd use to describe some of them. Namely Asher."

Sera was lounging in an armchair beside the open window. She crossed her legs and asked curiously "Who is this 'Dom' you mentioned?"

"Domeric Bolton," Robb answered for her, "The heir to the Dreadfort."

At first, Mira was stunned that he deduced that much. Then it dawned on her. There are not many highborn men in the North who could shorten their name to 'Dom.' Since I have been away for the last two years, Lord Robb would know better than I who all of them are. Apart from that... the 'skin' remark must have given it away.

"Mira has told us of the Boltons," Margaery recounted, "As I recall, their sigil is the flayed man, and their words are Our Blades Are Sharp. Most disturbingly of all, there was once a time when they skinned their enemies alive."

Sera shuddered. "It's a relief that flaying is outlawed in modern times."

While this was true, it was rumored that the Boltons continued to practice flaying in secrecy. No evidence of these rumors had ever been unearthed, but there was more stock in them than there was in most conventional gossip.

"Still, with a history such as that, the Boltons do not sound an agreeable sort," Margaery perceived.

"You are not alone in making that observation, my lady," Robb proclaimed, folding his arms again, "Every region of Westeros has one house which stands apart from the rest. For the North, it is House Bolton. If you desire proof, consider its current lord. Roose Bolton is regarded by many as a terrifying man. I have only met him once, but I would sooner fear him than any other man I've ever met. He is utterly devoid of emotion and empathy, and he can be inexplicably harsh and cruel to disobedient retainers. Some say he smiles even less often than Lord Tywin Lannister, he has an even weaker sense of humor than Lord Stannis Baratheon, and he could even rival Randyll Tarly for the distinction of the coldest man in the Seven Kingdoms."

That was enough to make Margaery and Sera wince. Since House Tarly stood vassal to House Tyrell, the Reachwomen were familiar with the Lord of Horn Hill. Lord Randyll had come to Highgarden twice whilst Mira was in Margaery's service, and neither of his visits had been memorable in a pleasant way.

"Be that as it may," Mira debated as she sat back down on her bed, "The only thing Domeric Bolton has in common with his father is their family name. He is a very proficient swordsman and archer, and he is scholarly, resourceful, congenial, and compassionate. At times, he can be severe
and ruthless, but only towards those who have wronged him or his."

If Robb had managed to give Margaery and Sera a very grim depiction of House Bolton, Mira had succeeded in getting them to reevaluate that negative outlook. Furthermore, while Robb may have been reasonably accurate in his description, he had mostly spoken from information he had acquired from others. Mira had spoken from personal experience.

"Well, Lord Roose may not be a model gentleman," Sera contended, "But Domeric certainly seems to be an ideal man."

"I am pleased you think so," Mira murmured softly, "He is also my intended."

Sera and Margaery were taken aback. So was Robb, despite his apparently neutral countenance.

"What?" Margaery murmured in astonishment.

"My probable intended, more like," Mira clarified, leaning back against her pillows, "Lord Roose was the one to propose the match. My father and I suspect he simply wished to strengthen his main ironwood connection. Even if that is his only reason, it does have other advantages."

"Such as…?" Sera bade her continue.

"My house's greatest rival is House Whitehill," Mira went on, "The union of Asher and Gwyn lessened the rivalry slightly, but not entirely. The Whitehills have been vassals to the Boltons for as long as the Forresters have been vassals to the Starks. The union of myself and Domeric could go a long way into improving relations between all four houses."

"That would prove to be an asset for the North as a whole," Robb declared, "It is past time our old enmities were cast aside."

_There we agree. As your house is fond of saying, Winter Is Coming._

"But all economic and diplomatic relations aside, Domeric is a decent man," Mira contended, "He has called upon Ironrath several times in the past. While he may not be a friend of the family, I like to think of him as a friend of mine."

"Yet you appear to have mixed feelings about his coming here," Sera noted.

"She is well within her rights to have such feelings," Robb Stark declared, leaning against the wall, "Domeric Bolton is a close acquaintance of mine, as well. He is much better at being a human than his lord father; on that, Lady Mira and I agree. However, since he will be here for a wedding, his presence could be a sign."

"A sign of what?" Sera enquired.

"A sign that Lord Roose may intend for me to be more than Domeric's 'probable' intended," Mira replied for the Young Wolf.

"Is that necessarily a bad thing?" Margaery asked rhetorically.

"No," Mira admitted, "Sooner or later, I anticipated that I'd be married off to a northern lord. All the same, I was holding out hope that that would not be for a few more years."

"Who's to say it would have to be in the immediate future?" Margaery disputed.

"A fine point," Robb conceded, "Think on this, Mira: even if a marriage contract is drawn up for
you very soon, it does not have to be honored straightaway. For instance, the contract between Margaery and myself was drafted almost eleven years ago."

Mira snickered and pointed out "With all due respect, my lord, at the time, you and she were younger than my brother Ryon."

"She is correct," Sera confirmed.

"Well, in any case, do not think overmuch of Domeric Bolton's arrival," Robb advised her, "Maybe he truly is coming here simply to pay you respects on behalf of Lord Roose."

"And if he has other motives, you are always within your right to refuse," Margaery added.

"I will bear that in mind," Mira claimed. \textit{Refuse the contract or refuse the man?} Mira decided not to ask. Whatever the case, she would rely on her own sound judgment when she encountered Domeric.

Supper was served a few hours later. The meal that evening was relatively plain, but Mira found the atmosphere quite marvelous. There was nothing at all like eating at the table under the roof of one's own home. She had been deprived of that luxury for the last two years.

At dinner, Mira also had the opportunity to get reacquainted with the household staff. Maester Ortengryn's beard and chain had both grown a bit. Ser Royland Degore was still as gruff as ever, but he did not raise his voice without cause. Gared Tuttle, Duncan's nephew and Mira's childhood friend, had been taken on as Father's squire, and thus far, he was performing excellently.

Uncle Malcolm had enlisted in the Legion without Banners a long time ago, and at present, he was across the Narrow Sea on Legionnaire business. Even though he would miss the wedding, his family did not begrudge him his absence. \textit{At least he is helping Westeros to grow stronger in another capacity.}

Early the next morning, House Forrester was finally made whole again, when Rodrik showed up at the gates with Elaena Glenmore and her family at first light. Mira wanted to be the first to welcome him back. Alas, Father, Mother, and Ryon managed to reach him before she did. Luckily, Mira was content with being the fourth to see him.

In any case, Mira and her siblings only had time to exchange a few words with their eldest sibling before Mother hastily escorted him and Elaena indoors. \textit{She is very much determined to remain on schedule; that much is evident.}

The entire day was devoted to readying Ironrath for the upcoming festivities. Lady Elissa Forrester took it upon herself to oversee all the preparations firsthand. She spent a considerable amount of time with Rodrik and Elaena. \textit{Never together, of course. The groom mustn't see the bride so soon before the event.}

Since the Glovers were the overlords of the Wolfswood, it was decided that the master of House Glover would conduct the wedding. As such, Galbart Glover of Deepwood Motte arrived in the late afternoon. At the time, Mother was preoccupied with assisting Elaena with her gown, so she was unable to welcome Galbart. Fortunately, Father could receive and greet the master of Deepwood without her.

The moment the Sun disappeared over the western horizon, the wedding ceremony commenced.

Ironrath had once of the largest godswoods in the North, so there was more than sufficient space to accommodate all the attendees. Mira, her family, and their guests from the Reach stood in the front
of the crowd on the right side; the Glenmores at the front on the left side. In a similar fashion, Galbart Glover stood before the heart tree with Lord Glenmore to his right and Rodrik to his left. The three men were quickly joined by Elaena.

Mira did not think words could do justice to convey how handsome and beautiful Rodrik and Elaena looked respectively. That had to be among the most gorgeous couples she had ever seen. Even so, she contained her awe and watched on in silence as Lord Glenmore removed his house's cloak from his daughter's shoulders and Rodrik swiftly replaced it with the clock of House Forrester.

The customary sermon was given, and then the vows were exchanged. It culminated in Galbart Glover declaring the union whole in the eyes of the Old Gods. It was then that Rodrik cupped Elaena's cheek with his hand, announced "With this kiss, I pledge my love," and pressed his lips against hers.

The applause that followed the kiss was deafening. It was so loud, in fact, that Mira could hardly even hear her own voice amongst the thunderous cheers.

The subsequent wedding feast was held in the courtyard. It was then that he showed up.

Although Domeric Bolton was not at the actual wedding, at least he was dressed for the occasion. He was clad in a doublet of boiled leather, a pair of riding trousers, and a hooded cloak, all tinted a shade of dark pink. *I cannot deny that he looks splendid.* His party was small; he had only been accompanied by half a dozen of his father's guards.

One particular table at the feast had been designated for honored guests of Ironrath. As the future Lord and Lady of Winterfell, Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell sat at the head of it. Olenna Tyrell, Sera Durwell, and Domeric Bolton sat beside them. Mira Forrester would have taken a chair at their table, but by mandate of tradition, she was required to sit with her family on the dais.

For the first two courses, Mira talked with her eldest brother and his new wife. The two of them claimed they were going to try to have an heir as soon as possible. They did seem quite eager to have one. Certainly more eager than Asher and Gwyn were. *The two of them have been together three years, yet they still have no babes of their own.* She suspected they were just waiting for the most ideal time. *In any case, it will be nice to have more children at Ironrath soon.*

After the second course, the dancing session began. As rehearsed, Rodrik and Elaena started the dance, and Lord and Lady Forrester and Lord and Lady Glenmore followed them up. A number of other couples, including Robb and Margaery, swiftly moved to partake.

A few minutes in, Domeric Bolton rose from his chair, strolled over to the dais, and stopped in front of Mira. He offered his hand to her and coolly requested "May I have this dance, my lady?"

His approach was not what one would call "charming," but he clearly remembered his courtesies. Mira decided to oblige him. She put on her most sincere smile, accepted his hand, and bade him "Lead the way, my lord."

Domeric Bolton was a nimble dancer. He did not hold Mira too close or too tightly, and his hands did not wander aimlessly along her body. For a while, they did not exchange any words.

The silence between them broke when Domeric asked "How was the wedding?"

"It went swimmingly," Mira informed him. *Wonderful way to use that word for the very first time,* she derided herself.
"Excellent," the heir to the Dreadfort commented. After a pause, he queried "Did you enjoy your time in the Reach?"

"Oh, yes," she responded, thinking back to her days at Highgarden, "Everything is so beautiful there. There's green as far as the eye can see, and all manner of crops grow in abundance. Fruits, vegetables, grains; they have it all. A single year's harvest could be enough to feed the total population of the North for two or three years. And I have not even begun to tell you about the people. You always hear that the Reach is the heart of chivalry. I can verify its truth firsthand. Never have I seen such etiquette demonstrated daily."

Mira abruptly stopped there. She felt like blushing, but she did not. She just gazed down at her feet and murmured "My apologies; I did not mean to rant. I just got a little caught up in my memories."

"Rants are still preferable to silences," Domeric assured her kindly, "And please; do not apologize. What matters is that you relished the experience."

"'Relish' is not the word I would use," Mira claimed, "But I suppose it is applies well enough."

"I would say it does," Domeric disputed, "I'm pleased to know the south pleased you so. I'd wager you pleased a few of the Reachmen, as well. While I was seated, I had some words with Lady Olenna. According to her, you and Lady Margaery are practically sisters."

Mira was astounded. That is perhaps the highest form of praise one could get from the Queen of Thorns. "Did she actually say that?"

"No, but it was heavily implied," Domeric disclosed, "Maybe she regards you as the closest thing she has to another granddaughter."

"It happens that she already has a granddaughter other than Margaery," Mira informed him, "Desmera Redwyne of the Arbor. Her parents are Lord Paxter Redwyne and Lady Mina Tyrell, Lady Olenna's first daughter."

"I said 'another,' not 'a second,'" Domeric reminded her, scoffing a little, "Regardless, she clearly holds you in some form of esteem."

"You surmised that much from one brief conversation with her?" Mira presumed, somewhat skeptical.

"No, I just made a simple observation based on logic and reason," Domeric illuminated, "Lady Olenna's words left little to the imagination."

"I cannot claim to be surprised," Mira coincided, "The Queen of Thorns does not bother with subtleties or half-truths. She always speaks very plainly. That is how she earned her moniker, after all."

"So I gathered," Domeric thought aloud, "Margaery does not take after her grandmother in that regard, I've noticed. At a glance, she seems much more discreet."

"At times, she is," Mira declared, "Depending on the situation, she can either be very straight or very discreet. I would say she more oft tends to lean toward the latter."

"Well, that is what I was hoping for," Domeric commented straightforwardly.

Now Mira was more than a little bewildered. "What you hoped for? Dom, what are you talking about?"
He did not answer her right away. Instead, he casually looked around to make sure that no one was listening in on them. Then he turned back to Mira and quietly told her "Mira, although I came here under the pretense of extending my father's best wishes to Rodrik and Elaena, you and I both know he cares little and less for the relations between houses. Unless they concern his own, of course."

"Of course," Mira repeated drolly. She leaned a little closer to him and remarked assumingly "I can probably guess why you actually came here."

Domeric did not smirk and nod, as she expected him to. Instead, he donned a serious facial expression and muttered sternly "As much as I delight in your company, Mira, I did not come to Ironrath only to see you. I am also here on business."

Once more, Mira was taken aback. "What business?"

He took ahold of her waist and whispered into her ear "Let us dance our way over to Robb and Margaery. I will tell you once we reach them."

"Very well," she said in response. *This must be imperative if he wishes to include both of them.*

Mira Forrester and Domeric Bolton casually waltzed over to the center of the courtyard, where Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell were engaged in a rather intimate dance sequence. She had her hands on his shoulders; he had his on the lower part of her back. There were less than six inches of air between their bodies, and even less between their faces.

"They're smitten with one another, aren't they?" Domeric assumed.

"What gave it away?" Mira retorted sarcastically. *I envy them. How often do two betrothed persons become enamored even before their own wedding?*

Less than a minute later, Mira and Domeric were dancing alongside Robb and Margaery.

The Young Wolf must have noticed how quickly they had moved across the dance floor, as he commented jokingly "Well, you two are quite frisky tonight."

"You're one to talk," Domeric retorted, gesturing to how Robb's hands were literally an inch above Margaery's arse.

"Whatever you say," Robb muttered, giving a slight eyeroll.

"Nothing wrong with getting frisky," Margaery murmured, a little saucily, "This is a wedding feast, after all."

"Yes, but I don't recall being invited to the bedding," Domeric slyly muttered. Robb and Margaery got a good laugh at that.

"Well, you weren't really invited to the wedding, either," Mira pointed out.

"I realize that," Domeric admitted, "But I was determined to come all the same."

"Determined?" Mira remarked, "Domeric, you make it sound as though you're here on an errand, not a celebration."

"Between you and me, I am here on errand," Domeric revealed, "But not the type of errand you might think. I did not travel all the way from the Dreadfort simply to wish Rodrik well. I also came... because I deemed it critical to do so."
"What do you mean 'critical'?” Margaery asked.

Again, Domeric checked to ensure that no one was eavesdropping on them. Then he beckoned Robb and Margaery to come a little closer, which they did. For safety’s sake, Mira moved a little closer, as well. Now there was even less space between her and Domeric than there was between Robb and Margaery.

When they were all close enough to hear each other breathe, the heir to the Dreadfort subtly told the three younger people there "After the feast, I would like for us to speak alone."

"By 'us,' you mean…?” Robb queried.

"You and I, my lord," Domeric explicated, "And Lady Mira and Lady Margaery. This concerns them, too."

"What is it about?" Margaery enquired in interest.

"I cannot elaborate while we are out here," Domeric Bolton proclaimed, "All I can say is that it is a very delicate and pressing matter, and it is urgent that we talk on it before the night is out."

Mira, Robb, and Margaery looked between each other for about twenty seconds, as though they were having a private conversation with their eyes. Ultimately, all three of them looked to Domeric and nodded their heads in approval. He was quite satisfied with that response.

An hour later, the feast reached its conclusion. As the scraps of the final course were cleared away, Rodrik and Elaena Forrester went to carry out the bedding. Most of the attendees went ahead and turned in for the night; the few that stayed up would go to bed soon enough.

Sera had had a little too much to drink that night. Mira had to give her a helping hand back inside. Domeric assisted her with that unpleasant task.

When they were halfway to the Great Hall, she lurched, as though she was going to throw up. When they were at the stairs to the Great Hall, she DID throw up. Luckily, it landed on the grass, and no one was standing near that spot when it happened.

A few minutes later, they reached Mira's bedchamber. An additional bed had been brought in for Sera; Mira and Domeric managed to tuck her into that bed without disturbing or unsettling her. After that, she promptly passed out. She really cannot stomach her drink.

After seeing to Sera, Mira and Domeric made their way to the adjoining room, which was Margaery's quarters. Margaery and Robb were already there. For whatever reason, so was Grey Wind. For security purposes only, I hope.

Unlike most, Domeric Bolton did not cringe or recoil when he saw the direwolf for the first time. He did not seem awestruck or flabbergasted, either. Instead, he only appeared a touch fascinated.

Grey Wind eyed the heir to the Dreadfort inquisitively for about a minute. Then he eased down, as though he had already accepted him as an ally to his master. That provided Mira some amount of comfort. At any rate, now we know Domeric is not a threat to any of us. Or to Robb, at the very least.

Domeric took a minute to shut the windows and lock the door. After securing the area, he declared "Now we may begin."

Margaery repeated her question from earlier: "What is this about, Domeric?"
She was sitting up on the side of her bed. Robb was standing directly behind her, and Mira was sitting beside her in an armchair. Domeric stood a few feet before the three of them.

He placed his hands behind his back, released a deep sigh, and proceeded with: "A couple months ago – shortly before you and Mira arrived in the North, I believe – I went on a hunting trip. My company was relatively small; I only brought a handful of my lord father's soldiers and servants. My friend Harrion Karstark, the heir to Karhold, and a few of his retainers joined up with us. We had a fairly prolific hunt. On the first three days, we shot us an average of two boars, three deer, and eleven rabbits each."

"That is quite intriguing; it truly is," Robb claimed, "But I assume you did not call us here just to tell us of your skills as a hunter. I suppose you are going somewhere else with this."

Domeric solemnly nodded his head in confirmation. Then he continued with "On the fourth day, we bagged something more than animals."

That alone captured Mira's interest, as well as that of Robb and Margaery. She bade him "Go on."

"Sometime around midmorning, Harrion spotted this one abnormally large rabbit," Domeric recounted, "It was an especially evasive one, as well. He spent twenty minutes pursuing it until he chased it all the way back to its lair. It vanished underground before he could catch it, but even then, he did not give up. He dug up the ground himself to get at the buck. Eventually, he found it. But… he also found the skeletal remains of a human hand."

Mira had a sharp intake of breath. "What?"

"He and I were just as shocked as you," Domeric recalled, "We decided to investigate further, and we found much more than a hand. The body it belonged to was buried there, as well. Bones were all that remained, so we could not hope to identify who it was. However, the body was clad in the armor of a Winterfell guard."

By this point, Margaery, Robb, and Mira were captivated by Domeric's tale. That last detail would have been enough to engross them, if the rest had not already.

"What happened next?" Robb enquired.

"Naturally, the hunting trip was put on hold," Domeric pronounced, "We were still on Bolton lands, so it was my father's jurisdiction. We send a rider back to the Dreadfort. In the evening, Lord Roose himself came to meet us. He took personal charge of the situation."

"What did Lord Roose do about this predicament?" Margaery inquired.

"He had the Winterfell guard's body brought back to the Dreadfort," Domeric replied, "He claimed that he would write Lord Eddard Stark, informing him of the incident."

"As far as I know, my lord father has received no such missive lately," Robb commented.

"I suspected as much," Domeric murmured, letting out an irritated sigh.

"That is rather quaint," Margaery thought aloud, "One thing I learned of Lord Eddard is that he cares dearly for every man in his service. Surely he would have noticed if even one of them went missing."

"He would have noticed, indeed," Robb affirmed.
"Well, Maester Wolkan examined the soldier's remains," Domeric revealed, "He determined that the body had been in the ground for at least fifteen years."

"Roughly the same time as Robert's Rebellion," Mira noted.

"True," Robb contended, "My father lost a great number of his soldiers back then. The one you found near the Dreadfort could have been listed amongst the casualties by mistake, seeing as he did not return from the war with the survivors."

"That would be a reasonable assumption," Domeric admitted, "However… I believe the soldier died even before the Rebellion."

"Why do you say that?" Mira said inquisitively.

"Because he had this on his person," Domeric answered her, pulling a piece of parchment out of his trouser pocket. "I saw my father remove it from the soldier's hauberk before they carted him away. At the time, I said nothing and pretended to see nothing. Even so… my curiosity ultimately got the better of me. So a few weeks back, I snuck into his solar and searched until I found it."

He then held the parchment out so that they could all see it better. The paper was roughly crumpled, stained with earth in some places, and turned to yellow in others. Even so, the grey direwolf of House Stark was still discernable on the seal. Grey Wind moved over to Domeric and sniffed at the parchment. He then backed away from it hastily.

"So the soldier was a courier," Margaery deduced.

"Yes," Domeric confirmed, "But he never reached his destination."

Evidently not. Mira asked him "Have you read it?"

"I've tried to," Domeric expounded, "Alas, fifteen years in the ground have not been good for the parchment. Most of the writing has been rendered illegible. Nevertheless, there are certain phrases I managed to decipher."

He handed the letter to Robb, who proceeded to examine its contents. Or attempt to, anyway. Mira, Margaery, and Domeric watched him in silence as he did so. Overtime, his facial expression shifted from inquisitive to bewildered. Grey Wind noticed his master's change in mood, and he growled quietly.

"This is… quite perplexing," the Young Wolf murmured. By his tone, he must mean perplexing in a bad way.

"May I see?" Margaery bade her betrothed.

Robb tentatively passed her the parchment. The Rose of Highgarden had her turn to look over the paper. Mira moved her chair closer to the bed so she could read over Margaery's shoulder. As Domeric had claimed, most of the letter could not be understood, due it being largely unreadable. Then again, even the readable parts were difficult to understand.

Neither Mira nor her mistress knew what to make of the contents.

When they were finished with their review, Domeric stated "There is one other thing you should know. The seal to the letter was broken even before my father removed it from the soldier's clothing."
"So someone must have opened it beforehand," Mira grasped. Domeric merely nodded his head.

"Could the courier have read it?" Margaery conjectured.

"My father's men are more discreet than that," Robb insisted.

"Then it must have been whoever buried the soldier," Mira supposed.

"That is just it," Domeric professed, "I believe my father may have been the one to put that soldier in the ground in the first place."

Margaery and Robb were stunned by that hypothesis.

"He may not have done it himself," Domeric contended, "He could have arranged it. Whatever the case, I am convinced he had something to do with the soldier's disappearance."

"I would not put it past him," Mira drily mumbled. Lord Roose sees everyone as a potential enemy, even his allies.

"What motivation could he possibly have to do such a thing?" Margaery asked, baffled.

"I do not know for a certainty," Domeric confessed, "But he took steps to ensure that word of this discovery did not spread. He actually intimidated Harrion and his retainers into agreeing not to speak a word of this to Lord Rickard Karstark or anyone else. I know my own retainers would never go against him, lest they risk incurring his wrath."

"You seem to have no qualms about disobeying him," Robb observed.

"Well, I am his heir," Domeric argued, "If I displeased him, he would be cross, but he would be more lenient with me. He still needs me to continue his line. Aside from that… he does not know anything about this conversation."

"Still, you took a huge risk coming here and telling us this," Mira declared. He is even braver than I thought.

"It was a risk worth taking," Domeric asserted, "Truthfully, I would have gone to you sooner. But Father could not know of my intentions, and it would have been too suspicious if I asked for his leave to travel to Winterfell for no explicit reason."

"So that's why you came to Ironrath instead," Robb realized.

"Just so," Domeric verified, "It was no easy feat to get here, but I managed. The concept of my wishing to give my regards to Rodrik Forrester on his wedding day was a plausible excuse. The harder part was acquiring the letter. My father hid it well, and his solar is almost always guarded, even when he is elsewhere. But I was able to sneak into it unnoticed and get my hands on the letter shortly before I left the Dreadfort."

He went against his own father's wishes. More to the point, he went against Roose Bolton's wishes. It is not just bravery; he is downright fearless.

"By the way, I'll need the letter back," Domeric remarked, holding his hand out to Margaery, "For all I know, even though my father put it away, he may check on it every now and then. If he discovers that it's missing, it will not bode well for any of us."

"That is a good argument," Margaery concurred. She closed the letter and gave it back to the heir.
"I admit that it is," Robb stated, "But enlighten us, Domeric; what exactly do you expect us to do with this information?"

"With your connections, you can pass it on to the right people," Domeric Bolton advised them, returning the letter to his pocket, "You could share what I've told you with Lord Eddard Stark or Lady Olenna Tyrell. Better yet, you could tell Lord Gregor Clegane. He would undoubtedly know what to do from here."

"Yes, he would," Mira agreed. It was he who averted a civil war between the Forresters and the Whitehills and made Asher and Gwyn's wedding possible, after all. If he could do that…

"We are grateful that you brought this to our attention, Domeric," Margaery proclaimed, "However, I cannot help but question your reasons for coming to us. While you may be doing the right thing, you are essentially informing on your own sire."

"Quite so," Robb concurred, "This could yield dire consequences for Lord Roose. He might be sent to the Wall. Or worse. You must realize that."

"Of course I realize that," Domeric muttered candidly, "I cannot fault you for wondering why I am going behind my father's back. Most men may innately be more loyal to their families than to their liege lord. But when the father's actions threaten to jeopardize the integrity of the entire house and other houses, one must choose where his fealty truly lies. If my father is covering up the murder of a Winterfell soldier – or worse yet, a conspiracy the soldier was involved in – I cannot in good conscience support his decision."

Mira, Robb, and Margaery thought on that argument. After a few seconds, Mira murmured "You have a point. Were I in your place, I doubt I could do that, either."

"I don't think I could do it," Margaery debated.

"Neither could I," Robb admitted.

"Well, you three are fortunate," Domeric contended, "Your fathers are honorable men."

My father and Robb's are. Margaery's, on the other hand... well, he is too foolish to try anything too dishonorable. By her countenance, Margaery Tyrell had a similar line of thought.

"Even so, Roose Bolton is your lord father," Robb, as though Domeric had forgotten that.

The heir to the Dreadfort gazed over at the wall and stated "People say my father is heartless. He may very well be. Even so, I still love him and respect him. Part of me is hoping that this will not end badly for him. But the other part realizes that if he has committed a crime, he must suffer the repercussions of his choices."

Admirable to have such conviction. Mira then interceded with "It appears to me that the main issue here is not whether Roose Bolton killed a retainer of House Stark. The main issue is what he was hoping to hide by doing so."

"Precisely," Domeric affirmed, placing his hand on the pocket that concealed the old letter, "It may be too early to make any assumptions. Even so, from what little we've uncovered, there is a likelihood Robert's Rebellion started all because of a grave misunderstanding."

Not pleasant to think on, but too perilous to ignore. Robb and Margaery appeared to share the
sentiment. Mira looked up at Domeric and inquired "So what happens now?"

"What happens next is your decision," Domeric told her, Robb, and Margaery. "There is nothing more I can do at this point."

"We may need you to produce the letter again," Robb disclosed.

"If I must, I will," Domeric pronounced, "All I ask is that you be wary of who you tell of its existence."


Domeric seemed appeased by that. He then gave a yawn and uttered "Thank you for having me. Now, I must make for the Dreadfort right away."

"You couldn't stay the night?" Mira proposed.

"I wasn't invited, remember?" Domeric wryly murmured, "My men and I could camp outside the walls, but that would still be imposing. Anyway, the sooner we get underway, the sooner we return to the Dreadfort, and thus, the sooner I can return this letter to my father's solar."

*And the less likely he is to notice it is gone.* As much as Mira would have liked for Domeric to lengthen his visit to Ironrath, she could not deny that it would have been safer if he left that night instead of the following morning.

She got up from her chair and offered "I'll see you to the gate."

"Very well, my lady," he uttered graciously.

Domeric bade Robb, Margaery, and even Grey Wind farewell. The three of them stayed in the bedchamber while Mira escorted him outside. The servants were in the process of cleaning up the remnants of the feast in the courtyard. Other than that, the vicinity was deserted.

The half-dozen men-at-arms who had accompanied Domeric were waiting around the stables. They dipped their heads to their future lord respectfully, but they regarded Mira with little more than scowls. That came as no shock, House Bolton's retainers were generally as dispassionate as their current lord. *I wonder if they're bitter because they serve House Bolton, or if they serve House Bolton because they're bitter.* In her mind, either was equally possible.

As the stableboys readied the Bolton horses, Domeric asked Mira "When will you go back to Winterfell?"

"In a week or so," she informed him, "Robb and Margaery's nuptials will occur sometime within the next month."

"I see," Domeric avowed, "Will you remain in Lady Margaery's employ after she weds the Young Wolf?"

"Yes," Mira responded, "For a little while longer, I suppose."

"How much longer would you say?" Domeric enquired.

"I have not decided just yet," Mira confessed, "Perhaps as long as Margaery will have me. She has had no complaints about my work so far."

"Well, I imagine you would be nearly impossible to replace," he uttered cheekily.
She scoffed and remarked "I suppose so."

There was an interval of silence which passed between them. It ended when Mira stated "Domeric, can I ask you something?"

"You know you can," he asserted.

Mira was not certain how best to word the question on her mind, so she kept it simple: "Why me?"

Domeric was confused by her vagueness. "I do not quite understand the question."

"I can understand why you wanted to talk with Robb and Margaery," Mira specified, "They belong to two Great Houses. But why did you want me present at that conversation? I couldn't just be because I'm a Northwoman or because I'm Margaery's handmaiden."

"You are correct; neither of those is the reason," Domeric confirmed, "The real reason I had you there is because I want you to know that I trust you."

Yet again, Mira was taken aback. This time, pleasantly. "You do?"

"Yes, I do, Mira," he declared, "I trust few men. I trust fewer women. But you… you I would entrust with anything."

Mira felt herself beaming widely. "Do you honestly mean that?"

"Of course," Domeric affirmed. He smiled at her gently, placed a hand on her shoulder, and asked "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," she promptly replied, "Completely."

"Good," was all he said. Then he leaned forward and kissed her once on either cheek.

Before he could back away, Mira found herself lifting her own hands, placing them on either side of his head, and pulling him closer. Then it was her turn to kiss him. Only this one was on the lips.

She could sense that Domeric was initially alarmed, but a few seconds in, he closed his eyes and voluntarily kissed her back.

By the time they parted, the stableboys had returned with the Bolton horses. The six men-at-arms were quick to mount theirs. Domeric was not so hasty. He shared an affectionate embrace with Mira Forrester before getting onto his destrier.

Mira chose to accompany Domeric to the gates. There, they said farewell one last time, and then Domeric Bolton and his soldiers departed from Ironrath and galloped down the eastern road. Mira Forrester stood at the gate and kept an eye on them until they faded into the distance.

As she reentered her ancestral home, she took a moment to reflect. *Lady of the Dreadfort. No one wants that distinction now. But with Dom as the Lord, the title does not sound so bad.*
Chapter Notes

Note: I already know what all will happen in this story, but I need to decide how to order the events. Like the original series, I am now balancing at least six different story arcs all at once. So updates may take longer than a week, but never as much as two. I want you to know that now because this chapter is when all the major events will start coming together.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After placing a chaste kiss against her forehead and releasing her from his grasp, he had asked "How do you fare?"

She had gazed at her feet for a long sullen moment before looking up at him and replying "I am afraid the tidings I bear are ill, good ser."

He had frowned and stated restlessly "Does that mean…?"

She had just nodded and confirmed his assumption with "The union has already been sanctioned by both the crown and the faith."

"You said you would speak to your father," he had recalled, trying not to sound accusatory.

"I tried to," she had insisted, "Alas, he could not be swayed. He is determined to see the match through."

"And there is no recourse to this?" he had presumed, though he pretty much already knew the answer.

"None that I can see," she had told him in dismay, "The wedding will happen. There is nothing anyone can do to prevent it. Not even you or I."

As if the King would ever heed my counsel. Or request my opinion. But the least he could have done was ask his daughter's.

He had sighed a long, sullen sigh and muttered "I suppose that is it then."

"Aye," she had agreed, "That is it."

He had said nothing in response, but his dissatisfaction must have been evident on his countenance. She had placed a soft hand on his shoulder and asked in worry "Will you be alright?"

"I will survive, my princess," he had reassured her. He had then turned to her and said "My main concern is whether you will."

"Ever the valiant knight," she had commented admirably, "You needn't worry, ser. I can handle my brother."

"If he ever harms you, you need only send for me," he had claimed.
She had asked worriedly "What would you do?"

"Whatever was necessary to protect you," he had answered.

"You could lose your head for such talk," she had cautioned him.

"Some things are worth losing one's head for," he had argued.

"I am not one of them," she had insisted, "Please, expel such ideas from your mind."

"Very well," he had conceded, albeit reluctantly, "For your sake, I will not intervene in your marriage."

"Thank you," she had said gratefully. She had then queried "What will you do now?"

"I will move on in my own way," he had proclaimed, "Everyone is meant to be with someone. For most, there is one person. For myself… I believe there are seven."

She had seemed surprised. "Did you decide that just now?"

"No, I have been contemplating it for a time," he had revealed. In the event that a scenario such as this one was to transpire. "At present, I believe it is the most appropriate option available to me."

"Then I hope you find solace in that pursuit," she had stated kindly.

"I shall strive to," he had declared. He had then shared another kiss with her; this one was on the lips. The mark to the end of a forbidden romance.

It had been forty years since that conversation. Ser Bonifer Hasty still remembered every moment of it, as though it had occurred minutes ago. It was special to him; it was the very last time he and Princess Rhaella Targaryen had seen one another in person.

Ser Bonifer had spent the last four decades of his life fighting in the name of the Seven. In all that time, he had found peace of mind in his work. More than he ever thought he would find. Definitely more than Her Grace found.

Rhaella Targaryen had become Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. Alas, she was wife to the least sane monarch the Seven Kingdoms ever had. Ser Bonifer had often heard of how King Aerys Targaryen had tormented and raped his sister. Their marriage was analogous to his rule.

Bonifer Hasty did not mourn the Mad King when Jaime Lannister drove his blade through his back. In fact, he had reveled in that sadist's demise. Alas, his satisfaction was short-lived. Just a few months later, Queen Rhaella died birthing her final child on Dragonstone. When he leaned of her fate, Ser Bonifer had prayed to the Seven for the rest of her soul, and to the Maiden especially. He had never prayed so hard as he did that night.

With the death of Prince Rhaegar on the Trident and the deaths of his children during the Sack of King's Landing, the only Targaryens left were his siblings Viserys and Daenerys. The prince, unfortunately, seemed to take too much after his father. The princess, on the other hand…

Bonifer Hasty had had seventeen namedays when he courted Rhaella Targaryen, and she had had fifteen. This year, Daenerys Targaryen had seen her own fifteenth nameday.

At this time, Daenerys was in the courtyard of Magister Illyrio Mopatis' manse. She was sitting in a comfortable chair and reading a book. Alysane Mormont was sitting on the ground nearby,
sharpening her sword on a whetstone. A few of the Westerosi units who did not belong to the Legion without Banners were lounging around the vicinity.

Bonifer Hasty was standing idly on the platform that overlooked the courtyard. He had come to that spot to admire the view of Pentos and the Narrow Sea to the west. He had stayed for another, equally beautiful yet more corporeal view.

Not only did Daenerys Targaryen look nearly identical to her royal mother; she was every bit as gentle and compassionate, as well. When he gazed at her, Bonifer felt he was staring at the spitting image of his late beloved. *If only she and I were not born four decades apart.*

He quickly shook that notion from his head. *None of that, ser.* To date, that was the only suggestive thought Ser Bonifer Hasty had had of the Lady Daenerys. Every other thought he had of her since he first met her was clean and platonic. He intended to maintain that type of relationship with her. Even though he was tempted to do otherwise.

In the midst of his reverie, Bonifer Hasty managed to discern the sound of footsteps approaching him from behind. He casually peered over his shoulder and saw his colleague Malcolm Branfield walking towards him.

"Ser Malcolm," he murmured in greeting.

"Ser Bonifer," the other knight returned cordially. He stopped a few feet away and inquired "Enjoying the sights?"

"Yes," Bonifer Hasty disclosed, "The Narrow Sea is rather peaceful this time of day, whilst Pentos is at the height of activity. Yet despite being in opposite states, they complement one another perfectly."

Malcolm Branfield smirked and muttered drily "You and I both know I was not referring to the city and the surrounding landscape."

*Indeed not. I sense what could be an accusation in those words, but it could also be a point of debate. *Malcolm, enlighten me. Are you commenting on the object of my admiration, or my admiration itself?"

"The latter, although the former merits some consideration," the native of the Crownlands remarked, "I would be a lackwit not to have noticed Lady Daenerys' beauty. You, however, have done more than notice it."

"How so?" Bonifer Hasty enquired, genuinely perplexed, "I have made no advances."

"True, you have not," Malcolm Branfield muttered, "But I can tell you would if you could. Go ahead and admit it."

"Very well; I admit it," Bonifer Hasty said grudgingly.

"Do not sound so ashamed," Malcolm calmly bade him, "It is not wrong to desire things. Even if said things are beyond your reach."

"No," Ser Bonifer supposed, "But it *is* foolish to hope one might actually have such things."

"There we agree," Ser Malcolm contended, folding his hands behind his back, "Men like you and I have a firm grasp of what is and is not within our grasp. We may wish to reach for certain things, but we know better than to pursue them."
"That is precisely what I believe, too," Bonifer Hasty coincided, "Nonetheless, even the most disciplined cannot help but to yearn for something. There is little that can be done to keep them from wanting it."

"Do you want her?" Malcolm Branfield asked straightaway, gesturing to the spot in the courtyard where Daenerys was reading.

Bonifer would have been alarmed by the suddenness of that question, had he not predicted the possibility of it being asked earlier on. Instead, he looked Malcolm in the eye and told him "If you must know... no, I do not. I may desire the image of her, but only because that image bears so great a resemblance to the last Targaryen Queen. But the mother is not the daughter, and the daughter is not the mother. I loved Rhaella dearly, but I feel nothing of the sort for Daenerys."

"Are you certain?" the slightly younger knight asked, skepticism detectable in his tone.

I am sensing an accusation. Bonifer was quick to answer it. "I know my place, Ser Malcolm. As well as I know hers. Her parents were King and Queen of Westeros. Even if deposed, her station in this world is much different from mine. Apart from that, I am old enough to be her grandfather."

"In another life, you might well have been her grandfather," Malcolm pointed out.

That was an intriguing concept. I more likely would have been her father, seeing as she is Rhaella's child. Either way, none of us would have had to venture to Essos in the first place with that manner of arrangement. "Perhaps. But the chance for that has long passed, and I am a man of the gods now. That will never change. Thus, it is no use lamenting on missed opportunities."

Malcolm Branfield appeared astonished by the elder knight's conviction. "It is that simple?"

"It is that simple," Bonifer Hasty affirmed.

Again, Ser Malcolm smirked. Then he murmured approvingly "Well, then I applaud your resolve. A great number of men, even husbands and fathers, would likely lunge at the prospect of courting a maiden such as Daenerys Targaryen."

He is not far wrong. Even so, I wonder how many of those men would be interested in more than appearance? A thought occurred to Ser Bonifer. "Would you?"

"No," was the former Crownlander's prompt response. Too prompt to be wholly believable.

"I have lived a solitary life because of my devotion to the Seven," Bonifer Hasty remarked, "But I am curious, Ser Malcolm. What reason do you have for remaining unwed and childless at your age?"

"If you must know, I just never had any interest in having a family. I never saw the need to, either. I was not my lord father's eldest son. I was not groomed to be a lord; I was spared the responsibilities of the heir. Instead, I became a knight and travelled the Seven Kingdoms, looking for adventure."

And found plenty of it, I am certain. Bonifer Hasty contended "I can understand why you followed that course in your youth. Back then, your house had no shortage of members. Yet even after your parents and siblings perished, you still never felt compelled to continue your line?"

"That is correct," Malcolm Branfield mumbled, a little drearily, "House Branfield's seat was burned to the ground during the Rebellion, so even if I wished to have a family of my own, I had nothing to be lord of. Fortunately, of all my siblings, I was always the closest to my sister Elissa. When she
married Lord Gregor Forrester of Ironrath, I went north with her. I was able to make a new home for myself in the North."

"But who did you side with during the Rebellion?" Bonifer said inquisitively.

"The Targaryens, at first," Ser Malcolm disclosed. Ser Bonifer expected as much. *He may have been living in the North at the time, but he was born a Crownlander.* "However, when I realized that we were fighting for a lost cause, I bent the knee. Alas, my brothers – the obstinate fools they were – refused to yield and perished for it."

*Then Ironrath was the only home left for him.* Not knowing what else to say, Ser Bonifer stated "They died for what they believed in."

"Or, one could argue, their beliefs were what killed them," Malcolm disputed bitterly. His bitterness did not linger for long. Soon, his usual jovial grin returned. He turned to his colleagues and asked "Which side did you join, Ser Bonifer?"

"The Holy Hundred stayed neutral throughout the Rebellion," Bonifer Hasty recounted, "Our members were from all over the Seven Kingdoms. We lived like brothers, and we would not pit brother against brother. Therefore, we opted to rally to neither side whilst the fighting lasted and rally to the victor whenever it ended."

"A prudent course of action," Malcolm Branfield observed, giving a nod of the head, "However, let us suppose you had not formed the Holy Hundred. Who would you have fought for then?"

"I am a Stormlander; naturally, I would have been obligated to support Robert," Ser Bonifer professed.

"Jon Connington was from the Stormlands," Malcolm countered.

"And he was exiled for his loyalty to the Targaryens," Bonifer reminded him. *Exiled by the Mad King himself.*

"Yes, but considering what Aerys normally did to those who displeased him, exile was a rather merciful punishment," Malcolm debated.

"Be that as it may," Ser Bonifer pronounced, "It would have been no contest for me. Had I not been a man of the gods, I would have sworn my sword to the Baratheons, and if need be, I would have died for them."

At that, Malcolm grimaced and said glumly "Then you are a better man than I."

That statement perplexed Bonifer a bit. "Why do you say that?"

The native of the Crownlands brushed the tips of his left thumb and index finger against his forehead for a few seconds. Then he lowered his hand and proclaimed. "A moment ago, I called my brothers fools for dying in the name of the Mad King. Between the two of us, there are times when I instead regard them as heroes who died for the realm. There is also the issue of my surrender in the war. On the whole, my choice to deflect seemed a wise one. But at times, I wonder if my choice was really dictated by cowardice. There are even certain occasions when I am ashamed outliving my family for so long."

Bonifer Hasty took a minute to reflect on everything he had just been told. After that, he lightly shrugged and professed "I see you live with a fair deal of guilt, Ser Malcolm. But you are not the only one. We have all done things we regret. All the same, you are not to blame for the destruction
of your house and the demise of your family. You made your decision; your brothers made theirs. All willingly."

"I… cannot disagree with that," Malcolm Branfield admitted after a moment of thought, exhaling deeply, "At the end of the day, I suppose there were no favorable options whatsoever in the Rebellion. Regardless of which paths we chose to take, we each had to pay the price for them."

"At some point in our lives, we all must pay for our decisions," Ser Bonifer debated, "The difference between you and your brothers is that you can atone for the wrongs you may have done."

"Atone how?" Malcolm enquired, intrigued.

"By doing just what you are doing now," Bonifer replied.

"Discussing my personal grievances about myself with you?" Malcolm stated sardonically.

"No, I mean what you are doing here," Bonifer Hasty uttered with a scoff, gesturing to their immediate surroundings, "Although you forsook the Mad King during the Rebellion, you can make peace with your desertion by protecting his children."

That remark seemed to bring a strange form of contentment to the knight from the Crownlands. He rubbed his chin, and then he smiled, lightly nodded his head, and murmured "That is a peculiar view of our present situation. But it seems fitting, just the same."

"Of course it does," Ser Bonifer asserted, "You fought for the Targaryens once. Now you can do so once more."

Malcolm raised an eyebrow. "Fight for them in what capacity?"

It took Bonifer a moment to realize what he was insinuating. "I mean you should fight to protect them. I am not implying you should shed blood for them."

Malcolm seemed somewhat relieved. He mumbled softly "I certainly hope not. Because as of now, the only person who would ever wish harm upon them is the man who sits the Iron Throne."

"True," Bonifer Hasty coincided, folding his arms and leaning against the balustrade to the platform, "Lord Gregor may have convinced the King to spare the Targaryens for the present, but I've little doubt that Robert Baratheon would still order their heads if he felt they posed too great a threat to his reign."

"Then we must assure him they do not," Malcolm proposed.

"Just what I was thinking," Bonifer professed. Long as we maintain the truce, neither party has anything to fear from the other.

"That is not as simple and straightforward as you make it sound," Malcolm debated, "Daenerys is harmless. Anyone with eyes can see that. But Viserys…"

He did not need to say any more. Where to even begin with him?

"That lad is impossible to control," Bonifer Hasty perceived, "If left unchecked, he'll be a threat to everyone. Including himself."

"Especially himself," Malcolm said with a note of malignance, "Do you know what I was doing
before I came here?"

Without even bothering to guess, Bonifer asked "What?"

"I was in the lounge, having another heated discussion with the self-proclaimed rightful king of Westeros," Malcolm revealed.

Bonifer rolled his eyes and let out a slow breath. He mumbled irately "What was it about this time?"

"His most recent attempts to amass an army of his own," Malcolm responded.

"Failed attempts, I presume?" Bonifer asked rhetorically.

"Aren't they always?" Malcolm muttered sarcastically, "As of today, he has suggested every sellsword company out there which he had yet to put forth. Alas, these prospects had many of the same problems as the others. Too small. Too honorable. Too remote. Too unknown. But, as usual, the most common excuse was too expensive."

*It is not without reason that Viserys is scorned as the Beggar King.* Bonifer Hasty rubbed his temple and thought aloud "Perhaps we could write King Robert and ask him for coin to hire an army. If not him, we could send a raven to Lord Gregor. The Legion can certainly spare enough funds to procure at least one sellsword company."

"Allard tried to explain that to Viserys," Malcolm disclosed, "In response, he looked at him as though he said his mother was a whore."

*If anyone called his mother a whore, I would not react well, either.* Bonifer quered "Did he give you the impression that he was displeased?"

"More than the impression," Malcolm said drily "He had a whole speech prepared about how he was above crawling to anyone and begging for money, least of all the Usurper and his Mountain. But his main argument was that this is all a matter of pride to him. He is very much determined to produce an army of his own making, without financial aid from anyone."

"Somehow, I am not surprised," Bonifer Hasty muttered bluntly. *Pride; a faster kill of men than blades.* "What are we going to do with him?"

"Just what you suggested; we will protect him," Malcolm Branfield stated, suddenly a fair amount calmer.

"Yes, but how do you protect someone from himself?" Bonifer disputed, "The lad is too pompous by half. If he goes on as he has, that malicious attitude of his will someday be the death of him."

"Oh, unless it improves, I'd wager that any person in this building could be the death of him," Malcolm conjectured, "Directives and discipline be damned; it is only a matter of time before he provokes someone here into giving him the same fate as his father."

"I hope it does not come to that," Bonifer remarked. *Though there is a distinct likelihood it will.* "I may care little for Viserys, but we are still under orders to keep him safe."

"I give you my word that no harm shall befall him from my hand at least," Malcolm Branfield assured the older man.

Bonifer Hasty smiled and "I know I can count on you."
"Always," Ser Malcolm confirmed, "Just as the rest of us can you."

"Of course you can," Bonifer affirmed.

If Allard Seaworth was the unofficial commander of the hundred Westerosi units that were guarding Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen, Bonifer Hasty was his unofficial second-in-command. While the second son of the Onion Knight oversaw the company's affairs, the leader of the Holy Hundred took responsibility of their behavior and the way they conducted themselves. For whatever reason, he was deemed better-suited to the task than anyone else in their party. Maybe it was due to his being a lifelong follower of the Seven. They do not call me 'The Good' without cause, I suppose.

Bonifer Hasty had a strange effect on people. Whenever he was around, people generally seemed more agreeable. For instance, Viserys did not beat his sister like he used to. The Westerosi solders had been able to protect her from his volatile mood swings, and none of them more than Ser Bonifer. Viserys' behavior still left much to be desired, but at least Daenerys was no longer a victim of his abuse.

Despite the observations made by Malcolm Branfield (and others), Bonifer Hasty truly had no profound feelings of sexual attraction towards Daenerys Targaryen. He was fond of her, and he appreciated her beauty, but he swore to himself that he would never lay a finger on her. All the same, he would protect and defend her with his life. He was aware that she never asked that of him. For that matter, neither did anyone else. Nonetheless, it was the very least he could do to honor the memory of her late mother.

Just as the conversation between Ser Bonifer and Ser Malcolm seemed to reach its conclusion, they received more company. Eddison Tollett arrived on the scene, looking as cheerless as ever.

"How do you fare today, Edd?" Bonifer asked the Valeman as he came closer.

"About as well as ever, ser," Dolorous Edd glumly answered him.

"That bad, eh?" Malcolm japed. Bonifer chuckled, whereas Edd Tollett sneered.

Bonifer Hasty noticed Dolorous Edd held something in his hand. "What's that you have there?"

"Message, ser," Edd replied, displaying the object to the two older men. It turned out to be a scroll.

"For me?" Bonifer Hasty assumed, taking the scroll in his hand. It was tightly wrapped, but the ribbon was loosely tied, as though it had already been opened.

"Well, not exactly..." Eddison Tollet murmured.

Ser Bonifer removed the ribbon and unrolled a foot of the parchment. Straightaway, he understood what the Valeman meant. He could not make sense of the contents.

"What the hells is this?" he thought aloud.

Malcolm Branfield stepped up behind him and peered over his shoulder. He furrowed his brow and noted "That's not the Common Tongue."

"Indeed," Bonifer conceded, "It is definitely in another language."

"I concluded as much," Dolorous Edd Tollett stated, "I consulted one of the magister's scribes. She claimed it was written in Dothraki."
Bonifer was stunned. He looked to the younger man and repeated "Dothraki?"

As Edd Tollett nodded his head, Malcolm Branfield scoffed and muttered "I was not aware the Dothraki could write."

"I believe they have scribes of their own," Bonifer Hasty thought aloud. As he rolled the scroll back up, he asked "Why did you bring this to me?"

"Well, the scribe I spoke to was able to translate it," Eddison Tollett disclosed. He reached into his doublet and pulled out a smaller piece of parchment, which he held out to Bonifer. "She was even kind enough to write it down. When you see the contents, you'll understand."

*I may as well take his word.* As Bonifer Hasty took the parchment, Dolorous Edd added in "I should warn you, ser. You're not going to like it."

He was quite right. When Ser Bonifer began to read the translated message, he was somewhat bewildered. Overtime his confusion gradually disappeared, and it was hastily replaced with shock and anger. By the time he was finished, his fists were clenched and his face was contorted in fury.

"That conniving rat..." he whispered darkly.

Bonifer speedily turned around and marched towards the manse. Eddison Tollett and Malcolm Branfield hastily followed him into the building. Bonifer stomped through three hallways until he arrived at the lounge. Without even bothering to knock, he burst inside.

As he expected, Viserys Targaryen and Allard Seaworth were still there. Magister Illyrio and the Red Woman were there, as well. All four of them were seated at a table on the side of the room. They all sharply turned to the door when the Stormlander knight made his entrance.

"Trouble, Ser Bonifer?" Allard Seaworth queried in concern.

Bonifer did not bother to answer him. When he came into the room, his eyes immediately went to Viserys Targaryen. He solemnly walked over to the blond man and seized him by the throat with his free hand. That action alarmed everyone there, the deposed prince most of all.

"Get your fucking hand off me!" Viserys yelled.

With no regard for the younger man's well-being, Bonifer Hasty forced him out of his chair and slammed him against the adjacent wall. He glared into his eyes and muttered through the gritted teeth "You bastard. You filthy, degenerate bastard."

*No, even bastards have more integrity than this.*

"Unhand me at once," Viserys snapped angrily.

Instead, Bonifer tightened his hold, as though he meant to choke the life out of Viserys Targaryen. Under different circumstances, he may very well have done just that.

Before he could, Allard Seaworth rose from his chair and shouted "Ser Bonifer! Stand down!"

Bonifer Hasty did not acknowledge the command right away. For a minute, he continued to grip Viserys by his throat, as though he was contemplating whether or not he would strangle him.

Ultimately, he chose to obey Allard's order. He released his hold on the blond man and backed away a pace. As Viserys gasped to regain his breath, Bonifer gazed down at him in malice.
By now, Malcolm Branfield and Eddison Tollett had entered the room, as well. Out of the corner of his eye, Bonifer spotted them standing by the doorway. He did not know how long they had been there, but it must have been long enough to see how he had handled Viserys. That must not have been a pretty sight.

"I knew he wouldn't like it," Dolorous Edd uttered drearily, "Count on me to be the bearer of bad news."

"Wouldn't like what?" Allard Seaworth enquired.

Bonifer Hasty turned to him and held out the parchment Edd had given him, saying "See for yourself, Allard."

The younger Stormlander took the piece of parchment and swiftly read it over. When he was done, he was considerably calmer than Bonifer Hasty had been, but he seemed no less angry. He slowly looked to Viserys Targaryen, waved the parchment in front of him, and mumbled heatedly "What is the meaning of this?"

Viserys did not reply right away. Then he said stiffly "First tell me what 'this' is."

Ser Bonifer gestured for Edd to come closer. When the Valeman reached them, Bonifer pointed to the scroll in his hand and proclaimed "That message is addressed to you. It was sent by a Dothraki horselord named Khal Drogo."

"And instead of bringing it to me directly, you had it translated and read it yourself beforehand?" Viserys snapped.

"That is beside the point," Malcolm Branfield contended.

"No, it is not," Viserys countered, swiping the translated note out of Allard's hand, "This is my business."

"Well, everything you do is our business," Bonifer Hasty debated, "Especially when it concerns your sister."

"Or your plans to marshal forces of your own," Allard Seaworth added crossly, "What in the name of the gods were you thinking? A khalasaar?"

"We do not have the money to hire sellswords," Viserys argued, "No one outside of Westeros is willing to fight out of duty or obligation. Everyone on this side needs incentive to fight for our cause. Thus, our only alternative is to deal with someone who was willing to barter instead."

"So you chose to barter with your own flesh and blood?" Bonifer Hasty spat.

"I would not sell Daenerys to just any man," Viserys pronounced, as though that made his intentions any less disgraceful, "She is the last female Targaryen; her virtue by itself is worth a fortune. In fact, I would say Drogo will be the one to get more out of the bargain."

"He won't get anything," Ser Bonifer declared stalwartly, "This 'bargain' will not happen."

"That is not for you to decide," Viserys muttered plainly, "Dany may feel safer with you and your lot around. But she will still do as I tell her."

"A man with a broken jaw or a missing tongue can tell no one anything," Bonifer Hasty murmured ominously, placing one hand on the hilt of his sword and tightening the other into a fist, "Which do
"Enough," Illyrio Mopatis interceded, right before any blows were exchanged. The magister proceeded to get up from his own chair. That took a bit of time, given how large he was. Once he was on his feet, he muttered sternly "I will not have this squabbling. Not under my roof."

"If it unsettles you, we could take this matter outside," Bonifer Hasty suggested. He was being sarcastic or spiteful; he was absolutely serious.

"That is not what I meant," Illyrio declared, "You are all guests of mine. Long as you are here, I demand you treat each other accordingly, or I will have you all thrown out."

"Thrown out of the manse?" Viserys assumed in astonishment.

"Thrown out of Pentos," Mopatis bluntly clarified.

The hostile atmosphere rapidly dissipated there. Some may have viewed that as an empty threat, but Magister Illyrio had the means to make it happen. He was one of the most influential men in the Nine Free Cities, not just Pentos. Additionally, he was the closest thing to an ally the Targaryens and their Westerosi guards had in Essos. They could not afford to lose their connection with him.

Although the threat of violence was gone, Bonifer Hasty was still quite displeased with this newest development. He looked to the cheesemonger and told him "I will keep my sword sheathed, but you cannot seriously mean to advocate this proposal, Magister. Daenerys is under your protection, as well."

The morbidly obese man gave a small smile and muttered "I have not forgotten that, good ser. I would advise you to relax."

"How can I relax?" Bonifer Hasty said, almost demandingly.

"Because no harm will come to Daenerys Targaryen," Lady Melisandre claimed, "I have seen it in the flames."

Bonifer Hasty was taken aback. So were Allard Seaworth, Eddison Tollett, and Malcolm Branfield. Allard said inquisitively "What exactly are you saying, my lady? You knew?"

"Of course I knew," Melisandre pronounced, "This is the most logical course of action for the prince to take."

"Hold up," Edd Tollett interjected, "Do you mean to say you put Lord Viserys up to this?"

"We both did," Illyrio Mopatis confessed. Upon seeing the shocked glances the Westerosi gave him, he smirked and muttered "Did you honestly believe I would have allowed this sort of business to go on in my establishment without my knowing of it?"

"Magister, I am appalled," Allard Seaworth uttered in disgust. You are not alone, my friend.

"Lady Melisandre and I only presented the idea to Viserys," "The choice to follow through was his entirely. Call it the act of a desperate man."

"Desperate for what?" Malcolm Branfield snapped, "Some delusion of glory?"

"Salvation for my homeland," Viserys claimed in an uncharacteristically noble tone, "The Usurper
will need every sword he can find. Even among his own people, Khal Drogo is a legend. He commands forty thousand, each of which would follow him to the death. They would make an impressive complement to the soldiers of the Seven Kingdoms.”

"Or, alternatively, they would make an impressive invasion force to the people of the Seven Kingdoms," Allard Seaworth debated, "When we return to our homeland, the only people we will bring back will be those that Robert Baratheon and Gregor Clegane have approved of. Lord Gregor may make an exception for a Dothraki horde, but hard as I might try, I cannot imagine the King granting such an unsavory mob entry into Westeros."

"Then wait for the Others to come," Viserys stated mockingly, "By then, he'll be begging the Dothraki to cross the Narrow Sea."

"We will return to Westeros long before that happens," Allard asserted, "But if the King and the Mountain refuse to give passage to the Dothraki, they will not come back with us."

"Good luck explaining that to Khal Drogo," Viserys shot scathingly.

"Frankly, I do not see why we should even bother negotiating with this horselord," Malcolm Branfield remarked.

"He has already received Prince Viserys' proposal," Melisandre pointed out, "Now he is coming here to see Princess Daenerys. If she does not appear, there will be trouble. On a grand scale."

"What trouble could he give us?" Edd Tollett disputed, "We could deny him access to the manse. Or better yet, the city."

"If we do, he would besiege Pentos," Illyrio Mopatis contended, "That would effectively cut off all the city's supply routes along the land. The supply lines from the sea would not be enough to sustain the city indefinitely."

"Then we could evacuate," Allard Seaworth recommended.

"And go where?" Melisandre countered, "Robert Baratheon has not yet summoned you back to the Seven Kingdoms, and you have no other trustworthy allies outside of Westeros."

*If we could call the magister trustworthy.* Bonifer Hasty let out a deep sigh and uttered "Then it appears our only option is to meet with him."

At that, Viserys smiled wider than Ser Bonifer had ever seen him smile before. The expression on his countenance was sickening. *And I said he did not smile often enough.*

Bonifer Hasty pointed a finger in Viserys' face and told him "Do not get too cocky just yet, boy. Drogo has only agreed to meet with you; he has not consented to your proposal."

"What if he does?" Viserys cheekily murmured, "What will you do about it?"

Off the top of his head, Bonifer could conjure up at least a dozen different threats, all of which he could make good on. Even so, he did not put forth any of them. Instead, he eased down and proclaimed "Nothing I suppose. For the present."

*But you will not remain in the magister's custody forever, and King Robert may change his mind about you. If so, the Seven have mercy on your soul. Even the Stranger has little love for a man who would sell his own sister for an army.*
The Legion without Banners was the largest brotherhood in the Seven Kingdoms. Some argued that it was a brotherhood in a more literal sense of the word. Those people saw it as an actual family.

Samwell Tarly was one of those individuals. While he loved his mother and sisters and they loved him, his relationships with his father and brother were not so spectacular. Then again, while he and Dickon were not the closest of brothers, at least there was no enmity between them. He could not say the same of Randyll Tarly.

The kindest thing Samwell's lord father had ever done for him was send him to Moat Cailin. He had intended for Samwell to serve as a squire to one of the top officers of the Legion. Samwell did no squiring; he instead earned the position of Gregor Clegane's personal notary. It turned out to be a position he was much better suited for.

For the last few years, Samwell had been aide to Lord Gregor in everything that did not require a sword. He had copied important letters, he had done the moat's sums, he had kept a record of the moat's stores, he had catalogued every new member of the Legion, he had assisted in determining where each member would be most useful, and he had even helped Lord Gregor with many of his inventions.

The work was tiring, but Samwell found it extremely rewarding. It was work he enjoyed doing, and work he was very much qualified for.

Apart from that, Moat Cailin was more of a home to him than Horn Hill, and the Legion was more of a family to him than his own. Most of all, Gregor Clegane was a better father than Lord Randyll. Not just to me; he is a better father in general. After all, I have never heard Rick or his siblings say a single negative thing about the Mountain.

Samwell Tarly was proud to be a Legionnaire. It was as though he had found his calling in life. In fact, while most Legionnaires would eventually leave the organization and return to their homes, Samwell could see himself staying on indefinitely.

At times, he was even tempted to renounce his birthright just so he could remain in the Legion permanently. However, he would not do something so rash without considering the possible ramifications of it. Furthermore, regardless of how serene he felt at Moat Cailin, there were times when he yearned for home. He missed his mother, his siblings, and, in a strange way, even his father.

Sooner or later, Samwell would go back to Horn Hill. In all likelihood, that will not be for at least another ten or twenty years. Maybe whenever I return, Father will be slightly less displeased with me than he was when I last saw him. There was a chance of such, but Samwell would not give his hopes up.

Whenever Samwell Tarly was not carrying out his duties to Lord Gregor, he could normally be found in the Knowledge Tower alone or in other parts of the moat with his friends. He was the type of person who liked to keep busy, even when on his leisure time.

At present, he was on the second highest floor of the Banquet Tower. He was seated at one of the trestle tables nearest to the entrance of the hall. It was almost time for the midday meal.

While he waited for the food to arrive from the Flour Tower, Samwell kept himself occupied with a number of sheets of parchment. One had the sketch of a contraption that he and Lord Gregor had
been working on. The rest had detailed accounts of each feature of the device. He had an inkwell in front of him and a quill pen in his hand. Every now and then, he made a slight modification to the blueprint and chronicled the alteration thusly.

As he worked, Samwell sang softly under his breath. He was fond of singing when no one was within earshot. It happened that he was on the only person currently seated on his bench, so he could sing without drawing attention.

As he amended the drawing and its description, he quietly chanted: "So give me reason, to prove me wrong, to wash this memory clean. Let the floods cross, the distance in your eyes. Give me reason, to fill this hole, connect the space between. Let it be enough to reach the truth that lies…"

"Across this new divide," a voice from behind finished the lyric.

Samwell glimpsed over his shoulder and saw Jon Snow standing over him. He smiled at his best friend and japed "You've heard that one too often."

"As have you," Jon Snow cheekily remarked.

He was not alone. A certain wildling girl with flaming red hair had entered the room alongside him. She muttered in assumption "Is that one o' the Mountain's songs?"

"Yes," Samwell affirmed, "It's one of my favorites of his."

"It is one of mine, as well," Jon concurred. He turned to his female companion and stated "I'm surprised you have not heard that song before, Ygritte. Ever since Lord Gregor patented it, it has been played from here to the Red Mountains."

"The lyrics are a trifle… bewildering," she observed.

"That is the beauty of them," Samwell debated, "That song – along with most of the other songs Lord Gregor has produced – are unconventional in that they do not have any direct story. Or, if they do, the story is meant to be interpreted in more than one way."

"That does sound interesting, I suppose," Ygritte commented bluntly, "Perhaps we could discuss this further. But what say we do so over lunch?"

"You'll hear no argument from me," Samwell slyly uttered. I am famished, in any case.

While Samwell usually ate breakfast and dinner on the top floor of the Banquet Tower with Lord Gregor, his family, his household, and the members of the secret council, he generally had luncheon on a lower floor with the lower-ranking Legionnaires. He was not the only one who preferred that arrangement. Jon and Ygritte often joined him.

Just then, nine cooks from the Banquet Tower arrived. Six of them were carrying three large black cauldrons in pairs. The other three were carrying platters of fresh-baked bread. The cooks set the cauldrons and the platters on a short stone table in the center of the room.

"Go ahead and sit down," Jon beckoned Ygritte, "I'll get our food."

He headed over to where the cooks were passing out bowls and spoons. The other soldiers in the room had already begun to crowd them. There was some pushing and shoving, but none from Jon. None was given to Jon, either. The Legionnaires always treated him respectfully, due to his status as Lord Gregor's dedicated squire.
While her lover got their food, Ygritte took a spot on the bench beside Samwell. As she sat down, the Reachman turned to her, flashed a smile, and nodded his head once. She did not acknowledge the gesture, but he was certain she had noticed it.

_Not so long ago, I would have cringed if any woman outside of my family sat next to me. Glad I've cured myself of that compulsion._

Samwell was far less timid than he had been four years ago. He did not get quite so nervous around women any more, but he still had yet to have a paramour of his own. _Maybe if I learned to flirt. It seems to work for Theon Greyjoy well enough._

"You're perspiring," he noted. _Brilliant way to start a conversation,_ he chided himself. Still, Ygritte did seem rather sweaty.

"You do not jest," Ygritte wryly muttered, wiping her brow.

"Have you been working out?" Samwell enquired.

"Yes," Ygritte replied, "But not outside."

At that, her eyes shifted from Samwell to a spot across the room. Without even looking, Sam could tell that she was looking at Jon. _She means that form of workout._

"Alright, new subject," Samwell proposed. Although the topic of intimacy between man and woman fascinated Samwell, he did not like discussing it at the table. Apart from that, Sam had no desire to know about Jon and Ygritte's sex life. Especially since he himself had no sex life to speak of. _Not yet, that is. I plan to change that soon. Hopefully before the Others get here._

Jon returned a minute later. He had two bowls in his right hand, a third in his left hand, and a loaf of bread tucked under his left arm.

Ygritte scooted down the bench a little to make some room for him, and he subsequently sat down between her and Samwell. He placed the two bowls in his right hand in front of her and himself. He started to place the bowl in his left hand in front of Samwell, but the heir to Horn Hill hastily stopped his friend and beseeched him _"Not on the parchment, please."_

Scoffing, Jon moved to place the third bowl next to Samwell, beside the sheets of parchment instead of on top of them. After that, he pulled out the loaf of bread and divided it into thirds.

Although Samwell did not like to leave jobs unfinished, he could afford to break for a meal. So he exchanged his quill for a spoon, pushed the bunch of parchment off to the side, and concentrated on his bowl. He grinned when he saw what was inside.

"So we're having stew," Ygritte remarked.

"Not stew," Samwell corrected her, "This is chili con carne."

Ygritte seemed bewildered, so Jon enlightened her with "It is Spanish for 'chili with meat.' When Lord Gregor found those scrolls about the long-dead civilizations of Spain and Italy, he uncovered much more than just their languages. The recipe for this dish was included in the Spanish one. Lord Gregor thought it looked appetizing; so he gave it to the cooks."

Ygritte lightly nodded her head in acknowledgment, but she still seemed more curious in examining the chili than eating it. She enquired "What all's in it?"
"Well, meat, obviously," Samwell Tarly revealed, "There are also tomatoes… onion… beans… herbs, spices, and peppers from the Free Cities… and a few other things which I cannot place. If you want the full list of ingredients, you could ask the cooks."

Ygritte shrugged and muttered "Alright, I will try it."

"You'll need a spoon," Jon told her, handing her one. He gave a second to Sam and kept a third for himself.

"Bread works, too," Samwell suggested, "Great for dipping."

Samwell noticed that his bowl held a little more than Jon's or Ygritte's. He was appreciative of that. *Jon knows how to distribute portions.* While Sam was not a selfish person, and while he was not as fat as he once was, he still ate a little more than the average man. Given how much he used his brain, Samwell felt he actually *needed* a little more nutrition than the average man.

Ygritte tried a spoonful of the chili. Immediately, she dropped her spoon and her hands went to her mouth.

In response, Jon placed one comforting hand on her chest and another on her shoulder, and he asked "Are you alright?"

"This is fuckin' hot!" Ygritte barked.

Jon chuckled, patted her on the back, and murmured "It's not hot. It's spicy."

"Which is a variant of 'hot'," Samwell pointed out.

At that moment, a serving girl placed three tankards of ale before them. Ygritte promptly picked up hers and gulped down a hefty amount. After that, she seemed fine.

"Give it another try," Jon bade her, "I know you'll love it."

She turned to him, grinned, and proclaimed "You know nothing, Jon Snow."

Samwell snickered. *I never get tired of hearing that. Even though it is quite erroneous.* Nevertheless, Ygritte picked her spoon back up and continued eating. The next spoonful went down more easily than the first. *Looks as though it agrees with her.*

Samwell broke off a fragment of bread, dunked it into his bowl, scooped up a bit of meat and a few beans, and shoved the result into his mouth. He chewed it happily.

After he swallowed, Jon restarted the conversation. He asked him "So, what have you been up to today?"

"I've been modifying some schematics," Samwell apprised him. *Not as fun as what you've been doing, but still engaging. Not to mention just as meaningful.*

"Schematics for what?" Jon queried.

"Lord Gregor's latest creation," Samwell disclosed.

"Oh?" Ygritte murmured, gazing at the heir to Horn Hill, "What is it this time?"

*Even the Free Folk know of Lord Gregor's accomplishments as an inventor. How about that?* Samwell ate two more spoonfuls of chili. Then he wiped his hands on a linen, picked up the sheet
of parchment with the drawing, and slid it in front of Jon and Ygritte. As they looked down at it, he proudly announced "He calls it a printing press. He's been working on it for over a year now, and I've been helping him every step of the way. The design has almost been finalized. Once it is complete, we shall start building. If it proves functional, it will be a breakthrough in modern literature."

Jon and Ygritte were intrigued.

"What exactly will it do?" Jon asked in interest.

"Basically, it is a machine that writes text," Samwell professed, "It will copy words at a much faster rate than the human hand. In my opinion, it will revolutionize the world."

Jon smirked and drily uttered "Lord Gregor has revolutionized the world before. Nine times, if I count right. He practically does it at least once a year."

"I suppose he'd need something extraordinary for the tenth occasion," Ygritte presumed.

"This is certainly what I would call extraordinary," Samwell giddily pronounced, "If you ask me, this will be far more beneficial than cement, concrete, black power, or anything else Lord Gregor has patented to date. With a printing press, letters will be written and copied in minutes. Books in days; whole libraries in months. Just think of all the information we'll be able to share with the world."

Jon seemed indifferent, but he raised an eyebrow and nodded his head, as though he quite liked the sentiment. He candidly remarked "Only you could get so excited over books, Sam."

"It is not just books," Samwell contended, "It is the ability to print them. With more books, we could educate more of Westeros. In time of war, books are just as invaluable as swords. Many people are reluctant to admit this, but it is undeniably true."

"Then when the Night's King comes along, how about we just chuck a bunch o' books at him until he retreats," Ygritte cockily proposed.

Jon laughed again, whereas Samwell glared at her. He did not get angry, though. It took a great deal to make him angry. He merely smirked and muttered "Fine, mock me now. But soon enough, you'll see that wits and strength are equally essential."

"I might agree…" Ygritte began. After a pause, she added in "Except my people survived north of the Wall without books for thousands of years."

"Yet they still ventured south," Samwell disputed, "Tormund and some of the others have learned to read. It has done them much good."

"He has you there," Jon perceived, taking his best friend's side for once. She just shrugged and went back to eating her chili.

"If you'd like, I could teach you to read, Ygritte," Samwell submitted.

He half-expected her to flat-out decline his offer. To his pleasant surprise, she actually seemed to consider it for a few moments. Eventually, she turned to him and uttered "Maybe."

"If you rather I taught you, I am willing to oblige," Jon declared.

Samwell grinned wickedly and commented "Why would she want to learn from someone who
knows nothing?"

Almost right away, Jon and Ygritte broke out laughing. Samwell soon joined in.

When the laughter subsided, Jon looked to Samwell and remarked "Oh, well. I suppose you would be the better teacher anyway. Every now and then, I enjoy a good book as much as anyone. But I am not eager to mentor anyway. I don't like books that much."

"Why not?" Sam queried curiously.

"Because they have an air of pretention about them," Jon professed, "In my experience, the average book is riddled with countless incidents, ironies, and abrupt shifts in the plotline. Those are the very things that separate fantasy from reality. If there is one thing about life I appreciate, it is that most everything about it is in our control. There are never any sudden, unexpected twists."

While some may have seen that as a good argument, Samwell did not. In his mind, life was full of "sudden, unexpected twists." Robert's Rebellion alone was ample proof to counter Jon's proclamation. Maybe Ygritte is right about him after all.

Be that as it may, Samwell said nothing to contradict his best friend's philosophy. He just accepted it and resumed eating.

Samwell, Jon, and Ygritte spent the remainder of their meal eating instead of talking. Within ten minutes, their bowls and tankards were empty.

After wiping his fingers of grease and crumbs, Samwell gathered up his sheets of parchment and organized them into a small neat pile. He thought aloud "I better deliver these to Lord Gregor. Once he approves them, I expect it will not be long before he commissions the construction of his printing press."

"Good luck to you there," Jon bade his best friend. He wrapped his arm around Ygritte's waist and muttered "We're going to get some exercise."

Initially, Samwell thought that was an innuendo. Then Jon saw the expression on his face, and he rolled his eyes and amended that last sentence with "In the training yard."

"In any case, have fun," the heir to Horn Hill uttered plainly.

The three young adults exited the dining hall at the same time. They found Jon's bodyguard, Ser Marvyn, standing just outside the door.

Very little was known about Ser Marvyn, just that he was originally from the Reach. Most likely Oldtown; Samwell was inclined to think he held the guise of a Hightower.

Interestingly, Ser Maryn was not the only person they encountered outside the room. Jon Snow's maid was there, too.

"Afternoon, Myrna," Samwell told her cordially.

"Jon, Sam, Ygritte," Myrna kindly greeted the three of them, "Are you busy?"

"Not especially," Jon claimed, ignoring the exasperated look Ygritte threw him.

"Then I would like you to come with me," Myrna politely requested, "Lord Gregor… has something he wishes to tell you."
And he sent a maid to summon us? As strange as that may have appeared, Samwell decided not to argue. Jon and Ygritte decided the same.

"Did he say what about?" Jon queried.

"No," was all Myrna said in response.

They were content with that. Lord Gregor would not ask for us without good reason.

"Very well," Ygritte uttered, "Lead the way."

Samwell, Jon, Ygritte, and Ser Marvyn spent the subsequent ten minutes following Myrna in relative silence. Sam expected her to bring them to the Lord's Tower. Instead, she brought them to the Meeting Tower. That was not only unusual; it was all but unheard of. As far as Sam knew, no one outside of the secret council had ever been inside that building.

Myrna led them to the primary council chamber on the highest level of the Meeting Tower. Samwell was expecting to find Lord Gregor up there by himself. Again, his assumption was premature. Prince Oberyn Martell, Princess Elia Martell, Edgar Sand, Ihtos, Lady Shaara, her daughter Rhaella, and Ser Reinald were all there, as well. What could they all possibly have in common?

All of them except Ser Reinald and Lord Gregor were Dornish, but being from the same region did not always entail further similarities. Besides, when did Lord Gregor ever distinguish an individual based on one's background?

Ser Marvyn was the last person to enter the council chamber. He shut, locked, and bolted the door behind him. Now it is just us. The whole rest of the world does not exist.

Before Jon or Ygritte could ask any questions, Samwell took the opportunity to approach Gregor Clegane. He held out all the sheets of parchment and announced "I've finished reevaluating and updating the schematics, my lord. I believe you will find everything in order now."

The Mountain took the sheets and spent a few moments shuffling through them. After that, he smiled down at his notary and told him "Very good, Sam. But the printing press will have to wait for the morrow. Now, we have something more urgent to discuss."

Samwell nodded his acknowledgment and declared "As you say, my lord."

There was a large table in the center of the room, yet no one was seated against it. Rhaella and Edgar Sand were leaning against two of the tall chairs, Ihtos and Ser Reinald were posted against the wall, Prince Oberyn was slouched against the table, and Shaara, Princess Elia, and Lord Gregor were standing in various spots around the room.

"Myrna claimed you wished an audience with us, my lord," Jon muttered simply yet respectfully.

"That is correct," the Mountain affirmed, "You in particular, Jon."

If Samwell was not intrigued before, he was now. Needless to say, so was Jon. The latter enquired "Why me?"

"Because what I have to say has to do with your… genealogy," Gregor tentatively apprised him.

"Well, you have my full attention, my lord," Jon proclaimed.
"Mine, as well," Samwell conceded.

"And mine, I suppose," Ygritte commented, though she actually sounded rather disinterested.

Everyone in that chamber stood in absolute silence for about two minutes. Finally, Lord Gregor exhaled a sigh through his teeth, and he told Jon "What I am about to tell you, I and others have been wishing to tell you for the longest time. I have considered all the possible ways to tell you. After all this time, I've decided the kindest approach is also the most direct one."

"Well, by all means, be direct," Jon implored him.

Lord Gregor most certainly was, as the very next statement out of his mouth was: "What you were told about your parents is a lie."

The suddenness of that revelation was almost as shocking as the revelation itself. Jon stared blankly at him for about ten seconds. Then he breathed out "What?"

Lord Gregor elaborated with "You were raised believing that you are the baseborn child of Brandon Stark and Ashara Dayne. That is untrue. He was not your father, nor was she your mother. You are not even a bastard. You were born from a legitimate union."

"Between who?" Jon asked, almost demanded.

It was not Lord Gregor who answered him. He instead turned to Myrna and beckoned her forward. Samwell watched Jon's maid as she gradually approached his best friend. She seemed extremely anxious.

When she was less than three feet away from Jon Snow, she told him in a soft tone "I know you hate being lied to Jon. I hated having to lie to you, as well. But I will lie to you no longer. There will be no more secrets between us."

Shaara was holding a length of cloth in her hands. At a signal from Myrna, she approached the young maid and held the cloth out to her. *Is it scented? I definitely smell something, but I am not certain what.* Myrna turned to her, picked up the cloth, covered her head with it, and pressed it against her face. She held it there for close to three minutes before she removed it.

When she turned back to Jon and Samwell, her façade had greatly changed. She had gone from blonde to brunette. Her hazel eyes had turned grey. Her freckles had disappeared, and her face had somehow gotten larger. *The cloth... it must have been a type of poultice.*

After giving the length of cloth back to Shaara, Myrna looked back to Jon and softly told him "My name is Lyanna Stark… and I am your mother."

Samwell had been expecting a shock, but nothing like this. He was downright flabbergasted. *And if I'm this stunned... I cannot possibly fathom what is going through Jon's head right now.*

Jon seemed frozen in this stance. It was as though he had ceased to blink, breathe, move, or do anything indicative of a living being.

In spite of that, Myrna – or the lady who was now Lyanna Stark, apparently – continued restlessly with "History claims that I was kidnapped by Rhaegar Targaryen. In that matter, history errs. I loved Rhaegar and he loved me. By my own volition, I ran away with him. He and I were wed before a heart tree. When the Rebellion began, I wanted to stay with him, but he refused to put me in harm's way. So he took me to Dorne and sheltered me there for my own safety. He promise he would return to me when the fighting was done. Alas, I never saw him alive again. But... before he
left, I was with him long enough to conceive a child."

That all but answered the question on Samwell’s mind. But he had to be certain it was accurate. So he cleared his throat and asked "My lady, does that mean…?"

Lyanna Stark just nodded at him, and then she told Jon "Prince Rhaegar Targaryen was your father."

Had he been in Jon's position, Samwell did not doubt that he would have fainted. What was incredible was that Jon did not. All the same, he had yet to physically respond to what he had just learned. *He must be in shock.* Jon was so motionless that Samwell was starting to worry for his best friend.

Ygritte seemed to handle the news better than either of them. She casually folded her arms and said to Lord Gregor "This is all most incredible, my lord. Most incredible, indeed. But just what are Sam and I doin' here?"

"You are Jon's two closest friends, Ygritte," Gregor Clegane debated, "Additionally, Samwell is here because I can rely on him to remain discreet. And you are here because… it would have been wrong for to have remained in the dark."

"Yes, I think it is my business to know just who I'm bedding down with," Ygritte stated jokingly. After that, she quickly turned to Lyanna Stark and said apologetically "I meant no offense, my lady."

Lyanna did not seem bothered by the former wildling's jape, or even by the meaning behind it. She merely nodded at Ygritte. Then she promptly returned her gaze to Jon Snow.

*No. Not Jon Snow. Jon... Targaryen? If Lyanna and Prince Rhaegar wed, then... my lord; Jon... he's a prince. A fucking prince, for gods' sakes!*

"I know I cannot begin to understand how or what you must be feeling," Lyanna Stark softly admitted, "But please understand, I did not just give you up. I tried to find some way to keep you with me. But it would have been impossible. You would have had to live apart from the rest of your family, as the whole world thought I was dead. Letting your uncle take you back to Winterfell was the only option. I would have given anything to have been there for you as your real mother. Please, believe me. I love you with all my heart."

If there was any question left as to whether Jon's mother truly loved him, any lingering doubt had effectively been expunged by that short speech. *She sounds far too sincere to be lying. No one, not even the best mummers out there, could say that without meaning it.*

Jon was still standing in the same motionless position as before.

"Jon?" Sam uttered nervously. He was getting seriously worried now.

So was Lady Lyanna. She seemed she was on the verge of tears. She begged her estranged son "Jon, please. Say something. Anything. Tell me you hate me. That you'll never forgive me for lying to you. That you never want to see me again. Just please… don't say nothing."

Finally, Jon answered her. He did none of those things. Instead, he stepped closer to Lyanna Stark, reached his arms out, and pulled her into a tight embrace, which she swiftly returned. As he held her close, he whispered in an anguished tone "Mother…"

That was the most heartbreaking thing Sam ever heard in his life.
Lyanna soon began to weep. Jon wept, as well. Most of the women in the room threatened to do the same.

Samwell Tarly had never seen his best friend cry. Not even once. Sam himself used to cry plenty. He still cried every now and then, but Jon, never. Jon almost seemed too manly to cry.

Even so, the present situation was entirely excusable. Not that it required an excuse anyway. Still…

*If ever it was manly to weep…*

Chapter End Notes

Note: It has finally happened! Jon no longer knows nothing (but part of him wishes he still did)!

I can imagine some of you were hoping for more interaction between Jon, Lyanna, and the other people involved in the Targaryen disappearance conspiracy. Do not fret; you shall have more of that in the following update. The very next chapter will pick up right where this scene left off, but it will be from the perspective of a difference character. So the full revelation of the Targaryens is by no means complete. Believe me, as Al Pacino would say, I am just getting warmed up…
Note: For those of you who like to keep official track of all that is happening, there will be a total of six major subplots in this fanfic: Gregor's continuous efforts to establish universal peace through Westeros (obviously, the primary one), the Targaryens' endeavors across the Narrow Sea, the Three-Eyed Raven and the attempts made to contact him, the Night's Watch and their plans to counter the Night's King, the constant development of family ties through various actions such as trade agreements and weddings (mainly Robb and Margaery's in the latter category), and a new arc which will be introduced in the latter half of this chapter. Everything you read from now on will stem from one or more of those six storylines.

It all started at Harrenhal.

It was there that Lyanna secretly fought for Lord Howland's honor, inadvertently gaining the crown's attention in the process. It was there that Rhaegar crowned Lyanna as his Queen of Love and Beauty over his own wife, prompting the wolf girl to seek out the Dornishwoman. It was there that Elia and Lyanna subsequently came to care for one another, inciting a dangerous plot. It was there that the precursor to the fall of the Targaryen dynasty occurred.

Most of all, it was there where Ashara Dayne met Brandon Stark. Although he was betrothed to the daughter of Riverrun, the then-heir to Winterfell had lain with the exotic beauty from Starfall. He had claimed to love her, that he wished he could wed her instead of Catelyn Tully. He was even considering relinquishing his birthright for Ashara. I actually believed him. I am certain I was not his first, but Starks value their word and treasure their honor.

But everything changed when Lyanna ran off with Rhaegar and Elia. Brandon Stark had rashly gone to King's Landing to rescue his sister and bring her supposed kidnapper to justice. His rashness and his quick temper were what got him, his father, his friends, and their fathers killed. Their murders (or executions, depending on one's perspective) were what incited the Rebellion.

Like most of Dorne, Ashara had remained out of that war. She mourned to loss of her one-time lover. He left a piece of him with her, which she took comfort in. For a time.

When her daughter came into the world, she was stillborn. Ashara's agony only increased from there. There were moments when she even considered throwing herself into the sea, just as people later said she did.

Then Arthur returned home. She had thought for a certainty that her brother would perish in the fighting. She was spared that bit of grief, at least.

Although Rhaegar Targaryen had lost his life in the Rebellion, Gregor Clegane had ensured the survival of both his wives and all three of his children. However, in order to guarantee the continuance of their survival, the Mountain would require additional aid.

By her own choice, Ashara had offered to assist him. She had accompanied Rhaenys Targaryen, Howland Reed, and Lyanna Stark to Greywater Watch. She had also consented to the Mountain's
idea to pass along the belief that she was the mother of Lyanna's son, Jaehaerys (better known as Jon).

Ashara had even arranged the first meeting between Jon and Lyanna. Of course, at the time, Jon was unaware that she was anything other than a maid. Despite the fact that she was assigned to Jon exclusively, he never once suspected that she was his mother. Nonetheless, she served him for nearly five years, which allowed a type of closeness to form between them.

Now Jon finally knew the truth. Ashara had been concerned that nothing, not even the last five years, could have prepared him for it. Fortunately, after a brief period of shock, he seemed to have come to terms with the revelation. He is likely experiencing a number of conflicting emotions. If so, that cannot be held against him.

Seeing Rhaegar Targaryen's youngest child embrace his mother, Ashara felt quite proud of herself. After all, it was she who had made this reunion possible.

Ashara did not know how long Jon and Lyanna remained locked in their hug, but she wagered it could have been less than five minutes.

Eventually, Jon and Lyanna removed their arms from each other. Probably because they finally remembered they were still in the company of others. Were they alone, they may have stayed together longer.

"So…" Jon mumbled awkwardly, wiping away the remnants of his tears and staring at the ground, "What now?"

"Now, there are a few more people I need to reintroduce to you," Lord Gregor Clegane declared, gesturing around the room. After a moment, he hastily added in "If you think you can handle it."

Jon scoffed. He turned to the tall man and stated "You needn't condescend me, my lord. After what I just learned, I can handle anything else you have to tell."

It looks as though he has already regained his usually stoic yet witty demeanor. That's a sign that he is ready to accept virtually anything else he is told now.

"Even the news that you are not an only child?" Gregor Clegane asked rhetorically.

Once more, Jon appeared stunned, but he was not flabbergasted this time. "What are you talking about?"

"As you know, your father had two other children from his first wife," the Mountain disclosed, gesturing to Princess Elia Martell.

"Yes, but they died during the Sack of King's Landing," Jon pointed out.

Lord Gregor solemnly shook his head and expounded "Contrary to what you've been told, I was not too late to save only their mother. Ser Amory Lorch nearly succeeded in putting Princess Elia and her children to the sword. I arrived just in time to stop him from killing any of them."

"But the small corpses that were presented to the king…" Samwell Tarly remarked.

"Although the city was taken with minimal loss, there was still some loss," Gregor Clegane recalled, "A young girl and a male babe were among the casualties. While their deaths were unfortunate, they did serve some purpose. A terrible, gruesome purpose, but a meaningful one, just as well."
In any case, the ruse with their bodies worked.

Princess Elia took over for a moment: "Lord Gregor managed to smuggle my son and my daughter out of King's Landing. They sailed back to Sunspear with us. Soon after, we rode for the Tower of Joy. Within a fortnight, Jon, you came into the world."

"That was the last time all three of Rhaegar Targaryen's children were in the same place," Gregor Clegane muttered, "For their own safety, it was decided that they would be kept apart. You, Jon, were raised in Winterfell with your uncle and his family. Rhaenys was sheltered in Greywater Watch by Lord Howland Reed. Aegon stayed in Sunspear under the pretense that he was Oberyn Martell's only male bastard."

At that, Jon gradually turned to face "Rhaella" and "Edgar Sand." Both of them gave a small smile. After a few seconds, Rhaenys began to approach him. Aegon started towards him a moment later. They both reached Jon at approximately the same time. It was then that he smiled.

"Brother," Aegon murmured kindly, extending his hand.

Jon took the elder boy's hand and shook it firmly. After that, he looked to Rhaenys, and he shook hands with her, as well. He also placed a light kiss on the back of Rhaenys' hand, causing her to giggle. She obviously appreciated the gesture.

"This must come as a surprise," Rhaenys wryly presumed.

Jon chuckled and muttered "Ten minutes ago, I did not have a mother. Now I have a brother and sister."

Half-brother and half-sister, in all technicality. But that is not the important part.

Jon then turned towards Ashara and thought aloud "Then you are not Rhael – I mean, Rhaenys' mother, my lady?"

"Indeed not, Jon," she bluntly admitted, putting down the poultice Lyanna used to remove her disguise, "Furthermore, Shaara is not my name. However, my true name uses the same letters."

Samwell Tarly was the first to understand her meaning. He softly uttered "Lady Ashara Dayne of Starfall."

Ashara merely nodded her head to confirm. The woman Jon's always believed to be his mother.

"The reports of my suicide were false," Ashara professed, "A fabrication invented so I could disappear with Lyanna and Rhaenys. I went with them to Greywater, where we all lived together in secret. A while later, your mother moved to Moat Cailin."

"All thanks to you," Lyanna murmured gratefully. She then informed her son "You should know our arrangement at Moat Cailin was Lady Ashara's idea entirely. Even with a disguise, I could not risk going back to Winterfell, as too many people there could have recognized me. Ashara thought around that. It was she who suggested that you be Lord Gregor's squire, and that I masquerade as your maid."

Ashara could not decide to smirk or blush at Lyanna's praise. Jon turned back to her, slowly walked over to her, and held out his hand. After this handshake, Jon stepped closer to Ashara and kissed her softly on the cheek. "I am will be forever grateful for what you've done, my lady."
This time, she smirked and blushed. *He has his father's charms. Of course, Ygritte could attest to that.*

Ygritte said nothing when her lover pressed his lips against Ashara's face. The Dornishwoman glimpsed at the redheaded girl out of the corner of her eye, and she seemed indifferent. That was a relief. *Say what one will about the wildlings; at least they do not get the wrong impression.*

Right then, Jon raised an eyebrow. He looked around the room at large and muttered "If you all reached the Tower of Joy before I was born, you must have been there for quite a while. Were you there during the ensuing skirmish between Lord Eddard's men and the Kingsguard?"

"Actually, there was no skirmish at the Tower of Joy," Prince Oberyn Martell revealed, "You see, my boy, the Kingsguard were unwilling to bend the knee to Robert, and even if they were, they refused to leave their late prince's children unprotected. So they went into hiding, as well."

"Where are they?" Jon inquired.

"I believe I know," Samwell Tarly interjected. When all eyes were on him, he declared "They're standing in this room."

Before any questions could be asked, he gazed around the meeting chamber and announced "Ihtos, you came here with Princess Elia's party. Ser Rebinald, you arrived with Lady Ashara's. In the time since then, both of you have hardly left Prince Aegon or Princess Rhaenys' respective sides. Similarly, Ser Marvyn, as far back as I recall, you have never been more than fifty feet from Jon."

After a short pause, Samwell went on with "Despite always wearing that helm, Ihtos is clearly a Dornishman. Based on how he interacts with Lady Ashara, he has to be her brother, Ser Arthur Dayne. Secondly, the Reach is a large place, but Oldtown is not too far from Horn Hill. Thus, I can tell at a glance that Ser Marvyn is really a Hightower. Ser Gerold Hightower, no less. Lastly, Ser Rebinald shares some facial features with Lady Catelyn Stark, whose mother was a Whent. So even without the use of process of elimination, he must be Ser Oswell Whent."

Ashara was impressed. *He is very observant. Then again, I should have expected as much.* Samwell Tarly was one of the most intelligent people Ashara Dayne had ever met. She was not stunned that he was able to deduce all that on his own.

"If there was no fight at the Tower of Joy, what became of the three among Lord Eddard's company who did not return to the North?" Jon enquired, "What happened to Mark Ryswell, Ethan Glover, and Theo Wull?"

"Who do you think were the three men – apart from Ser Oswell – who arrived at the moat alongside myself and Lady Ashara?" Rhaenys slyly murmured.

Lord Gregor stepped forward and elaborated with "No one would have believed that the Kingsguard fell without taking at least one of the Northmen with them. Some of them would have had to disappear, too. Lord Eddard Stark and Lord Howland Reed were not expendable, Martyn Cassel had a son of his own, and Lord Willam Dustin was the last of his line. But Mark Ryswell, Ethan Glover, and Theo Wull were all childless bachelors from large families."

"Why aren't they here?" Samwell enquired curiously.

"I have them standing guard outside the chamber," Gregor Clegane answered him simply, "I needed them to ensure that we were not disturbed by anyone. Given what they know, they are better-qualified for that task than any of my guards."
Jon and Samwell seemed content with that response.

"Well, this has been a most peculiar day," Ygritte drily mumbled. Ashara and a few of the others chuckled at her candor. Is there anything that astonishes her?

"The day is not over yet," Gregor Clegane said sternly, "There is much more we have left to discuss."

"Such as what, my lord?" Aegon said inquisitively.

"Such as where we go from here," Gregor Clegane professed. He turned so that he faced Jon, Aegon, and Rhaenys all at once, and then he told them "The plan for you three to live in hiding was always meant to be a temporary one. Sooner or later, I meant for your existence to become common knowledge."

"And you believe the time for that is now?" Ashara Dayne conjectured.

"No, but it will be soon," Gregor Clegane contended, "Much sooner than I originally intended."

"How do you mean, my lord?" Rhaenys enquired.

The Mountain told her and her brothers "I have studied this issue from every angle, and I have determined that there were only two ways your identities could be made public without jeopardizing your lives. The first was if you had the means to retake the Iron Throne. Currently, support for the Royal House of Baratheon is at an all-time high, and none of the Targaryens has the power or influence to even begin to match Robert Baratheon. Apart from that, I was hoping to avoid that path. I have no wish to incite another insurrection, especially with the Long Night nearing."

Understandable. No civilized person wants bloodshed if it can be avoided.

"And the other 'way?'" Jon said in interest.

"The more passive of the two approaches," Gregor Clegane claimed, "I would have you emerge from the shadows only when I was certain you were safe from your grandfather's enemies."

"So you believe we are safe now?" Aegon assumed hopefully.

"No," Gregor Clegane bluntly responded, "Right now, the Starks, the Arryns, the Tullys, and even the Baratheons are capable of reasoning with you. But Tywin Lannister has never been a reasonable man. Unless by some miracle he becomes one, you'll never be safe whilst he draws breath. I was hoping he would die on his own sometime before the next winter. Alas, he is not dead now. Nonetheless, I can no longer afford to wait until he is."

"Why is that?" Lyanna Stark queried.

"Because I aim to be the one who tells Robert Baratheon the truth," Lord Gregor professed, "This may sound haughty, but I believe I am the only person who can tell him of this affair without endangering any of the involved parties. But if I do not act fast, he could learn of it from someone else."

"Someone else?" Elia Martell repeated, a little perplexed, "How could that happen? There are only a few dozen people who know about Rhaenys, Aegon, and Jon, all of whom are our trusted allies."

"For the sake of curiosity, who all knows about us?" Aegon enquired.
"The people in this building, obviously," Gregor Clegane revealed, "Prince Doran Martell, a few of his retainers, some of my men-at-arms, and Varys. Other than Varys, none of them would betray our trust. For the present, we can count on Varys to keep his silence. Oh, and the members of the secret council, but with the exception of Prince Oberyn, all of them were only made aware recently."

"Wait, you told all of them?" Jon noted.

"That is correct," Gregor Clegane confirmed, "For the most part, their reactions varied. I'd say Willas took it best."

I can imagine why. Ashara glimpsed over at Rhaenys, and based on her smile, she appeared to be having a similar line of thought. I wonder which of them is the luckier?

"What about the others?" Aegon asked.

Lord Gregor recalled "Lyn, Lothor, and Tormund were more or less indifferent. Brynden, Smalljon, and Maron were astounded at first, but came to terms with the news quickly. The one I was most concerned about was Gerion. He has assured me he would still chose the Legion over his brother, so long as I continue to pursue the best interests of all Westerosi. I was also worried about how Renly would respond, but he claims he will not tell his brother, simply because he is curious to see what I have planned. Dacey… I am actually somewhat amazed by how well she accepted the news."

Ashara knew Lord Gregor did not like having to keep so many secrets from anyone, Dacey Mormont least of all. He should count himself fortunate to have such an understanding woman as a wife. Then again, had it been her and Brandon, Ashara had little doubt that she would have reacted the same way.

"Have you told anyone else, Gregor?" Oberyn Martell asked

"No one," Gregor firmly claimed.

"Then everyone who knows about Rhaegar's sons and daughter will not speak of them out of turn," Oberyn debated, "So why are you so concerned that someone other than you will tell Robert?"

"All of the people who know the full extent of this matter are our allies," Gregor Clegane pronounced, "However, there are some individuals who at least know certain aspects of it. Two in particular we should be mindful of, and neither of them can be counted an ally."

"Who might they be?" Samwell Tarly queried.

Instead of answering the heir to Horn Hill right away, Gregor Clegane turned to Rhaegar Targaryen's second wife. He muttered "Lyanna, at the Tower of Joy, do you remember when you claimed to send out ravens and riders to your father and brothers shortly before you fled with Rhaegar?"

"I did more than claim to do that, Gregor," Lyanna Stark asserted, "I know I dispatched them. I was not about to run away from home without telling my family what I was doing and why. The three couriers I sent out were all Stark men; reliable and unwavering. They should have reached their destinations."

"Under other circumstances, they would have," Gregor Clegane disputed, "After sixteen years, I have finally discovered what became of each of them. The one sent to the Eyrie was ambushed by
the Moon Brothers, one of the mountain clans of the Vale. Given how dangerous the road to the Bloody Gate normally is, he should never have gone out by himself. The one sent to Riverrun tried to pass through the Twins, but he was denied the use of the bridge. He consequentially tried to ford the forks of the Trident and drowned in the attempt. Now, both those losses were entirely accidental. But the rider who was sent to Winterfell... what happened to him was no accident."

"Go on," Elia Martell beckoned him. By this point, he had everyone's full attention.

"A few days past, I received a raven from Lord Eddard Stark," Gregor Clegane illuminated, "Within the last fortnight, his son Robb attended the wedding of Rodrik Forrester and Elaena Glenmore. During the feast, Domeric Bolton, son and heir of Lord Roose, showed up and spoke with Robb in private. He talked about a hunting trip he went on earlier this year. During the hunt, he stumbled across the buried corpse of a Winterfell soldier."

He allowed a moment for that to set in. Ashara could hear others gasp softly. She herself was stunned. Lord Gregor soon continued with "Lord Roose did not report the discovery, and Domeric saw him remove something from the soldier's body. He did some investigating of his own, and it turned out to be a letter. He showed the letter to Robb Stark, Margaery Tyrell, and Mira Forrester. After so much time underground, the letter was practically indecipherable. But they managed to decipher certain parts of it. Mainly the passage which utilized the words 'Rhaegar' and 'wed' in the same sentence."

Even before that last statement, Ashara had had a very good idea as to where Lord Gregor was going with this revelation. Nevertheless, she was alarmed by the confirmation he provided to her hypothesis.

"Where was the rider found?" Rhaenys enquired, rubbing her temple.


"That's in the northeastern section of the North," Lyanna thought aloud, "Rhaegar and I were wed near Castle Cerwyn, which is no more than thirty miles north of Moat Cailin. The rider should not have gone anywhere near the Dreadfort on his way to Winterfell.

"Unless he was only buried on the Boltons' lands," Elia countered, "Perhaps he was killed elsewhere."

"Of course he was," Gregor Clegane candidly affirmed. He almost sounds as though he's talking to a bunch of lackwits. Then again, he has already given us plenty of clues. If anyone he was talking to had failed to realize what he was implying by now, he may as well have been. "Domeric believes his father had the soldier tracked, murdered, and interred. He also believes that the message was Roose's motive for doing all that in the first place."

"That makes sense," Lyanna muttered through gritted teeth, "Bolton has always coveted the seat of House Stark. By keeping that courier from doing his duty, he allowed my father and eldest brother to be murdered by the Mad King. He probably hoped Ned and Ben would meet the same fate."

Then Lord Roose was just as big an instigator of the Rebellion as anyone. That filthy leech...

"If he could make that happen, I've little doubt he would," Oberyn Martell drily stated, "But Roose Bolton's profound desire to become Lord Paramount of the North is not the main issue. How much does he know about...this?"

"For the present, I believe Roose only knows that Rhaegar and Lyanna eloped," Gregor debated,
"He may not even know that much; he probably only suspects. I am reasonably confident he has no idea that Rhaegar's children are alive, or even that the prince had three."

"But Robb, Margaery, Mira, Domeric..." Jon muttered worriedly, "Even if they only received minimal knowledge of this issue from that letter, we should still take their involvement into account. How much do they know?"

"They know nothing," Gregor Clegane reassured him.

Ygritte smirked and began to open her mouth. Without even looking at her, Jon held up his hand and said snappily "Don't..."

The wildling girl closed her mouth, but she smirked again.

Gregor Clegane then pronounced "On that subject, Lord Eddard did mention that Margaery told him that Lady Olenna was fairly inquisitive about the direwolves, especially how the mother direwolf seemed to favor Ghost the most, and how she bonded to the woman who was serving as maid to Ghost's master."

_A prime example of what Lord Gregor would call 'juxtaposition' or 'lives in parallel.'_

"Then the Queen of Thorns suspects?" Elia assumed anxiously

"I spoke with Willas on this, and he believes it is quite possible that his grandmother may have deduced all by herself that Lyanna is alive and that Jon is her son," Gregor Clegane professed, "Moreover, he supposes that she may have also determined that Rhaenys is the unnamed bride I have selected for him."

Flushing slightly, Rhaenys queried "So why has she not said anything?"

"I asked Willas the same," Gregor disclosed, "He claims that his grandmother actually approves of the match, as it will strengthen relations between the Reach and Dorne. He has also assured me that Lady Olenna will stay silent about Jon and Lyanna as long as our plans work in her family's favor. Since they do, we needn't worry that she will share what she has learned with anyone."

_Just so, it would be both impertinent and impractical to cross the Queen of Thorns._

"Well then, if – after fifteen years – Roose Bolton has still not come forward, I would say he is no threat to us, either," Aegon contended.

"He is very much a threat to my brother's family," Lyanna bitterly remarked.

"Unfortunately, Lord Eddard cannot confront him, lest we run the risk of Bolton exposing us," Ashara Dayne noted.

"Just so, my lady," Lord Gregor conceded, "All the same, Lord Eddard is going to be more heedful of Bolton from now on. He has no intention of allowing that flayer to overthrow his family."

"Sooner or later, Bolton will have to be dealt with," Elia Martell argued.

"It will have be later, then," Gregor Clegane proclaimed, "Of the two hostile parties that may be on to us, Bolton is the one I am less worried about. He has held his tongue for fifteen years. He will not loosen it until he believes he has a practical chance of seizing the North from the Starks. Long as the Legion is garrisoned here and Lord Eddard maintains order, that will never happen."
He would not say that unless he was certain. That is sufficient for me. Based on the expressions of the others, that was sufficient for just about everyone else in the room.

"What of the other individual?" Ashara Dayne inquired, "Who is the one you believe to be the greater threat?"

Again, Gregor Clegane did not give a direct, immediate answer. Instead, he stayed silent for a minute, and then he asked no one in particular "What do you know of the followers of the Lord of Light?"

"They wear all red," Jon muttered.

"They treat fire like a holy object," Rhaenys uttered.

"They spit on all other gods," Aegon murmured.

"They claim to be able to see what is to come," Samwell mumbled. They are also fond of drink. Or maybe that is just Thoros of Myr.

"All true," Gregor Clegane averred, folding his arms, "My colleague Allard Seaworth is occupied with business across the Narrow Sea, as some of you are already aware. He is leading the company that was tasked with guarding Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen. Currently, they are all still in Pentos as guests of Magister Illyrio Mopatis. A few weeks back, Allard sent me a letter. In it, he notified me that a red priestess had shown up at Illyrio's manse."

"What was she doing there?" Rhaenys queried.

"According to Allard, she wished to enter your aunt and uncle's services," Gregor apprised the young princess and her brothers, "Now, before I say anything more, you should know I am familiar with this red priestess."

"Familiar how?" Princess Lyanna inquired.

"She was part of my vision of the Long Night," Gregor Clegane disclosed, "Her name is Melisandre. In my premonition, she entered the services of Lady Seylse Baratheon of Dragonstone. Overtime, she tried to convince Lord Stannis Baratheon that he was Azor Azai reborn. She also supported him in his efforts to seize the Iron Throne."

"Hold right there," Elia Martell interjected, "Stannis Baratheon would have sought to take the crown from his own brother?"

Lord Gregor merely nodded.

I would never have thought it possible. "I heard it said Lord Stannis values honor as much as the Starks."

"In my vision, he believed himself to be Robert's rightful heir," Gregor Clegane claimed, "Under different circumstances, he would have been. But none of that matters now. I have averted the fiasco that encouraged him to rise against the crown. In this world, Stannis would no sooner rebel than I would."

"That is fortunate," Aegon contended, "As you said earlier, my lord, we do not any more unnecessary conflict, even if it was just civil war between the Baratheons."

That may be advantageous for those loyal to the Targaryens, but it would yield unfavorable results
for the rest of the Seven Kingdoms. And ultimately, even the Targaryens would be worse off for it.

"Anyway, since I have avoided the events that caused Lord Stannis to forsake the Seven, I assumed Melisandre would give us no trouble," Gregor Clegane explicated, "This marks one of the few times when my assumption proved to be premature. I never once considered the possibility that she would seek out the Targaryens instead."

"We've encountered unexpected difficulties before, Gregor," Prince Oberyn reminded his friend, "This is just another to add to the list."

"Normally, I would agree with you, Oberyn," Lord Gregor proclaimed, "However, there is one thing Allard mentioned about the Red Woman that greatly unsettles me. It is something I never would have imagined possible, even in my most vivid dreams."

If Ashara was not engrossed before, she definitely was now. So was everyone else, apparently. She stepped closer to the Mountain and asked him "What did he tell you?"

Gregor took a moment to gaze around the room, and then he sighed and revealed "Allard believes the Red Woman may have the same gift from the gods as I."

Silence. That was what followed. A tense, unpleasant, elongated period of silence.

Jon broke it with the proper question: "What led him to think that?"

"Less than a moon's turn ago, the Red Woman asked to speak with him, Viserys, and Daenerys privately," Gregor Clegane expounded, "During that meeting, she claimed to be aware of certain events. Some of these events would only have occurred if the scenarios in my visions came to pass. Furthermore, she told him that Rhaenys and Aegon were not dead, and that I was the one who saved them. She even knew that Lyanna was alive and that Jon was her and Rhaegar's son."

Everyone in the chamber was effectively rendered speechless.

"There must be some other explanation, my lord," Rhaenys proposed.

"None that I can see," Gregor Clegane refuted frankly, "We have already established that none of our allies who know of you, Aegon, and Jon would have informed on us. As such, Melisandre must have learned the truth all on her own. While it is normal for red priests and priestesses to make outlandish predictions of the future, Melisandre is not just supplying predictions. For instance, she claimed she would have entered the service of Lord Stannis Baratheon in another life. The only way she could have known that was if she has the same visions I have."

Two people who could see into the future and act to change it as they please... that sounds nearly as dangerous as the Long Night itself.

"What does this mean, my lord?" Aegon stated enquiringly, "More to the point, what does it mean for us?"

That is the real question.

"On the plus side, Allard has shared this information and his theory with no one else," Lord Gregor professed, "However, if he is correct about Melisandre – and it is very likely he is – everything is now far more complicated than it once was. And I mean everything. Not just the matters that concern Westeros and its residents. This affects the whole of the Known World."

"Surely she cannot be as troublesome as all that," Samwell Tarly contended.
"Oh, she can," the Mountain insisted, "You have seen how much change I have brought about, Sam. Melisandre could inflict just as much change. Perhaps more, as she is not bound by the laws of the Seven Kingdoms. She has the liberties of the Free Cities on her side. Additionally, the Red Woman knows everything I know. Fortunately, I in turn know everything she knows. So neither of us has an advantage over the other. Even so, she has the same capacity to garner great power and influence."

"Do you honestly believe that, my lord?" Ashara asked. Lord Gregor was not one to exaggerate or make grand allegations without cause. Any observations he made about anything and anyone had to be believed. Especially when such observations were about potential hazards to the stability of the world.

"Yes," Gregor Clegane affirmed, "Because of Melisandre, I have already had to revise some of my long-term plans. Originally, I was not going to share the news of Jon, Rhaenys, and Aegon's existence with the secret council until I told King Robert. You see, in the event that the Targaryens were somehow exposed before then, I wanted the secret council to have complete deniability. At least they would have been spared the king's wrath. However, the predicament with the Red Woman necessitated a change in my plans, and I had to be forward with Allard. As such, I deemed it necessary to be forward with the rest of the secret council."

"Your straightforwardness could turn out to be a benefit, Gregor," Elia suggested.

"Maybe," the Mountain admitted, "But be that as it may, I must now accelerate another of my timetables."

"Which one?" Ashara Dayne queried.

"The one concerning the world's awareness – or lack thereof – of Rhaegar's children," Gregor Clegane answered her, "Every day we delay is another day Melisandre could tip off the king. It is unlikely she would feed him this news directly, but he could acquire the information secondhand from one of a number of intermediate third parties."

"Well, that, we cannot have," Lyanna Stark sternly proclaimed.

Ashara then gazed over at the wolf girl, and a thought occurred to her. It may be best if she stayed in hiding, even after Jon, Aegon, and Rhaenys come out of it. Lord Gregor had likely arrived at that same conclusion. After this conversation ended, Lyanna would don her facial disguise and become "Myrna" again. She may have to remain Myrna for as long as the Usurper lives. After all, it was the "death" of Lyanna Stark that had inspired Robert Baratheon to turn his life around for the better of all. If he were to discover that that was all a fallacy… just thinking about the potential consequences that would result from that made Ashara shudder.

"I quite agree," Oberyn Martell conceded, turning to the tallest man there, "Now that I reflect on this, I feel you are correct, Gregor. You should be the one to tell Robert Baratheon about Aegon, Rhaenys, and Jon. I just need to know first: do you think he can be persuaded not to harm them? I mean, would he seriously grant them amnesty if they were to appear before him?"

"At this point, we can only hope," Lord Gregor glumly admitted, "But I like to think he would. At the very least, he is a much better man than he was when he first claimed the Iron Throne. From what Jasper has told me of his father, the Robert Baratheon who sits the throne now would never sanction the murder of innocent children, Targaryen or otherwise."

"That is good enough for me," Aegon declared.
"Me, as well," Rhaenys decreed.

Jon stayed silent for a few seconds, and then he shrugged and commented "Me, too, I suppose."

Ashara doubted that was enough consolation for Elia Martell or Lyanna Stark, but neither princess said anything to protest. Either they trusted their children's judgment, or they had faith in Lord Gregor Clegane's ability to overcome rather unfavorable odds. *In this situation, I'd lean more towards the latter. After all, it was Lord Gregor who got us this far.*

"Then I must arrange a meeting with the King and soon," Gregor Clegane swiftly decided.

"How soon?" Lyanna queried, stepping closer to Jon and placing a protective hand on his shoulder.

"Before the year is out," Lord Gregor announced. *Just a little over three months.* "At this time, however, when is not as important as where. I have come to the conclusion that our audience with King Robert will have to be on neutral ground."

*That would be for the best.* That much, Ashara could tell straightaway. If the King came to Moat Cailin, he would question why Gregor had waited until he was in the company of the Legion without Banners to tell him about the Targaryens. Lord Gregor would not have meant that as a threat, but if Robert interpreted it as one, Ashara would not have blamed him. Holding the meeting in King's Landing would pose similar risks. Even if King Robert gave the Targaryens safe quarter, at least half of the guards in the Red Keep were loyal to House Lannister. If the Queen or her father commanded them to attack Rhaegar's children, they would undoubtedly obey without hesitation.

The meeting will have to be somewhere between Moat Cailin and King's Landing. Someplace where neither man has higher ground, but both feel safe and out of danger within reason.

"Have you chosen a location yet, my lord?" Jon queried.

"As it happens, I have," Gregor Clegane notified his squire, "In preparation for occasions such as this, I have designated a multitude of holdfasts in the Seven Kingdoms as possible temporary meeting sites. Earlier this week, I wrote to Lady Shella Whent, asking her if she would be willing to host us in the near future. I just got a raven back from her this morning. In the message, she said she would be honored to accommodate us sometime in the following three turns of the moon."

Just about everyone in the room seemed satisfied with that proposal. Ashara was not, but she made no objections. Still, she could not ignore what this arrangement meant. *Life is full of these little ironies, I suppose.*

They were going back to Harrenhal. They were going back to where it all started.

…

"Does this hurt, my lord?" Maester Velix asked, squeezing gently on the boy's bicep, right on top of the bruise.

Young Lord Mors winced but did not groan, and he lightly nodded his head, saying "Yes, Maester."

*He is wounded, but he does not let the pain consume him. Very much like his lord father.* He smiled and declared "I am pleased to say nothing is broken. But your arm will feel a little sore for the next day or so, and I will need to wrap it up to bring down the swelling."

"As you say, Maester," Mors said, quite accepting. *He was expecting worse, I imagine.*
"So, he'll be alright?" Young Lady Tyta asked in concern for her brother.

"Yes, my lady," Velix assured her. *For the fifth time.* He did not allow himself to become irritated, though. After he retrieved a roll of gauze from his bag, he told the girl gently "You mustn't blame yourself for this."

"But it was my fault," Tyta debated.

"No, it was mine," Mors insisted, as Velix treated the abrasion on his arm, "I didn't listen."

*He listened as well as any lad of five nearing his sixth nameday could. The difference is that most others are unwilling to admit their flaws.*

"Oh, stop blaming yourself, Mors," Tyta urged her brother, "You did nothing wrong."

"Then how did I get this?" Mors asked rhetorically, gesturing to his now-bandaged wound.

"I did that," Tyta remarked, as though he had forgotten, "Your form was fine; it was I who used too much force."

"Father says there is no such thing," Mors reminded his sister.

"In a real combat situation, perhaps," Velix contended, pulling the boy to his feet, "In a drill, restraint is important as aggression, my lord."

Mors sighed and mumbled heatedly "I knew you would side with her."

"I have not sided with Lady Tyta," Velix claimed, "Nor have I sided with you. This was a simple accident. There is no point in placing guilt for it."

If need be, the maester was prepared to give a whole speech on the importance of making amends and moving on. Fortunately, the speech was unneeded. Those simple words were sufficient to appease both children. They were still young enough that they did not require an elaborate soliloquy.

Velix was pleased by that. *It would have been a rather unusual speech, given the circumstance.* At this age, most children generally blamed their siblings for any damages incurred on one another. Tyta and Mors were dissimilar in that they tended to blame themselves sooner than each other. Both of them were abnormally empathic for their age.

Some people may have thought that quaint. Then again, the Cleganes were an unusual family. If there was one person who knew that, it was Velix. He had served them longer than any other living man.

Velix was born the only son of the steward of Lord Piper of Pinkmaiden. He had had two sisters of his own. Even past childhood, his relationship with them had never been as good as the one between Tyta and Mors. That was mostly because his parents had always seemed to prefer them to him.

From the beginning, Velix’s ambition had been to become a maester. He had to actively work towards that goal every step of the way. He took whatever work he could get, whenever and wherever he could find it. Most of the time, it was legitimate work. But there were some things he did which he was not proud of. *Nothing illegal, but certainly not honorable, either.*

It ended up taking Velix six years to save up the coin needed for both the passage to Oldtown and
the Conclave's tuition. In his days as a novice, he had apprenticed under Archmaester Walgrave. Back when he was in control of all his senses. He had also worked with the esteemed Marwyn the Mage, the current Grand Maester of King's Landing.

Velix's first links had been in history, medicine and healing, ravenry, and economics. Overtime, he had also forged links in astronomy, warcraft, and smithing. His abilities were not what one would regard as exceptional, but in most areas, his skills were greater than those of the average scholar.

After doing his time as an acolyte and forging a proper chain, Velix had remained at the Citadel for a while longer. Two full years elapsed before he was finally sent somewhere. Although maesters had no say over where they were posted, Velix had hoped that he might be assigned to a holdfast in the Riverlands. Even if he went to someplace other than Pinkmaiden, he would have appreciated the opportunity to go back home.

Before he was dispatched, Velix had been aware that the odds that he would actually return to the Riverlands were quite small. As such, he had been fully willing and prepared to apply his chain elsewhere. Nevertheless, he was gravely disappointed when he ended up in the Westerlands instead. Worse yet, he ended up in the service of the smallest, newest, most insignificant house of that region: House Clegane of Clegane's Keep.

Back then, House Clegane was only in its second generation. It was also considerably poorer. Its keep was barely large enough to pass as a lone tower; its retainers numbered under a hundred. Its lands and holdings were laughably tiny. Only those willing to swallow their pride would serve such a house. But unlike everyone else who entered House Clegane's employ, the maester was not afforded the luxury of choice.

Only two other maesters had served House Clegane before Velix. The first had succumbed to an illness; the second had fallen from a horse and broken his neck.

Velix suspected a similar death awaited him, and that it would claim him soon. He would almost have welcomed such a fate. At the very least, it would have spared him the indignity of having to live and work in that sordid place.

Now, Velix was ashamed to have ever had those thoughts. He regretted them more than anything else he had ever done in his entire life.

Maester Velix did not know the exact moment his view of House Clegane changed, but he believed it was the day the house began its third generation. Somehow, the day Gregor Clegane came into the world, fortune started to smile on House Clegane.

Four and thirty years had gone by since then. In that time, House Clegane had grown in power and influence at an almost unheard-of rate. It had risen to lordly status, it had married into Dorne, it had married into the house of its Lord Paramount, and it had established trade alliances all throughout the Seven Kingdoms. Clegane's Keep was no less than nine times larger than its original size. After House Lannister and House Lefford, House Clegane was now the third richest family in the Westerlands.

Of course, like all who rose high in the world, House Clegane had to suffer its share of hardships on the road to greatness. That included the loss of its patriarch.

Tarrence Clegane had been the head of his house for nearly four decades. In the final six years of his tenure, he had contracted palsy. Velix had been the one to diagnosis him, and he had deemed the case incurable. Nevertheless, he had done all he could to make Lord Tarrence's everyday life as comfortable and normal as possible. Even as the palsy spread through more of his body, Tarrence
never once complained about it publicly or privately. He had often expressed his gratitude to Velix for his invaluable services.

Velix had been there when Lord Tarrence Clegane drew his final breath. He had pronounced him dead one day in the middle of 294 A.C. It happened in the early morning, shortly after the morning meal. For a long period afterwards, the entire household mourned him, and Velix was no exception. In fact, the death of Lord Tarrence had hit him especially hard; he had known the man longer than anyone else at Clegane's Keep, including his lady wife, Daliah of House Lydden.

Lord Tarrence had always treated Velix as more than a mere vassal. He had also regarded him as a friend. Indeed, Velix felt Tarrence Clegane was one person he could count as a lifelong friend. Sometimes outliving one's closest friends is just as painful as outliving one's family. In Velix's case, it was actually worse, as he had felt more at home at Clegane's Keep than he ever felt at Pinkmaiden, and he had been far closer to the Cleganes than he had to his own family.

Be that as it may, Velix had managed to cope with the change and move on. Although Lord Tarrence was gone, his house lived on. He was very much determined to keep doing his duty. The Cleganes will need my help to guarantee the continuance of their prosperity.

Although Gregor was Tarrence's firstborn son, Sandor was the one who ultimately became his heir. He had succeeded his father at the age of four and twenty. Although the lad had initially had doubts about his capacity to replace his father, he had quickly proven himself worthy of the position of Lord of Clegane's Keep.

Sandor had already been a father of two at the time of his succession. In the five years that followed, his lady wife had given him a third child.

As it happened, Lady Obara Clegane entered the vicinity just then. She walked straight over to where Tyta and Mors were standing. She was holding their younger brother Dermot in her arms. He was still at the age where his favorite thing to do was cling to his mother, even though he had been weaned off her breast a while back.

Maester Velix dipped his head and stated respectfully "My lady."

She flashed a grin in response. It appeared to be a sultry grin, but Velix could tell it was not meant to be suggestive. I have been around Lady Obara long enough to know better. The Lady of Clegane's Keep then looked down at her two elder children and said enquiringly "Is anything amiss, Maester?"

"Not any longer," Velix apprised her. He picked up the two discarded wooden swords off the ground and displayed them to his lady, saying "Lady Tyta was teaching Lord Mors a certain offensive technique. His execution of the move was fine, but her counterattack turned out to be a little more powerful than she intended."

At that, he gestured to the gauze around Mors' left bicep. Lady Obara's eyes momentarily widened in concern.

"You needn't worry, Mother," Mors claimed, casually rubbing his bandage, "It doesn't hurt anymore."

That was enough to console Lady Obara. She lightly smirked and murmured "Of course it doesn't. You are a Clegane. Cleganes are tougher than that."

"Then let's get back to it," Ser Bronn cheekily suggested, grabbing the wooden swords from
Maester Velix. He held one out to Tyta and the other out to Mors, and he added in "No sense wasting any more time."

Maester Velix glared at the younger man and muttered "Did you not hear anything I just said? For the moment, Mors cannot use his left arm in combat."

"He has two arms," Bronn drily disputed, "Long as one works, he can fight."

"I agree, Ser Bronn," Mors pronounced, taking his wooden sword from Bronn. He then turned to Velix and told him "I'll be careful, Maester. I promise I'll only use my right arm."

Velix sighed and murmured "Very well, my lord. But I would prefer not to have to treat any more injuries today."

"Then I'll go easy on him, maester" Tyta slyly uttered as she retrieved her wooden sword.

"I would rather you did not," Mors rejoined, cracking a smirk which bore an uncanny resemblance to Lady Obara's, "'Easy' is no fun."

"Now that is more like it," Bronn stated approvingly. He led the two children back to the center of the training yard, and he had them get into position. This time, Tyta took the offensive and Mors took the defensive. Once they were ready, Bronn folded his arms and asked "Alright, what shall we learn next?"

'We' meaning the children, of course. There is little Ser Bronn could learn.

Bonn was originally a freelance sellsword. His background was largely unknown. The only thing anyone knew for a certainty was that he was from neither the North nor Dorne. Velix suspected Bronn may have been a fellow native of the Riverlands, as most of the tales of his exploits took place there.

Bonn had spent much of his life roaming the Seven Kingdoms, offering his skills to whoever had need of them. Which was often the highest bidder. He believed in a strictly business approach in his line of work. As such, he had purposely avoided getting involved in any political scuffles, including Robert's Rebellion and Greyjoy's Rebellion.

Then a few years back, Lord Tyrion Lannister and his wife Lady Ellyn had decided to travel the Westerlands' countryside. One night on their trip, they stopped to rest at an inn. Bronn happened to be a lodger at that very same inn. By pure chance, the three of them had had their dinner at the same bench.

A conversation had started up between Bronn and Lord Tyrion, and a strange friendship had blossomed from it. Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn had ended up bringing Bronn back with them to Casterly Rock. Tyrion Lannister had been hoping to hire him as a soldier for House Lannister. Bronn was willing to take the job, given the stories he had heard of the Lannisters' tremendous wealth.

Unfortunately for him, Lord Tywin Lannister was very averse to the concept of having sellswords in his employ. There was little Tyrion could do to protest his father's decision. Luckily, Lady Ellyn managed to procure some other means of work for Bronn. She sent him to her brother's holdfast. The arrangement worked out for everyone, as the pay was nearly as good, and while Bronn would not be at the Rock, he would be on the lands immediately east of it. So Tyrion and Ellyn would still be able to correspond with him regularly.

Initially, Bronn only served the Cleganes as a household guard. However, he had plenty of
opportunities to demonstrate his skills with a blade, and they were quite superior to those of any other guard in the service of House Clegane. In the span of three years, Bronn had risen from common soldier to master-at-arms of Clegane's Keep.

That was a bold and somewhat controversial move on the part of Lord Sandor. The master-at-arms was rarely anyone other than an anointed knight or a renowned swordsman of high birth. At the time of his appointment, Bronn had no title or lands to his name, and he was no one of great import. But when did 'trivial' details such as those matter to House Clegane? In any case, Bronn is a knight now. Not the type of knight one may envision when they hear the word, but a knight all the same.

Velix was loath to admit it, but Bronn was the best master-at-arms Clegane's Keep had seen since the late Ser Wallis Peckledon. Other than Bronn, three other men had served as the keep's master-at-arms after Ser Wallis. The first had died of sickness, the second had been sent to the Wall for pilfering goods, and the third had resigned his post at the insistence of Lord Sandor.

In a queer way, Ser Bronn reminded Maester Velix of himself. Both of them had started with nothing, but through constant struggle and hard work, they had both made something of their lives. Bronn still had yet to completely renounce his habits as a sellsword. He required a little more incentive to serve House Clegane other than duty. Fortunately, his wages were not demanding. All he asked was enough to feed and shelter him, plus a bit of coin for him to spend on his leisure time. He is fortunate we could easily spare that much. Given Bronn's popularity with the local whores, Velix could imagine what he did with his money, but while he might not have approved, Lord Sandor did not object.

For all his flaws, Bronn was a brilliant swordsman. And, Velix had to admit, an excellent teacher. Tyta and Mors enjoyed his teachings, and they always learned something. Sometimes something more than tactics. He also gave them valuable lessons in realism, which Lord Sandor and Lady Obara approved of. Their children were precocious both mentally and physically; they would not have them growing up ignorant of the ways of the world. They believed Bronn was the perfect one to familiarize Tyta and Mors (and later Dermot, as well) with many of those subjects.

So long as Ser Bronn does not tell Tyta and Mors what happens when boys grow into men and girls into women, I would not be surprised if their parents will allow him to be their mentor in virtually everything.

Of course, Bronn was not the only role model for the children of Clegane's Keep. Maester Velix had raised and educated all three of Lord Tarrence's children. Now he was doing the same for all three of Lord Sandor's. While he may not have been as "exciting" as Ser Bronn, he was wiser and more esteemed. Additionally, what he taught Tyta and Mors (and eventually Dermot, too) may not have been as practical as Bronn's teaching, but it was more orthodox. And, in the long run, more versatile.

"How about blocking?" Tyta humorously suggested, grinning deviously and glancing over at her brother, "That might be useful for some of us."

Mors scoffed and uttered cockily "I would mind that mouth, sister dear."

"Why?" Tyta murmured jokily, "Because that is the only place you have a chance of hitting?"

"No," Mors rejoined wittily, "Because if you use it overmuch, you'll just make the rest of yourself too easy a target."
Lady Obara chuckled at this interaction between her two eldest children. Velix could not help but join her. A few minutes ago, Tyta and Mors had been comforting each other over an accident. Now they were exchanging japes and playfully teasing one another. That was a definite reminder that they were still children. *Moreover, they are still siblings.*

"You are here to trade blows, not taunts," Bronn bluntly remarked.

Mors hastily said in a serious tone "Blocking is fine with me."

Tyta shrugged and stated in agreement "Me, too, I suppose."

"Good," Bronn acknowledged. He drew his sword and waited for the two of them to give their full attention. He held his blade in the air, took a certain stance with it, and proclaimed "Now, I picked this technique up during a commission from House Estermont."

*In which life might this have been?* Velix doubted Bronn had ever been in the Stormlands long enough to enter the employ of the Estermonts. Still, he did not ask that question aloud. Anyhow, the source of Bronn's lessons did not matter so much as how useful and efficient they were.

As Ser Bronn instructed Tyta and Mors, Maester Velix turned to their mother. He asked politely "How are you faring on this fine morn, my lady?"

"I am well, maester," Obara Clegane replied, "And you?"

"Just fine, thank you," he informed her.

After a brief pause, she inquired "Have any ravens come in today?"

That may have seemed a vague question, given the lack of context. Even so, Velix knew what his lady was actually asking. *The very same question she has asked every morning for last six days.*

Velix tucked his arms into the long sleeves of his robes and shook his head. He disclosed "I am afraid there has been no further word from Lord Sandor."

Lady Obara sighed. Dermot began to fuss a little, as though he shared his mother's discomfort. She only needed a few seconds to pacify him. Once her boy was tranquil again, the Dornishwoman looked back to the maester and commented "It's been nearly a week."

*One more day and it will have been.* Wanting to set her mind at ease, he thought aloud "I am confident Lord Sandor is alright."

"So am I," she claimed, "But what is taking him so long?"

"He is simply being thorough," Velix conjectured. *Just like always.*

"He shouldn't have to be," Lady Obara debated, "After all, how hard could it be to track a group of bandits?"

"There was once a time when doing so would have been simple," Velix observed, "But Westeros is much more secure than it used to be. Thanks in large part to your brother-by-law. These days, very few people are still bold enough to attempt to make a living as a bandit. Only those who believe they can do it without being apprehended will try."

"That is quite possible," Lady Obara contended, "Even so, of all the countless villages in the Seven Kingdoms, why did one of ours have to be one of the few that were raided in recent years?"
"That, I cannot account for, my lady," Maester Velix said candidly, "All I can say is that it was bound to happen to someone eventually."

"So perhaps we simply had the misfortune of being 'someone,'" Obara theoried.

"Precisely," Velix affirmed, nodding his head, "What truly matters is that Lord Sandor is determined to bring the assailants to justice."

"Yes, it is commendable of him," Obara murmured in agreement, "I only wish it took him less time. Or, better yet, that he could have sent Ser Bronn or someone else to do it in his stead."

"He could have done that," Velix admitted, "But the bandits attacked his people. I need not remind you that any attack against a lord's people is an attack against the lord himself. As such, he is obligated to hunt down those who have wronged him and chastise them accordingly."

"Well, that is his prerogative," Lady Obara pointed out.

Velix nodded again and professed "It may not be my place to say, my lady, but if the villages surrounding Sunspear had been raided, I reckon you would do the same as your lord husband."

"You're right," Obara coincided. Is it not my place? "I would have done just that. Only I would not bother bringing back their heads. I would bury them in sand until the heads were all that were visible."

Although that statement left a gruesome image in his head, Velix had to snicker at how plainly Lady Obara said it. Knowing her, she is not jesting.

By then, Bronn had finished drilling Tyta and Mors on the blocking technique he had supposedly picked up whilst in service to House Estermont. Now it was time for a trial run.

He stepped back a few paces to give them some space, and once he was clear of them, he signaled them to begin.

Mors made the first strike. He chose to cut from above. His sister was quick to parry; she intercepted the blow before it came anywhere near her shoulder. Her brother swiftly rebounded and delivered an underhand cut to her right side. Tyta managed to stop it, but by a narrower margin this time. This one almost made contact with her thigh.

While they sparred, Velix noted Obara seemed strangely content. He wondered if that was because she was intrigued by the mock combat scenario, or because they were both performing so well. Either way, she was not as restless as she had been earlier.

Velix decided to take advantage of that moment. With compassion in his voice, he told Obara Clegane "Worry not, my lady. While I have every confidence in Lord Sandor's ability to capture those bandits, in the unlikely event he does not, someone else will. The Legion without Banners would certainly be up to the task. The circumstances might be different than he planned, but the outcome would be the same."

Lady Obara reflected on that for a short while. Ultimately, she looked to the maester, smiled kindly, and said "You are quite correct, Maester. Of course, I know that no bandit can escape justice forever. To my knowledge, for the last fifteen years, no bandit has remained at large for longer than a week. As such, Sandor has likely caught up with those raiders by now."

"If he has, I would not be surprised in the least," Velix stated sincerely. After all, Lord Sandor is every bit as tenacious and resilient as his brother Lord Gregor. "I would be willing to wager that is
on his way back here right now."

"We shall see," was all the Lady of Clegane's Keep said in response.

Maester Velix's hypothesis turned out to be true. Not an hour after his conversation with Lady Obara ended, the sound of a horn being blown resonated all around the grounds of the keep. That particular horn meant only one thing. *The Lord is returning.*

At the time, Maester Velix was still in the training yard with Lady Obara and her children. When she heard the horn, she flashed him a smile, as if to say "How about that?"

Ser Bronn clapped his hands together once and announced "Alright, that's enough for today. Go and welcome your lord father."

Tyta and Mors did not need to be told twice. They speedily returned their wooden swords to the rack that had been designated for them. Then they proceeded towards the front yard. Their mother and Maester Velix accompanied them. Bronn came along, as well. *Mainly because he felt like doing so, I imagine. It is not likely he is coming to receive Lord Sandor simply out of duty.*

By the time they reached the front yard, the portcullis to the main gate had been raised. Subsequently, three score mounted soldiers passed through the gate and onto the grounds of the keep. Maester Velix watched them as they gathered in the area before him. The majority of the riders appeared to be fatigued, and several of them were wounded. Thankfully, their leader was neither. Velix could determine that at a glance.

Lord Sandor Clegane was very easy to tell apart from his men. That was not solely because of his size and his face. He also wore a very distinctive helm. It bore the likeness of a hound's head, complete with ears, a muzzle, and bared fangs.

The moniker Sandor's lady wife had given him in the days of their betrothal had stuck with him. Much like his elder brother was known as "The Mountain," he was still known throughout the Seven Kingdoms as "The Hound," and he wore that label proudly.

As Lord Sandor and his party gathered in the front yard, a small crowd started to assemble in the vicinity. Maester Velix spotted Lady Daliah Clegane amongst the smallfolk. Soon enough, she noticed him and who he was with, and she made her way over to them.

When they saw their grandmother, Tyta and Mors greeted her quite merrily. *And they saw her just a few hours ago. They had not seen their father in nearly a week. Velix could only imagine how affectionately they would greet him.*

Once Lord Sandor's company was amassed in the front yard of Clegane's Keep, they all proceeded to dismount. Velix noticed a couple of the men were carrying some brown woolen bags. The bags were full, and they had a number of large, round lumps in them. They also emitted the foul odor of rotting flesh. *The results of the mission.*

Furthermore, some of the horses carried more than one rider. However, only one person from each of the shared mounts was clad in armor. The other was clad in rags or worse. He did not recognize anyone of the individuals in the latter type of garb. *They must have been through an ordeal. They look terrible.*

There was one man who seemed downright abysmal. This particular man was so pale that it was almost as if his body had been drained of blood.

Lord Sandor Clegane was the last to climb down from his horse. Once he was on the ground, he
opened up his Hound's Helm and removed it. Some people said he looked better with it on. Never to him directly, of course. Not that he would care. It was well-known that Sandor Clegane was not ashamed of the scar that encompassed most of the right half of his face. Like his moniker, he wore it with honor, and he never allowed anyone to use it against him as an object of scorn.

After handing over his helm to his squire, Sandor saw his mother, his wife, and his children standing close-by. He grinned.

Due to the deformity on his face, it was not a wholly pleasant grin. But that mattered little and less to his loved ones. They see past the scar. Velix did, as well.

Lord Sandor hastily walked over to his family. He kissed Lady Daliah on both cheeks, and she kissed him once on the forehead. After that, he turned to Lady Obara and embraced her tightly. He was careful not to suffocate Dermot. Then he picked up Mors in his right arm and Tyta in his left arm. The two of them giggled and embraced their father as he lifted them into the air.

*The Cleganes of Clegane's Keep are finally all back together once more.* Velix could not help but give a smile of his own.

"Successful hunt, my lord?" Ser Bronn inquired. *He could not have waited until the reunion was finished?*

Lord Sandor Clegane was not annoyed, fortunately. He merely turned towards his master-at-arms and nodded, saying "Quite successful. It took time, but we managed to locate every last raider. We collected their heads to keep track."

Velix shot another glimpse at the brown bags that smelt of corpses. *Just as I thought.*

"Shall I have those mounted on spikes, my lord?" Bronn asked rhetorically.

"That was the intention," Lord Sandor replied drily.

Bonn scoffed a bit. Then he declared in his most official voice "It will be done, my lord."

As Bronn went to put the raiders' heads on spikes, the Hound turned to Velix and told him "Maester, we recovered the villagers the raiders took prisoner from the village. They will require your attention."

"As you command, my lord," Maester Velix asserted. He proceeded to the center of the front yard, and there he announced "If you require healing or medicine of any sort, come to me, and I will attend to you."

Despite all the activity that was currently going on in the immediate area, the maester was loud enough so that all could hear him.

Slowly, the wounded began to congregate around him. There was about sixteen of them altogether. More than half were the villagers that had been held hostage by the bandits.

"Follow me, if you would," Velix bade them. He subsequently led the group to his office in the keep.

On the way there, the man with the pale face walked alongside Maester Velix. He was clutching his arm, and he moved with a noticeable limp.

"Let me help you," Velix kindly advised him. He took the pale man's free arm and slung it over his
shoulders. He held the man so that his maester's chain would not leave marks in the skin of the man's arm. After continuing in silence for a few seconds, he looked to the pale man and told him in assurance "You will be alright; I promise you that."

The pale man gradually turned his face toward Velix and murmured quietly "A maester is correct. A man will not die today."

Velix was perplexed by those odd remarks. Without trying to sound rude, he remarked "I beg your pardon, ser?"

"A man cannot say more," the pale man disclosed, "But know that a man is thankful for a maester's aid. A man shall not forget it."
"Well... what do you think?" Trisfier Botley asked expectantly.

Rodrik Greyjoy took a good, long look at the vessel before him. *It is quite grand; no disputing that.* He glimpsed down at the large blueprint he was holding. He could not manage a firm grip with his right hand, but his thumb and forefinger where sufficient to keep it steady. He looked back and forth between the vessel and the blueprint, and he found he was not pleased. *But not grand enough.*

"This will not do," Rodrik announced, lowering the blueprint.

"And why not?" Ser Harras Harlaw inquired. He did not sound genuinely interested in receiving an answer, or even in knowing what it was. Instead, he sounded irate, as though he had expected Rodrik to be dissatisfied. *He is likely fed up by this point.*

In any case, Rodrik supplied a reply: "The head sail is inadequately tethered to the mast. Its rigging will need to be reworked. The hull has not been properly reinforced, either. I said to use ironwood, not ash."

"We were short on ironwood," Tristifer revealed, "We had to make do with what was available."

"I would have been content to wait until the next ironwood shipment came in," Rodrik claimed, trying to stay patient, "That would have taken far less time than rebuilding the entire ship. Unfortunately, that is precisely what will have to be done now."

"Alright, we'll start over from scratch," Ser Harras mumbled, swiping the blueprint out of Rodrik's hands. As he rolled the parchment up, he added in "For the fifth time."

"Calm down, Harr," Tristifer beckoned him, "Rod said we were in no great hurry to complete this project."

"So I did, Tris," Rodrik affirmed, "For the present, we aren't. But that does not imply that I wished to waste our time with needless miscommunications."

"Then we'll have to ensure that nothing is miscommunicated this time," Harras declared, tucking the roll of parchment under his arm. *Let us hope nothing will be.*

"What about that?" Trisfier queried, gesturing to the vessel before them, "Should we scrap it?"

Rodrik stood thinking for about a minute. Finally, he remarked "No. While it is not good enough to be the new flagship, it is still a fine vessel. It will make a superb addition to the Royal Fleet."

"Very well," Trisfier avowed, clapping his hands together once, "Who should we give it to?"

"How about Gormond?" Harras proposed, "It's about time he had a ship of his own."

*Perhaps so.* Rodrik thought aloud "I'll consider him, but I make no promises. For now, just keep the ship docked. We'll pick a captain later."

"Fair enough," Trisfier commented. Ser Harras nodded in agreement.
"Now, let's find those shipwrights," Rodrik decisively pronounced, "I want construction to begin as soon as possible. This time, we have to make certain they follow the blueprints to the last detail."

"Too bad we're not on the Islands," Tristifer slyly muttered, "We could have threatened them with drowning if they fail to deliver."

"We could still do that," Ser Harras suggested. He does not sound as though he is japing.

"No point in making a threat we could not make good on," Rodrik Greyjoy debated.

"Who says we couldn't make good on that one?" Harras countered.

"The City Watch, for one," Rodrik bluntly responded, "As well as the dockhands, the nobles, the smallfolk, and, of course, the King. Basically, the entire fucking city."

"He's right," Tristifer concurred, "The laws of the Seven Kingdoms strictly prohibit drowning, unless it is done by a priest."

"So we should just allow the greenlander laws to dictate our actions?" Ser Harras presumed.

"If doing otherwise throws us out of the crown's good graces, then yes," Rodrik contended, "As you said, Harr, this will be our fifth attempt to build a new flagship. I do not plan for there to be a sixth. But there are ways to achieve our goal that do not involve intimidation."

"I'm aware of that," Harras asserted, "Still, these 'ways' are not as simple or efficient. And nowhere near as fun."

"All true," Rodrik admitted, scoffing a bit, "Even so, there is little that can be done about it. We have to build a new flagship, and we have to do it while killing as few people as possible."

"It can be done, Rod," Tristifer proclaimed. Count on him to take my side.

"It will be done," Rodrik declared, "Now let's go."

Tristifer Botley, Harras Harlaw, and Rodrik Greyjoy made their way along the docks towards the section where the shipwrights' offices were located. Tris walked at the head of the group. He was always eager to get somewhere, even if he did not know where it was.

Harras and Rodrik were by each other's sides. Just as when we were boys. As they headed down the marina, Harras turned to his best friend and stated quietly "Tell me something, Rod. About the shipwrights."

"What?" Rodrik said, disinterest evident in his tone.

Nevertheless, Harr proceeded to ask him "Between the two of us, would it honestly bother you if anything happened to the shipwrights?"

"No, it wouldn't," Rodrik flatly answered him. Frankly, I could not care less about those imbeciles. They're supposedly the best maritime architects in Westeros, yet they've failed to produce satisfying results four times.

"You know, the shipwrights might take the work more seriously if they realize how dangerous failure can be," Harras proclaimed, a wicked grin on his face, "Now I am not saying we should kill them ourselves. But suppose an 'accident' was to befall one of them…"

"If we could afford to lose them, I'd be all for it," Rodrik uttered candidly, "But with everything
that’s going on in the world right now, we cannot spare even one of those builders. We need their services now more than ever."

"As you say," Harras conceded. He maintained his sinister smirk and remarked "All the same, inform me when you change your mind. I already have half a dozen ideas on how to bring about a tragic yet motivational incident to the docks."

Were it not for the law, I'd be ordering you to carry out all six of them. If only we were back on the Islands.

Despite being a recognized region of Westeros, the Iron Islands had traditionally stood quite apart from the Seven Kingdoms. Most notably, they were a fair deal poorer than any part of the mainland. As such, the Ironborn had to resort to extreme means to provide for themselves. The most extreme of these means was the Old Way, where the Ironborn way of life principally involved reaving, raiding, reaping, raping, and taking whatever they pleased.

The Old Way had been forsaken long ago, shortly after Aegon the Conqueror burned Harren Hoare and his sons alive and liberated the Riverlands from the control of the Iron Islands. Only a few bolder individuals, namely the late Euron Greyjoy, stuck to the Old Way after. In the three hundred years that followed the Targaryens' arrival, the Ironborn had kept the tradition of raiding alive.

Lord Quellon Greyjoy had attempted to put a firm end to Ironmen raids once and for all. His efforts had nearly succeeded during his lifetime, but ultimately failed upon his untimely death at the end of Robert's Rebellion. His eldest surviving son Balon had intended to revive the raids by invading the western coast of Westeros.

And we all know how that ended. The outcome was so abysmal that one might think we were always predestined to fail.

Indeed, one could be led to think just that. The Ironborn defeat in Greyjoy's Rebellion was due largely to how Lord Victarion Greyjoy had chosen the realm over his family and sided with King Robert Baratheon and his lot. Some on the Iron Islands called Victarion a traitor for swearing fealty to the crown. Be that as it may, Victarion had given the lordship of the Iron Islands in exchange for his loyalty. Yet he never even asked for it.

Ever since Victarion was named Lord of Pyke, the Iron Islands had prospered like never before. Some innovative farming techniques had been brought to the Islands, allowing crops to be cultivated on a grand scale. These methods made possible what was once deemed impossible. Although most Ironborn continued worshipping the Drowned God, septs had been built and weirwoods replanted at various locations on the Islands. Furthermore, trade and diplomacy between the Islands and the mainland had reached its pinnacle.

Most of all, there was no raiding. None. Not a single holdfast on this side of the world had been struck by Iron ships in over a decade. The majority of the Westerosi viewed this as a good thing. Most greenlanders found the whole concept of raiding to be the equivalent of living off the misery and suffering of others. Who are they to judge us?

Nonetheless, the ending of the raids had changed the overall image of the Ironborn, as well. The tension and fright that used to be associated with the Ironborn no longer existed in Westeros. Whenever people spotted an Ironborn ship in the distance, whether they were on land or sea, they either waited patiently for the vessel to come to them, or they did nothing and waited for it to leave. Simply put, there was no longer any reason for anyone to feel intimidated by the Ironborn. While that may have been good for relations between the Seven Kingdoms, there were some Ironborn who despised that prospect. Fear was what made the Ironborn so strong and great to begin
with. They once held the fear of all those who resided on the shores of Westeros. Now they held no one's.

*How the mighty have fallen. More to the point, how they have fallen astray.*

When Balon Greyjoy rebelled against the crown, his eldest son and heir, Rodrik Greyjoy, had joined him willingly and without hesitation. Back then, Rodrik had sincerely believed that his father's campaign would be successful, and that through constant and considerable show of force, the Iron Islands would gain the respect of all Westeros. Rodrik Greyjoy also believed that one day, after his sire was laid to rest in the waters surrounding Pyke, he too would sit the Seastone Chair.

_Had I known that I'd actually end up here ..._

Many Ironborn had suffered losses in Greyjoy's Rebellion. Rodrik's losses had been especially great. His uncle. His freedom. His birthright. Most of his right hand.

He would never forget that day at Seagard, when Jorah Mormont maimed him in one-on-one combat. Even after ten years, he could still vividly recall the sensation of that bastard sword cutting through his hand. _It is true what they say; nothing holds an edge like Valyrian steel._

That was only the first of the many tribulations Rodrik had faced during Greyjoy's Rebellion. Not long after he was captured, his uncle Euron's forces were defeated at Fair Isle. The Crow's Eye himself was slain at the hand of Gregor Clegane's brother, Sandor. Soon enough, the Ironborn defeat at Pyke came about, as well. Subsequently, Rodrik's father was removed from the Seastone Chair and sent to the Wall.

After Victarion was named the new Lord Paramount of the Iron Islands, Lord Balon's sons were made hostages of the crown. They were forced to relocate to certain other places in Westeros; places that were strange to them. Theon was sent to Winterfell, Maron to Moat Cailin, and Rodrik to King's Landing.

Rodrik and his brothers had not been made prisoners of the crown to ensure their Uncle's fealty. Victarion Greyjoy had already proven his loyalty to the realm many times over during the rebellion. However, there were still some Ironborn who shared Lord Balon's ideals. These same Ironborn had believed Balon and his sons deserved to remain in the line of succession before Victarion.

Rodrik later learned that he and his brothers were actually taken prisoner to guarantee that those Ironborn behaved themselves. The concept and reasoning behind it had both been devised by Lord Gregor Clegane. The Mountain had debated that as long as Balon and his sons were away from the Iron Islands, none of the Ironborn loyal to them would be incited to do anything to compromise Victarion's power or worsen the Islands' relations with the mainland anytime soon.

_Indeed, nothing of the sort happened._

Although Lord Balon was now a sworn brother of the Night's Watch and would remain one for life, his sons were no longer hostages of the realm. By the time Uncle Victarion returned to Pyke to lay claim to his lordship, nearly all the Ironborn who sympathized with Balon had died, disappeared, or – in most cases – switched sides. There were some who still supported Balon's cause as strongly as ever, but their numbers were far too few to pose any real threat to the stability of Westeros.

Therefore, it was decided by both Lord Gregor Clegane and King Robert Baratheon that there was no longer any need to hold Balon's sons hostage. As a result, Theon, Maron, and Rodrik were freed from their captivity soon after.
Interestingly, even after they regained their freedom, none of the three Greyjoy sons immediately returned home to Pyke. They had each chosen to remain right where they were for a while.

Theon had done alright for himself. He had become close to the children of Lord Eddard Stark, and he had many friends among the noble families of the North. That was a sign that he could improve overall relations between the Islands and the North.

Maron had fared even better. He had been inducted into the Legion without Banners, and after Victarion returned to Pyke, he had replaced his uncle as the Iron Islands' representative on Lord Gregor's secret council. He was one of the Mountain's closest allies and friends.

Some might have said Rodrik had done the best of all. In the ten years he had resided in the capital city, he had gone from an Ironborn prisoner to the Iron Islands' official liaison to the throne. He provided all direct correspondence between his people and the crown. A couple years back, the King had even appointed him to the position of Master of Ships on the small council. He had performed that role quite well, thus far. Despite certain… limitations.

Shortly before he and his companions made it to the shipwrights' offices, Rodrik felt an itch on his nose. He involuntarily raised his right hand to scratch it. When his fingers reached his face, he scowled and mumbled "Ow."

Harras turned to him and asked "Something wrong?"

"No," Rodrik told him frankly, scratching the tip of his nose with his index finger, "Just poked myself. Again."

"Alright then," Harras remarked, scoffing a bit. Rodrik resisted the desire to grimace at him. You find this amusing, huh?

During his first year at King's Landing, Rodrik Greyjoy had quickly discovered that life was much harder with only half of his right hand. Then Grand Maester Marwyn had provided a partial solution to his problem. The Grand Maester had crafted a prosthetic which could be attached at the wrist and fastened in place where part of Rodrik's palm was missing. With the prosthetic, he had five fingers once again. But only two of them were real. The other three were made of metal, and they could never be moved.

After he scratched his nose, Rodrik gazed down at his right hand. He flexed his thumb and his index finger. His middle finger, his ring finger, and his little finger were stuck in a partly-bent position. The Grand Maester had fashioned them that way so that Rodrik could lift things, hold things, and pick things up almost as easily as he had when his hand was whole.

Rodrik could still eat and drink as effortlessly as before with his half-flesh, half-iron hand. However, he had to retrain himself to swordfight and learn how to write with his left hand. He had spent years in those endeavors, and his form and posture still left much to be desired.

In spite of all else, Rodrik could not overlook the irony of his injury. The vessel he had captained during his father's rebellion was called the Iron Fist. Now, one could argue the name applied to him just as well. It would have been a much choicer moniker than the one he had actually been given. Rodrik Never-Right. If ever I find the scum who first coined that term…

His aggressive reflection was cut short. Right then, he and his companions reached the shipwrights' offices. There they found Dale Seaworth, eldest son and heir of Ser Davos Seaworth. Based on how he was casually leaning against the wall, he had nothing on his schedule at this time. That indicated that he was available.
Finally, someone who actually knows what he's doing is on-hand.

In Rodrik's mind, Dale was the one shipwright in King's Landing who never disappointed anyone with his creations. Rodrik regarded him as one of his closest non-Ironborn friends. It happened that Dale also captained his own vessel. From what Rodrik seen and heard, he was as good a commander of ships as he was a builder of them.

When he saw Rodrik Greyjoy, Harras Harlaw, and Tristifer Botly approach him, Dale flashed a friendly smile and greeted them with a gruff "Good morning."

Rodrik gave a stiff nod in return. He remarked "I hope you are not indisposed."

"Not at the moment," Dale Seaworth claimed. He folded his arms and queried "What can I do for you?"

"They just completed the latest attempt on the flagship," Rodrik apprised him, "I am not satisfied with the results."

"So you're doing the whole thing over?" Dale presumed. It's as though he read my mind.

"Precisely," Rodrik confirmed, "This time, I'm looking for a shipwright who is actually qualified for the job."

Dale smirked and cockily muttered "You should have come to me in the first place."

"I would have," Rodrik claimed, "But I know you're a busy man."

"Fortunately for you, my immediate timetable is empty," Dale revealed. He stood up straight, extended his right arm, and asked "May I see the designs?"

At Rodrik's signal, Harras stepped forward and held out the blueprints. Dale took them in his hands, unrolled them, and spent a couple minutes studying them. After that, he gazed up from them and declared "I'll have these plans recommissioned straightaway. Once the required capital and space have been set aside, I will assemble a team of builders."

"How long would you estimate this will all take?" Rodrik inquired in interest.

Dale stood thinking for a few seconds, and then he replied with "If we allocate our resources efficiently and properly… a turn of the moon or two."

Anyone else would have needed three or more. He's fast and reliable.

"Good," Rodrik murmured in approval, "Send us daily reports of your progress."

"Absolutely," Dale acknowledged. He then moved towards the entrance to the shipwrights' offices. Just before he went inside, he peered over his shoulder and muttered "Oh, by the way, Rodrik, you'll be interested to know that the Black Wind was sighted further up Blackwater Rush not a half-hour ago. It should be docked here within the next few minutes."

Initially, Rodrik was somewhat astonished. Then he grinned lightly and stated "I appreciate you telling me this, Dale."

"Anytime," was all the Stormlander captain said in response. Then he opened the main door to the building and swiftly entered it.

After Dale Seaworth deprived the three Ironborn of his company, Tristifer observed "She's here
ahead of schedule."

"That's Asha for you," Ser Harras drily uttered. *Yes, it is.*

"We're not too far from the highborn docks," Tristifer professed, "If we head that way now, we may get there in time to receive her."

*Count on Tris to be the first to make that suggestion. Oh, well. No point in avoiding it.*

"Since I am not needed back at the Red Keep until this afternoon, I suppose we can afford to be there when the *Black Wind* pulls in," Rodrik thought aloud, "But remember, Tris; things have changed since you last saw Asha."

"I am not as dense as I appear, Rod," Tris sarcastically commented, "I am very much aware that things are not as they once were."

"See that you do not forget," Rodrik cautioned him.

"Relax," Tristifer bade him, "I can stay out of trouble."

"If that was true, you wouldn't have gotten yourself banished from the Islands," Harras uttered cheekily.

"I was not banished," Tristifer disputed angrily, "I was asked to temporarily live on the mainland. For my own safety, mind you. The situation has improved now, and I can go back home whenever I please."

"Yet you're still here," Rodrik pointed out.

"So are you," Tristifer contended. That was a fair point. *So I am.*

"Well, I'm Master of Ships," Rodrik countered, "What's your excuse?"

"I'm the assistant to the Master of Ships," Tristifer slyly proclaimed.

"I thought that was my title," Harras Harlaw stated jokily.

"There **is** no such title," Rodrik Greyjoy told them candidly, "You two are my aides, plain and simple."

"Your chief aides," Tris debated. *He thinks overmuch of himself, doesn't he?*

"Again, no such thing," Rodrik murmured plainly. He then exhaled sharply and mumbled "Just behave yourself, Tris. The woman we're about to encounter is not the girl you once loved."

"Well, she no longer has an **axe** for her lover," said Harras, "That's for certain."

"I do not need you pointing out the obvious either, Harr," Rodrik told his best friend, "Treat her as you would any other person of great import."

*Better yet, treat her with due respect.*

"Aye, Rod," Harras avowed. Tristifer nodded his agreement. That was enough to assure Rodrik that they would stir up no mischief. Thereafter, they hastily left the vicinity.

Five minutes later, they came to the highborn docks. Like the rest of the harbor, the place was
bustling with activity all around. Fishermen and merchants were selling their wares. Porters were loading and unloading cargo from various ships. The on-duty gold cloaks were making their rounds on patrol. Six years previously, a shrine to the Drowned God had been built in the area's southernmost section. Standing by the altar was Beron Blacktyde, the drowned priest who led the congregation of drowned men in King's Landing.

Some of the people on the docks dipped their heads to Rodrik as he passed them. They undoubtedly knew who he was. Everyone else only gave him enough regard to stay out of his way. To their credit, they know their place. Or their courtesies, at least.

At present, most of the vessels stationed in the hightborn docks were Stormlander, Westerlander, or Riverlander in make. Additionally, there were a few foreign ships that had sailed here from all the way across the Narrow Sea. Only two ships there were of Ironborn design, and neither was particularly outstanding.

Then the Black Wind made its appearance. Even alone, that one ship made for a very fine display of Ironborn strength. It certainly compensated for the conspicuous lack of Ironborn presence at the hightborn docks. Rodrik could not help but grin when the longship entered his field of vision. She's a real beauty. More so than her captain.

Soon enough, the Black Wind pulled into the nearest empty port and dropped anchor. As Rodrik and his companions headed over to that spot, the gangplank was extended from the bridge of the ship to the platform below. Once the crossway was deemed stable and secure, the crew began to disembark. As usual, the captain was the first off. Normally, the captain came down alone. Not this one. This captain emerged alongside her husband.

Although Rodrik had not seen his brothers since Father's rebellion, he had occasionally seen his sister at some points in that interval. The last such occasion was only a couple years ago, when he had attended her wedding at Riverrun. While Ironborn were infamous for crashing festivities, Rodrik had not shown up at that event with the intention of ruining it. In fact, he had been invited.

The wedding between Lord Gregor Clegane and Lady Dacey Mormont had been done in such a way that it paid homage to both the Old Gods and the New Gods. Similarly, the nuptials between Ser Edmure Tully and Lady Asha Greyjoy had involved a combination of two faiths. It had taken place in the sept of Riverrun, and it had been conducted by the Old Grey Gull, a renowned drowned priest from the Islands. The oaths had been sworn by the Seven, and the saltwater blessing had been poured on the heads of both the bride and the groom.

Rodrik had been the one to give Asha away. Beforehand, he had been concerned that his lack of a whole right hand might have impeded his ability. He did not share those qualms with anyone, lest they think him insecure. Luckily, even with only seven fingers, he managed to remove the black and gold cloak of House Greyjoy from around his sister's shoulders without botching the job. He recalled how he had breathed a huge sigh of relief when Ser Edmure replaced it with the blue, red, and silver cloak of House Tully. He had never thought he would be so consoled by such a sight. Not often will a kraken willingly mate with a trout.

Many of the dishes at the feast had involved fish. That was unsurprising, seeing as most of the attendees were Riverlords and Ironborn. There were more types of fish served that night than Rodrik knew existed. Salmon, sea bass, tuna, sardines, clams, oysters, and plenty of trout. There were even some crabs that had been plucked from the Bay of Ice. Rodrik and all the other guests ate heartily that night. Wine and beer had flown freely, but Rodrik drank sparingly. Although he had been a bit of a drunk in his youth, he had become more responsible with his cups in his later years. Too much drink makes a man reckless. For all I know, that could be the real reason I lost
Naturally, Rodrik did not participate in the bedding ceremony. That was not solely because he was related to the bride. Even if someone other than his sister had gotten married that day, Rodrik doubted many women would have enjoyed having her tits groped by cold metal.

Rodrik and his party had left Riverrun the morning after. He saw his sister and his new brother-by-law once more before he left. They were visibly exhausted from the previous night's... activities. Nonetheless, they seemed to be very happy with one another.

Two years later, they still looked every bit as happy together. As a matter of fact, Asha was glowing. In more than one way.

Rodrik was aware that he was going to be an uncle soon. A few months ago, he had received a raven from Riverrun, informing him that the castle's future lord's wife was with child. He had sent a follow-up raven, expressing his congratulations to Ser Edmure and Asha. While he mostly did that as a courtesy, he was genuinely delighted for his sister and her husband.

At this point, Asha was in the fourth month of her pregnancy. She was really starting to show by now. Her abdomen had a palpable bulge, she was slightly pale, and walking straight was a little difficult for her. When she descended the gangplank, Edmure lent her his arm for support. When they saw Rodrik, they both gave a warm smile, which he returned.

The moment Asha set foot on the docks, she practically leapt forward and threw her arms around Rodrik. He was taken aback by both that action and the suddenness of it. His sister had never been so affectionate to him before. Must be one of her mood swings. Regardless, he hugged her back.

Once they came apart from each other, Rodrik turned his attention to Ser Edmure. Continuing to grin, his brother-by-law stepped closer and cordially extended his left arm to him. Least he remembered to offer his left hand this time. The Master of Ships took the hand of the future Lord Paramount of the Trident and gave it a steadfast shake.

"How was the voyage?" Rodrik asked when Edmure released his one good hand.

"Smooth as they come," Edmure apprised him.

"Indeed," Asha conceded, "Rather scenic, as well. If you sail along the Red Fork, you'll find some lovely sights throughout the Riverlands this year."

"Fascinating," Rodrik uttered bluntly. Based on their countenances, his tone must have been enough to indicate that he did not especially care for sightseeing. When I get on a ship, beautiful scenery is far from the top of my list of priorities.

After a brief pause, Rodrik declared "Go ahead and check in with the harbor master. Once the rest of your crew has disembarked, come with me. I'll escort all of you to the Red Keep."

"Sounds like a plan," Asha commented favorably.

"Only one drawback," Edmure thought aloud, "King Robert does not yet know we got in earlier than we anticipated."

"I'll send a rider to inform him of your early arrival," Rodrik proposed. That suggestion seemed to please Ser Edmure.

As Asha and Edmure waited for the crew of the Black Wind to assemble on the docks, Rodrik
turned to the two Ironborn who had been there all along. "Tris, ride on to the Keep. Notify the
King that the Tullys have arrived."

"You got it, Rod," Tristifer proclaimed.

As the youngest of the three Ironmen departed from the vicinity, Harras turned to Rodrik and drily
muttered "So Tris can be trusted with such a critical task, but I cannot?"

"Of course not," Rodrik retorted wryly, "I did not send Tris ahead because he is more reliable or
anything like that. You are still here because unlike Tris, you and Asha do not have a history."

"Ah," Harras remarked, realization setting in. He then smirked and patted Rodrik on the shoulder,
saying "You know I was only jesting with you, right?"

_Naturally. He definitely needs something to do._ "Go help Asha and Ser Edmure get signed in with
the harbor master. I'll have the stableboys ready the horses."

"Whatever you say," Ser Harras drily murmured. He promptly went to carry out that task.

About forty-five minutes elapsed. At the end of that interval, Rodrik Greyjoy, Ser Harras Harlaw,
Ser Edmure Tully, Lady Asha Tully, and the whole crew of the _Black Wind_ were out of the marina
and heading for Aegon's High Hill on horseback. Most of the crew were fellow Ironmen who had
moved to the Riverlands with their captain. The rest were lifelong vassals of the Tullys.

Rodrik rode at the front of the large group. He gripped his reins tightly in his left hand. Although
he could direct the horse well enough with both his hands, he had long ago learned how to do so by
using only one of them. *This will be useful if I'm ever without my prosthetic. Or if my injury ever
gets any worse.*

Near the start of their ride to the Red Keep, Ser Harras, Ser Edmure, and Asha fell in beside. Right
then, Asha called out to her brother "Hey, Rod!"

He promptly turned to face his younger sister. She grinned and began to softly sing: "Let the river
run…"

Rodrik smiled. He sang the next lyric with his sister: "Let all the dreamers wake the nation…"

Edmure and Harras joined in and finished the verse with "Come the new Valyria…"

They all knew that song well. It was one of the many that had been composed by Lord Gregor
Clegane. It was one of his earlier pieces, having been around since shortly after Greyjoy's
Rebellion.

That song had been played at Edmure and Asha's wedding feast. That was the first time Lord
Hoster Tully ever heard it. Rodrik could remember how perplexed Lord Hoster had been by the
song's beginning. He had asked aloud "Let the Riverrun what?"

Rodrik, Edmure, and Asha had all been amused by how badly he had misheard the opening verse.
They had quickly enlightened him that the actual wording was "river run," not "Riverrun."

Afterward, Lord Hoster said he felt a bit of a fool for having misinterpreted the lyric. _Not that
anyone could really blame him for it. The first time I heard that song, I thought much the same._

In any case, it was a very pleasant song. It was especially popular in the Riverlands and the Iron
Islands, given how its title and subject matter pertained to both water and success.
Soon they got to the lyric that went "It's asking for the taking. Trembling, shaking. Oh, my heart is aching…"

At that exact moment, Asha stopped singing. She placed a hand over her chest and swayed in her saddle slightly.

Edmure promptly trotted closer to his wife, placed a gentle hand on her back, and asked in concern "Is something wrong?"

After a few seconds, Asha shook her head to clear it up, and then she turned to her husband, smiled kindly, and assured him with "Yes. Just a slight dizzy spell. It's gone now, though."

Edmure let out a sigh of relief and stated "Good. If you need anything, I'm right here, my love."

"Thank you," Asha told him gratefully. She leaned over and pecked him once on the cheek.

Rodrik observed this interaction between the two spouses. Who would have thought my sister would marry such a protective man? On that note, who would have thought she would marry in general?

Given Asha's current condition, Edmure's worries were justified. Rodrik happened to share them. He looked back at her and enquired "Are you certain you should even be riding a horse right now?"

Asha flashed her elder brother an annoyed glare and spat "I'm pregnant, not helpless."

"I never said you were," Rodrik calmly rejoined.

"You implied it," Asha contended, a little ire in her voice.

"I did not," he refuted, "I merely questioned whether it was most sensible for you to be on horseback at this stage. Being temporarily unfit to ride a horse does not mean you are helpless."

"Oh, what do you even know of being helpless, anyway?" Asha snapped.

It had occurred to Rodrik that Asha was not actually trying to start a fight. Most likely, she may have simply been experiencing another mood swing, and she was just more prone to anger and other negative emotions this time. Nevertheless, that last remark of hers struck a nerve. Without uttering a single word, Rodrik slowly turned to face his sister. Then he raised his right hand so that Asha could see it.

Asha quickly realized how tactless and thoughtless her last statement had been. She looked away from her brother in shame and uttered softly "Never mind. I'm sorry, Rod. I didn't mean-

"It's alright, Ash," Rodrik told her in reassurance. She's changed moods yet again. Three emotions in as many minutes. That is rather peculiar. "You needn't worry yourself. It'll be a dry day on the Islands before I allow harsh words to trouble me."

"I was not that harsh, was I?" Asha asked him anxiously.

"No, you were not harsh at all," Rodrik firmly proclaimed. He turned his horse so that he was facing her. Then he stated "You'll be here for at least a fortnight. Let's not start your visit off by getting all excited over nothing."

At that, Asha nodded her head and declared "Alright then."

The heated discussion ended there, much to everyone's relief.
The party trotted on in silence for a couple minutes. Then Rodrik restarted the conversation with "So, Edmure… how is your lord father?"

The heir to Riverrun did not supply an immediate answer. Instead, he gazed down at his hands in quiet contemplation, and then he drearily disclosed "He is ailing, I am afraid to say."

Normally, Rodrik did not bother to learn about the physical health of others. However, Edmure was his brother-by-law, and Edmure's father was Asha's father-by-law. Family meant very much to Rodrik Greyjoy. As such, he looked to his sister's husband and inquired "How so?"

"He has been bed-ridden for the last few months," Edmure apprised him, "His condition has only gotten progressively worse since then. Maester Vyman believes he only has a year or two left."

"I am sorry to hear that," Rodrik uttered sincerely, "Hopefully, he’ll live long enough to see his ninth grandchild."

Edmure then perked up a bit and pronounced "Ninth and tenth, actually."

Rodrik was confused. "Come again?"

Asha brought her horse next to her eldest brother's and placed a hand on her abdomen. She told him "Maester Vyman believes I am carrying twins."

"Oh?" Rodrik murmured in pleasant surprise. When Asha nodded her head, he smiled again and declared "That's wonderful!"

"Yes, it is," Edmure concurred, beaming with pride.

"Have you decided on names yet?" Rodrik asked quite suddenly.

"As it happens, we have," Asha disclosed, "For the girl, Minisa, in honor of Edmure's late mother."

"And for the boy, Urrigon, in honor of your late uncle," Edmure supplemented.

"Excellent choices," Rodrik proclaimed. Ah, yes. Good old Uncle Urrigon. I have so many fond memories of him from my youth. Too bad he had to die just because that useless maester could not treat his infection properly. "Well, give my regards to Lord Hoster when next you see him. Tell him I am honored that my nephew will one day be the Lord of Riverrun, and that he will be named for my beloved uncle."

*That came off as more sentimental than I would have liked.* Be that as it may, Edmure and Asha had no objections to it. They seemed perfectly willing to grant that simple request.

By this point, the company was more than halfway to Aegon's High Hill. The Red Keep was starting to loom up on them quickly.

Edmure and Asha had never been to King's Landing before. Logically, they had never seen the massive edifice that was the Red Keep before, either. One look at their faces was enough to tell Rodrik that they were both deeply amazed by its size, structure, and magnificence. Rodrik had a similar reaction to the first time he saw the Red Keep. Of course, back then, it had been his prison. Even though it no longer was, it was not as impressive as it used to be. *It isn't so splendid after you've lived in it for ten years.*

Once they got over their awe, Edmure and Asha resumed focusing on the path in front of them. Edmure turned back to Rodrik and remarked "Well, enough about my father for now. Tell me; how
is yours?"

Still on the Wall, last I checked, Rodrik replied with "I would not know. I have not seen him lately. Not since he went north."

Last he heard of Father, he was at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, which was under the control of Cotter Pyke. The thought alone sickened Rodrik. My father, the great Balon of House Greyjoy, taking orders from a bastard of the Iron Islands... this is truly a cruel world we live in if such a thing can come to pass.

"You may be interested to know that Father has been promoted," Asha apprised him.

That succeeded in catching Rodrik's interest. "Promoted how?"

"The Wall recently reopened another of their castles, Woodswatch-by-the-Pool," Ser Edmure expounded, "Lord Balon was tasked with leading its garrison."

"Oh, jolly good," Rodrik mumbled mockingly. He went from serving under a bastard to being the lord of a fucking pool. That's progress if ever I saw it.

"Look on the bright side, Rod," Asha advised her brother, "Father finally has a command of his own."

"He already had a command of his own eleven years ago, Ash," Rodrik muttered bitterly, "Or have you forgotten that Uncle Victarion was not always meant to be Grandfather Quellon's successor?"

Asha appeared indignant. "Of course I haven't forgotten. What kind of question is that?"

One that warranted asking, given what I just heard, sister dear. "That was his last true command. Even if he has control of a whole garrison of black brothers, he still answers to Lord Commander Jeor Mormont. Isn't that remarkable? It was Lord Jorah Mormont who crippled me at the battle of Seagard. Now his father is giving orders to ours. It is as though we are destined to be subjugated by the Mormonts. There was once a time when our names were feared by those who resided on Bear Island."

"Those days are long gone, brother," Asha muttered solemnly, a bit of tension detectable in her voice, "There is no point in brooding on them anymore. Anyway, we are hardly servants of the Mormonts. The Greyjoys still wield far greater power and influence than they."

Seeing as the Mountain married a Mormont, I would question the validity of that observation. Ser Edmure must have sensed some hostility, as he hastily muttered "I should not have addressed this matter. Let us not say anything more on it."

"That may be for the best," Rodrik agreed. Unless you want tempers to flare.

"Well, here's a new topic," Asha announced, "Aunt Gysella is having another babe."

"Is that right?" Harras asked rhetorically. I nearly forgot he was here.

"Yes, it is," Asha affirmed, "Nuncle Victarion sent a raven a few weeks before we departed Riverrun. According to what the maesters have told him, little Gregor will be an elder brother in about six or seven months."

"That's marvelous, Asha," Rodrik said in a tone so dry that it was obvious he really thought the news was anything but, "This is still not something I'd like to converse on. If I was interested in
what goes on back home, I would have asked for word of it. I propose we just continue on to the Red Keep in silence."

Edmure, Asha, and Harras said nothing to protest that suggestion. They do not wish to aggravate me. Whether that's for my benefit or theirs, I could not say. In either case, it is fortunate. All this talk about Uncle Victarion and Father can produce no good whatsoever.

Rodrik was aware that Asha was one of the many Ironborn who now frowned upon the rebellion their father had launched, as well as everything Lord Balon and his uprising stood for. By all accounts, Maron and Theon shared those views. Rodrik had yet to develop such a mindset. If Balon Greyjoy still had one stalwart supporter in the whole of the world, it was his eldest son.

Another major difference between Rodrik and his younger siblings was how pleased they each were with how their lives were going. There was no denying that Asha was quite happy with her life. After all, she was married to the future Lord of Riverrun, and she was carrying their children, one of whom would also be Lord of Riverrun one day. From what Rodrik heard, Theon and Maron were also very happy with their current accommodations in the North. What I'd give for a taste of their happiness.

At first glance, one would have assumed that Rodrik found his life in the capital city to be quite fulfilling. Alas, he was not content with it. In public, he may have seemed so. In actuality, it was a different story.

Secretly, Rodrik Greyjoy HATED King's Landing. He hated virtually everything about it.

He hated the pretentious atmosphere. He hated the absurdly small ratio of Ironborn residents. He hated the never-ending political disputes. He hated having to constantly look over his shoulder for fear of being overheard by spies. He hated that godawful smell.

Then again, the smell had improved since Rodrik first came to King's Landing. A few years back, Lord Gregor Clegane had proposed that proper waste management be implemented in the capital city. After the King approved the suggestion, the Mountain had commissioned a team of Essosi architects – the very same team which had renovated Moat Cailin – to build a sewer system for King's Landing. It had been an expensive and time-consuming endeavor, but the outcome was well worth everything. Now the city no longer smelt of piss, shit, and other unpleasant, unidentifiable odors. One could say it finally smelt how a city was supposed to smell. Rodrik was not entirely certain what that was. What is a city supposed to smell like?

The closest thing the Iron Islands had to a city was Lordsport, the seat of House Botley, and it smelt of salt and fish. Of course, everything on the Islands smells of salt and fish. A proper Ironborn city would smell that way. But this is not an Ironborn city, and it never will be.

As much as Rodrik despised living in King's Landing, it was preferable to the alternative. He had been allowed a one-week visit back to Pyke during each year of his incarceration at King's Landing. When his confinement ended, he was free to go back home as often as he pleased. If he wanted to, he could even leave for the Islands and never return to the mainland.

However, the end of Rodrik's confinement had coincided with when Victarion Greyjoy withdrew from the Legion without Banners and sailed back to Pyke to sit the Seastone Chair. Rodrik had not gone back to the Iron Islands since then. He had no desire to go back there whilst Victarion was in charge. He could hardly even think of his uncle without being consumed by the overwhelming feelings of malice and betrayal.

So he opted to stay in King's Landing indefinitely. Much as he detested the capital, he detested a
Pyke ruled by Victarion Greyjoy far more. At least here, I can make a name for myself, and no one will deprive me of what is mine.

Master of Ships was not as powerful and prestigious a position as Lord of Pyke, but Rodrik had earned it on his own merits. He took some comfort in the knowledge that his services were appreciated, that his work was benefiting the whole of Westeros (particularly the Iron Islands), and that he was establishing himself by doing something he enjoyed doing.

Designing and building ships for the Royal Army was the one highlight of Rodrik Greyjoy's otherwise grim and uneventful life. Oftentimes, it was essentially the very thing that inspired him to keep going. It may not be much, but it is all I have.

Needless to say, there were still times when he yearned for more. Mainly, if he had the opportunity to seize the Seastone Chair from his Uncle, he would undoubtedly do so. But the way things stood now, that would never happen. After all, he was about as significant and prevailing in the world as the Targaryens.

However, unlike the Targaryens, Rodrik still had his connection to his ancestral home. He had never been officially removed from his family's line of succession; he had merely been displaced. If anything happened to his uncle and cousin, lordship of Pyke would fall to him. That thought was tempting. Be that as it may, Victarion and Gregor Greyjoy were on the other side of the Seven Kingdoms, surrounded by hundreds of loyal retainers. No way to get past them without anyone noticing. Oh, well. That aside, I am no kinslayer.

Soon enough, Rodrik and his company came to the Red Keep. They found the portcullis raised and the drawbridge lowered. Tristifer Botley was waiting for them there, astride his chestnut palfrey.

"Hey there, Tris," Asha greeted her one-time love interest.

"Pleasure to see you again, my lady," Tristifer said formally.

"None of that 'my lady' crap," Asha murmured cheekily, "My name is Asha."

"Oh, and here I thought it was 'Yara'," Tristifer joked.

"Yara? What kind of stupid name is that?"

Tristifer was not alone. There were two other men with him. One was a Dornishman with long black hair, a pointed beard, and large golden earrings. He was Ser Aron Santagar, the master-at-arms of the Red Keep. The other was a middle-aged landed knight of the Stormlands. He was Ser Davos Seaworth, Dale's father and Lord Stannis Baratheon's most trusted advisor. Each man was sitting atop a brown garron.

"Welcome back, Lord Rodrik," Ser Aron bade the Master of Ships. Ser Davos gave a polite nod.

Rodrik was no real lord. Even so, as a member of the small council, he was normally addressed as such. Not that I have any complaints.

"Good day, Ser Aron, Ser Davos," Rodrik returned the greeting, "Fancy seeing you here."

"The King was holding court when I got here," Tristifer notified him, "As such, I was unable to speak to him, but I managed to find Lord Stannis instead. I told him of Ser Edmure and Asha's arrival, and he sent Ser Davos and Ser Aron to receive them."

"We are grateful for the acknowledgment," Edmure Tully proclaimed, "I hope our early coming
"Not at all, my lord," Ser Davos asserted. "The King is still holding court as we speak, but you will be able to seek an audience with him this afternoon. Would you care to get some rest before then?"

"Certainly," Asha replied.

Ser Aron nodded and announced "Chambers have already been prepared for you in the Maidenvault. Most of you will room with two or more others. Ser Edmure and Lady Asha will have their own private chamber near the Tower of the Hand."

There were no objections from the company, apart from the occasional grumble. But that was to be expected. *Ironborn will find anything to grumble about, even if they are pleased.*

A couple minutes later, they were at the stables of the Red Keep. The horses were turned over to the stableboys, and a small group of porters assisted them with their baggage. Once all that was handled, the entire party went inside the Red Keep.

They parted ways there. Ser Aron led the Ironborn and Rivermen to the Maidenvault. Ser Harras and Tristifer accompanied them. Rodrik and Ser Davos escorted Asha and Ser Edmure to the Tower of the Hand.

Though Davos Seaworth was over a decade his senior, Rodrik Greyjoy got on with the Onion Knight quite well. Almost as well as Rodrik got along with Ser Davos’ eldest son. It turned out they had very much in common.

Both had a mutual love of ships and maritime adventures. Both had gotten into a fair amount of trouble in their youth. Both now served under the King and his brother. Additionally, neither of them had two complete hands. However, Ser Davos was only missing the first knuckle of each of the fingers on his left hand. He kept the bones in a pouch around his neck. He liked to call the pouch his luck. *If four knuckles were all I lost at Seagard, I would have called it luck, too.* Furthermore, when their hands had gotten maimed, the action had been called "justice" by the man who did so. *It would seem wartime justice and peacetime justice are two entirely different things. Ser Davos is fortunate it was not his right hand.*

When they got to the Tower of the Hand, they came across a tall woman with auburn hair. The moment she saw them, she broke into a wide grin and came to them with her arms outstretched. She called out merrily "Edmure!"

Edmure Tully braced himself as his sister approached him. She pulled the heir to Riverrun into a tight hug, which he tentatively returned. He whispered not unkindly "It is good to see you, too, Lysa."

After a few moments, Lysa Arryn pulled away from her younger brother and turned her attention to the woman at his side. She smiled and thought aloud "This must be your blushing bride."

"That’s not a word I’d used to describe her. Nonetheless, Asha *did* blush slightly at being referred to as such.

Lysa stepped forward to embrace Asha, as well, but the Ironwoman hastily held up her hand and beckoned her "No hugs, please!"

Lady Lysa seemed alarmed, bewildered, and a little hurt. Luckily, Asha thought fast and placed a hand on her midsection. She added in "At least not until *this* passes."
Lysa appeared to understand that. *I thought she would, having been through that process three times herself.*

The Hand's wife smiled again and leant forward until that her face was nearly level with Asha's abdomen. She cooed softly "Hello, you. I'm your Aunt Lysa. You're going to be part of a wonderful family, little darling."

Rodrik did not know whether to chuckle or cringe. His sister did the latter. Her husband did the former. *He must have seen this coming. Too bad he could not have warned Asha in advance.*

Lady Lysa Arryn had to be the most eccentric person Rodrik knew. She had been that way for as long as he had known her. But it could have been far worse. He had heard that shortly before he came to King's Landing, she had been very unstable. Apparently, the death of a childhood friend had shocked her into a near-unresponsive state. Thankfully, her husband and the Grand Maester had helped her through that ordeal. *I doubt she ever made a full recovery, but at least she is not violent or delusional. Just strange.*

Soon enough, Lysa returned to her full height and declared "Alyssa, Robin, and Donella are at their lessons with Prince Tommen and the princesses, but I hope you'll see them later."

"Of course we will," Edmure assured her. Asha nodded compliantly.

Lysa grinned again and pronounced "In the meantime, come with me. I'll show you to your quarters."

Edmure and Asha allowed the Hand's wife to lead them to the highborn bedchamber that had been set aside for them. Once they were gone, Rodrik was left alone with Ser Davos. But not for very long.

"I should get back to the Great Hall," the Onion Knight thought aloud, "Lord Stannis is expecting me to return soon."

"Then do not let me keep you, good ser," Rodrik told the older man, "Will I see you again when the small council convenes today?"

"If I am summoned, yes," Davos Seaworth replied, "But I have yet to be."

"In any case, take care," Rodrik Greyjoy bade him.

As Ser Davos headed back to the throne room, Rodrik went to his own bedchamber in Maegor's Holdfast. As soon as he was behind locked door, he allowed himself a few moments of respite.

Without even glimpsing at the looking glass against the wall, Rodrik knew he looked filthy. He certainly *felt* filthy. *Spending half the day by the harbor will do that.* It would not do if he showed up at the small council meeting looking so disorderly. *Better wash up.*

Rodrik swiftly called for hot water. As ever, the maids were quick to obey. Once the tub was full, he dismissed them and stripped out of his soiled clothing. He removed his prosthetic half-hand last, and then he climbed into the tub and soaked for a good twenty minutes. While some people may have been content to be washed by their maids, Rodrik preferred to do his own bathing. He wanted to be as independent as possible to make up for all the situations where he could not be, due to his injured hand.

Once his body was rid of sweat and grime, Rodrik emerged from the tub, toweled off, and proceeded to get into some new attire. That morning, he had only worn a tunic and breeches. He
always dressed casually whenever he went down to the docks. The afternoon would require some more formal apparel.

Rodrik Greyjoy clad himself in a black doublet with the golden kraken of his house emblazoned on the front, along with a pair of woolen trousers and a cloak of black and gold. In the last ten years, he had mastered putting on a belt using only his left hand. After fastening the belt's buckle, he picked up his prosthetic, attached it to the clamp on his right hand, and locked it in place.

He took a few more moments to study his appearance in the looking glass. He smoothed down his hair so that it was not so unkempt. He also trimmed his beard with a small pair of shears. He had had this beard since before Father's rebellion. He liked to keep it thin and even. He had once considered losing the beard altogether, but he decided shaving it with only one good hand was not worth the effort.

Shortly after Rodrik finished tidying up, there was a knock on the door. He called out "Yes?"

One of the many guards of the Red Keep opened the door. By his colors, he was a Lannister man. He dipped his head and revealed "The King has called a gathering of the small council, m'lord. Your presence is required in the Throne Room."

Rodrik nodded in acknowledgment and clapped his hands together. *Ouch.*

As he shook out the slight twine of pain in his left hand, Rodrik muttered "Very well. I shall leave immediately."

Rodrik hurriedly made his way to the small council chamber beside the Throne Room. When he got there, he discovered he was the last to arrive. Everyone else was already assembled.

King Robert Baratheon was seated at the head of the table. To his right sat his wife, Cersei of House Lannister. Customarily, the Queen was not part of the small council. Then again, customarily, the King was a Targaryen. Apart from that, the King was known to value his wife's opinion.

To the King's left was his Hand, Jon Arryn, Lord of the Eyrie and Warden of the East. Lord Jon was an elderly man, more than twice the age of his wife, but he was still as strong, patient, and reliable as he had ever been.

The eunuch Varys served as Master of Whisperers. Ser Barristan Selmy served as Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. The King's brother Lord Stannis Baratheon served as Master of Laws. Marwyn the Mage served as Grand Maester. Ser Kevan Lannister served as Master of Coin. Lastly, Rodrik Greyjoy served as Master of Ships.

Lord Gregor Clegane was the Master of Order. The position had been made specifically for him. However, the Mountain was seldom able to attend the small council meetings, given how he had business all over the Seven Kingdoms.

There were normally eight chairs at the small council table. A ninth would be brought out on the rare occurrences when Lord Gregor appeared. This time, two more chairs had been brought out. They were currently occupied by Ser Edmure Tully and Lady Asha Greyjoy.

"I sincerely apologize if I've kept you waiting," Rodrik quickly murmured as he took his usual spot at the far end of the table.

"You haven't, Rodrik," King Robert claimed, "But now that you are here, we can begin."
How reassuring, Rodrik thought wryly. The meeting started right then.

The King folded his hands together and declared "First of all, I would like to extend a royal welcome to Ser Edmure Tully and his wife, Lady Asha Tully née Greyjoy. May your first visit to King's Landing be a pleasant one."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Edmure Tully said appreciatively, "Alas, it will likely be a brief one."

"Why is that?" Robert Baratheon enquired.

"It has to do with the reason for our coming," Asha disclosed. She sat up in her chair, placed her hands on the surface of the table, and stated "Earlier this month, we received two missives from Moat Cailin. The first was addressed to me, and it was sent by my brother Maron."

"The other was addressed to me, and my Uncle Brynden was the one who sent it," Edmure Tully continued for her, "However, the two letters may as well have been one, as they both pertained to the same subject. In fact, apart from the signatures, they used the exact same wording."

"What were these letters about?" Queen Cersei questioned, somewhat demandingly. That is just like the Queen; always trying to cut straight to the heart of the matter.

"Simply put, Lord Gregor Clegane is arranging a conference," Ser Edmure disclosed, "He means for it to take place at Harrenhal."

"When?" Stannis Baratheon inquired.

"That remains to be determined," Asha pronounced. She looked to the King and professed "They claim Lord Gregor will only select a day that you agree to, Your Grace."

"Why would he need my approval on the date of this conference?" Robert Baratheon asked, baffled.

"Because Lord Gregor wishes for you to attend it," Edmure disclosed.

Rodrik was astounded. Well, that was abrupt. But definitely to the point. The King and the other members of the small council were intrigued.

"Why does he wish that?" Jon Arryn inquired.

Edmure continued with "According to what our relations in the North have told us, Lord Gregor has acquired new intelligence on the Targaryens. Intelligence he wishes to share with the crown."

King Robert gave a dismissive wave of his hand and muttered "If you refer to the matter of how Viserys Targaryen plans to auction his sister Daenerys for a Dothraki horde, the Mountain needn't bother with a conference. We are already well-aware of that issue."

"Actually, what he has to share is not about the Targaryens across the Narrow Sea, Your Grace," Asha professed, "It is about their brother."

Again, Rodrik and the others on the small council were perplexed.

"What possible reason would he have for discussing Rhaegar Targaryen?" Robert mumbled sardonically, "The man has been dead for sixteen years. I would know; I was there when he died."

Hells, you were the one who did the deed.
"The precise term Maron and Ser Brynden used was 'Rhaegar's legacy,'" Asha recounted, "Apparently, Lord Gregor has made a vast breakthrough regarding the late prince."

"As to what this breakthrough is, we haven't an inkling," Edmure admitted, "Maron and the Blackfish were very vague in their description of it. Be that as it may, the Mountain believes this information could be used to greatly benefit the realm and establish peace with the Targaryens once and for all."

"Such information would be invaluable," Kevan Lannister thought aloud.

"And dangerous," Varys commented.

"It must be, if Lord Gregor thinks it so imperative that I meet him face-to-face when he makes this revelation," King Robert observed.

"He believes a raven or a rider would be too risky," Asha illuminated, "As well as ineffectual and insufficient. Sending an emissary or a middleman would pose the same complications."

Then it appears a direct meeting is the only way to go.

"Why can't the conference take place here?" Rodrik queried.

"Lord Gregor has his reasons," Asha apprised her brother, "Mainly, he believes this information should not yet be distributed in King's Landing. It could be… gravely misinterpreted. In the wrong hands, it could yield devastating results."

"But why Harrenhal?" Ser Barristan Selmy said inquisitively.

"Lord Gregor claims Harrenhal is the one of the few places in the whole of Westeros where this conference can occur and all involved parties will feel safe," Edmure professed. You certainly could not say the same if it took place at Pyke. "I am inclined to agree with him. Furthermore, Harrenhal is part of my house's domain. My lord father has already given the Mountain permission to host this conference at Harrenhal. So has Lady Shella Whent."

"Suppose Robert simply refused to come to Harrenhal," Cersei Lannister conjectured.

"Lord Gregor would understand, of course," Varys contended, "But there are holes in these walls, and my little birds are not the only ones who make use of them."

"That aside, the Mountain would not waste our time with trivial matters," Robert Baratheon asserted, "If he believes we must convene at Harrenhal, then so be it."

"So you will consent to attend the conference, Your Grace?" Edmure said hopefully.

The King said in meditative silence for no less than five minutes. Clearly, he was weighing every possible option and considering their individual advantages and disadvantages all on his own.

Ultimately, he let out a slow breath and declared "Yes. The Master of Order has never let me down before. It is highly improbable that he intends to start now. So I will hear him out on his terms."

Edmure and Asha seemed pleased by that decision. Clearly, the King's answer means as much to them as it will to Lord Gregor. They must be somehow invested in this affair, too.

"There is one thing I'd like to know, Asha," Rodrik told his sister, "Did you come all the way here just to tell us this?"
"Well, we did have some lesser motives for coming," Asha informed him, "But, yes; this message was the primary purpose for our visit."

"So why did you not send us a raven?" Rodrik enquired.

"For the same reason Lord Gregor has not sent you one yet," Edmure Tully disclosed, "We wished to convey the magnitude of the importance of this conference. Again, what better way than face-to-face?"

"Spoken words are more meaningful than written words," Varys conceded.

"Indeed," Edmure agreed, "The idea to deliver the message directly was given to us by our relations on the Legion's secret council. We took the advice, as I trust my uncle implicitly."

"Just as I trust my brother," Asha commented, "Neither of them would mislead or misguide us. They told us Lord Gregor wanted the small council to hear of this matter in person before he sent a raven."

"So he will send one?" Stannis Baratheon noted.

"Yes," Edmure affirmed, "It should arrive any day now. Could be as soon as today."

At that, the King turned to Marwyn and asked him "Grand Maester, have any ravens come in from Moat Cailin since this morning?"

"As it happens, one has, Your Grace," Marwyn the Mage professed. He reached into his robe, pulled out a small rolled up parchment, and passed it to King Robert. He revealed "It arrived just an hour ago. Originally, I planned to make it the first point of discussion at today's meeting. Had Ser Edmure and Lady Asha not gotten in when they did, it would have been."

Then some good came out of their early arrival after all. King Robert unrolled the parchment and started to examine its contents.

"I have already read the message, Your Grace," Grand Maester Marwyn disclosed, "It will confirm everything Ser Edmure and Lady Asha just said."

King Robert spent ten minutes reviewing the message. After that, he looked up and announced "Lord Gregor would prefer to meet before year's end, but sooner would be better. Even so, we will need some time to prepare for the occasion."

"So, when will you have the conference, Your Grace?" Kevan Lannister inquired.

"Sometime between three and five weeks from now," Robert Baratheon thought aloud, "What's more, I will not go alone. Cersei, Jon, you will accompany me. I will need your counsel more than ever at this conference. The rest of the small council will manage the city in our absence."

Queen Cersei and Lord Jon both nodded their agreement. They seemed pleased with the King's decision.

They were not the only ones who were pleased. The King, Queen, and Hand would all be going away soon, and a small group of people would be left in charge. Rodrik was among them.

The King, Queen, and Hand… all absent from King's Landing, even if only for a short while…

This has possibilities…
Note: Some people have asked me who I would cast for all the characters in this fanfic, mostly so that they could visualize what they would look like and better understand what kind of personalities they would have. For a while now, I have been composing – for lack of a better term – a cast sheet for all the new characters. Everyone who has already appeared in the show would still be played by whoever played them previously (and whoever provided the voices for characters exclusive to the video games would play them in body, too). As for the ones who have not appeared in the show or games, but have appeared in the books and/or this fanfic, here is what I have (keep in mind, this is not finalized):

Gregor Clegane – Ian Whyte (most qualified of the three men who have played the Mountain, in my opinion); Dacez Mormont – Rebecca Romijn (mostly due to her height, her athleticism, and her ability to adapt an exotic accent. Just dye her hair black and she'd be perfect for the part); Willas Tyrell – Charlie Cox (I just now realized that with this arrangement, Willas is Daredevil and Loras is Iron Fist. How about that? Two Defenders in the Tyrell family); Garlan Tyrell – Aaron Taylor-Johnson; Gerion Lannister – Cary Elwes; Allard Seaworth – Jamie Bell; Victarion Greyjoy – Paul Bettany; Lyn Corbray – John Barrowman; Lothor Brune – Liev Schreiber; Maron Greyjoy – Luke Mably; Maester Kennick – Rhys Ifans; Rhaenys Targaryen – Katrina Kaif; Aegon Targaryen – Dev Patel; Arianne Martell – Ileana D'Cruz; Quentyn Martell – Kunal Nayyar; Daliah Clegane – Julie Christie; Tarrence Clegane – Brendan Gleeson; Ellyn Clegane – Lily Cole; Elia Martell – Aishwarya Rai; Lyanna Stark – Kate Beckinsale; Oswell Whent – Rory Kinnear; Gerold Hightower – Robert Carlyle; Arthur Dayne – Javier Bardem; Ashara Dayne – Catherine Zeta-Jones; Erryk Ruttiger – John Leigh; Maester Velix – Ray Winstone; Sylas Vikary – Damian Lewis; Wallis Peckledon – Eddie Marsan; Grand Maester Marwyn – Liam Neeson; Rodrik Greyjoy – Joel Edgerton; Garth Hightower – Joseph Fiennes; Osmund Kettleblack – Devon Murray; Domeric Bolton – Will Poulter; Bonifer Hasty – Peter Stormare; Jasper Baratheon – Joe Dempsie (basically, think of Gendry, only highborn); Rickard Clegane – Freddie Highmore

I'll post this on my profile and update it as more characters are introduced/incorporated. Hope this helps those of you who have had trouble visualizing any character thus far.
Winterfell was normally a very quiet and peaceful place. Not today. Today, the grounds were teeming with activity.

Bran had never seen so many people at once. He had not even seen that many people in his entire life. From the top of the Great Keep, he could see them all.

From Maester Luwin's lessons, Bran and his siblings had learned to identify each of their lord father's vassals by their sigils. The encampments surrounding Winterfell were covered with banners.

To the north, Bran could make out the roaring giant of the Umbers, the sunburst of the Karstarks, the silver fist of the Glovers, and the bear of the Mormonts. To the west, the ironwood tree of the Forresters, the horse's head of the Ryswells, the frogs of the Marshes, and the three sentinels of the Tallharts. To the east, the merman of the Manderlys, the bronze keys of the Lockes, the bullmoose of the Hornwoods, and the flayed man of the Boltons. To the south, the stone hand of the Flints of Flint's Finger, the battle-axe of the Cerwyns, the rusted longaxes of the Dustins, the plain grey of the Slates, and even the lone mountain of the Cleganes of Moat Cailin.

There were some banners Bran did not recognize, but that was not his fault; not all the guests were Northmen. A fair number of them were of the south, namely the Reach. There was some amount of representation for each of the other eight regions of the Seven Kingdoms, but more were from the Reach than anywhere else.

That was to be expected, as the whole purpose of this assemblage was to celebrate the joining of the daughter of House Tyrell to the heir of House Stark.

The betrothal of Robb and Margaery had been the talk of the North – or at least, the talk of Winterfell – for the last few turns of the moon. Everyone had been looking forward to their wedding in great eagerness. Now, the wait was just about over. Tonight is the night. What a night it will be.

Mother had been readying the fortress for a fortnight and a half. She was still rushing to finish up the last-minute arrangements with the household. Luckily, no difficulties had been encountered thus far, and those preparations were nearly complete. They would most certainly be complete by sundown. That was fortunate. Mother would not accept anything less than perfection.

Although Lady Catelyn Stark was easily the person most invested in the upcoming ceremony, everyone else was doing his or her own part. Most of them were just as busy as she was. Because of their affairs on the ground, not one of them thought to look up. As such, Bran was hiding in plain sight.

Almost all of Winterfell was accessible to Bran from the roof the Great Keep. He could climb to the Great Hall, the Guards Hall, the maester's turret, the sept, the godwood, the rookery, the Library Tower, the Bell Tower, and even the First Keep, if he was heedful. Of course, Bran always was heedful. I never slip.

The only part of the castle he could not climb to from the Great Keep was the Broken Tower.
While Bran used to be disappointed with that, he was not so displeased now. Recently, he had been getting strange headaches whenever he went there. He could not explain how or why he got these headaches, but he did notice that they began when the Reeds arrived. That's just one of a number of queer things that came with the crannogmen.

That was far from the top of his most immediate concerns now. Although he had no role in his mother's plans, Bran still had his own part to play. At this time, he was supposed to be getting ready for his brother's wedding. Father and Mother had insisted that he bathe more thoroughly than usual that day. Bran did not see why that was necessary; it was not his wedding. No one would care how he smelt. He himself would not care how Robb would smell either. He felt a man should always smell of sweat, even when swearing the most intimate of vows. But no one bothered to ask my feelings.

In any case, Bran did not wish to upset his mother. If he turned up at the ceremony all filthy and smelly, he undoubtedly would. Thus, he elected to obey her wishes.

After spending a few more minutes observing the people below him, Bran climbed off the roof of the Great Keep. He cautiously scaled the keep's stone walls until he reached the open window of his bedchamber. He easily dropped onto the ledge and slid inside.

Summer had been lying on his stomach. When Bran entered, he lifted his head attentively. He had a habit of snapping to attention whenever his master was near.

Bran smiled, crouched down by the direwolf, and stroked him behind the ears. "Better get ready."

Of course, it was debatable that Summer was already ready. He did not need to bathe, he had no clothes to put on, and his hair did not require brushing. Unlike me.

Bran had instructed his maids to wait outside the door. He claimed he wished to feed Summer in privacy. Unbeknownst to them, Summer had eaten before he and his master came to his room. That had provided the perfect cover for him to climb outside without drawing attention.

After rubbing Summer's head, Bran summoned his maids. They proceeded to fill his tub with boiling water, help him inside, and scrub his skin until it was tender and spotless. Once the water was drained, they helped him out, dried him off, and got him dressed in his most formal attire.

At the end of all that, Bran whistled for Summer, and the direwolf promptly came to his side. He grinned at his loyal beast and told him "Let us make for the celebration."

The two of them swiftly headed down to the first floor of the Great Keep. When he reached the main entrance, he encountered Sansa, Arya, and Rickon. They were with Mother, who was examining them for any imperfections.

She started by wiping Rickon's face and buttoning up his jacket. Once she was done with that, she rubbed a bit of dirt off Arya's cheek and smoothed down the front of her dress. Arya could not have had it on for more than a half-hour, but she had somehow gotten it wrinkled since then. Sansa's appearance was perfect, as usual. Her complexion and clothing had no blemishes to speak of.

It was then that Mother noticed Bran was there. She turned her attention to him next. She fussed with the clasp of his cloak so that it was even, and then she neatly combed his hair to the sides so it was even, as well. She smiled at her second son and stated "Thank you for readying yourself so quickly, Bran."

It appears I'm on time for once. "How much longer?"
"Less than an hour," Mother informed him, "Just as soon as Margaery is finished getting dressed, we will commence."

"Perhaps it would be ideal if we proceed to the godswood now," Sansa proposed.

"Indeed, it would be," Mother agreed, "Robb and your father are already there. I mean to join them before anyone else does."

Bran, his siblings, and his mother exited the Great Keep and headed to the godswood. Despite how overcrowded Winterfell was at present, everyone made way for the Lady and her children. Some of them were merely shying away from Summer, but most did this out of respect. Many of them offered her words of congratulations as they passed by, which she accepted with due happiness and gratitude.

From the roof of the Great Keep, Bran had noticed that the godswood was the only section of the fortress that was nearly empty. When he and his family arrived there, he saw that it was still much the same. Father and Robb were standing before the heart tree. Bran's cousin Jon Snow and his uncle Benjen Stark were standing a little further away to their left.

Grey Wind, Ghost, Lady, Nymeria, Shaggydog, and Lyarra were all gathered around the heart tree. Summer padded forward to join up with his siblings and their mother. Bran grinned at that. Now their family and mine are all together once again.

Uncle Benjen was Father's only surviving sibling. He was also a sworn brother of the Night's Watch. Their First Ranger, in fact. His oaths generally required him to remain on the Wall or north of it. However, he had been given leave by Lord Commander Mormont to attend his nephew's nuptials.

Whenever Jon Snow was not at Winterfell, he was at Moat Cailin, squiring for Lord Gregor Clegane, the commander of the Legion without Banners. Ever since he got back earlier this week, Bran had noticed that he seemed more somber than usual. It was as though something was troubling him. If something really was troubling him, he would not say. He was not one to divulge his feelings.

At least he managed to put on a smile for the occasion.

Bran, Sansa, Arya, and Rickon went to stand with Jon and Uncle Benjen. Mother left them for a moment to see to Robb. He was clean-shaven, freshly-bathed, and garbed in his finest apparel. The grey and white cloak of House Stark was draped around his shoulders. By the way he stood, he looked older than his six and ten years. Father, by contrast, did not look more than his six and thirty years for once. He still held his normally stoic countenance, but beneath that, he was teeming with pride.

Mother briefly looked Robb over, and she found she was pleased with what she saw. She placed her arms on his biceps and asked him pressingly "Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be," he firmly replied.

Mother smiled widely and placed a light kiss on his cheek. A tear came to her eye and she muttered softly "Then you are. I am so proud of you."

Robb smiled and gave her a comforting hug. If the godswood was occupied by a larger number, he would have only smiled. Robb was like Father in that he was not generous with displays of affection in public. Yet in private, both of them could be warm and receptive.
Mother then rejoined her four youngest children, her bastard nephew, and her brother-by-law in the area immediately right of the heart tree.

Over the course of the subsequent hour, the wedding guests congregated in the godswood. Among the first of them were Willas Tyrell, Lady Olenna Tyrell, Ser Loras Tyrell, and Ser Brynden Tully, Mother's uncle. Willas went to join Father and Robb by the heart tree. His brother and grandmother stood to the left of the heart tree. Great Uncle Brynden stood by his niece.

Bran tried to count the guests as they arrived, but he lost track sometime after the first hundred. The final tally had to be four hundred or close enough that it made no matter. Most were Northmen and Reachmen, but there were people from all parts of Westeros, including the lands north of the Wall.

The last person to arrive was the bride. All noises and voices rapidly vanished when Lady Margaery Tyrell and her handmaidens Mira Forrester and Sera Durwell entered the godswood. All three women wore beautiful gowns, but Margaery's was the most noteworthy. It was the result of half a dozen seamstresses' diligent work. It was made from the finest silks and fabrics from the Free Cities, and it had taken over a week to put together. It was the perfect dress for a native of the Reach, given its many pastels and how it was patterned with images of flowers. She looks lovely. Robb must have thought so; he could not remove his eyes from her.

When they reached the head of the congregation, Margaery's handmaidens separated from her. Mira joined the Northmen on the right, and Sera joined everyone else on the left. Margaery continued forward until she was reached her brother Willas, who flashed a bright smile at her.

Father waited for absolute silence. When it came, he moved directly in front of the heart tree so that his back was to its massive face. He stood tall and straight as he asked aloud "Who comes before the gods?"

Margaery looked to Father and pronounced "Margaery of House Tyrell, daughter of Lord Mace of Highgarden. A woman grown and flowered, trueborn and noble. I come to beg the blessings of the gods."

Father continued with "Who comes to claim her?"

Robb stepped forward and announced "I, Robb of House Stark, heir to Winterfell and future warden of the North. I claim her."

Lord Eddard Stark then questioned "Who gives her?"

Willas responded with "Willas of House Tyrell, heir to Highgarden and future Lord Paramount of the Reach and Warden of the South. Elder brother to Lady Margaery."

Father turned to face the audience and declared "We are gathered here today to see the joining of the North and the Reach. More importantly, we are present to see a groom and a bride united as one. It is with great honor that I serve as officiator on this grand occasion."

An honor and a privilege. How often does a man conduct his own son's wedding?

Father looked to his future gooddaughter and asked "Lady Margaery of House Tyrell, will you take this man?"

"I will take this man, my lord," Margaery said solemnly.

Father gave a light nod, moved away from the heart tree, and gestured for Robb and Margaery to
come forward. They had rehearsed this time and time again by themselves, but never with each other. Fortunately, the actual ceremony went just as well as the practice ones did.

Robb and Margaery knelt before the heart tree and spent the next few minutes in silent prayer. As they did this, Father stood behind both of them and muttered a speech he had prepared. Bran did not pay much attention to the speech; his mind tended to wander when someone spoke for so long. From what little he remembered, the speech was essentially an account of the importance of fidelity, truth, and stability, and how those qualities were as critical to marriage as they were to all other meaningful relationships.

When the speech was concluded, Robb and Margaery rose from the ground. Willas stepped forward and gently removed the cloak of House Tyrell from his sister's shoulders, leaving her momentarily without a house. Robb swiftly slid the cloak of his house off his own shoulders and moved to replace it on Margaery's, bringing her into his protection.

When they turned back to the congregation, Father announced "In the sight of the Old Gods and all who stand witness, I present the future Lord and Lady of Winterfell!"

The applause did not come just yet. First, Robb and Margaery turned to each other. As he took her in his arms, she happily muttered "I am his and he is mine."

In response, he jovially declared "I am hers and she mine."

Then their lips connected, marking the moment they officially became husband and wife. When that happened, Arya and Rickon turned away, Sansa looked as though she would swoon in delight, and Bran just smiled. He was very happy for his brother. So was everybody else there, given how quickly they all burst into enthusiastic cheers.

Bran could hardly recall leaving the godswood. As soon as Robb and Margaery parted, the next thing he knew, he was indoors. *Now the real celebration can begin.*

All grand weddings needed an equally grand feast. This one was by no means an exception. The smallfolk and soldiers were being feasted outside the walls of Winterfell. House Stark's vassals were being feasted on the grounds within the walls. Bran was in the Great Hall with his family and all the other highborn attendees.

Bran sat between Arya and Rickon on the right side of the dais. Left of Arya was Sansa, who in turn was to the right of Mother. By her, Father sat in the lord's chair. Robb was to his immediate left, as befitted the heir to Winterfell. Margaery sat on Robb's other side. Her grandmother and brothers were left of her. *Wolves to the right; roses to the left. That makes for quite an arrangement.*

Lyarra and her pups were all gathered behind the dais. Their masters and mistresses often fed them from their own plate. The plates would be very full tonight.

Uncle Benjen, Great Uncle Brynden, and Jon Snow had been offered places on the dais, but they had chosen to sit at the trestle tables with colleagues and friends instead.

Ser Brynden Blackwish was seated at a table near the Tyrells. Most of the people at his table were fellow Legionnaires. Jon Snow was at a table in the middle of the hall with several of his friends, which included Rickard Clegane, Samwell Tarly, and Ygritte. Uncle Benjen was at the back of the hall. The majority of the people he sat with were Northmen. There was also a pair of unexpected guests who wore the crimson of House Lannister.
Originally, Lord Tyrion Lannister and his wife Lady Ellyn had come to the north with Margaery and her family. However, unlike the Tyrells, they had not stopped at Winterfell. They had gone all the way to the Wall. They had been there for most of the last two turns of the moon. Obviously, they had not gone there to enlist. Bran assumed they had simply wished to revel in its size and glory. In his mind, that was reason enough to visit the Wall.

When Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn finally came back south, they had been travelling in Benjen Stark's company. Uncle Benjen must have bonded closely with them at the Wall or after it, as he had convinced Father to allow them to attend the wedding feast.

Bran was aware of his father's disdain for Lannisters. Then again, Lannisters were not much loved in the North on the whole. Lord Tywin Lannister's ordering of the Sack of King's Landing had garnered him a fair deal of notoriety and scorn. Ser Jaime Lannister had gained the moniker "Kingslayer" for running his sword through the back of the late Aerys II. Cersei Lannister was the wife of King Robert Baratheon and Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, but she was infamous for her ambitious nature, and the North had never cared much for the politics of the south anyway.

Be that as it may, Tyrion Lannister was not like his father and elder siblings. He was more thoughtful, more patient, much wiser, and easily the most reasonable person in his family. He also had some manner of interest in the affairs of the North. Maybe that is why Father made room for him at the feast.

While Lady Ellyn was a Clegane by birth, she was a member of the Westerlander branch of her house. Of course, she was also the sister of Lord Gregor Clegane, the founder of the Legion without Banners and head of the Northern branch of House Clegane. Father spoke fondly of the Cleganes of Moat Cailin, particularly Lord Gregor. That must be why Father was so quick to accept Lady Ellyn. In contrast to the Lannisters, one Clegane was much like the other. Tall, strong, clever, and considerate.

Soon the first course of the evening was brought out. It was composed mainly of soups, stews, and salads, all intended as appetizers before the main course.

Lord Wyman Manderly had supplied most of the food for the feast. He, his two sons Ser Wylis and Ser Wendel, and his two granddaughters Wynafryd and Wylla were all in attendance. The rest of the food had been provided by the Tyrells. As such, a diverse selection of dishes from both the North and the Reach would be served that night.

During the first course, Bran took the time to survey the room. There were so many in attendance. Lord Greatjon Umber and all his children, with the exception of his heir Smalljon. The Greatjon's uncles Mors Crowfood and Hother Whoresbane. Lord Halys Hornwood, his heir Daryn, and Daryn's new wife, Alys of House Karstark. Alys' father Lord Rickard and his sons Harrion, Eddard, and Torrhen. Galbart Glover, Robett Glover, and Robett's wife and children. Ser Helman Tallhart and his son Benfred. Lord Gregor Forrester, his wife, and all their children.

Those were just some of the Northmen present whom Bran could identify at a glance. It amazed him to think that all of them were there in honor of his brother. Then again, the wedding of a future Great Lord was cherished in this fashion everywhere in the Seven Kingdoms. However, celebrations of this magnitude were not common in the North. For that matter, whenever the North had reason to celebrate, it was typically done quietly and modestly. This is a rare exception.

The second course was comprised of the meat which had been missing from the first one. Chief among those dishes were venison, pork chops, lamb shanks, and lamprey pies. Unsurprisingly, this course was received more openly than the first. There is nothing like the taste of fresh meat at a banquet.
Although music had been playing since the start of the feast, the dancing did not begin until halfway through the main course. Once he had his fill of meat, Robb offered Margaery his hand, which she giddily took. Together they climbed down from the dais and went to the center of the hall. There they began their dance.

Soon they were joined by other couples. Father and Mother, Domeric Bolton and Mira Forrester, Theon Greyjoy and Sera Durwell, Rodrik Forrester and his wife Elaena Glenmore, and Lord Jorah Mormont and his wife Nymeria Martell. Willas Tyrell even asked Sansa for a dance, and she graciously accepted, flushing all the while. There were also a number of pairs of between highborn boys and girls who – as of yet – were not involve with each other.

*How many more marriage contracts will be devised tonight?*

Bran had expected to bypass the dancing phase of the feast. While he was friends with several of the Northern girls, he was so close to any of them that he would have liked to hold her in his arms and move about with her intimately. Furthermore, it was customary for men to be the ones to encourage a dance.

In spite of that, women asking men to dance was not unheard of, especially in the North. As luck would have it, that was precisely what happened to Bran.

A few minutes into the dancing, Meera Reed stepped up to Bran on the dais, donned her most sincere grin, and asked him "Join me on the ground, my lord?"

Bran's first impulse was to refuse. He would have been well within his rights to. The Reeds' station was far below the Starks', and Meera was nearly twice Bran's age. Apart from that, he had no express desire to dance with her. He had already seen plenty of her and her brother in the last month and a-half.

Nevertheless, for some reason he could not fathom, he could not bring himself to refuse Lady Meera's proposal. Instead, he chose to agree to it, albeit hesitantly. Whether it was courtesy, curiosity, or something else that dictated his decision, he could not say. *Maybe it's because I like her. But how could she know that?*

Bran and Meera proceeded down to the dance floor with the other couples. Thankfully, they did not draw any odd glares. Their difference in height alone could have earned them at least a few. But no one seemed especially interested in them. *I hope it remains as such.*

Nearby, Jojen was dancing with Klara Dustin of Barrowton. Bran raised an eyebrow and muttered to his partner "I did not know your brother harbored such an interest in Lady Klara."

"Neither did I," Meera remarked, shrugging slightly, "It could be he is only interested in the thing they have in common."

"What do they have in common?" Bran said inquisitively.

"The same thing you and I do," Mira replied, "All our fathers were at the Tower of Joy."

Bran thought on that, and he realized it was true.

Near the end of King Robert's Rebellion, Father and six of his companions had ridden to the Red Mountains of Dorne to rescue Bran's aunt, Lyanna. Lords Howland Reed and Willam Dustin had been among those six. When they arrived at the Tower of Joy, three of the Mad King’s Kingsguard had stood between the Northmen and Lady Lyanna Stark. A violent skirmish had ensued, and Lords Stark, Reed, and Dustin had been three of only four survivors. The other survivor had been
Martyn Cassel, Winterfell's master-at-arms.

Bran thought it quaint that Jojen would choose to dance with Klara simply because both their fathers had been in a battle. Even if it was a battle as historic as the skirmish at the Tower of Joy. That made him wonder. *Could that also be why Meera asked to dance with me?*

"No, that is not why I asked you down here," Meera disclosed. Bran was astounded. It was as though she had genuinely heard his thoughts.

"Then why did you?" Bran inquired.

"To talk," Meera informed him. *Of course.* "Have you thought any further on what we discussed?"

"Yes, I have," Bran told her, "But it is no use. Hard as I might try, I cannot become Summer."

For the duration of their stay, Meera and Jojen had taken the time to interact with all the Starks. However, Bran had been the one whose time they had most occupied. Bran was still uncertain why that was. But it must have had something to do with Summer and his packmates.

From the moment they first arrived in Winterfell, Meera and Jojen had developed a deep interest in the direwolves. They seemed to share Jon Snow's theory that the Starks were always meant to have the wolves. However, the Reeds also believed the wolves were meant to be more than faithful animal companions.

When Bran asked them what else the wolves might serve as, Meera and Jojen had told him at length of two very old, outdated practices known as greensight and warging.

Greensight was fundamentally the ability to gaze into the past and the future. It was similar to the visions experienced by Lord Gregor Clegane. Except, of course, greenseers could not alter the will of the gods, whereas Lord Gregor could. *And, many times, has.* Jojen Reed claimed to be a greenseer. Bran was inclined to believe his claims, as Jojen had successfully forecasted a number of events that had already come to pass.

Warging was the rarer and the more dangerous of the two. That was the process of a human entering the mind of another being and taking control of it. Most often, the second being was an animal or lower lifeform. It was quite possible to warg into another human, but to do so was regarded as abominable, even by the standards of the wildlings. It happened that several of the wildlings who had come south of the Wall, namely Varamyr Sixskins, were wargs. But no known citizens of the Seven Kingdoms had been identified as a warg. *Yet.*

For whatever reason, Meera and Jojen were under the impression that one of the Starks was both a greenseer and a warg. Earlier that week, Bran had discovered that it was he whom they suspected of such. In the time since that revelation, they had continuously been trying to prove it.

Bran had decided to humor them. Alas, he had yet to witness any definite indication that he could glimpse into the past or future, or that he could take over the mind of another. *I may be doing something wrong.*

Meera all but confirmed that hypothesis a moment later. She apprised him "You are not supposed to be Summer. The idea is for you to merge with him instead. Do not think of it as seizing his body so much as sharing it."

"I will try," Bran professed, "But could it be possible you and your brother erred? Maybe I am not a warg or a greenseer after all."
"Until we can prove otherwise, we must assume you are," Meera contended.

"Why?" Bran murmured, slightly annoyed, "Why must we? What good would it do anyone if I truly am a warg or a greenseer?"

"More than you ever thought possible," Meera asserted.

Bran was alarmed by the conviction in her voice. He sighed and uttered "I wish I shared your faith, Meera."

"Do not fret, Bran," Meera bade him, "The problem is not whether you are what we say you are. The problem is your willingness to admit it. You mustn't doubt yourself; doubt will only lead you astray. Fortunately, I can help you to embrace the truth."

"How?" Bran questioned curiously.

"By guiding you," Meera pronounced, speaking more quietly now, "There is one aspect greensight and warging have in common. Both require being fully aware of one's surroundings. One could not hope to glimpse through time or take control of another if one is not properly focused. Therein lies the solution you seek."

"What do you suggest I do?" Bran asked her.

"Concentrate on everything that is going on around us," Meera advised him, "The dancing will go on for a while longer. While it lasts, you and I will have free range of the hall. As we pass the other couples and the trestle tables, try to pick up on the various conversations."

"You want me to eavesdrop?" Bran presumed, somewhat taken aback.

"Yes," Meera affirmed, "But do not let anyone know that you are listening. If they become aware of your eavesdropping, they will stop talking and your focus will be disrupted. That cannot happen; the conversations must have no interruptions. Consistency is key to your focus."

Bran thought on that. Part of him did not believe he was really capable of greensight or warging. However, Meera and Jojen believed he was. They also believed he would do a lot of good if he was. If so, he felt obligated to give the concept some further thought. With that in mind, how could he ever hope to peer into the past or the future or occupy another individual's head if he was not even willing to overhear a few private conversations?

"Very well," Bran conceded, "Where should we start?"

"That decision is yours entirely," Meera decreed.

Bran looked around the room, wondering who might have something intriguing to talk about. Better yet, who is most likely to talk about things they would rather not freely announce?

Ultimately, he chose to approach his elder brother and his new bride first. Maybe he and Margaery are talking about what they'll do after the feast. Bran was not entirely certain what went on between the bride and groom after the wedding, but whatever it was, he did know all newlywed couples were expected to do it. Interestingly, most couples enjoyed it far more than the wedding itself.

In any case, Bran believed he would not feel so guilty if he listened in on a family member instead of someone who was not his kin.
Bran casually led Meera over to the center of the hall, where Robb and Margaery were dancing intimately with each other. Their mouths were moving, but their voices were practically inaudible. It soon dawned on Bran that they were murmuring quietly into each other's ears. They were likely whispering "sweet nothings," whatever those were.

A few seconds later, Robb and Margaery were approached by Domeric Bolton and Mira Forrester. The two of them were doing a slightly more suggestive yet equally intimate dance.

"Congratulations, both of you," Domeric bade them.

"Thank you," Margaery said gratefully, "I hope to offer the same to the two you soon."

"Do not get too ahead of yourself, my lady," Mira muttered slyly, "For the present, I believe there have been enough northern weddings."

"I'm hurt, Mira," Domeric murmured jokingly, "Am I that dreadful?"

"No, but considering the name of your ancestral home..." Robb japed.

The four of them chuckled at that observation. Bran had to admit; it was witty. The Dreadfort certainly was not called so without cause.

"Soon enough, Dom," Mira assured her intended, "Soon enough."

"That's good to know," Domeric muttered bluntly.

"Indeed," Margaery concurred, "Now I can tell Grandmother. You know, Mira, she was beginning to propose matches for you."

"Really?" Mira said in interest.

"Yes," Margaery disclosed, "They were all from the Reach, though."

"Well, tell her I am appreciative, but she needn't bother," Mira stated, "While the Reach is a wonderful place, I cannot envision living there indefinitely. My only true home is the North."

"I understand the sentiment," Margaery proclaimed, "For most of my life, the Reach was my home. Now, my home is here in the North. But the Reach will always hold the most special place in my heart."

"I expected it would," Robb thought aloud, "Here's a thought. Someday, after the Long Night most like, we could travel to Highgarden."

"I like that thought, my lord," Margaery said approvingly.

Knowing him, he'll make it into an action. When the time is right, that is.

Domeric then looked to Robb and muttered "By the way... have you spoken to Lord Eddard on... that 'other' matter?"

"I have," Robb notified him, "In response, he sent a letter to Lord Gregor, telling him of the situation. The Mountain was quick to reply. He assures us that he is looking into the matter thoroughly. He has also counseled that while he is busy, we do nothing for the time-being."

"Normally, I would question such advice," Mira commented, "But seeing as it's from the Mountain, it must be legitimate."
"Quite so," Margaery agreed, "Lord Roose does not suspect anything, does he?"

"No, thank the Gods," Domeric replied, "Be that as it may, I am hoping Lord Gregor will not require too much time to conduct his investigation."

"That makes all of us," Mira conceded.

Bran was perplexed. What is Lord Roose Bolton up? What could he have done that was so atrocious that his own heir would go behind his back and consult with Robb?

He ultimately decided he would be better off not knowing. For now, anyway.

"Let's move on," Bran quietly told Meera. She nodded in acknowledgment.

They spent a few more minutes dancing about the room. Eventually, they came to the trestle table where Bran's baseborn cousin was seated. They lingered there for a few minutes.

"Are you certain you do not wish to dance?" Jon asked Ygritte.

"Quite," was the redhaired wildling's candid reply.

"Oh, come on," he playfully goaded her, "For all you know, you might enjoy it."

"You know nothing, Jon..." she began. She cut herself off in mid-sentence. She almost looked as though she was uncertain how to finish that jibe.

"The name is Snow," he told her sardonically.

"Is it?" she asked.

"For the sake of everyone's well-being, it still is," Jon stated frankly. 'Still?'

"That might change soon," Ygritte disputed.

"It might," Jon admitted, "But until then, I am just Jon Snow, bastard of Winterfell and squire of Lord Gregor Clegane."

"And lover of the Free Folk," Ygritte cheekily added in.

"No, just one of the Free Folk," Jon countered, smirking deviously. Ygritte snickered.

Just then, Samwell Tarly sat down beside Ygritte. He asked her and Jon "Talking about the conference?"

"In a way," Jon replied, "We are thinking about how it could end."

"Try to stay positive, Jon," the heir to Horn Hill advised his best friend.

"I am positive," Jon Snow claimed. After a short pause, he shrugged and murmured "Well, rather, as positive as I can be, all things considered."

"Which is not all that positive at all," Theon Greyjoy cockily uttered, leaning against the end of the trestle table. He and Sera Durwell had just finished their dance. Apparently, his charms were finally starting to work on her. Bran looked over at Sera, and he noted she looked in much better condition than usual. It appeared her health was finally improving.
"No one asked your opinion, Greyjoy," Jon mumbled in annoyance.

"That's everyone else's mistake," the Ironman slyly declared.

"Or good fortune," Rickard Clegane wittily pronounced. He was sitting across from Jon, Ygritte and Samwell. He was sitting on his knees and leaning forward so that his friends could hear him over all the noise of the feast.

Theon pretended not to hear that last remark. Instead, he asked no one in particular "Now, what's all this about a conference?"

"In a fortnight or two, Lord Gregor will be meeting with the King at Harrenhal," Samwell disclosed, "I cannot divulge the purpose of the conference or anything about it. All I can say is that it concerns a very private matter which only the secret council is aware of it."

Theon cocked his head and uttered inquiringly "Is that right?"

"Yeah," Rickard confirmed, folding his arms and resting them on the table. He slowly let out a deep sigh.

Bran noticed he seemed distraught. Jon must have noticed that, too. He asked his friend "Are you alright, Rick?"

Rickard began to nod his head, but he ended up shaking it. He murmured "Most of the Legion's secret council will be attending the conference at Harrenhal. My mother has not yet decided if she will go. If she does join my father when he goes south… it will be up to me to run the moat in their absence."

Bran could understand what Rickard meant by that. No young heirs appreciated having the burdens of the lord thrust upon them. So far, Bran had been spared any such tribulation, as Father and Robb had never been away from Winterfell at the same time. But if ever they were, he would be expected to run the castle until they returned.

"You shouldn't let that get to you, Rick," Samwell said in reassurance, "Lady Dacey may decide not to attend the conference. And even if she does, she would only do so if she had total faith in your ability to manage Moat Cailin."

"I suppose that's true," Rickard straightforwardly contended.

"Obviously it is," Theon Greyjoy muttered, raising his goblet of wine cheerily. "Besides, having both your parents away for a few weeks could prove exciting. I foresee some good times at the moat in the near future."

"You're not invited, Theon," Rickard said wryly.

"Who said I needed an invitation?" the Ironborn countered cheekily. On the whole, he does pretty much go where he pleases.

"As much as I'd love to partake in these 'good times,' I cannot," Jon Snow revealed, "I have to go to Harrenhal with Lord Gregor."

"That's quite odd," Theon perceived, "Unless he plans to do a lot of brawling, why would he need his squire?"

"Maybe the Mountain's just fond of his company," Ygritte slyly conjectured, "More than anyone
could say of yours, kraken."

"Oh, I disagree, wildling," Theon drily rejoined, his cocky grin back, "There are a great many who revel in my company. If you desire proof, you merely have to ask around."

"I'd rather not inquire after your affairs," Ygritte proclaimed soberly, "Anyway, since I'm going south with Jon, what goes on up here in the meantime will be no concern of mine."

"Well, I hope the two of you will enjoy your trip," Rickard uttered sincerely, "While you're down there, I'm stuck up here. Not that I'm complaining. At the very least, I won't get lonely running the moat. I know Jasper's going with you to Harrenhal so he can see his parents, but I'll still have Robb, the Northmen, and the rest of the Legion to keep me company."

"And me," Theon pointed out.

"Yes, and you, Theon," Rickard said frankly, "Maybe you, too, Sam?"

"Well... honestly, I haven't decided yet," Samwell professed, "For the moment, I'm torn between joining Lord Gregor and remaining at Moat Cailin. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, I would be able to carry out my duties as Lord Gregor's notary directly. On the other hand, Lord Gregor wishes to assemble his printing press as soon as possible, and I'm the only person apart from him who knows every detail of its design."

_He would likely be safer if he stayed at the moat._

"Well, in the end, it's really up to you," Jon contended.

"I know," Samwell admitted, exhaling slowly, "Still, sometimes I wish I could have other people decide for me. It would make things considerably easier that way."

"Just do whatever you believe is the right course of action," Rickard recommended.

"That is something I can do," Samwell asserted.

Bran was captivated in this conversation. He was learning quite a bit from it. He did not know that Lord Gregor Clegane would be holding a conference at Harrenhal in the next month, or that said conference would involve the King and Queen. _Must be very important if he could not have sent a raven or a rider instead._

"Oh, by the way, Rick," Theon pronounced, turning to the youngest person at the table, "I'd like to know your thoughts on the love triangle going on at your home."

"Love triangle?" Rickard repeated, bewildered, "What in the hells are you talking about?"

Theon elaborated with "Jon mentioned something about a certain Dornish princess who's been at Moat Cailin lately, and how she seems quite taken with both Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey."

"That's not quite how I'd describe it, but I get where Theon's coming from," Samwell murmured, turning to the tallest of their group, "Surely you know what we're talking about, Rick."

"Of course I do," Rickard affirmed, laughing a bit and gazing off to the side, "Ever since she arrived, Princess Elia has spent a fair amount of her time with my lord father. Interestingly, whenever she is with him, my mother is almost always around, as well. If I did not know better, I would say she was trying to make advances on both of them."
"Well, Dorne does have looser guidelines on marriage," Samwell Tarly professed, "As long as both the husband and the wife consent to it, any activities done with a third party are not regarded as unfaithfulness."

"That could be why Princess Elia seems so interested in getting friendly with both your parents," Jon theorized, looking to Rickard.

"Oh, please," Rickard murmured exasperatedly, "Just the thought of that is ridiculous. I mean, I can understand why Princess Elia would be attracted to my father. He saved her during the Sack of King's Landing. Be that as it may, I cannot see my mother with Princess Elia. Can you even imagine such a thing?"

"Oh, I'm trying to," Theon mumbled with a wicked smirk, "That makes for quite a pleasant image in my head."

"If you treasure your head, mind your mouth, Greyjoy," Rickard snapped heatedly.

"Hey, it is no fault of mine your mother is a fair woman, who happens to attract other fair women," Theon disputed.

"You should take that as a compliment," Ygritte advised Rickard.

"Coming from him, it is," the heir to Moat Cailin commented bluntly.

Alright, I have heard enough here. Bran did not know why two women would be interested in one another the way a man and a woman would be. Then again, he had much to learn of all the different preferences, tastes, and lifestyles of the world. Even so, he decided he would rather not know more of this topic just yet.

"Continue?" he suggested to Meera. Once more, she nodded her head, and they sauntered away from the scene.

By now, some of the other couples were starting to return to their seats. But there were still more than enough that Bran and Meera could continue to blend in with them.

At some point, Great Uncle Brynden had walked up to the dais and beckoned Lady Olenna Tyrell for a dance, and she had accepted. Together, the two of them had more than a hundred years. By the way they danced, one would not think so. They were both quite nimble for their age.

All the same, their dance only lasted about fifteen minutes. After that, Lady Olenna returned to her seat on the dais. However, Ser Brynden did not go back to his spot at the trestle table closest to the front of the hall. Instead, he made his way to the tables near the entrance. He stopped at the one where Lord Tyrion, Lady Ellyn, and Uncle Benjen were seated.

The four of them all in the same place. Interesting...

Meera must have had the same thought, as when Bran began to lead her towards the front of the hall, she hurriedly matched her movements to his.

They came within earshot of Ser Brynden just as he sat down beside Uncle Benjen.

"Who knew the Blackfish could dance?" Tyrion Lannister muttered wittily.

"You'd be amazed if you knew what else I am capable of, my lord," Brynden Tully cheekily retorted.
"You got the Queen of Thorns to take you by the shoulder," Ellyn Lannister observed, "That would be rather hard to top."

"Well, the Tyrells are now aware that the Reach is not the only region that is well-versed in chivalry," Uncle Benjen pointed out.

"That is true," Lord Tyrion conceded, smirking, "Lady Olenna must have found you quite charming, Ser Brynden. She is still gazing this way."

Bran peered over at the dais, and he found that Lord Tyrion was merely jesting. Lady Olenna was not glimpsing over at Ser Brynden Tully. In actuality, she was conversing with her grandson, Ser Loras Tyrell, the Knight of Flowers.

At any rate, Ser Brynden must have called Lord Tyrion's bluff; he did not bother looking back to the dais. He just scoffed and leaned his head on the palm of his right hand. He then turned to the Lannisters and asked them "So, how was the Wall?"

"Oh, it was quite eventful," Tyrion Lannister pronounced, "We visited six of the fortresses, saw giants and mammoths, and even went north of the Wall twice."

"We also fought wildling style," Aunt Ellyn added in.

"Well, you did that," Lord Tyrion countered, "My method of fighting involves more words than swords. Alas, most of the Free Folk do not trade witticisms as well as they do blows."

Perhaps not. But some of them do speak words of wisdom every now and then.

"They are not the best at combat, either," Ellyn Lannister professed.

"How's that?" Brynden Tully said enquiringly.

Lady Ellyn explicated "I challenged each of the spearwives at Castle Black to a duel. None of them last more than ninety seconds. I then offered to face three of them at once. They managed to make it to almost four minutes before I had them on the ground. After that, I moved on to the male wildlings, hoping they might do better. Alas, not one put up a sufficient fight."

"Perhaps they underestimated you," Ser Brynden theorized.

"Or maybe Lady Ellyn is simply one of the best-trained fighters in Westeros," Benjen Stark supposed.

"Since I received the same training as my brothers, that is quite possible," Ellyn Lannister debated, "I certainly hope that is the case. Otherwise, the wildlings will not be much good to us when we finally face the Others."

"I can assure you there are some wildlings who can put up a decent fight," Uncle Benjen proclaimed, "For instance, Harma Dogshead, the Weeping Man, Alfyn Crowkiller, Rattleshirt, Styr the Magnar of Thenns, and Tormund Giantsbane."

"I can vouch for Tormund," Brynden Tully declared, "Unfortunately, not all of those other aforementioned parties are on this side of the Wall yet."

"There is still time," Tyrion Lannister contended, "They'll come around soon enough."

"I wouldn't count on that," Uncle Benjen murmured gloomily, "Many of the wildlings still hate us
'kneelers' almost as much as they hate the White Walkers."

"Rivalries can be set aside for a greater purpose," Ellyn Lannister argued, "Consider this: even though I beat the wildlings at Castle Black, I still got along with them well enough afterwards."

"Despite the moniker they gave you," Tyrion slyly added in.

"What moniker?" Great Uncle Brynden inquired.

"The Imp's Bitch," Lady Ellyn replied, smirking, "That's what they called me."

Ser Brynden fought back a laugh. "Are you serious?"

Tyrion nodded and disclosed "At first, it was just the spearwives who used that label. Before long, the whole of Castle Black was using it."

"Odd; I never heard anyone call her that," Uncle Benjen recalled.

"That was intentional," Lady Ellyn revealed, "They never used it when you or the other officers were around."

"You should have told me, my lady," Benjen Stark stated, "I would have put an end to it."

"I appreciate that, ser," Ellyn Lannister asserted, "But I did not wish to trouble you. Anyway, the moniker did not bother me. If anything, it was a fitting one, seeing as how the sigil of my house is three hounds."

She has a point. Tyrion Lannister was known throughout the realm as the Imp. Given how Ellyn Clegane was married to him and how her house's official symbol was a trio of dogs, it would be queerly appropriate to refer to her as the Imp's Bitch. Despite how vulgar it may have seemed.

"I admire your humility, my lady," Brynden Tully commented, "Most women would be outraged by such a moniker."

"Well, Ser Brynden, as you may have noticed, I am bigger than most women," Ellyn Clegane wryly pointed out.

Lord Tyrion, Ser Brynden, and Uncle Benjen shared a laugh with the tall woman.

Bran was a little disappointed. He had presumed that the First Ranger, the Blackfish, and the two Lannisters would have something fascinating to talk about. Alas, so far, their conversation had been rather dull.

Fortunately, that changed a moment later, just when Bran was beginning to consider moving on.

"Tell me; why were at the Wall for so long?" Brynden asked Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn, "Unless you're all in black, I imagine two months up there would get tedious."

"Even if you're in black, it can get tedious," Uncle Benjen jested. That produced a few more chuckles.

"Originally, we were only going to stay for one month," Tyrion Lannister answered the earlier question, "But while we were there, there were some unforeseen developments."

"What developments?" the Blackfish queried.
"Two, mainly," Ellyn Clegane expounded, "One of which we'd rather wait to discuss until we next see my brother."

Before Ser Brynden could ask for clarity, Tyrion illuminated with "It has to do with how the Watch intends to handle the Long Night. Lord Commander Mormont has a plan for countering the Night King's attacks on the Seven Kingdoms."

Bran and the Blackfish were both intrigued. Lady Ellyn informed the latter of them "You'll know more when we get back to Moat Cailin. It is very likely Gregor will want the secret council to know what we have to tell him, anyway."

"If it is as imperative as you make it out to be, he will definitely share it with the secret council," Ser Brynden affirmed. What I’d give to have a seat at that council."

After a pause, the Blackfish enquired "What of this other 'development'?

Neither Lord Tyrion nor Lady Ellyn answered him right away. They hesitated a bit first. Eventually, Ellyn Lannister stated "As Tyrion mentioned a few minutes ago, we went north of the Wall twice during our stay there. The second time… we saw something. Something out of the ordinary."

While Bran was captivated, Ser Brynden was not as taken. Even so, he bade the dwarf "Go on. What did you see?"

"Truthfully, we are not entirely certain what we saw," Lady Ellyn claimed, "We do know it was not a grumpkin or a snark. And it was too small to be a giant or a mammoth."

"Far too small," Lord Tyrion confirmed, "Hells, it was too small to be a normal man. It was almost even smaller than I."

That must be small. Although Bran had only seen his eighth nameday, he was almost of a height with Tyrion Lannister.

"Was it human?" Ser Brynden asked.

"It appeared to be," Lady Ellyn recalled, "It’d be difficult to say for sure. We only got a brief glimpse of the thing, and when we tried to approach it, it ran off."

"But that was not the last we saw of it," Benjen Stark disclosed, "Nor was it the only of its kind we encountered. Over the next several days, we spotted more of these miniscule human-like beings from the top of the Wall. Every time we went north to investigate, they inexplicably vanished without a single trace."

"Did you try searching for them?" Ser Brynden asked.

"Of course we did," Uncle Benjen claimed, "I sent a dozen rangers led by Ser Jarman Buckwell on an expedition to find those creatures. Thus far, none of them have come back or reported in."

"Hopefully they are only being methodical in their search," Lady Ellyn offered, "I would like to think they have not been inconvenienced by the Others."

"Perhaps those small creatures are Others," Brynden Tully conjectured.

"Unlikely," Lord Tyrion disputed, "Those creatures ran from us. The Others do not run from men."
"They were not wildlings, either," Uncle Benjen professed, "My rangers can find a way to track any wildling. Yet those creatures left absolutely nothing to track."

Ser Brynden was starting to become a little annoyed. Bran could hardly blame him; this tale was not going anywhere.

The Blackfish drily mumbled "So, they were not the Others, nor were they the wildlings. Obviously, we can rule out anyone from the Seven Kingdoms. What does that leave? The Children of the Forest?"

Bran could tell he was being sarcastic. Nevertheless, after that last statement, he felt Meera stiffen. He looked up at her, and by her countenance, she appeared to be stunned.

When Lord Tyrion, Lady Ellyn, and Uncle Benjen only responded with uneasy stares, Ser Brynden realized he may have actually been on to something. He murmured quietly "You don't mean…"

"Again, we could not conclusively identify those creatures," Tyrion Lannister declared, "However, my lady wife and I both considered the Children of the Forest. While you may only be japing, Ser Brynden, since you brought them up in the first place, perhaps it actually is the Children of the Forest."

"They would be the most plausible explanation," Ellyn Lannister contended.

"Except that the Children of the Forest have been gone for centuries," Brynden Tully pointed out.

"So have the Others," Benjen Stark countered.

"Yes," Ser Brynden admitted, "Still, Lord Gregor has never addressed the Children of the Forest at any council meetings. If the Children were still around, he would most certainly have mentioned them."

"Not necessarily," Tyrion Lannister supposed, "If the Children of the Forest are real, the Mountain is undoubtedly aware of them. As such, perhaps he did not deem it critical to speak of them. Or maybe he is waiting for the most opportune time to address the Children."

"I propose that we speak to Greg when we get to Moat Cailin," Lady Ellyn recommended, "Maybe he could supply some information on this topic."

"He could," Ser Brynden debated, "Provided, of course, that he has time before he goes south."

Ellyn Lannister was baffled. "He is going south?"

Meera abruptly leaned forward and whispered into Bran's ear "Let's go."

Bran was surprised. "But their conversation is still going."

"Yes, but now they are only discussing things we have already heard," Meera informed him.

She was right. From Jon's talk with his friends, he had learned that Lord Gregor Clegane would be convening with King Robert at Harrenhal sometime in the next month. While Ser Brynden Tully may have known more on this matter, it was hardly new information to Bran.

"Alright," Bran conceded.

As he and Meera danced back into the center of the hall, she told him "That is enough for now. But
later, I want you to meet up with me and Jojen."

"Where?" he enquired. "My quarters? Your quarters?"

"No, somewhere even more private," Meera advised, "Can you think of such a place?"

Bran tried to think of such a place. Doing so was not easy. The grounds of Winterfell were currently overflowing with wedding guests, most of whom were staying overnight. Every inch of free space was being allocated to accommodate them. The godswood, the glass garden, and even the First Keep had been designated for lodgings.

However, there was one particular edifice that no one had taken up residence in. The only problem was that Bran's head ached whenever he went near that building. Still, he wished to appease Meera, and he could deal with a slight headache.

"After the feast, go to the Broken Tower," Bran quietly murmured, "No one goes in there anymore except me. We'll be completely alone on the top floor."

Meera nodded in acknowledgement and stated "As you say, my lord."

The dancing ended a few minutes later. The third and final course, the desserts, was brought out soon after. It only lasted about a half-hour. After that, the feast ended.

There were no bedding ceremonies in the North. Even though the bride was a southerner, an exception was not made for this wedding.

When the feast reached its end, Robb and Margaery went up to the room that had been selected as the bridal chamber. Theon Greyjoy and a few of the more devious wedding guests followed them, but they kept a reasonable amount of distance from the bride and groom.

Bran spotted his sister Arya leaving the Great Hall alongside Rickard Clegane. Bran assumed they were going to the training yard. The two of them were always open to a sparring match, regardless of the time of day.

At any rate, his sister's intentions with the heir to Moat Cailin were of no great concern to Bran. He had an objective of his own to see to.

Bran Stark swiftly exited the Great Hall with Summer in tow. Together, boy and wolf passed through the crowds and towards the northwestern section of Winterfell. Before long, they reached the Broken Tower.

As he approached the decrepit building, Bran felt a twinge of pain in his forehead. When he pressed his hand against the cold stone wall, the twinge grew into a jolt. Bran moaned in slight discomfort, but he could handle the pain.

When Bran was last here, the door to the stairwell was shut tight. Now, the door was slightly ajar, meaning Meera and Jojen had already gotten there. They must have left the Great Hall sometime before me. The Reeds had a talent for slipping away without anyone noticing.

Bran turned to Summer and instructed him "Stay down here. I'll be back soon."

Summer lowered his head and sat down on his haunches, which verified that he understood and obeyed the command. Bran knew he could trust him not to wander off or attempt to follow him. Not that he could.
While the stairwell was in no danger of collapsing, it was not Bran's first choice for ascending the Broken Tower. He much preferred to climb the external wall.

There was a loose block near the baste of the tower. Bran began his ascent there. He grabbed the crevices in the wall with his hands, inserted his right foot into the little empty space above the loose block, hoisted himself up, and started to climb.

Climbing came naturally to Bran Stark. However, he was a better climber when he was free of distractions. The pain in his forehead was now a nuisance, as well.

He did his best to ignore the pain, but that was no simple feat. The higher he rose, the more his head stung. Nevertheless, he intrepidly pressed on.

When he got to gargoyles on the top floor of the Broken Tower, his headache had devolved into a migraine. It was extremely difficult to concentrate on anything, not just climbing. He had to stop frequently to compose himself. At one point, he had to stop and catch his breath. By then, the pain was so intense that he was worried he might actually lose his balance and slip. Still, he was very resilient for his age. He did not and would not back down.

Once he got to the gargoyles, he shimmied over to the nearest window. His headache only worsened as he inched ever closer to it. But that changed nothing. Bran was very determined to reach his destination.

Finally, he arrived at the window. The pain reached its peak when Bran pulled himself up to it. At the exact moment Bran peered inside, there was a very bright light.

The light only lasted for about two seconds. When it disappeared, Bran looked back inside the Broken Tower and saw two figures. Straightaway, he realized that they were not Meera and Jojen.

These two figures were considerably older than the Reeds. One of them was male; the other was female. They wore no clothing, and by the way they held each other, they were wrestling.

Bran noticed they looked quite alike. So much alike that they may have been siblings. In addition to that, they were both blonde. Their hair was the same shade of gold as Lord Tyrion Lannister.

That did not make any sense whatsoever. Tyrion Lannister did have two elder siblings. Ser Jaime Lannister the Kingslayer and Cersei Lannister the Queen. But they were at Casterly Rock and King's Landing respectively. What could they have been doing in Winterfell?

Bran was at a loss. There was no rational explanation for this. None at all. What is going on?

The bright light reappeared then. It was then that Bran finally slipped.

Thankfully, before he could fall, he felt someone grab him. When the light disappeared this time, he looked to his front and saw Meera and Jojen at the window. Each of them had seized one of his arms, and they were holding on without no intention of letting go.

The Reeds swiftly pulled Bran Stark into the Broken Tower. All three of them needed a moment to regain their composure.

Miraculously, Bran's headache had all but vanished. He felt much better now. Strangely enough, he felt... aware of everything.

When he finally regained control of his senses, Bran slowly turned to Meera and Jojen and stammered "Thank you."
“Think nothing of it, my lord,” Jojen assured him.

Meera helped Bran to his feet and asked him "Are you alright?"

“Yes,” he responded, even though he was not wholly certain of himself, "I'm... I'm fine."

“Good,” Jojen remarked, “Now we can talk.”

Bran was intrigued. "Talk about what?"

Meera smiled kindly and responded with "Remember what Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn saw north of the Wall?"

"They claimed to see the Children of the Forest," Bran recalled.

"They did more than claim," Jojen professed, "They did see the Children."

"How do you know?" Bran demanded.

"Because I have seen them, too," Jojen Reed informed him, "And you with them."

Now Bran was downright baffled. "Explain what you mean, Jojen."

"I shall, my lord," Jojen asserted. He gestured for Bran and Meera to get comfortable on the ground. Once they were, he sat down with them and declared "It is time we told you of the Three-Eyed Raven."

Chapter End Notes

Note: Some of you may be wondering "What the literal fuck just happened?" If so, allow me to clarify. I was hoping to devise a believable situation where Bran's warging and greensight abilities could be activated without him having to lose the use of his legs. Then I had an epiphany: Chaos Theory. While it is by name a theory (and, therefore, has yet to be proven), I believe it can be plausibly applied in certain scenarios. Such as this one, an alternate universe where the original timeline has deliberately been thrown out of order by at least one anomalous individual.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with Chaos Theory, I suggest you take a look at the masterpiece of a video game that is "Life is Strange" as an example. If you'd like a more well-known instance, think of the scene in "Pulp Fiction" where John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson inexplicably do not get shot when another guy empties a whole chamber of bullets at them.

All that aside, this will be the only instance of Chaos Theory that I intend to utilize in this fanfic. Most, if not all, of the remaining major events will rely more on concrete explanation and logical reasoning. Believe me; I won't be jumping any sharks anytime soon.
"Is that the best you've got?" Mother spat, returning to a defensive stance.

"Oh, not even close," the nearest opponent proclaimed. His friends mumbled their agreement. *They sound so sure of themselves.*

Mother sneered and goaded them with "Come at me, then!"

One of the armed men charged towards Mother with his sword raised. At first, she stood perfectly still, as though she was going to let him hit her. *But that is not going to happen.* Indeed, at the very last moment, she dodged the blow. Before he could rebound, she waved her spear through the air and struck him on the back of his head. He stumbled and groaned, but to his credit, he did not fall or let go of his weapon.

While he was recovering, his companions moved in on Mother. For a brief moment, they appeared to have the upper hand. Alas, she was too fast for them. She roughly jabbed the first one in his lower chest, successfully knocking the wind out of him. Immediately after that, she spun around and parried an incoming stab from the second one. Before he could raise his sword again, Mother smacked him on his wrist. He shouted in pain and dropped his sword.

The third one was the fastest of them. He was also the least reckless and most cautious. He only attacked when he spotted a viable opening, and he kept a safe distance so that his own vulnerabilities were concealed. Nonetheless, even he proved no match for her. After one minute of uninterrupted sparring, she thrust her spear between his legs and swung it upwards. He struggled to keep his balance, but ultimately, he tripped and fell onto his back.

Mother stood over him and pointed the tip of *Swift Thrust* directly at his face. He dared not move, lest he chance losing an eye. Mother gazed down at him and said inquiringly "Well?"

Her downed opponent sighed, held his hands up in surrender, and declared "I yield."

She smirked in satisfaction and extended her hand to him. He grudgingly accepted it and let her help him get back up on his feet.

Father had been standing next to the bench Tyta and her brothers were sitting on. Ser Bronn was standing on the other side of him. He turned to the master-at-arms of Clegane's Keep with his arms folded and told him "Render your judgments."

Ser Bronn nodded, walked into the yard, and called out "Form up!"

The four men Mother had just dueled – along with twelve others she had dueled earlier – moved to arrange themselves into a single row of sixteen. Once they were all in a straight line, Ser Bronn started pacing in front of them. He spent a good few minutes looking over the men in front of him. Every now and then, he paused to examine one of them a little more closely.

Eventually, he stopped pacing and announced: "Rechar, Lurs, Dwigher, Lucan, Zane, come forward."

The men whose names had been listed stepped forward, and Bronn told them "You five are ready to officially enter the services of House Clegane. Report to the steward. He will set up accommodations for you in the barracks. Once you are settled, go to the armory."
Out of respect, Dwigher, Lucan, Lurs, Rechar, and Zane all saluted Ser Bronn to show that they understood his orders. After he dismissed them, they promptly filed out of the training yard. They seem proud. And they should be.

Bronn turned to the other eleven men in the line. Disappointment was evident on many of their faces. Trying not to sound too discouraging, he remarked "The rest of you need more training. Fortunately, some of you are almost ready. The rest… well, luckily for you, I'm a patient man. Soon or late, you will get there."

Not as soon as they'd like, Tyta supposed.

"Just keep practicing, lads," Father advised the eleven would-be soldiers, "You all have potential. Now all you must do is better yourselves. Then before you know it, you'll be able to put your services to good use."

"Aye, m'lord," said the man who Mother had taken out first in the last round. Tyta believed his name was Connin. None of the other ten men said anything, but they clearly understood Father's proposition.

Tyta knew they would be approved of soon enough. In these times, they could never have too many soldiers. Unless, of course, they were unable to feed them all.

Like all noble houses, House Clegane of Clegane's Keep was always looking to increase the size of its household. Especially with regards to the number of people in its army.

Ever since its rise to lordly status the end of Greyjoy's Rebellion, House Clegane had gained more soldiers with every passing year.

However, not everyone who came to fight for the Keep was accepted straightaway. Father and Mother were very particular about who entered their service. They had devised a system for choosing their soldiers. A very good system.

First, they had Ser Bronn briefly interview each prospect. That was done to learn a bit of their background and their accomplishments. Thus far, most of them had led fairly uneventful lives.

After the interview, Father and Mother would each have the recruits spar with them in groups. These combat drills were held once a week in the training yard. Tyta tried to attend them if she could; it thrilled her to see her parents in action.

Father would fight the recruits to test their strength and endurance; Mother would fight them to test their agility and speed. None of them were ever a match for Lord Sandor Clegane or Lady Obara Clegane, but their skills with a blade were generally adequate.

After the combat runs, Ser Bronn would evaluate the recruits based on their performances – both individually and collectively – and from there, he would decide which of them were ready to join the ranks of House Clegane's forces. Anyone who was not deemed ready would have a chance to prove himself again the following week. Of course, he would have to hone his swordsmanship before then.

Tyta Clegane was not a vain person, but she liked to think she could take on some of the men who had been recruited in recent years. While most of them were capable fighters, Tyta had learned to fight directly from her parents and Ser Bronn, three of the best warriors in the west.

Alas, even if she could best her father's soldiers, doing so would be a pointless endeavor, as she
could never join them. Female soldiers were not common in most of Westeros. The North and Dorne were notable exceptions, and it happened that Mother was Dornish. That was one of the two reasons why Tyta's parents had taught her to fight. The other reason was that Father wanted all his children to know how to handle weapons. He and Uncle Gregor were indifferent about gender when it came to the art of war. In fact, they had convinced their own parents to allow Aunt Ellyn to learn how to fight.

Nevertheless, so long as Tywin Lannister ruled from Casterly Rock, there would be no place for women in the ranks of the Westerlander army. Mother was the only exemption, and only because she was not native to the Westerlands, whereas Tyta had been born and raised there. Maybe once Lord Tywin passed on, his heir Ser Jaime would consider revoking his decree about keeping women off the battlefield.

In any case, at least Tyta was not denied the opportunity to wield a blade of her own. She took some amount of comfort from that.

All the same, she could not spend all her time in the training yard. Nor could her brothers. They were required to learn much more about the ways of the world than that.

She was reminded of that a moment later, when Mother walked over to their bench. She smiled at her children and commented "It is about time for your lessons, I believe."

"Now?" said Mors, who hoped not.

"Yes, now," Mother drily told them.

Mors groaned. Tyta was not surprised; her brother was not fond of their lessons. That was likely due to how he had yet to see his sixth nameday. At that age, most children had fairly short attention spans. Tyta had been that way, and Mors certainly was, as well. It really depended on what he was doing. Unless it was fast and exciting, he did not give it much notice. Then again, his sixth nameday was not far off. Maybe once it came, he would be able to sit still for a longer period.

"Come on, Mors," Tyta encouraged her brother, patting him on the shoulder.

Mors' resolve was not very strong; that was all it took to win him over. He sighed and mumbled "Alright."

As the eldest child, Tyta took it upon herself to look after her siblings. I must be doing a fine job. She had good reason to think so. Mors practically idolized her, and Dermot tended to be by her side almost as often as he was by Mother's. Her brothers definitely looked up to her, and not just literally.

Tyta hopped off the bench and landed on her feet. Mors gradually climbed down to join her, and the two of them helped Dermot onto the ground. Together, the three of them headed up to Maester Velix's office.

When they left the training yard, they came across a certain character with a pale face. The one with the strange name. And stranger speech.

"Hello, ser," Mors greeted him.

"A man is not a ser, young lord," Jaqen H'ghar muttered softly, "A man is just a man."

He always spoke of himself as though he was speaking of someone else. Tyta did not know why. Maybe he believed I's were only good for seeing.
"Can we help you with anything?" Tyta offered. She never forgot her courtesies.

Jaqen H'ghar nodded and murmured "A man would like a moment to talk."

"Talk about what?" Mors enquired.

"That man," Jaqen replied, gesturing with his eyes. Tyta and Mors turned, and they saw that he was referring to one of the eleven recruits who were still in the yard. The same one who had verbally acknowledged Father's declaration.

"You mean Connin?" Tyta presumed.

"Yes," Jaqen affirmed, "That man is not who that man appears to be."

"What do you mean?" Mora asked in interest.

"That man is not as unversed with a sword as that man lets on," Jaqen H'ghar disclosed.

"How do you know that?" Tyta asked curiously.

"A man has seen that man before," Jaqen replied.

"Where?" Mors queried.

"Nowhere on this side of the world," Jaqen expounded, "Beyond that, a man cannot say more."

His remark did not answer their last question. If anything, it simply raised another one.

"So what is he doing here?" Tyta inquired.

"A man does not know," Jaqen H'ghar confessed, "But children should be mindful of that man. That man did not travel all this way to serve a lord. That man may have grimmer intentions."

So why did he come here?

"Have you mentioned this to our lord father?" Mors queried.

Jaqen shook his head and professed "A lord is more likely to believe a man's tales if they come from a lord's children."

"So should we tell our father what you just told us?" Tyta supposed.

"That is up to a girl and a girl's brothers," Jaqen contended.

"Very well," Tyta murmured tentatively, "Is there anything else you need?"

"No," Jaqen H'ghar asserted. He then dipped his head to the three Clegane children, turned around, and headed towards the courtyard.

Tyta and Mors watched him as he left. Dermot did not. Then again, he was too young to have taken an interest in that (or any) conversation. In fact, he had threatened to wander off a couple times during it. Fortunately, Tyta and Mors were each holding one of their little brother's hands.

"Should we go to Father?" Mors thought aloud.

"No, that can wait until after we see the maester," Tyta debated, "If we tell Father now, he will just think we're trying to get out of today's lessons."
"It might get us out of today's lessons," Mors disputed, grinning wickedly.

Tyta rolled her eyes and countered with "We won't get off that easily, Mors. Now, come. Maester Velix awaits."

Mors grumbled in annoyance, but he ultimately complied.

As they continued towards the maester's office, Tyta reflected on what she and her brothers had just learned from Jaqen H'ghar. Needless to say, it was rather perplexing.

_He encountered Connin in another part of the world?_ That implied somewhere across the Narrow Sea. That was the only logical explanation, considering what little they knew of Connin and Jaqen H'ghar.

Connin had shown up at Clegane's Keep few days ago. He spoke with what sounded like a Westerosi accent, but it was of indeterminate origin. He had given very little information about himself in his interview with Ser Bronn. At a glance, his swordsmanship was average at best. Now, Jaqen H'ghar was claiming otherwise.

On the other hand, Jaqen was an even more puzzling individual.

Tyta remembered how one of the villages around Clegane's Keep had been attacked by bandits a few weeks earlier. Several of the townsfolk had been taken prisoner. Father had made it his personal goal to hunt down the raiders and bring back their heads and the hostages. He had been successful in both regards.

Jaqen H'ghar had been among the people saved. However, none of the other victims knew anything about him. The villagers who had survived the raid could not account for him, either. One of the bandits had lived long enough for Father to question him; Jaqen had singled him out as the leader. Be that as it may, up until the moment he lost his head, the bandit claimed to have no idea where Jaqen H'ghar came from.

Another interesting feature was how Jaqen emerged from his captivity. The majority of the hostages had sustained some type of serious injury. A few of the women had been abused, but Father and Mother would not tell Tyta how.

Jaqen H'ghar's wounds were by far the least severe. He had only suffered a long cut on his arm. Despite how pale he looked, he had not lost much blood. As it happened, Maester Velix thought his cut almost looked self-inflicted. Jaqen had also walked with a limp when he first arrived. Now he walked as straight as any man, and there was no sign that he ever had a limp.

After the hostages recovered, nearly all of them returned to the village, which was now much better-guarded than before. Jaqen H'ghar was the only one who chose to remain at Clegane's Keep. Father and Mother would be able to accommodate him for a time, but not indefinitely. Jaqen H'ghar claimed he would be moving on soon enough. Even so, no one how long he would be at the Keep, or what business he had in the Westerlands.

Jaqen H'ghar was a man shrouded in mystery. Tyta did not even know where he was from. She had never heard an accent like his before. Mother, Father, Maester Velix, and Ser Bronn all believed he was from the Free Cities. _So what is he doing in Westeros?_

Although Tyta could be quite curious, she was not one to pry into the affairs of others. Unless such affairs concerned her or her family. As of yet, this one did not. _I should put it out of my mind for now._
Tyta hastily led her brothers inside the Keep and up to the rookery. They found Maester Velix waiting for them in his office. He dipped his head and murmured politely "My lady, my lords."

Tyta, Mors, and Dermot took their seats in front of the maester's desk. Once they were settled, the lessons began.

Currently, the lessons were more for Tyta and Mors' benefit. Dermot was too young to do any actual learning. Right now, he was mostly there to bond with his brother and sister. He'll be able to 'appreciate' these lessons soon enough.

Tyta used to be like her brothers. There was a time when she did not care for the maester's lessons. Not long ago, she had come to enjoy them. They were insightful, intriguing, and informative. Oftentimes, a captivating new topic was brought into discussion.

Two such topics were addressed that day.

The first came up during their history lesson. Recently, they had been studying the kings of the Targaryen dynasty. They had covered one monarch each day for the past couple weeks. Today, it was Aegon IV, otherwise known as Aegon the Unworthy.

Tyta discovered he had not been named so without reason. He had been morbidly obese, sired dozens of bastards, legitimized them all, and incited the Blackfyre Rebellions as a result. Those were just a few of the abominable things he had done in his twelve-year reign.

Before long, they got to the part about how Aegon's sister-wife, Princess Naerys Targaryen, had been accused of adultery by Ser Morgil Hastwyck, and how Naerys' other brother, Aemon the Dragonknight, had saved his sister's name and life by slaying Ser Morgil in a trial by combat.

When they were done recounting that matter, Tyta held up her hand and stated "Maester, I have a question."

"Yes, my lady?" Maester Velix said in acknowledgment.

Tyta folded her hands together and asked "What is it always a princess who needs to be rescued?"

Maester Velix seemed bewildered. "I am afraid I do not quite understand the question."

Tyta elaborated with "In all these tales of a fair damsel being in distress, even the ones based on truth, the damsel is always a princess. Why is it never a queen? Or an heiress? Or a highborn lady? Or even just a woman of common birth? Why are only princesses seen as so helpless?"

Velix chuckled a bit. All the same, he gave a sincere answer: "It is not always a princess, my lady. Not too long ago, Prince Rhaegar Targaryen kidnapped Lyanna Stark. While she was a highborn lady and a daughter of a Great House, she was not royalty. Nevertheless, her abduction sparked King Robert's Rebellion."

"Yes, but what about near the end of the Rebellion?" Tyta contended, "During the Sack of King's Landing, Uncle Gregor saved Great Aunt Elia from Ser Amory Lorch. Back then, she was both a Princess of Dorne and the Crown Princess of the Seven Kingdoms."

"True enough," Velix admitted, "That aside, not all princesses are like that, my dear. Just look at your lady mother."

That was a very good point. Lady Obara Clegane used to be Princess Obara Martell, the eldest daughter of Prince Oberyn Martell of Sunspear. She had made a name for herself squiring for her
Obara Martell had never been a damsel in distress. She was a prime example of a warrior princess. So was her sister, Tyta's aunt Nymeria Martell, who was wed to Lord Jorah Mormont of Bear Island. Neither of them could ever be called helpless or incapable of protecting themselves. They were a source of inspiration to young females all throughout Westeros. *Including me, who is lucky enough to be related to them.*

Tyta's grandfather was a prince, and her mother was a princess, but Tyta herself would only ever be a lady. She was perfectly content with that. Most girls would delight in the concept of being a princess. Tyta was not among them. Truth be told, the title made her skin crawl. Father occasionally used it as a term of endearment with Mother, but never on his daughter. Instead, he called her his "little lady," which she appreciated.

That exchange turned out to be rather thought-provoking. Tyta was oddly delighted. It amazed her how the most meaningful of discussions could result from the most seemingly-trivial of issues.

That was how the second engaging topic came up, as well. When Velix brought up the various ways noble houses grew and developed overtime, he spent a while discussing how the line of succession worked. He provided some historical examples to illustrate his points. Since House Clegane was relatively young, Maester Velix cited the lineages of other highborn Westerlander families instead. Tyta noted that in the majority of these cases, the new head of each house was a man. The only exceptions were when female heirs were all that remained.

Mors must have noticed that, too. At one point, he spoke out with "Maester, I'm confused."

"Why are you confused, my lord?" Maester Velix inquired.

"Very few women have become the heads of their families in history," Mors pointed out, "Even the ones who are older than their brothers. Why is that? I thought the elder sibling was supposed to inherit before the younger."

"Unless the elder is a woman," Velix apprised him, "Tradition dictates that men inherit over women."

"I do not understand," Mors pronounced, "Where Mother's from, boys and girls are treated as equals."

"We are not in Mother's homeland," Tyta pointed out.

"Indeed," Velix affirmed, "In Dorne, age is normally all that matters in the line of succession. But here in the Westerlands and the rest of Westeros, gender is seen as more important."

"Why?" Mors queried. He was genuinely baffled.

"That is just how the world works," Tyta replied simply.

"Your sister speaks true," Velix validated her.

Mors looked as though he had just been told Grandmother Daliah had died. He uttered quietly "All this time I thought Tyta was going to be the next head of our house. Are you saying she won't be?"

"That's right," Tyta muttered plainly, "The Keep is not my birthright. It is yours."
Mors seemed deeply dismayed by that revelation. At first, Tyta could not imagine why. She assumed he would be thrilled by the prospect of being the future lord of Clegane's Keep.

Then it dawned on her: it was all a matter of perspective. Younger siblings tended to view older siblings as a kind of guide and role model. In other words, the eldest was generally viewed as the leader.

Therefore, Mors may have gotten used to the idea of Tyta being a leader to him in more than bloodline. He had probably become accustomed to the concept of her being his leader in position, as well. Now he was being told otherwise. Quite suddenly, too. That had to be a type of rude awakening to him.

"Why didn't anybody tell me?" he murmured anxiously.

"There was no immediate need to," Velix proclaimed, "You are still a child, my lord. The innocence of childhood is a blessing; a blessing we do not appreciate until we've lost it. Your lord father and lady mother wished for you to enjoy that bliss while it lasted. They planned to wait until after your sixth nameday to thrust the burdens of the heir and future lord upon you."

"It may be for the best that you found out sooner," Tyta contended, "Now you'll be a little readier when Father and Mother prepare you to be the lord."

"What if I do not want to be the lord?" Mors conjectured.

I did not consider that. Tyta shrugged and said "Then I guess the title would pass on to Dermot."

Dermot looked up at the mention of his name, but other than that, he gave no indication that he had heard anything that had been said. He was unusually quiet for his age. He could speak clearly and in full sentences, but most of the time, he preferred silence.

At any rate, Mors seemed no more pleased with the thought Dermot being the next lord than he was with the thought of being the next lord himself.

"Why can't you be the next head of our house, Tyta?" Mors said inquisitively, "You'd do much better than Dermot or I would."

"You don't know that for certain," Tyta countered.

"Sure I do," Mors insisted, "I mean, everyone loves you."

That, Tyta could not deny. For as long as she could remember, she had been adored by her father's retainers. Some had labeled her as the perfect combination of both her parents. Perhaps she was. She had her father's stature and strength, her mother's beauty and charms, and the charisma, graces, and benevolent nature they both possessed.

Then again, so did Mors and Dermot. The difference, of course, was that Tyta had been around a few years longer than her brothers. As such, their vassals knew her a little better. But that does not mean they love me more.

"They love you and Dermot, too, Mors," Tyta assured her brother, "Don't ever doubt that."

"I didn't," Mors claimed, "But… do they love me enough to follow me?"

"Of course they do," Maester Velix professed, "You must not despair, Mors. If the Gods are good, Lord Sandor will continue to be the head of this house for many years to come. I promise you this:
you will have ample time to prepare yourself for when you succeed him."

Those statements seemed to give Mors the peace of mind he needed. *It is unlikely he is entirely at ease. He may need some time to get used to what all we've discussed.* In any case, he no longer seemed so bothered by the prospect of being the heir to Clegane's Keep.

"Now, if you've no objections, shall we continue?" Velix bluntly proposed.

"Yes, please, go on, maester," Mors bade him. Tyta nodded in agreement.

The children and their maester got through the rest of that day's lessons without any further interruptions. Other than the occasional outburst from Dermot. Fortunately, his siblings managed to keep him mollified.

Their lessons were concluded shortly after noon. They finished just in time for the midday meal. That was fortunate; Tyta was rather hungry. *Learning certainly work up an appetite, doesn't it?*

When Maester Velix dismissed Tyta and her brothers, they were quick to leave his office. The maester elected to accompany his lord's children. Tyta, Mors, and Dermot did not protest; they were fond of the old wise man.

The most direct path to the Great Hall required them to go the section of the Keep past Father's solar. When they passed through that part of the castle, Tyta spotted a sudden movement out of the corner of her eye. In response, she came to an abrupt halt.

Mors noticed this and asked her "What's wrong?"

"I thought I saw something move," she thought aloud. She turned to their mentor and inquired "Maester, do you know if any of the guards are patrolling this part of the castle?"

"Not at this time of day," Velix notified her, "The hallways of this wing are generally empty in the early afternoon. The entrances to the wing are guarded, though. No one would gain entrance to it without my approval or your lord father's."

"Odd…" Tyta murmured, rubbing her chin. After a short pause, she declared "You three go ahead. I'm going to take a closer look."

"By yourself?" Velix assumed, obviously not favoring the idea.

Tyta solemnly nodded her head.

Before she could take a single step, Mors took ahold of her arm and declared "I'm going with you." He spoke in a tone that brokered no argument. *A proper lord's voice.* Reluctantly, Tyta conceded "Very well."

Dermot expressed no desire to join them, so Maester Velix took his hand and led him away. He looked over his shoulder "Do not take too long, if you please."

They gave him their word they would not. Once the maester was gone, Tyta and Mora headed down the adjoining corridor. Although the place appeared to be deserted, they crept along quietly. Tyta did not wish to risk finding out the hard way that they were not alone after all.

A couple minutes later, they arrived at Father's solar. The door was slightly ajar. That was very unusual. As far as Tyta knew, the solar was locked up tight whenever Father was away.
She cautiously approached the door and peered through the crack. Straightaway, she saw that the solar was not empty.

A single person was inside. He had his back to her, so she could not tell who he was. He was not tall enough to be Father, and he was not thin enough to be Ser Bronn. But he had a sword attached to his belt. That made him even more ominous.

Finally, he turned his head enough that she could make out his face. It was Connin. The man Jaqen warned me about. But what is he doing?

She watched him as he approached Father's desk. He stopped by the jug of wine on the adjoining table. Then he reached into his tunic, pulled out a small glass vial, and deposited the vial's contents into the jug. After that, he turned back to the desk and started shuffling through the pile of papers on top of it.

"Tyta?" Mors whispered worriedly, "What's going on?"

She looked back at her brother and ordered him "Find Father. Now."

"What about you?" he uttered in concern.

"I'll stay here and keep an eye on him," Tyta softly replied, "Just get Father and bring him back before he tries to go somewhere."

Mors seemed very hesitant to leave his sister alone while there was a strange man in the next room, but he must have trusted her judgment, as he complied with her command.

He did not comply as quickly as she would have liked. He progressed very gradually down the hall, and quite often, he gazed back at her.

Eventually, Tyta had to urge him with "Hurry!"

That was enough to encourage him to depart more quickly. Unfortunately, it was also just loud enough for everyone in the immediate vicinity to hear. As Mors' footsteps faded away, they were replaced by a louder, rougher pair of footsteps... and they originated from within Father's solar.

Connin was coming right towards the door!

Tyta did not panic. Instead, she waited until Connin reached the door. When he got there, she roughly swung it open. She took momentary pleasure from the startled expression on his face. But it was hastily replaced with anxiety when his shock turned to anger.

Not allowing herself to show fear, Tyta murmured heatedly "What are you doing here?"

"That is no business of yours," Connin snapped.

"It is if it involves you sneaking into my father's solar," Tyta sharply countered.

Connin eased down slightly, and he muttered "If you must know, I am on an errand for Lord Sandor."

"Liar," she spat angrily, "I saw you put something in the wine jug."

She stepped forward and demanded "What was it?"

For a moment, Connin almost looked afraid of her. Then he sighed and muttered "I hoped it would
not come to this. But oh, well."

He reached for his sword with his right hand. He was fast, but Tyta was faster. Before he could even touch the hilt of his weapon, she shot forward and shoved him into the wall. Connin was momentarily thrown off balance, but he recovered quickly. He seized Tyta by her arms and pushed her away from him.

Tyta came to a stop in the middle of the room. Connin swiftly drew his sword. She reached for hers… and realized too late that she had left it in the training yard. She desperately looked around for anything else that could have served as a weapon.

She spotted the poker by the fireplace. She made a lunge for it just as Connin rushed towards her. Her hand wrapped around the poker's handle just as he was upon her. Without even looking, Tyta swung the poker with all her might.

Connin yelled in agony and held his face with his left hand. Tyta raised the poker in the air, but she did not club him again just yet.

A few seconds later, Connin removed his hand and turned back to her. She left a huge gash on his temple. He was seething in rage. He mumbled "You little cunt…"

Tyta held the poker in both hands and sneered. "Try me."

Connin certainly did. He proceeded to throw a volley of deadly blows her way. Tyta soon discovered Jaqen H'ghar was right. Connin was far better with a sword than he appeared to be in the training yard. He could have been as superb a fighter as Father or Mother.

With that in mind, Tyta did not think she stood a chance. She could not help but feel as though any one of those blows would be the one she failed to parry.

He managed to deflect over a dozen of Connin's attacks before the fight turned in his favor. Then he knocked the poker out of her hands and slashed at her upper body. Tyta shouted in pain and clutched the spot on her shoulder where he cut her.

She had no time to examine her injury; she was too busy dodging Connin's attacks. With no means to defend herself, she had to be quick to avoid getting hit. That worked for a time, but ultimately, she ran out of space to run to, and he backed her into a wall.

Connin scoffed and muttered threateningly "This will teach you to mind your own business, you idiot girl."

He raised his sword high above his head. When his blade was at its highest point, Tyta honestly thought she was going to lose an arm… or worse.

That did not happen. Before Connin could strike, he was swiftly grabbed from behind by a hooded figure. The figure locked its left arm around Connin's throat. Then it brought out a dagger with its right hand. In one smooth motion, it plunged the dagger into Connin's abdomen.

Connin screeched in anguish and let go of his sword. The figure released him, and he crumpled onto the ground. Tyta stared down at him for a good long moment before she looked up at her rescuer.

She recognized him almost right away "Jaqen?"

The Essosi pulled back his hood to reveal his face. He muttered "A girl is correct."
"So were you," Tyta professed, gesturing to Connin on the ground, "I must thank you."

"This man requires no thanks," Jaqen asserted, "But a man has another favor to ask."

"Name it," she beckoned him.

"A girl must not tell a lord that a man saved a girl," Jaqen requested.

Tyta was perplexed "Why not? My father will want to reward you."

"A man still has business in this land," Jaqen H'ghar disclosed, "A man cannot attract too much notice, but with too much praise, a man will."

"Then how will I explain this to my father?" Tyta queried, gesturing to Connin.

"A girl will claim she overpowered a man," Jaqen suggested.

"He'll know that's a lie," Tyta contended.

"Then a girl will make it truth," Jaqen proposed. He held the dagger out to her.

Tyta was flabbergasted. "What?"

Connin was still alive. He was in terrible pain, but he was somehow clinging to life. Jaqen was now suggesting that she change that.

"Why can't you do it?" she queried.

"This man can only take life this man is told to take," Jaqen claimed, "Not life meant for others to take."

"You mean I really have to be the one end it?" Tyta assumed, horrified.

"No, a girl's father will be along shortly," Jaqen H'ghar disclosed, "However, a lord will be far less merciful than a girl would be. Especially when a lord sees what that man has done to a girl."

Tyta could not dispute that. Father was typically a gentle man, but at times, he could be brutal and terrifying. Especially when his family was in jeopardy. When that happened, his moniker "The Hound" was much more than just an alias.

As much as Tyta hated Connin at this time, she did not wish to subject him to her Father's wrath. So she took the dagger from Jaqen and stared down at Connin. He had already lost a lot of blood, and his agony was worsening with every second. I should just get it over with.

Tyta leaned down to Connin's level and stabbed him in the center of the chest, right where his heart was. He sputtered for a few seconds, and then he ceased struggling and his head fell to the side.

Soon enough, he became totally motionless. Tyta looked into his eyes as all signs of life disappeared from them. She thought it would chill her or disturb her. But it did not. She was practically indifferent. I just killed a man... and I feel nothing.

Actually, Tyta did feel an ache in her shoulder. When she regained her senses, she shuddered and held her wound. Jaqen came to her side and gently lowered to the ground, saying "A girl must be still, lest her injury worsen."

Tyta nodded at that. As she pressed down on her cut, she enquired "So, can you tell me what your
true intentions are now?"

"A man will explain everything to a girl in time," Jaqen proclaimed, "But only if a girl promises to keep this affair a secret."

Tyta gradually turned to look at the fresh corpse of Connin. Seeing it made her reflect on her choices more deeply. Part of her was compelled not to go along with this proposal. But the other part of her could not resist the thought of being the only one who knew of Jaqen's reasons for being in the Westerlands.

In the end, she looked Jaqen in the eye and told him "A girl agrees."

Jaqen H'ghar nodded his acknowledgment and hastily exited the solar.

For a few moments, Tyta was left alone with Connin's dead body. She could not believe how close she had come to death, and how narrowly she had escaped it. All because Jaqen H'ghar had intervened. I guess Maester Velix was right. It isn't always a princess.

After that, Mors finally returned. She smiled when her father entered the room. I've never been so happy to see his burnt face. Actually, Mors did not bring just Father. He also brought Mother, Ser Bronn, Maester Velix, and a few of the household guards.

Father and Mother promptly went to their daughter. Father went to her right side; Mother to her left. She had never been so glad to see her

"Oh, gods; Tyta!" Mother exclaimed when she saw the open wound on her shoulder

Father called out "Maester, get over here. She's hurt."

Maester Velix swiftly crossed the solar to the spot where Tyta and her parents were. Mother moved to make room for him.

"I'm alright," Tyta insisted. All the same, Maester Velix proceeded to examine her injury.

While they were preoccupied, Ser Bonn walked over to Connin and began to search him.

"What happened?" Mother asked Tyta.

"I caught him snooping around," Tyta revealed, "I think he poisoned the wine. What's more; he was looking through the papers on your desk, Father."

Father grimaced. "He got what he deserved then."

"Why was he here anyway?" Mors said inquisitively.

Right then, Bronn extracted a small object from the pocket of Connin's breeches. He turned to Father and declared "This might begin to provide some answers."

Ser Bronn tossed the object in their direction. Father caught it in his left hand and brought it closer to his good eye.

"What is this?" he wondered aloud.

"It's a medallion, my lord," Bronn explicated, "A medallion which contains the unofficial symbol
"And which organization might that be?" Mother asked.

Ser Bronn was silent for a moment, and then he tensely announced "The Golden Company, my lady."

Life north of the Wall was generally quite difficult.

At times, Ygritte realized, life south of it could be just as trying.

Where she came from, she had to constantly struggle to survive. Often, it was eat or be eaten. More so when up against those fucking Thenns.

Ygritte did not have to worry about going hungry in the Seven Kingdoms. The people there were able to feed her on a daily basis.

However, she did have to worry about slacking off. If she became too complacent with the laidback lifestyle of the south, she would risk forgetting how to fend for herself if ever she had to. And soon enough I will have to.

For that reason, she liked to go out hunting at least thrice a week. She frequently joined Lord Gregor Clegane's hunting parties. Sometimes she went out on her own with. In either case, she tended to bag some of the finest kills.

Ygritte's aptitude with a bow was well-known by both the Free Folk and the kneelers. She was recognized as one of the best archers in Westeros. If not for Theon Greyjoy, Lothor Brune, Anguy, and some of the other members of the Legion without Banners, she would probably be the undisputed best archer. Not that I care for such a distinction.

Another aspect of life that was different in this part of world was how one would take shelter. As far back as she could recall, Ygritte had always been on the move. She had camped all throughout the region north of the wall. In those days, she had never gone inside building. Until she went south, she had never even seen a building.

In the south, people tended to make their homes in one place and remain there until they died. While that was certainly easier than the life of a nomad, occupying a permanent residence took Ygritte a while to accustom herself to. She was not the only one. Relaxation did not come as naturally to the Free Folk as it came to the kneelers.

Then again, not all the residents of the Seven Kingdoms stayed put indefinitely. At times, some of them roamed the land. Usually they did so out of obligation, not out of necessity. Such as what I'm doing now with this lot.

Currently, Ygritte was astride a horse, going down the Causeway. She was not by herself. She was travelling in a large caravan led by the Mountain.

Ygritte rode near the front of the column with the top officers of the Legion without Banners and the other persons of great import. That included her paramour.

It had been almost without question that Ygritte would accompany him on the journey to Harrenhal. His maid – who was really his mother – was unable to join him. His uncle would be going to the conference at Harrenhal, too, but Lord Eddard's party would not arrive until sometime
after Lord Gregor's. As such, Jon had chosen to bring Ygritte along. He claimed she was the closest person to a family member who was available at present. *In his mind, at least. But I can understand why he'd think that.* Before she went south of the Wall, none of the people Ygritte regarded as family had been actual kin of hers. Her parents were long dead, and she had no brothers or sisters. Still, her fellow Free Folk had been family enough.

Be that as it may, when Ygritte first heard that Mance Rayder had worked out a deal with the kneelers, she had jumped at the chance to go south of the Wall. She had been among the twelfth group of the Free Folk that relocated to the Seven Kingdoms.

Like most of her people, she had settled in the region known as the North. At first, the name had seemed quaint to her. To the Free Folk, the North was part of the south. Eventually, she got used to the name. Furthermore, the Legion without Banners was like a second family to her, and it had not taken long for Ygritte to make herself at home in the North.

Now for the first time in six years, she was leaving it. Although she would only be away for a turn of the moon, she could not avoid having qualms. Despite Lord Gregor's assurances, there were so many things that could go wrong on this trip.

"Something on your mind?" a calm voice interrupted her broodings.

Ygritte quickly turned to the young man riding alongside her. She bluntly muttered "Something is always on my mind."

Jon Snow chuckled. "You know what I mean."

"If you must know, I am fine," Ygritte informed him. That was mostly true. She was a little fatigued at this time. Then again, they had been riding for over a week.

"Alright," Jon acknowledged. He turned back to his front and stated, "We're about to reach the end of the Causeway. Once we emerge, we'll be on the other side of the Neck."

"Indeed," Ygritte remarked, "So, we'll finally be in a kingdom other than the North?"

"Yes, at long last," Jon wryly muttered, "You looking forward to it?"

Ygritte shrugged and pronounced "It would be nice to have a change of scenery."

*I've had enough of swamps for a while.*

"There we agree," Jon slyly uttered, "I just know the sights will get more pleasant from here."

"You know nothing, Jon Snow," Ygritte drily retorted, scoffing. He grinned and snickered with her. The first few times she had told him that, he had been irritated. Now, he had come to enjoy when she said that. *Does he set these up?*

Snow was the name given to bastards of the North. Although Ygritte was now aware that Jon was not really a bastard, for his sake, she had to keep calling him "Snow." *Perhaps I'll keep calling him that, even after this endeavor.* Frankly, he did not seem to care how she addressed him, so long as it was not meant to be a spiteful or derogatory term.

Several minutes later, the company came to where the Causeway turned back into the Kingsroad. Once they got there, Lord Gregor issued the order for them to spread out. That command was well-received, which did not surprise Ygritte. The pathway was so narrow that at most six horses could
travel abreast. No wishing to risk anyone falling into the bogs, Lord Gregor would only permit five riders per row or less. Even with that arrangement, space was limited. Riding so close together for prolonged periods of time got to be irksome for most of the party. Including Ygritte. Thank the gods that is over.

Now they could all get some breathing room. The majority of those mounted placed at least six feet of space between the other riders.

Jon and Ygritte stayed close to each other. Together, the two of them lifted their heads and let the daylight shine on their faces. It had been days since they last saw the Sun. They savored the heat and brightness of its rays as they fell upon their skin.

"That feels good," she murmured under her breath.

Jon looked to her and slyly remarked "Enjoy it while you can."

*Oh, I shall. Before too long, even the southrons will not see very much of the Sun.*

Since they were no longer packed so close together, the riders were now able to quicken their pace. They were not going to break just yet. Lord Gregor meant for them to reach the Twins before sunset.

A quarter of an hour later, Ygritte felt her brow perspiring. She wiped her brow and mumbled "Did it get hotter?"

Jon snickered and said sarcastically "Welcome to the real south."

"Is it always this hot?" Ygritte inquired, unfastening the front of her coat.

"I wouldn't know," Jon drily replied, "Last time I was here, I was only a babe."

"You know nothing, Jon Snow," Ygritte countered.

She and Jon laughed again. A few seconds later, they heard a third person laughing with them.

They turned and saw Prince Oberyn Martell nearby. He reigned his horse up alongside them and declared "Normally, it *is* this hot in summertime, my lady. In most of the Seven Kingdoms. In Dorne it is much hotter."

He looked up at the sky and observed "I would say this weather is like Dorne on one of the cooler days of autumn."

"Then I won't be visiting your homeland anytime soon," Ygritte muttered flatly.

Prince Oberyn scoffed and remarked "Suit yourself, my dear."

*I am not your dear. Nor am I a lady.*

Ygritte aid inquisitively "How long has it been since you last went this far south?"

"A year or two," the Red Viper recounted, "And that was just to resolve a dispute between some of Lord Stevron's overly ambitious half-brothers. It took less than a fortnight."

"Have you been back to Dorne since you joined the Legion, my prince?" Jon queried.

"Once," Oberyn Martell disclosed, "To visit my six youngest daughters. And my 'son.'"
Ygritte smirked at that. So did Jon. They were two of the few who knew what the prince really meant.

"What of your two eldest daughters?" asked Ygritte, "Have you seen them recently?"

"I've seen Nymeria on at least six different occasions since she wed Lord Jorah Mormont," Oberyn Martell proclaimed, "It is rather convenient that Bear Island is not too far from the moat. Alas, Clegane's Keep is much further away. So while I have written to Obara frequently, I have not seen her since she wed Lord Sandor Clegane."

"Why is that?" Jon inquired.

"I've simply never had reason to travel to the Westerlands," Prince Oberyn revealed, "Nor have I had the desire to. Until Tywin Lannister does the world the courtesy of dropping dead, I do not intend to go back there."

"I can hardly blame you," Jon remarked grimly, "Were it not for him, I might have learned the truth about my parents long ago."

"Least you know now, my boy," Oberyn pointed out.

"True," Jon concurred. After a bit of quietness, he turned to the older man and remarked "By the way, my prince… there is no animosity between us, is there?"

Ygritte was surprised by that statement. Clearly, Prince Oberyn was, as well. He proclaimed "Of course not. Why could possibly lead you to think that?"

"My father all but cast aside your sister for my mother," Jon pointed out, "I know that marriages vows are not as strict in Dorne as they are everywhere else, but I've heard it said the Martells tend to nurse their grudges. For all I know, you may hold some resentment for what my parents did."

"A little," Oberyn admitted, "But not much, and none towards you. While I was furious with your father when he crowned your mother at Harrenhal, Elia was very understanding. She persuaded me not to do anything rash. Furthermore, they were unwilling to marry without her blessing, which she voluntarily gave."

"Then she must have been very understanding," Jon observed.

*Or maybe she was just unwilling to fight for her husband.* Ygritte did not voice that theory. Oberyn Martell was said to have killed for less than that.

"Did she partake in the bedding, too?" Ygritte asked abruptly.

Jon glared at her, as though he was appalled. Prince Oberyn, however, did not seem offended. He snickered and disclosed "Rhaegar and Lyanna had a bed to themselves on their wedding night. But Elia claims she shared their bed at least once after. Lyanna has never confirmed those claims, but she has never said anything to suggest otherwise, either.

Ygritte was strangely fascinated. "Are all the people of your homeland so indifferent on the issue of sex?"

"Not all," the Red Viper professed, "But enough to garner Dorne a reputation. Just look at my family. My brother Doran has never fancied anyone with a cock, but Elia and I are not so particular."
"I know," Jon wittily remarked, "I have seen the way you and she look at Lord Gregor. And Lady Dacey."

Oberyn chuckled and proclaimed "Yes, I suppose we are not exactly subtle. Tell me, in your opinion, which of us is more likely to succeed?"

That must have been an easy choice for Jon, as he said almost right away "Well, Prince Oberyn, while you have your own… appeal, Princess Elia may have the better chance."

Ygritte chuckled. *Of course she does. In the bed, women always win.*

"Suppose I was to invite Ellaria," Oberyn conjectured, "Who'd triumph first then?"

"Still your sister," Jon pronounced, "I mean no offense, but I believe Lord Gregor has the same preferences as Prince Doran."

*It is not very likely Lady Dacey shares Princess Elia's tastes, either. But that would be more likely than the Mountain sharing the Red Viper's.*

"Since nothing has happened in the sixteen years that I've known him, you're probably right," Oberyn conceded. He smirked again and added "Doesn't mean I'll stop trying, though."

"Well, good luck with that," Jon bluntly remarked. His tone implied he did not truly care whether Oberyn Martell managed to sway Gregor Clegane's mind on this subject.

Just then, they heard a horse whinny loudly from behind.

Jon, Ygritte, and Oberyn looked over their shoulders and spotted Ser Gerold Hightower – otherwise known as "Ser Marvyn" – atop his destrier. He was struggling to control his mount, as the horse had been spooked by something. Ygritte then discovered what. There were two large, furry creatures on the ground close by. She soon realized they were two of the Starks' direwolves. To be precise, one was Jon's companion Ghost, and the other was his mother, Lyarra. *Definitely her favorite.*

"I forgot they were here," Ygritte thought aloud.

"So did I," Jon admitted, snickering in amusement.

After that, they rode on in relative silence.

By midday, they arrived at the Crossing. Lord Stevron Frey welcomed Lord Gregor and his lieutenants graciously. Ygritte had heard some unpleasant things about House Frey. Most of them had occurred during the tenure of Lord Walder Frey.

Fortunately, Lord Stevron had very little in common with his father. He showed the Mountain and his party far more hospitality than the Late Lord Frey had ever shown anyone. He even came out to receive them personally.

Lord Gregor Clegane had arranged for his company to stay at the Crossing overnight. Due to the holdfast's overcrowded conditions, only a select few of the Mountain's party could take up lodgings inside the Twins. Those select few turned out to be Lord Gregor himself, the members of his secret council, Princess Elia Martell, Crown Prince Jasper Baratheon, Ser Arys Oakheart, Lady Olenna Tyrell, and Olenna's twin manservants, Erryk and Arryk. *Only the people with the greatest status are allowed inside,* Ygritte noticed.
Everyone else had to camp along the western riverbank. That included Jon and his half-siblings. To preserve their cover, they were still travelling under false names. Most people still believed Rhaenys was the daughter of a common woman and that Aegon and Jon were two highborn male bastards.

Jon chose to spend the afternoon with his brother and sister. They wished to have some special bonding time. They certainly did. For the whole afternoon, it was just the three of them. And their bodyguards. Their late father's Kingsguard knights were still refusing to let his children go unprotected. All the same, they kept a respectful amount of distance between themselves and their charges.

While Jon was with his half-siblings did that, Ygritte went out hunting with Lothor Brune and the other top hunters in their company. While the Legionnaires had brought along adequate provisions to last them to Harrenhal, it never hurt to have some backup stores. In any case, they managed to shoot plenty of game that day. Ygritte herself snagged three hares and a deer.

The hunting group returned to camp in the early evening. Jon was waiting for Ygritte in the tent they shared. He invited her to have dinner with Rhaenys and Aegon. While she generally preferred to eat alone if she could, she accepted his offer.

The four of them had supper around a private campfire in one of the more secluded parts of the camping grounds.

The meat tasted a little queer that night. Ygritte could not tell why. It was cooked fine; neither too bloody or too charred. It was not seasoned with any of those overwhelming spices, either. Still, it tasted… different.

Ygritte ultimate decided to just force it down. Sustenance is sustenance. She was used to eating things that were not especially appetizing. When she lived north of the wall, she could not even afford the luxury of food that tasted good. I should just be thankful food is more accessible here.

After they ate, Ygritte and the Targaryens lingered around the campfire for a while. They decided to start up a conversation.

For a while, they talked about themselves and some of their more interesting experiences. Rhaenys was the only one old enough to remember life before they had to go into hiding. She could vividly recall how Lord Gregor had saved her and her family from Amory Lorch. Most of the rest of her memories were of Greywater Watch with Lady Ashara Dayne.

Aegon's life had not been especially eventful, either. He had been at Sunspear for most of it. Once when he was a child, his father and aunt – who turned out to be his uncle and mother – had taken him and his "sisters" on a trip to Braavos. He never knew the true purpose of that trip, but he believed it was not just meant to be a family outing. In any case, he had enjoyed it.

Although Jon had been at Winterfell for most of his childhood, He had made friends with many of the children of his uncle's vassals. He felt that his existence became much more meaningful when he was made Lord Gregor Clegane's squire. It was demanding work, but very rewarding, all the same. He was also one of the very few people in the world who could speak both Spanish and Italian.

When Ygritte had her turn, she hesitated. She typically did not like to talk about herself. Even so, she ultimately decided to indulge the others. I may as well before they resort to begging.

Ygritte knew she was older than all three of the Targaryens. Rhaenys only by a few months, Aegon
by two years, and Jon by three. That was just one of the many ways in which she differed from them. But despite that and all their other dissimilarities, there was one facet she shared with all three of them: she had had to struggle for survival.

However, the Targaryens had had people watching out for them for the entirety of their lives. Ygritte did not possess that advantage. Her sole reliable source of protection came from her own hands, her own feet, and her own mind. At an early age, she had concluded that she could trust no one but herself.

Her mindset changed when she moved to the North and took up residence at Moat Cailin. The Legion without Banners changed her life. Very much for the better.

The Legion was like nothing she had ever seen. It preached and embraced universal tolerance, and it was founded on no bias whatsoever. It did not allow for any discrimination based on origin, status, birth, age, or even faith. Anyone was welcomed into its ranks, so long as they had not committed any crimes.

Although Ygritte was tempted to enlist, she ultimately chose not to. As much as she admired the Legion and the principles it was built on, she had a personal aversion to anything that involved swearing an oath. Even though she was in the Seven Kingdoms, she was still determined not to become a kneeler. I have no intention of binding myself to anything.

Nevertheless, someone else may have intended to bind himself to her.

When she first met Jon Snow, it had only been in passing. But their encounters had rapidly grown in number and length. Some of them appeared to be coincidences, but Ygritte was inclined to wonder if Lord Gregor had actually arranged their meetings beforehand. That assumption was not unreasonable, especially since Lord Gregor had been the one to suggest that Jon court Ygritte in the first place.

Initially, Ygritte expected her intimate relationship with Jon to only last a short while. When he started courting her, he had been too gentle with her. By my people's standards. Not his. He was not even willing to sleep with her until he turned six and then. The residents of the Seven Kingdoms may have seen that as flattering, but Ygritte wondered if it was just an excuse incited by apprehension.

Gods, was I wrong. On the day he turned six and ten, Jon had lain with Ygritte in the Broken Tower of Winterfell. He made a woman of her, and she made a man of him. She would never admit it, but he was well worth the wait.

Still, Ygritte did not overthink her bond with Jon. For all she knew, this would still only be a fling. However, Jon was a bit of the sentimental type. As such, he may have expected their relationship to lead to something more.

Then again… things were not as simple as they once were. Not until about a moon's turn ago, when Lord Gregor summoned them to the Meeting Chamber. After that day, everything suddenly became far more complicated.

When he was a bastard, Jon was free to bed whomever he pleased.

Now he was a prince. Thus, he was supposed to adhere to higher standards.

Of course, since the Targaryens had been deposed, it was debatable that Prince Rhaegar's children had lost their royal stature. Be that as it may, Lord Gregor claimed there was a chance he could
convince King Robert to allow the Targaryens to retain their titles. Even if not, he would hopefully be able to get the King to grant Jon and Aegon the title of "Lord" and Rhaenys the title of "Lady."

But regardless of what happened… Jon would probably have to terminate his relationship with Ygritte. According to the laws of the Seven Kingdoms, she was far too below him in status for them to make a compatible match.

He must have known that. *Despite what I say about him.*

A marriage contract had already been drawn up between Rhaenys and the heir to the Reach, Willas Tyrell. Lord Willas’ grandmother, Lady Olenna, had already given the match her blessing. Now she was determined to see it happen.

After seeing her granddaughter married to the heir to Winterfell, the Queen of Thorns had meant to return to Highgarden. Before she could leave, Willas informed her of the conference at Harrenhal. After some deliberation, she had chosen to accompany Lord Gregor and the secret council to the conference before she went back to the Reach. The Mountain believed her presence there would strengthen his case went he gave it to the King. Therefore, he had agreed to her proposition.

At present, no one had suggested any potential betrothals for Aegon. Like Jon, he had not even known he was trueborn until recently. All the same, he had already contemplated a few likely prospects for himself. Among those he had considered were Sansa Stark, Alyssa Arryn, Shireen Baratheon, his cousin Arianne Martell, and even Joy Lannister (who had originally been Joy Hill, Ser Gerion Lannister’s baseborn daughter, but she had been legitimized a few years earlier). *When they’re older, hopefully.* As far as Ygritte knew, Arianne Martell was the only one of those girls who was of age. The others were still too young for marriage, even by the ideals of most of the Free Folk.

As for Jon… he had not even given the issue any thought. Still, Jon Snow had had much more options than Jon Targaryen. A lord or a prince marrying a "wildling" was virtually unheard of in Westeros.

*Of course, the world is always changing. That is not to say that everything can change. Or will change.*

Whatever the case, Ygritte would never know what Jon would do unless she spoke to him about it. Therefore, she decided to address the subject that night.

After their conversation reached its end, Rhaenys, Aegon, Jon, and Ygritte turned in for the night. Rhaenys and Aegon went to their own tents, and Jon and Ygritte retired to the one they shared.

They did not go to sleep straightaway. The night was still young. *Plenty of time for some "activities."

The first round lasted nearly a half-hour. Ygritte cherished that experience. It was the first time Jon claimed her outside of the North, and it was more pleasurable than any other time he had claimed her. Maybe the setting honestly made a difference. Or maybe her libido was stronger than usual. Regardless, after Jon pulled out of her, Ygritte only wanted him even more.

However, she did not begin the second round straightaway. Instead, she just let Jon hold her close to his chest. She rested her head on his chest and breathed in his scent. She traced her fingers around his upper chest and arms, savoring the utter bliss of the moment.

She did not get too relaxed, however. She still had to address a subject of precedence.
After laying there in silence for a few minutes, Ygritte gazed up at her lover and remarked "Jon… I would like you to tell me something."

He looked down at her and stated "Certainly. What's on your mind?"

"It's… about us," Ygritte tentatively began.

He sat up a bit and queried "What about us?"

Ygritte gradually lifted her head up off his chest and sat so that her eyes were level with his. She peered into them and pronounced "I may not be too familiar with your culture, but I know enough that there is a great gap between those of high birth and those of low birth. Far as I can see, this gap is never crossed."

"A fair observation," Jon contented, "But 'never' might be too strong a word. Exceptions have been made, mainly in Dorne."

"I gathered that from our talk with the Red Viper," Ygritte cheekily commented, "But have any exceptions been made in the North?"

"At some point, they must've," Jon supposed, "I don't know if this would count, but it's been rumored that from time to time, the women of House Mormont sleep with the bears on Bear Island so that they could produce legitimate heirs."

*It would not surprise me if that was true.* Ygritte smirked and muttered "That's nothing new to me. Tormund once fucked a bear."

"Yes, he told me," Jon slyly murmured.

Ygritte shifted her position slightly, and then she proclaimed "While we're speaking on this, I believe that children are not simply a means of ensuring the endurance of one's family. Or one's house, in the case of your society."

"That goes without saying," Jon conceded, leaning back a bit, "That's where that 'gap' you mentioned really comes into play. That gap can be a nuisance. In fact, there are times when I envy the smallfolk. While they do not hold the privileges and luxuries of the highborn, at least they've the freedom to mingle with whomever they please."

"That is just the point I am trying to make," Ygritte claimed, laying her head beside his, "Now that you are a prince-"

*Might* be a prince," he corrected her.

She lightly rolled her eyes and grinned, saying "Might be a prince… what does that mean for us?"

He seemed bewildered by the question. "I'm afraid I do not understand."

Ygritte sighed and enlightened him with "From the moment you started courting me, I realized there was a chance our affair would not last. Back then, I certainly never would have guessed that it would last this long."

For some reason, he laughed. Then she thought about what she said, and she laughed, too. Jon cockily uttered "I'm full of surprises, aren't I?"

"I suppose so," Ygritte conceded. She then gazed off to the side and murmured "What I'm trying to
ask you is... where are we going?"

*If he says 'Harrenhal,' I am going to break his jaw.*

Fortunately, he did not. He must have understood what she was asking, given the expression on his face. He presumed "Do you think I would cast you aside?"

"That is possible," Ygritte debated, "Even if you do not wish to do so, you may have to out of duty."

Jon then placed his hand under her chin, gently turned her towards him, and told her "You are far more important to me than duty."

Although Ygritte had no way of knowing what Jon would say, she was not expecting him to say that at all. *It could be I misheard him. Do you mean that?*

"Of course I do," Jon asserted, "I don't care if people disapprove of us. All that matters is how you and I feel. I admit there is still a possibility we will not remain together in the end. But if we do... I promise you I would give our relationship my all."

Ygritte was touched. Deeply touched. Jon's argument was starting to make her revaluate her entire stance on commitment. She muttered "All this time, I thought marriage was for fools."

"Everyone's a fool every now and then," Jon contended. He then smirked and japed "Perhaps I am not the only one who knows nothing."

Ygritte got a hearty laugh at that witticism. Then she turned to Jon and said "All jests aside... do you mean everything you just told me, Jon?"

"I do," Jon told her, firmness evident in his voice. He kissed her softly on the lips, and then he gazed into her eyes and declared "Believe me, Ygritte. I would only sleep with women I genuinely loved."

Ygritte would have questioned most other men if they made that declaration. But she believed Jon. He would not lie to her on this matter.

She grinned wickedly, placed her hand on his shoulder, and wryly proposed "Prove it then."

He gave an equally devious smile and stated "With pleasure."

*Lots of pleasure.*

The two of them went three more rounds that night, each more enjoyable than the one before it.

The final round ended shortly before midnight. By that point, they were finally spent.

As Ygritte went to sleep in Jon's arms, she thought about everything they had discussed that evening.

For all the differences the Free Folk and the Seven Kingdoms had with one another, Ygritte realized they had even more features in common. The most notable was how a child could change everything.

*A child...*

Ygritte had never given much thought to motherhood. Even so, she found herself wondering what a
child sired by Jon and carried by her would look like. Ideally, it would have her hair and his face, and it would be strong and resilient. *Like the both of us.*

Then Ygritte realized something else.

Recently, she had exhibited a lot of abnormal behavior. That same morning, she had tired very easily on horseback. When they first entered the Riverlands, her body had reacted unfavorably to the sudden change in climate. At dinner, she had felt queasy when she ate meat. That night, her sexual prowess had been greater than usual. Jon could verify that much.

Lastly, it dawned on her that she had missed her moon's blood. For the second month in a row.

*That can't mean... can it?*
Doubtlessly, many of you have noticed that – with the obvious exception of Gregor – none of the perspective characters have more than one section from his or her POV. Also, unless specified, the amount of time meant to elapse between each section is approximately one week (excluding the end of Ch. 42 and the beginning of Ch. 43). Another exception is this chapter. It will span the course of a week and change perspectives twice. Furthermore, after this chapter, I may start to reuse certain perspective characters in future updates.

By the way, has anyone noticed that as of now, Tyrion is the only person who has interacted with both Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen at some point in their lives? So if Jon is the "Ice" and Dany is the "Fire" in "Ice And Fire," perhaps Tyrion is the "And." Seriously; no other character in the entire franchise has ever been in the same place as both of them. You could argue Theon has, but technically, he does not count, as he has only encountered them both in the show. He never went anywhere near Slaver's Bay in the books. Just wanted to mention this; I thought it was interesting, even though it may not be true for much longer.

Anyway, a word about this chapter… be prepared to possibly be underwhelmed. I decided to have the entirety of the conference at Harrenhal in this chapter. Now that I look it over, it may have been better if I had chosen to split it up into two different chapters. Not just because it is the longest one yet. You see, I feel as though this chapter was grossly rushed. So much so that it may have to be revised. But if I DO decide to revise it, I will do so at a later date. I just wanted to have the Harrenhal section wrapped up before Season 7 started, and it happens that Season 7 premieres this weekend (Incidentally, so does the next season of Star Vs. The Forces of Evil).

On that note, I would like you all to be aware that Gregory Welch died before Season 7. However, the person reborn as Melisandre did not. In her first life, she did not die until sometime after Season 7 ended. That could either mean good or bad news for Gregor. I won't say which; you will just have to wait and see.

One last point. Although I've managed to update this story on a weekly basis since I got my Master's Degree, I'm afraid that routine will have to stop for a while. Doing so much writing every week has gotten to be quite exhausting and time-consuming. Additionally, right now, I really need to be more focused on finding a better job than the one I currently have. Since I have already been job hunting for weeks, I am hoping that will not take more than a month. Still, until further notice, I am only going to update every other week. Maybe every ten days if I can afford it, but I make no promises.

Anyway… read on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Of all the hundreds of holdfasts in the Seven Kingdoms, Harrenhal was perhaps the most
infamous. It was relatively young, but its history was already unforgettable.

Much like the ancestral homes of each of the Great Families, it was massive, formidable, and incapable of being conquered. Supposedly. If only Harren bothered to look up whilst it was being built. When the castle fell to Aegon the Conqueror and his sisters, the Riverlands had been liberated from control of the Iron Islands. Thus, the Tullys rose to greatness.

Although Harrenhal was still occupied and fully manned, one could be forgiven for thinking it abandoned at first glance. From afar (and even from up-close), it looked to be a decaying ruin. It also had a habit of inciting terror and apprehension on the majority of those who passed by. But not I. It will be a cold day in the Seven Hells before I allow a building to frighten me.

In spite of its rotting and ominous appearance, Ser Brynden had to admit that Harrenhal was an impressive structure. He took a good long moment to marvel in its sheer size and bizarre yet unique design as he approached it atop his sturdy grey destrier.

His group was the first to arrive. It had required far less time to travel there from the Twins than they originally thought.

In order to cross the Red Fork, they had to ride all the way to Riverrun, where they stayed the night. There he discovered that the reports of his brother's failing health were not inaccurate. Hoster had gone from a tall, strong, imposing figure to a weakened, dense, shriveled shadow of his former self. When he saw his brother in this state, Brynden barely even recognized him. He certainly did not recognize me. On the other hand, I doubt he would have received me any better if he did.

All the same, Brynden did not allow this despair to distract him from the importance of his mission. The following morning, after saying a sorrowful goodbye to the lord of Riverrun, the Blackfish left his ancestral home alongside his fellow Legionnaires and Lady Olenna Tyrell's entourage. Within days, they came to their destination.

His nephew was the next to get in.

Edmure had not been at Riverrun when the Legion spent the night. He and his lady wife Asha had sailed to King's Landing to inform King Robert and the Small Council of the conference in person. They had lingered in the capital a while longer for various other reasons. Once the King and his party made for Harrenhal, so did the Black Wind.

They had sailed most of the way. I'm certain they would have sailed the whole way if they could. Alas, Harrenhal was not built along any rivers or lakes. The nearest body of water was the Gods' Eye to the south, and even in the most ideal sailing conditions, it required weeks to traverse the distance between the Eye and Blackwater Rush.

Instead, they had docked at Lord Harroway's Town, which was just a little north of Harrenhal and southeast of where the three forks of the Trident converged. They could have stopped at Saltspans or Maidenpool, but that would have necessitated more time on the land. Edmure wished to do as little riding as possible. Not only because his Ironborn wife was far more comfortable on a ship, but also because she was carrying his heir. Or heirs, if Maester Vyman is correct.

In any case, Brynden was delighted to see his nephew again. Unsurprisingly, Maron was just as thrilled to finally reunite with his sister after ten long years.

Not long after, the Northmen showed their faces. Lord Eddard Stark's company had vacated Winterfell at approximately the same time Ser Brynden's left Moat Cailin, and they had followed a
nearly identical route. Of course, since they started their journey from further north, it had taken them another week to reach Harrenhal.

Lord Eddard brought along his friends who had been at the Tower of Joy. There was Martyn Cassel, Winterfell's master-at-arms, Lord Willam Dustin of Barrowton, and even Howland Reed, the reclusive Lord of Greywater watch who had not emerged from the marshes of the Neck since the end of Robert's Rebellion.

Ethan Glover, Ser Mark Ryswell, and Theo Wull had come ahead of their old accomplices. Like Prince Rhaegar's children, the Kingsguard, and Lady Ashara Dayne, they were still travelling under false identities. Not for much longer, though.

Brynden noticed Lord Eddard seemed grimmer than usual. Apparently, he was not looking forward to the conference. The Blackfish could not fault him that, given what was at stake. At least he took some comfort from being with his nephew "Jon Snow."

The King's party was the last to come. It was also the largest. Initially, it almost looked as though Robert had brought half of King's Landing with him. In actuality, there were only about seven hundred soldiers and servants, as well as a couple hundred camp followers.

Still, more people had come with the King than with Lord Gregor, Edmure, and Lord Eddard combined. If any disagreements or heated disputes broke out, the fighting would sooner go in Robert's favor than theirs. Let us hope the Mountain does not overestimate his ability to reason with the King.

When the King's party was spotted in the distance, Lady Shella Whent assembled her household in the main yard to receive him. Lord Gregor and the secret council joined her, as did Edmure, Asha, and Lord Eddard. Lady Olenna Tyrell, Princess Elia Martell, Prince Jasper Baratheon, and anyone else of great import came, as well.

Before long, a herald called out "The King is approaching!" In response, the gates of Harrenhal were opened, and the King's procession entered the grounds.

Ser Brynden Tully had never actually met Robert Baratheon. Although they had fought on the same side during his Rebellion, they were never in the same battle. Furthermore, the Blackfish had commanded the Legion garrisoned in Moat Cailin for the entirety of Greyjoy's Rebellion. So this was the very first time he and King Robert were in the same place at the same time.

Seeing him now, Brynden thought the King was a fine display of a man. He was in excellent physical condition, he held a stern yet good-natured countenance, and he rode at the very front of the column. A true leader is unafraid to go ahead of his men.

A few score retainers of the Royal House of Baratheon followed the King through the gates. Everyone else remained outside. Among the first division, there were two wheelhouses and a number of mounted knights.

Three of the knights wore the white enameled-plate armor of the Kingsguard. Brynden did not know the younger two, but it was obvious that the eldest one was Ser Barristan Selmy, the last of Aerys' seven. The man was as much a legend with a blade as the Blackfish himself.

I wonder who would win in a duel. Myself or Ser Barristan? Brynden was inclined to believe he would triumph. For the last sixteen years, he had constantly employed his swordsmanship all over the Seven Kingdoms, whereas Ser Barristan had been at Robert Baratheon's side most of that interval. While protecting the King was an admirable and difficult duty, it did not require as much
work with a blade as one might think. *I imagine it would get rather dull.*

The King brought his mount to a halt in the center of the front yard. Then he gracefully climbed down off it. A stableboy hastily rushed to take the reins of his horse.

As the lad led the destrier away, the King turned to face all those who had assembled in the vicinity. They collectively knelt before him.

Although it was Lady Shella's castle, the King went to Eddard Stark first. He stopped before the Lord of Winterfell, gazed down at him, and observed "You got fat."

The Blackfish stifled the urge to laugh. *Either he is joking, or he is not very perceptive.* It was probably the former. Brynden's niece's husband was thinner than the average man his age. *Certainly thinner than his old friend.* Although the King had not gone soft since taking the Throne, he had a bit of a bulge in his stomach. Lord Eddard must have noticed that, given the perplexed expression he wore when he looked at Robert's midsection.

After an awkward silence, Robert started guffawing. Eddard joined him soon after. As the King helped him to his feet, the two old friends embraced each other affectionately.

When they came apart, Robert remarked "It's been far too long."

"Ten years," Eddard affirmed.

"Why haven't I seen you?" the King asked rhetorically "Where the hells have you been?"

"Guarding the North for you, Your Grace," the wolf lord replied.

"Well, this isn't the North, Ned," the stag king pointed out, "And for the moment I am not 'Your Grace.' I am your dear friend Robert."

A small grin came to Eddard's face. Those were quite infrequent. *Hopefully, by the end of this conference, he will smile again. However unlikely that may be.*

Everyone else in the assembly got back to his or her feet. Lady Shella was standing directly next to Lord Stark. When the King turned to her, she bowed her head and declared "Harrenhal is yours, Your Grace. I wish to extend every hospitality my house has to offer."

"Duly noted, my lady," Robert stated.

He then proceeded to exchange pleasantries with the present officers of the Legion without Banners. The twelve of them were arrayed in a single neat row, so the King could speak with them individually. Ser Brynden was at the far end of the line, so he would be the last to shake the King's hand.

While he waited for Robert to near him, Ser Brynden stole another glimpse back towards the King's entourage. The doors to the two wheelhouses opened, and the occupants were in the process of stepping out. From one of them emerged the Queen and her four youngest children. The other one carried Brynden's niece Lysa and her children Alyssa, Robin, and Donella. Her husband, Lord Jon Arryn, the Hand of the King, had entered Harrenhal on horseback, but he had climbed down to help his wife and children out of the vehicle.

By the time they were all out on the ground, Robert had had words with almost all of the secret council. Other than Brynden Tully, the only one he had yet to greet was his younger brother.
"Renly!" he exclaimed merrily when he reached the Legion's top officer from the Stormlands.

Renly Baratheon smiled and stepped forward to embrace his royal brother. They held one another affectionately for close to thirty seconds. After the hug, Robert looked the younger man over and noted "You look more like me with every passing year,"

"Then why does everyone think me so handsome?" Renly Baratheon cheekily muttered.

Robert laughed again. Brynden allowed himself a scoff, but other than that, he made no sound. The King's observation was likely true. Lord Eddard and others who knew Robert when he was Renly's age often claimed the younger stag lord took very closely after his brother.

Interestingly, Renly Baratheon was the youngest member of the secret council. It was debatable that he was not even a permanent member. One could argue that he was only substituting for their colleague Allard Seaworth. After all that has happened, Renly might not wish to relinquish his seat, even after we reunite with Allard.

On that note, Brynden Tully was by far the oldest member of the secret council. He had around twenty years on the next oldest members. For that reason, he was treated with tremendous respect by his associates, and excluding Lord Gregor, his opinion was usually seen as the most meaningful.

Finally, the King stepped in front of Ser Brynden Tully. He pronounced happily "Ah, the great Blackfish of the Tullys. I have heard much of you. It is a travesty that we have not met before this day."

"Quite so, Your Grace," Ser Brynden concurred, surprised by the King's flattery but grateful for it, "It is an honor and a pleasure to make your acquaintance at long last."

The two men shared a handshake. Very powerful grip. He has an iron fist, yet he does not rule with one.

Up until this moment, there was no one to the Blackfish's immediate left. Just then, the Crown Prince appeared at that very spot. When King Robert saw him, he broke into an even wider grin and said happily "Hello, Jasper."

"Your Grace," Prince Jasper cordially rejoined, tilting his head and extending his right arm.

As father and son shook hands, Queen Cersei and the other royal children joined them. Jasper hugged his brother and sisters, and he kissed his mother on her cheek. That was not enough for Cersei Lannister. With a wide smile, she pulled her son close, hugged him tightly, and kissed his brow in turn. Evidently, Jasper's parents were both delighted to see him after two years. But if one of them missed him more, I think I can guess who.

The Hand and his family came over soon after. Lysa swiftly came up to Brynden Tully and embraced him affectionately. The Blackfish snickered at his niece's excitement and hugged her back. After that, Lysa took the opportunity to introduce her uncle to his grandnephew and grandnieces.

Lord Jon Arryn shook hands with a few people there, including Ser Brynden. The Blackfish had served as the Knight of the Bloody Gate for years before he went north to enlist in the Legion. My name is still an honored one in the Vale, and I am not even native to it.

Lord Jon looked around at the people present and inquired "Is everyone here?"

"Yes, my lord," Gregor Clegane answered him, "Yours is the last party to arrive. Now the
conference can commence."

"Could we wait until later to get started?" the King proposed, "We just got in, and I would like some time for my company to recover."

"As you wish, Your Grace," the Mountain conceded, "But I would prefer to begin before the day is over."

"That is acceptable," Robert Baratheon proclaimed.

Of the five towers that comprised the majority of Harrenhal, the Kingspyre Tower was the least damaged and most inhabited. Lady Shella and the main members of her household resided there. Quarters had also been set up there for all the castle's hightorn guests, including the royal family.

The King, Queen, their children, the Hand, and his family were quick to get settled in their rooms near the top. Those were the best lodgings the Whents had to offer. Brynden was certain they still could not compare to the elegant apartments of the Red Keep, but they seemed sufficient for the current occupants.

The day proceeded normally for the residents of Harrenhal. The smallfolk, the servants, and the soldiers went on about their business as they would any other day. Anywhere else in the Seven Kingdoms, a visit from the King may have been greeted with much more enthusiasm. But even with the whole royal family present, Harrenhal was as bleak as ever. The people of Harrenhal are as dreary as the castle itself.

As such, nothing exciting or noteworthy happened that day. That night, however…

After dinner in the Hall of the Hundred Hearths, the King told Lord Gregor that he was ready for the conference to begin. Subsequently, Lord Gregor gathered the secret council and everyone else he wished to attend the event. He announced that they would hold their meetings in the Tower of Dread.

"Why the Tower of Dread, my lord?" Ser Brynden asked

The Mountain enlightened him: "The Kingspyre Tower is too full, prisoners are kept in the Widow's Tower, the noise produced by the Wailing Tower is very distracting, and the Tower of Ghosts is too great a safety hazard."

Fair enough. Still, the tower's name is a touch ironic, given the circumstances.

Within the next half-hour, Lord Gregor Clegane had Lord Eddard Stark, King Robert Baratheon, Queen Cersei Lannister, Prince Jasper Baratheon, Ser Barristan Selmy, Lord Jon Arryn, Lady Olenna Tyrell, Princess Elia Martell, Ser Edmure Tully, Lady Asha Tully, Lord Howland Reed, Martyn Cassel, Lord Willam Dustin, and the other eleven members of the secret council convene in the largest room of the Tower of Dread. At Lord Gregor's insistence, Lady Shella had ordered all her retainers to vacate the floor of that chamber for the duration of the conference. The meetings would be conducted in absolute secrecy.

They did not have access to a large circular table like they did at the Meeting Tower. Fortunately, a number of smaller regular tables on hand. Those were placed all throughout the room with at least four chairs to each. Even so, only about half of the attendees chose to sit. Lord Gregor and Ser Brynden were among those who preferred to keep on their feet.

Once everyone had found a seat or a place to stand, Lord Gregor turned to face the King. He was standing in the center of the room, so there was at least ten feet of space between them. As he
gazed down at Robert, he murmured "Your Grace, before I start, there is something I would ask of you."

"What might that be?" Robert Baratheon said inquisitively.

"Many things will be discussed over the next few days," Gregor Clegane professed, "Some of the things I mean to share are all but guaranteed to stun, disturb, and even outrage you. However, the thing that is perhaps the most shocking of all will be addressed straightaway. Even now, I know that you will not be pleased to learn of it. Worst case scenario, you may even be incited to call for my head. All the same… I implore you to allow me to explain the issue fully before you render any hasty judgments. You are under no obligation to do so, and even if you did, you have every right to change your mind, but it would be in everyone’s best interest – yours especially – for you to hear me out. What all I have to tell you is too critical to just be discarded."

Most of the people in the room, including Ser Brynden, already knew what this sensitive topic was. As such, they also knew why Lord Gregor was confident that the King would react negatively to it. There is no turning back now. What happens next is up to Lord Gregor's words and how the King responds to them.

King Robert was perplexed by Lord Gregor's introductory statements. He was likely wondering what the Mountain was going to tell him. More to the point, he was wondering what news could possibly be so grave and reprehensible that he would wish the Mountain dead.

In any case, he ultimately decreed "Alright, Lord Gregor. At your personal request, I swear on my honor as your king that I will not condemn you or any other person until you have finished talking."

"I am immeasurably grateful, Your Grace," Gregor Clegane claimed. Just pray that Robert keeps his word. As the man who sits the Iron Throne, he is the one person who does not have to.

Once he had Robert's reassurance, Lord Gregor swiftly began the first – and hopefully not the last – meeting of the conference. He chose to very direct. He folded his hands behind his back, stood up straight, let out a slow breath, and stated "When you first seized the Iron Throne, the bodies of two small children were placed before you. You called them 'dragonspawn.' You were wrong to do so. But not because the term was insulting or anything of the sort."

"Why, then?"

"Because there was nothing dragon about them," Gregor Clegane disclosed, "Those were not Rhaenys and Aegon. They were just two children who happened to look like them. I do not know who those children were, as their entire family was slaughtered in the Sack of King's Landing, and the soldiers who did the deed were executed soon after. Thus, I was the only one who could tell the difference."

Already, the King looked to be bewildered. The full truth had not yet dawned on him, as he queried "Then what became of Rhaegar's children?"

"They were taken back to Sunspear," Gregor promptly revealed. After a short pause, he added "Alive and unharmed."

As Ser Brynden predicted, King Robert was flabbergasted. To various degrees, so were Queen Cersei, Lord Jon, Prince Jasper, Ser Barristan, Ser Edmure, and Lady Asha.

"Do you mean to say that Rhaegar Targaryen's children survived?" Jon Arryn presumed.
"Yes, my Lord Hand," the Mountain confirmed, "In fact, they are here, in this very building."

At that, Lord Gregor snapped his fingers. The door to an adjoining office opened up, and Princess Rhaenys Targaryen and Prince Aegon Targaryen entered the conference room.

All eyes were on the two siblings as they moved to stand beside Princess Elia Martell. By having all three of them so close to one another, it was plainly obvious that they were related. Rhaenys looked very much like their mother, and while Aegon tended to favor their father, the characteristics he had inherited from Elia were quite discernable, too.

Gregor gave everyone a good few minutes to absorb this astonishing revelation. *Silence is better than yelling, I suppose.* Nonetheless, the expressions on King Robert and Queen Cersei's faces were not promising.

Gregor Clegane soon continued with "That is not all. Oh, no; there is more to this matter than that. You see, Rhaenys and Aegon were not the only Targaryens who lived through the downfall of their father's house. And I am not referring to their aunt and uncle across the Narrow Sea."

"Then who are you referencing, my lord?" Jasper enquired. He was more curious than astounded.

Lord Gregor answered that question with "Do you know why Rhaegar Targaryen sought Lyanna Stark? It was not because he loved her. It was because he loved Westeros."

"What are you talking about?" Robert demanded. The ire in his voice was unmissable, but he was keeping his anger at bay.

Gregor Clegane did not let the King's mood trouble him. Instead, he went on with "In the Year of the False Spring, I had two more of my prophetic visions. The first was of the tourney that took place here. The other was of what happened afterward. As some of you know, it was Rhaegar Targaryen himself who knighted me. When I met him, I hoped to avert that calamity. So I tried to caution him against doing anything rash. Alas, he decided to disregard my advice."

*Had he listened, the world would be very different now. Then again, we'll never know whether it would've been better or worse.*

"Why didn't you tell him of your visions?" Jon Arryn enquired.

"The same reason I waited until after Greyjoy's Rebellion to tell the world," Gregor Clegane professed, "At the time, I had no way to prove myself. My status was much smaller back then, too. My name was known only in the Westerlands. Even if I wanted to tell anyone, who would have believed me?"

"We understand, my lord," Lyn Corbray remarked, "In that scenario, you could've prevented the war no more than anyone else could have."

Lord Gregor nodded his head. "Be that as it may, I saw the war coming. I knew Rhaegar was going to abscond with Lyanna even before he did. However, the real reason he did so didn't become clear to me until the end of the Rebellion."

"So what was his actual motive?" Edmure inquired.

"Like me, Rhaegar forecasted the return of the Others," Lord Gregor elucidated, "But instead of visions, he took stock in the prophecy of the Three-Headed Dragon. He interpreted the story very literally, and he became heavily invested in it. He believed it was his duty to sire three children, and that his children would be paramount to averting the end of the world. He was very determined
to bring these three children into the world."

"Sadly, I was only able to give him two," Princess Elia glumly commented, "Nonetheless, Rhaegar was not dissuaded from fathering a third. For that, he looked elsewhere."

"And he found an answer to his problem here," Gregor commented. He looked around the room and asked no one in particular, "Remember the Knight of the Laughing Tree?"

"Of course," Ser Barristan Selmy declared, "He was one of the few to escape King Aerys' wrath."

"She, good ser," Lord Howland Reed corrected the old Kingsguard, "The Knight of the Laughing Tree was Lyanna Stark all along. At the start of the tourney, I was harassed by three young squires. To get back at them, Lady Lyanna found her own armor and weapons, entered the tourney lists, and defeated the knights those squires served just so the squires would learn a lesson. Naturally, when the Mad King called for her head, she withdrew from the lists and fled. Prince Rhaegar stumbled upon her when she was getting out of her armor."

"Rather than deliver her head to his father, he took an interest in her," Prince Oberyn Martell expounded, "And we all know how that ended."

"I would say it was more a beginning of something than an end," Princess Elia countered her brother, "After Rhaegar crowned Lyanna, she came to my tent to beg my forgiveness. However, I was not upset with her. I treated her like I would a sister. Eventually, Rhaegar turned up, and the three of us spent the whole night talking. Rhaegar chose to tell Lyanna of the prophecy. Although she did not believe it at first, she eventually came to share our conviction. That was when Rhaegar proposed that she be the one to help him complete the Three-Headed Dragon."

King Robert suddenly burst out laughing. Ser Brynden and several of the others were alarmed by his reaction. He could have done worse than laugh, but still… I fail to see what is so amusing. Once the laughter stopped, the King muttered drily "Oh, that is rich. A grown man asking a betrothed girl of six and ten to mother his third child… and they say Aerys was the mad one."

"She ultimately agreed," Lord Gregor hurriedly illuminated.

The humor rapidly vanished from the King's face. He darkly whispered "What?"

"Lyanna chose to give Rhaegar the child I could not," Elia clarified, "I myself saw them married before a heart tree outside of Castle Cerwyn in the North. Rhaegar was very insistent that they wed; he would not repeat the mistakes of Aegon the Unworthy."

Lord Eddard briefly took over the explanation then. He proclaimed "When we got to the Tower of Joy, Lyanna was dying of a fever. A fever contracted from childbirth."

"On her deathbed, she told us everything," Lord Gregor disclosed, "She had not been taken against her will; she had gone with Rhaegar willingly. To avoid bringing shame on the Starks or the Baratheons, she did so in secret. Most importantly, she did not do it to spite anyone or out of love for Rhaegar. She did it for the same reason as he: she believed it would be for the greater good of all Westeros."

_It remains to be seen if his actions will actually benefit the great good of anyone. Lord Gregor may believe so, but the rest of us cannot be so certain._

"If Lady Lyanna was not taken, why did she never tell anyone of her plight with Prince Rhaegar?" Asha said enquiringly.
"We discovered that she actually did try to send letters to the Eyrie, Riverrun, and Winterfell," Lord Eddard told his old mentor, "Alas, fate dealt a harsh hand, and the messages were lost."

"We managed to recover them overtime," Gregor Clegane revealed, "But the damage had already been done."

"Then the war was all a misunderstanding," Jasper supposed.

"Not entirely," Elia Martell contended, "Sooner or later, there would have been war anyway. Rhaegar was aware of how unstable King Aerys was, and he was plotting to remove his father from power. Had he not wished to produce the dragon's third head first, he might have succeeded."

There came another interval of silence. It was broken by the King. He mumbled in a surprisingly tame yet notably tense voice "If this is all true, where is Rhaegar's third child?"

Lord Gregor snapped his fingers again. At that, Lord Eddard's nephew tentatively stepped inside, and he slowly went over to his uncle. Eddard Stark then announced "This is my nephew. Many know him as 'Jon Snow.'"

Robert was confused and surprised in equal measures. "You told me Jon Snow was the result of a fling between your brother Brandon and Ashara Dayne of Starfall."

"A lie invented to protect him," Eddard bluntly revealed. One might call it a necessary evil. "His proper name is Jaehaerys Targaryen, third and last child of the late Rhaegar Targaryen. And the only child of his second wife, my sister, the late Lyanna Stark."

The King was not a slow-minded person, so he had doubtlessly worked the truth out by now. Regardless, hearing the truth spoken aloud did not make it any easier to embrace, even when it was uttered from the mouth of his best friend. He almost seemed downright shaken by this newest revelation. Well, he just learned that his former intended eloped with his deceased adversary just to give him a child and fulfill an outdated prophecy. If that happened to me, I would not be in the soundest of minds, either.

"There is not much more to tell of this tale," Gregor Clegane stated, "Only a few people knew Rhaegar's children were not dead. Even fewer knew he had three. All those who did know were determined to keep them protected. Consequentially, a plan was drawn up to ensure the continuance of their survival."

"For their own safety, they were separated from each other," Princess Elia expounded.

"I hosted Rhaenys with my family at Greywater Watch," Howland Reed disclosed.

"Aegon was taken back to Sunspear, where he was raised believing he was my bastard son, Edgar Sand," Oberyn Martell revealed.

"I brought Jon with me to the North, where he could grow up with his cousins and have a normal life," Eddard Stark pronounced.

"In other words, you all knowingly harbored enemies of the crown," Queen Cersei spat venomously.

"Some may see what they've done as such," Gerion Lannister debated, "In my mind, they were merely protecting innocent children."

Cersei Lannister was taken aback. Her own uncle had sided with the Mountain over the King. In
another sense, he had chosen his commander over his kin. The secret council had addressed this issue beforehand; Gerion was not the only one who was prepared to stand up for their leader.

If need be, Brynden would back up Gregor Clegane if Edmure turned against him, and Maron would defend the Mountain if Asha criticized him. Even Renly was prepared to reinforce the Lord of Moat Cailin if his brother the King condemned his actions.

"I did not like having to keep the truth from you, Robert," Eddard asserted, "But I made a promise to my sister. Lyanna begged me to raise her son as my own, and to do whatever I had to keep him from harm. I could not deny her that."

"I understand, Ned," Robert muttered very quietly. He sounded calm, but the tension in his voice was totally detectable. He hostilely glared at Gregor Clegane and said bitterly "You still have a vast amount of explaining to do."

"I am prepared to account for all my actions, Your Grace," Lord Gregor pronounced.

"You better be," Robert snapped heatedly, "Why did you do this? Why did you conspire behind my back? You, who I entrusted with the security of the Seven Kingdoms."

"That is just it," Gregor Clegane sternly declared, "Despite what you might think of me now, my foremost priority – my only priority – has always been for the welfare of Westeros. That is why I sought to protect Rhaegar's children."

"Elaborate," the King commanded him.

The Mountain continued with "When you first took the Iron Throne, there was no indication that your reign would last. According to my visions, you would have died before the Long Night, and your death would have torn the realm apart. Thanks to my gift from the gods, I found myself in the unique position to ensure that the Seven Kingdoms thrived under your rule. Although I have succeeded, back then I had no way of knowing that I would. In the event that I failed to stabilize your reign, I needed a backup solution. A contingency plan, if you would. Hence, the arrangement to shelter Rhaenys, Aegon, and Jon."

"In other words, if I was not good enough for the Iron Throne, you would have given it to the family I took it from," Robert Baratheon sharply stated, "Would you have offered them my head, as well?"

"Absolutely not," Gregor Clegane insisted, "That is not what I meant at all, Your Grace. I simply wished to be prepared for any possibility. Be that as it may, I would never have supported another rebellion against the crown, even if the insurgents were the rightful rulers."

"Surely you must have considered the potential repercussions of this endeavor, Lord Gregor," Jon Arryn contended.

"Of course I have," the Mountain claimed, "Every day since I began this endeavor, I have contemplated all the myriad ways it could have gone wrong or fallen apart. Yet even now, I do not regret having accepted the risks. King Robert is the man best-suited to govern the Seven Kingdoms. The realm does not need the Targaryen dynasty anymore. Even so, the Targaryens themselves are invaluable. That is precisely why I organized this conference."

"How do you mean?" Jasper Baratheon enquired. Unlike his parents, he did not seem appalled by all these secrets and lies. If anything, the prince was deeply fascinated.
Lord Gregor looked between the King, the Queen, the Prince, and the Hand. He notified them "I never intended for the Targaryens to permanently remain in hiding. One way or another, I was going to reveal their existence to the world in time. This is the approach I was hoping for. The one that involved us sitting down and talking like reasonable men. Instead of the one that involved us bearing steel against one another."

"Why was it so necessary to bring them out of hiding in the first place?" Edmure inquired.

"For one thing, forcing them to live their whole lives as exiles in their own country would have been cruel and oppressive," Gregor debated, "We will also need them in the struggles against the Others. I will explain how later. Furthermore, they will be useful in the final stages of uniting the entirety of Westeros."

"How so?" Lord Jon queried.

"It was the Targaryens who first brought the Seven Kingdoms together," Gregor Clegane pointed out, "That will never be forgotten. So long as they are banished from Westeros, the country will never be genuinely whole. They will always have sympathizers who scheme to return them to power. Of course, bringing the Targaryens back is not that simple. It would be a very intricate process. Fortunately, I have crafted the perfect system for handling this dilemma."

"We're listening," Robert declared. By now, he was more intrigued than infuriated with the Mountain's speech.

Lord Gregor reached into his doublet and pulled out a roll of parchment. He approached the King and held the scroll out to him, saying "This is my proposal. It may seem long and complicated, but the gist of it is simple and straightforward. Basically, in the near future, you should announce that the Targaryens are alive, and you should claim that the idea to shelter them was originally yours."

Robert Baratheon was stunned. "You want me to lie to the residents of the Seven Kingdoms?"

"It is not lying," the Mountain countered, "It is merely bending the truth. The plan to shelter the Targaryens may have been mine primarily, but I was given the power and the ability to make it happen from you. After all, at your orders, I have always functioned in the best interests of the realm. By that logic, it was technically your plan all along."

"Except that I was unaware of it until now," Robert pronounced.

"The common people needn't know that," Gregor contended, "If you do this, everyone will be pleased. Those already loyal to you will only believe in your reign more strongly than before, the Targaryen sympathizers will finally respect and support you, and anyone neutral will come to admire you. Public opinion of the Baratheons will be enhanced throughout all the Seven Kingdoms, and maybe even so far as beyond the Wall or across the Narrow Sea."

He must have faith in the likelihood of this proposal's success. Otherwise, he would not be speaking with such conviction. Lord Gregor may have been idealistic, but he was not naïve.

At any rate, Robert took the roll of parchment from the taller man. He thought aloud "I admit this does seem a very promising solution to resolve the issue at hand, Lord Gregor. But there is one factor you have neglected to consider."

"With all due respect, that is unlikely, Your Grace," the Mountain argued, "But for the sake of argument, what might that be?"
"How do you know the Targaryens will actually go along with this proposal?" the King debated, holding up the scroll, "They have no reason to wish to cooperate with me. Especially the three in this room; seeing as it was I who killed their father."

"On that subject, how do we even know that these three are in fact Rhaegar's?" Cersei Lannister murmured skeptically, narrowing her eyes "Suppose the bodies you presented were not decoys after all, and Lord Stark's nephew actually is his brother Brandon's. For all we know, this is just an elaborate falsehood meant to regain power for the Targaryens."

_Who knew the Queen could be so paranoid?_ Lord Gregor seemed more amused by that accusation than anything. He coolly told Cersei Lannister "Oh, you need not worry on that, Your Grace. I can put those qualms to rest right now."

He snapped his fingers a third time, and eight more people entered the room from the next door office. Ygritte, Lady Ashara Dayne, Mark Ryswell, Theo Wull, and Ethan Glover stood off to the side for the moment. The other three were armed and in armor. They went over to Rhaenys, Aegon, and Jon, and they stood around them protectively.

Gregor Clegane than turned to the knight in white armor and asked rhetorically "Ser Barristan, who are these men?"

The Lord Commander of Robert's Kingsguard looked as though he had just seen ghosts. _He may as well have. Then again, the Tower of Ghosts is on the other side of the castle._

"Arthur… Oswell… Gerold…" the Stormlander knight muttered softly. Evidently, he was dumbfounded.

"It's good to see you again, Barristan," Gerold Hightower affably told his successor. His two companions nodded in agreement.

"As you've probably surmised, there was no skirmish at the Tower of Joy," Gregor Clegane professed, "I made sure to get there before any fighting broke out. All the same, the three remaining knights of the Targaryen Kingsguard would not abandon their prince's children. Instead, they chose to go into hiding with them. Also, I believe some of you are acquainted with Lady Ashara Dayne of Starfall."

He allowed a minute for everyone to absorb these new tidbits of information. Then he turned back to Barristan Selmy, gestured to Rhaenys, Aegon, and Jon with his left hand, and remarked "Tell me, Ser Barristan. Would the Kingsguard have bothered to protect these three if they knew they were not really of the royal family?"

"No," Ser Barristan Selmy uttered candidly, "They would have gone out in search of Rhaegar's brother and sister and offered their services to them instead. The Kingsguard is sworn to guard the royal family and no one else."

Gregor Clegane smirked in satisfaction. He looked over at the Queen and slyly commented "Does that answer your question, Your Grace?"

Cersei grimaced angrily, but all the same, she nodded her head.

"Alright, so these three are Rhaegar's sons and daughter," Robert confirmed, "But this does not guarantee a lasting association between them and myself. Can you assure me that they will not try to reclaim the Iron Throne?"
"No, but they can," Lord Gregor disclosed, "Would a direct verbal pledge suffice?"

"What do you mean?" the King said inquisitively.

Lord Gregor turned to the three Targaryens and waved them over. As they approached, he reminded them "Just as you practiced."

Rhaenys, Aegon, and Jon stood before King Robert, and they all dropped to one knee before him. Then they each made a solemn declaration.

"I, Rhaenys of House Targaryen, hereby swear to never take up arms against you, Robert of House Baratheon, the First of His Name, King of the Seven Kingdoms. I swear it on my life, the lives of those I love, and the Old Gods and the New."

"I, Aegon of House Targaryen, hereby swear to never take up arms against you, Robert of House Baratheon, the First of His Name, King of the Seven Kingdoms. I swear it on my life, the lives of those I love, and the Old Gods and the New."

"I, Jaehaerys of House Targaryen, hereby swear to never take up arms against you, Robert of House Baratheon, the First of His Name, King of the Seven Kingdoms. I swear it on my life, the lives of those I love, and the Old Gods and the New."

Robert Baratheon had never been one to put all his faith in the words of others. Still, there were some oaths and vows that transcended old rivalries. The pledge of fidelity was among the most sacred of them. Even the King would not simply cast it aside.

Robert Baratheon got to his feet, placed one hand on the shoulder of each of the Targaryens, and declared "Then rise, and from this point on, serve as my loyal vassals. Do this, and I will grant you the protection of the crown, afford you all the corresponding privileges and rights of the noble houses, and cause you no grief or hardship on my part."

He mustn't do this very often; those are not the traditional words to that pledge. But I suppose they're close enough. In any case, they must be what Lord Gregor and the Targaryens were hoping to hear.

"Now that the hostilities have been resolved – for the moment, at least – I suggest we call it a night," the Mountain recommended, "Let us reconvene here at the same time tomorrow. Then we will discuss where we go from here."

That advice was received very favorably. It had been a long day, and while the meeting had been short, it had been somewhat draining for most of the people who attended it. Ser Brynden felt they could all use a good night's rest.

We will most definitely need it. Starting tomorrow, the more pressing items of business are going to be addressed. This could be more exhausting than a week-long battle.

…

Cersei Lannister was furious. More than furious; she was livid.

For whatever reason, her husband was not. That somehow only made her even angrier. How can he be so tranquil?

Robert was pacing the length of the bedchamber. In his hands, he held the scroll Lord Gregor Clegane had given him. He was in the process of reading it, he was deeply immersed in its
contents. Every now and then, he lightly hummed, as though he was impressed by certain details.

"Are you going to read all night, my love?" Cersei said dryly, "Please, come to bed."

"In a minute," he assured her. Just one?

It was ten minutes before he finally rolled the scroll up and placed it on the nightstand. Then he removed his robe and laid down beside his wife.

"What a day this has been," he bluntly remarked. It is not over yet. Not even close.

"I am amazed you can be so indifferent about all this," Cersei perceived.

"Who said I was indifferent?" Robert inquired.

"No one," the Queen pronounced, "Your behavior suggests so."

"Oh, do not let that mislead you, Cersei," the King countered, "I most certainly am not indifferent. I am astounded, bewildered, and affronted. Be that as it may… the conference has only just begun."

"Why should it go on?" she contended, "The man who arranged it – a man who owes everything he has to – just confessed to having hidden the children of your enemy for the last sixteen years. After learning of that, I would have expected you to introduce the Mountain to Ser Ilyn Payne."

"I was tempted to," he admitted, "All the same, Lord Gregor presented a fairly compelling argument. One might assume the only reason someone would shelter the Targaryens would be so that they would one day retake the Iron Throne. Had I known they were alive sooner, that is the conclusion I would have drawn. However, it could very well be possible that Lord Gregor is hoping to find a nonviolent way to end the hostilities between the Baratheons and the Targaryens. After reading that proposal of his, I am starting to believe that his one desire truly is to establish peace in Westeros."

Oh, my darling ignorant husband.

"Or so he claimed," Cersei disputed. She sat up in bed, and then she queried "Do you remember the aftermath of Greyjoy's Rebellion, when Lord Gregor held that one meeting in Clegane's Keep?"

"I could never forget it," Robert claimed. I doubt anyone could. The things we were told that day…

"After it ended, my lord father came to me and gave me a word of warning," Cersei Lannister recounted, "He suggested that perhaps the meeting was merely a pretense for the Mountain to seize more power. Even after Lord Gregor proved the validity of his visions, my father continued to believe that he had some ulterior motive."

"No disrespect to Lord Tywin, but it is quite possible he was just being mistrustful of Lord Gregor," Robert conjectured. Of course he was. He is mistrustful of everyone. That is how he's lived this long.

"He was right to have such reservations," Cersei disputed, "Think on everything Gregor Clegane has done. He arranged a betrothal between the heir to Winterfell and the daughter of Highgarden. He pushed to have the wildlings brought south of the Wall. He strengthened the Night's Watch alongside the Legion without Banners. He even established a tentative peace with Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen. He may have claimed he did all that for the benefit of Westeros, but in the long run, the North and the Targaryen sympathizers would be the ones to benefit the most."
Robert took a minute to think on that. Ultimately, he gave a light shrug and murmured "I see why you might believe that. Even so, it does not entail the North and the Targaryen sympathizers are the only ones to benefit. The union between the North and the Reach is just one of many that Lord Gregor helped to bring about. Some of the wildlings have moved outside the North. The Watch is meant to be neutral in the affairs of the realm, and the Legion is not a lifelong occupation. As for the Targaryens across the Narrow Sea… you should not underestimate the good that could come from the truce with them. Right now, I believe this truce will make Lord Gregor's proposal easier to enact."

Cersei did not know whether to be impressed or annoyed with her husband's counterarguments. *He is more shrewd than I gave him credit for.* That aside, that last statement he made was a little astonishing. "You are seriously considering going ahead with his proposal?"

"Indeed I am," Robert Baratheon proclaimed, "From the moment I first sat the Iron Throne, my greatest fear has been… that I would be a lousy king, actually. But my next greatest was that the Targaryens would seek to take back what was once theirs. I once thought I would only achieve peace of mind if every last Targaryen was dead. Then I read Lord Gregor's proposal, and I found it to be a promising alternative. Maybe if you read it, you'd think the same."

"Perhaps I'll read it later," Cersei suggested. *But I doubt it would sway my mind so easily. I've never taken much stock in words, printed or spoken.*

All of a sudden, there was a knock on the door. Robert looked over at the door and asked "Who is it?"

"It is the Crown Prince, Your Grace," the voice of Ser Preston Greenfield replied from the other side, "He wishes an audience with you."

Robert swiftly got out of bed, put his robe back on, and called out "Let him in."

Cersei remained partly under the covers when her son Jasper entered the room. He was still in his doublet, trousers, and cloak. He looked a little tired, but despite the circles under his eyes, he was still quite handsome. *Even when he is fatigued, he looks exactly what a future king should like.*

After shutting the door, he cordially greeted his parents with "Evening, Father. Evening, Mother."

Cersei smiled at him. "Hello, sweetling."

Robert walked around the bed, folded his arms, and stated "I assume you have a good reason for coming to us at this hour."

"I certainly do," Jasper asserted, "I would speak with you on what we learned earlier this evening."

Robert scoffed. "You came at the most opportune time. We were in the midst of discussing that ourselves."

"I suspected you would be," their son proclaimed, "I wish to add my voice to your conversation."


Jasper inserted his hands into his pockets and stared off at the wall for a moment. Then he faced his parents and said "I was every bit as surprised by Lord Gregor's revelations as you were. However, I do not think he should be condemned for his actions. Instead, he should be commended."
Robert cocked his head and inquired "Just why do you believe that?"

"Many reasons," Jasper professed, "First, there is everything he has done for the realm thus far. You may suppose he was actually using the Legion without Banners for his own ambitions, but not every man looks for personal profit in his actions. After two years in Moat Cailin, I have learned that there is such a thing as doing a good deed without expecting or receiving something in return.

"Next, there is what he did for me personally," the prince continued, "I never told you this, and I had no plans to, but now would be as good a time as any. Not too long ago, I was not thrilled by the concept of becoming the next king of Westeros. In fact, I was all but mortified of it."

"You were?" Cersei was sincerely alarmed. She never would have guessed her elder son – who was strong in both body and mind, and who seemed to fear nothing – would have had such profound self-doubt.

Jasper nodded his head and revealed "Lord Gregor noticed, and he confronted me on the matter. It was he who gave me the confidence I lacked. You see, we had a long, meaningful talk, and by the end of it, he convinced me that I would be a good king someday. If he was actually conspiring to help the Targaryens retake the Iron Throne, why would he have told me that?"

*He does present a fine case.* Robert must have thought the same, as he rubbed his chin and nodded his head in agreement.

"There is also what Lord Gregor has not done," Jasper contended.

"Such as?" Robert beckoned him.

"I was in the North for two years," Jasper pointed out, "Although Ser Arys Oakheart never left my side, he is only one man. It would have been very easy for Lord Gregor and the officers of the Legion to overpower Ser Arys and take me prisoner."

The King and the Queen were startled by the implications of that observation. Cersei said inquisitively "What are you saying?"

"If he wanted to, Lord Gregor could have encouraged me to abdicate the crown," Jasper disputed, "Doing so would have made it easier for the Targaryens to make a comeback. However, a far simpler solution would have been to remove me from our house's line of succession altogether. It must have occurred to Lord Gregor that if he wished to give the Targaryens an advantage over the Baratheons, the quickest way would have been to hold the current heir to the Iron Throne hostage."

*Or to kill him,* Cersei realized.

"He would have had the means and the opportunity to do such a thing," Robert thought aloud, "Once you were taken, it would have been nearly impossible to recover you. Our armies would never have been able to lay siege to Moat Cailin from the south. It would not have made much difference if Ned aided us, as the moat is now impenetrable from the north, as well. Add that to the fact that the Legion has enough provisions to last them for at least a decade, and Lord Gregor could have held you indefinitely."

"What matters is that he did not," Jasper debated, "While I was in the North, Lord Gregor never allowed any harm to befall me. For the duration of my stay at Moat Cailin, he was a chivalrous and accommodating host. I owe my self-confidence to him. I understand that this situation with the Targaryens changes many things, but it has not altered by view of him. I know some punitive measures may have to be taken, and I am aware that the decision on what to do with Lord Gregor is
yours to make. All I ask is that you remember all I've told you before you judge him prematurely."

Strangely, Cersei could not help but grin. *He has a gentle heart. Normally, I would say a monarch with a gentle heart is doomed to fail. But Jasper just might prove me wrong.*

"As you wish, my boy," Robert proclaimed, "For the moment, I am undecided on how to deal with Lord Gregor. A part of me is still furious with him for withholding the truth of Rhaegar Targaryen's children. At the same time, I am beginning to give some serious consideration to using his proposal concerning them."

"That may be the best course of action, Father," Jasper debated, "Lord Gregor definitely knows what he's doing. You should trust in him as I do."

Yet his trust does not appear to extend to us. Cersei leaned forward, placed her hands on her knees, and stated "Jasper, I can comprehend why you would believe in Gregor Clegane's capabilities. But do you have so little faith in your father's ability to do the right thing without the Mountain?"

"Of course not, Mother," Jasper promptly replied, "If I have led either of you to think that I am choosing Lord Gregor over you, I sincerely apologize. I do not wish to give you the impression that I am taking Lord Gregor's side. I promise you; I am on no one's side. In a scenario such as this, there should be no sides."

"Perhaps not," Robert conceded, "That would be the case in an ideal world. But the world is far from ideal"

"I quite agree," Jasper commented, "Still, with the likes of Lord Gregor and the Legion without Banners looking after the realm, the world has a greater chance to become an ideal place."

As of now, that is up for debate.

Jasper then brought his hand up to his mouth and let out a loud yawn.

"Tired?" Cersei presumed.

"Very," her son affirmed, scratching his brow, "In any case, I've said what I came to say. Take some time to reflect on it."

"We shall," Robert asserted.

Jasper was content. He yawned again and murmured "I should probably get some rest."

"You could use it," Cersei observed.

Jasper chuckled and nodded his agreement. He then started walking towards the entrance of the bedchamber. When he was halfway there, he turned back and pronounced "One last thing, Father. When the meeting ended, I was approached by Lord Gregor. He asked me to relay a message to you."

"What message?" Robert said inquiringly.

Jasper looked at his father and told him "I do not recall his exact words, but essentially, he wanted you to know that he did not feed you falsehoods about Lyanna Stark."

Cersei was perplexed. So was Robert. He asked "How so?"
Jasper enlightened them with: "While he did conceal certain things – mainly the Targaryens – from you and the rest of the world, he insists that the last things Lyanna Stark said of you were not embellished."

Cersei did not know what to make of that statement, but Robert seemed quaintly pleased to hear it.

"I am clueless as to what he meant, but he claimed you would understand," Jasper professed.

"He was right," Robert confirmed, smiling a bit, "Thank you for informing me."

"Of course," the prince asserted. He then walked back over to the door, opened it up, and stepped outside. Before he closed it again, he declared "I will see you in the morn."

"Good night, my prince," Cersei bade her eldest.

Shortly after Jasper left, Robert returned to bed. As he cast aside his robe again and got in beside his wife, Cersei asked in interest "What was that about? What were Lyanna Stark's last words of you?"

Robert did not respond right away. Instead, he stared at her for a full minute, as though he was wondering how she would react to his answer. After that, he let out a deep sigh and apprised her "I don't like to talk about it with most others, but I will be forward with you. When Lord Gregor returned from the Tower of Joy, he told me how Lyanna Stark's dying wish was for me to find happiness with another woman and to be the best ruler I could possibly be."

Cersei cocked her head. "That is an odd final request, coming from the woman who had just birthed the child of the man you killed at the Trident."

"I can see why you would think that," Robert claimed, "But those words changed my life. They inspired me to stop being the man I was and become the man I am. A better man, as well as a better leader of men."

Cersei was not amazed very easily. At this moment, she was downright astounded. "They truly had so great an impact on you?"

"They did," Robert affirmed, "Now, after sixteen years, I have finally fulfilled her wishes. Even Lord Gregor and the Targaryens have faith in my reign."

*If they are to be believed, that is.*

"To be a good ruler is just one of the two things she wished for you," Cersei noted, "You said the other was-"

"To find happiness with another woman," Robert finished for her. He then grinned, inched closer to his wife, and placed a hand on her cheek. He softly told her "Which I did. When I lost Lyanna Stark, I never thought I would love anyone ever again. I proved myself wrong shortly after our wedding. What I felt for Lyanna is but a shadow compared to my feelings for you."

That last remark effectively rendered Cersei speechless. She knew Robert cared for her deeply, but she did not hear it from his mouth regularly. A wide grin came across her face, and she placed a gentle kiss against her husband's lips.

"You mustn't tell anyone that, though," he uttered jokingly, "I have a reputation to maintain."

Cersei chuckled and playfully remarked "Your secret is safe with me, Your Grace."
"Good," he acknowledged. He then took his other hand, caressed her breast through her nightgown, and deviously proposed "Now, what say we shed a few more 'secrets'?

That was all the incentive she needed. With the next minute, her nightgown was off and he was in her.

Like all of Harrenhal's highborn guests, the King and Queen had their apartments in the Kingspyre Tower. Normally, the Wailing Tower was the loudest and noisiest of Harrenhal's five towers. That night was an exception.

…

Before he even got there, Lord Jon Arryn predicted that the conference at Harrenhal would be a most fascinating event.

His suspicions were confirmed during the very first meeting, when Lord Gregor Clegane opened the talks with a very alarming revelation.

Prince Rhaegar Targaryen's children alive after all these years. Had I not seen them with my own eyes, I never would have thought it true.

Be that as it may, it was merely the first of many disclosures. While it may have been the most shocking, there were several other topics discussed during the conference that were just as relevant and significant.

While the purpose of the first meeting was mainly to establish that Rhaegar's children were alive and well, the purpose of the second meeting was to determine what would be done with them.

Naturally, Lord Gregor Clegane was the first to offer a solution. He thinks of everything before the rest of us think of anything.

Based on the Mountain's claims, the Targaryens were prepared to fully renounce their right to the Iron Throne and King's Landing. However, they did not wish to be denied a home to call their own. By "home," they did not mean a small house in a village or a cottage out in the middle of nowhere. The only way Lord Gregor's proposal regarding the Targaryens would work was if they were given at least one holdfast to call their own.

Therefore, he announced to the King "Dragonstone belonged to the Targaryens before King's Landing was even built, Your Grace. As such, it should be returned to them."

Robert rubbed his chin and thought on that for a minute. Then he lightly shrugged and muttered "I suppose that's a reasonable request. Dragonstone is just a few leagues northwest of the capital city. They'd be sufficiently far away for my comfort, but close enough to appease the sympathizers. Stannis may not be willing to part with it so readily, though."

"Then send his family back to Storm's End," Gregor Clegane suggested, "Renly and I have spoken on this, and we both believe it would be best to rename your Master of Laws to the position of Lord of Storm's End."

Robert looked to his younger brother for confirmation. Renly Baratheon gave a cocky grin and wryly muttered "I may be a better man than Stannis, but he's the better lord. He'd do a much finer job of managing our ancestral home than I would, Robert. Besides… I find I am having too much fun in the Legion to be bothered with the duties of a lord."

The King laughed at his brother's dry remarks. Once his laughter stopped, he gave a nod and
declared "Very well then. I will speak with Stannis once when we get back to King's Landing. Once he has relinquished his domain over Dragonstone, I will move to bestow it upon the Targaryens once again."

"We appreciate the gesture, Your Grace," Aegon proclaimed. Rhaenys and Jon Targaryen murmured their agreement.

Robert nodded again. Then he leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. He said inquiringly "You are certain Dragonstone will suffice? After all, it is just a lone island out in the middle of where Blackwater Bay and the Narrow Sea converge."

"Perhaps to you, Your Grace," Rhaenys disputed, "To us, it is a chief icon of our family's lineage."

*I have a similar view of the Eyrie. All hightborn individuals see their ancestral homes in such a light.*

"Fair enough," King Robert commented, "All the same, there are some who might argue that one holdfast will be inadequate for House Targaryen."

Jon Targaryen then stepped forward and stated "If I remember my history right, Your Grace, the day our father Prince Rhaegar was born, the Targaryen stronghold of Summerhall was burned down. It has been a ruin since then. Maybe we could consider restoring it."

Robert appeared to approve of that idea. He proclaimed "I could see that. Two holdfasts in two regions of the Seven Kingdoms; one on land and one in the sea. No one would view the Targaryens as underprivileged then. Yes; I will give the idea some thought."

*Already we’re making great progress.*

The next issue they debated at that meeting was the Targaryens' official status. It took a great deal of persuasion from a lot of different parties, but King Robert ultimately agreed to allow the Targaryens to retain their old titles. In other words, Rhaenys was still a princess, and Aegon and Jon were still princes. *This means their aunt and uncle across the Narrow Sea are once again royalty, too.*

At one point, potential marriage options for the Targaryens were discussed, too. It was then that Willas Tyrell revealed that he intended to wed Princess Rhaenys.

The princess confirmed his claims, as did his grandmother, Olenna Tyrell. Lady Olenna had already given the match her blessing. Although Lord Mace Tyrell was unaware of it, the Queen of Thorns did not believe her son would be a problem.

*A rose of the Reach has already married into the wolves of the North. Now another one intends to marry a dragon. The Tyrells are even more ambitious than I thought.*

Aegon had no plans to marry anyone just yet. Neither did his brother Jon. However, a wildling girl by the name of Ygritte had accompanied him to Harrenhal. Lord Jon had quickly noticed how much time the two of them spent together each day. *I may be the oldest person here, but I know young love when I see it.*

Although the first and second days of the conference were mostly centered around the Targaryens, very little of them was mentioned on the third and fourth days. Those days were spent more on conversing about what was going on throughout the Seven Kingdoms and the lands north of the Wall. Basically, the meetings were a methodical review of how prepared each region of Westeros currently was for the upcoming hardships the Long Night would bring. *As of now, it would seem*
we are ready for the trials to come. But we cannot afford to become complacent. It would be a grave error if we were to underestimate the Others.

On the fifth day of the conference, the Targaryens were once again the main subject of interest. However, this time, the focus was more on the two who were residing in Essos instead of the three who were still in the Seven Kingdoms.

Some rather bizarre topics were addressed at that meeting.

For instance, Gregor Clegane talked at length about a red priestess named Melisandre who had entered Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen's services a few months back. Of course, the small council knew of the Red Woman; they had been aware of her for as long as the Legion without Banners had. However, even the King and his Hand did not know of a certain theory Lord Gregor had about her. To everyone's astonishment, the Mountain had reason to believe that Melisandre has the same visions – the same "source" – as he.

Lord Gregor frequently emphasized that the Red Woman was conniving, dangerous, unpredictable, and not to be trusted. However, under certain circumstances, he claimed that she could be useful to them. Even so, he insisted that she should only be consulted as a last resort.

Once the issue of the Red Woman was settled, they moved on to a more pressing matter.

Ever since the end of Greyjoy's Rebellion, Lord Gregor had often spoken of a certain "advantage" the Targaryens would have against the Others. He had not shared this knowledge without anyone, not even the secret council. It was then that he finally revealed what the advantage was. Once he did, no one believed him straightaway.

To be precise, everyone either did not want to believe him or was inclined to question him. As for Lord Jon, he did not know what to make of this new information.

"You mean to tell us that sometime in the next few years, dragons will return to the world?" Jon Arryn whispered in astonishment.

"Correct, my Lord Hand," Gregor Clegane affirmed. He gazed around the room and pronounced "I know what some of you are going to say. You'll be keen to point out that the last of the dragons died during the reign of Aegon III. Well, I would like to present two counterarguments. First, while the dragons have been gone for a hundred years, the Others had been absent for eight thousand. It is true that the Others do not reproduce in the fashion of living beings, but if they can return, anything can. Secondly… there might be no dragons in the world at present, but there are dragon eggs."

"And where might these eggs be found?" Queen Cersei queried sardonically.

"They are in the possession of Magister Illyrio Mopatis," Gregor Clegane disclosed.

"You mean to say the man hosting Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen has more than those two dragons in his custody?" Edmure Tully presumed.

"Indeed, Ser Edmure," the Mountain professed, "However, the magister does not know the eggs are real. He believes they turned to stone long ago."

That just goes to show how little anyone knows of dragons.

"Truthfully, he is partly right," Lord Gregor went on, "The eggs are currently dormant. They can still be hatched, but to do so, they will require fire and blood."
"You mean they will need a sacrifice of some kind, my lord?" Jon Targaryen assumed.

"Just so, Jon," Gregor Clegane told his squire. He continued looking around the room and stated "If I knew where the eggs were, I would advocate that we seize them from Magister Illyrio. Unfortunately, even I do not know where he is storing them at present. For all I know, they may not even be in Pentos right now."

"So how will we find them?" Aegon Targaryen inquired.

"Our only viable option is to wait until the magister himself brings them out," Lord Gregor contended. He then looked toward the King, the Queen, and the Hand, and he muttered "I assume most of you are aware that Viserys Targaryen is in the process of selling his sister for an army."

"The units we have guarding them did mention that in a missive" Lord Jon recalled.

Robert scratched his temple and remarked "They said something about a scheme Viserys had to marry Daenerys to a Dothraki horselord named Khal Drogo."

"He did that in my visions, as well," Lord Gregor disclosed, "From what I've heard from my fellow Legionnaires, Viserys still has every intention of going through with that plan."

"In your opinion, my lord, what should be done about that?" Rhaenys enquired.

"I personally would prefer to prevent that wedding altogether," Gregor Clegane revealed, "Nevertheless, if it were to occur, it would be beneficial to us in more than one way."

"Beneficial how?" Lord Eddard Stark asked.

"When the Night King's armies come for us, we'll need as many fighters as we can find to counter them," the Mountain contended, "The Dothraki are very capable warriors, and Khal Drogo commands forty thousand of them. They might not do so well in the cold, given the climate of their natural habitat and how many of them prefer to ride bare-chested. But that's nothing a few layers of thick wool apiece won't cure."

That would not be too difficult to manage. Right now, wool is relatively inexpensive in our economy.

"I will not deny that we could use the additional manpower," the King declared, "Even so, I have certain misgivings about allowing a khalasar into the Seven Kingdoms."

"So do I, Your Grace," Lord Gregor claimed, "I am merely considering all possibilities. We may get by without the Dothraki, but the dragons are critical to our survival. However, Magister Illyrio will not present the eggs until Daenerys Targaryen's wedding."

"Then she'll have to wed the Khal Drogo?" Lady Ashara Dayne assumed grimly.

"She will have to go through with the ceremony," Gregor Clegane contended, "But only until Magister Illyrio gives her the eggs. Once she has them, we can intervene. We would be able to extract her, her brother, and all our fellow Westerosi from Pentos before the Dothraki even have a chance to stop us."

"That sounds like an excellent plan, my lord," Jon Targaryen commented, "Just one problem. What if Daenerys decides she actually wants to marry Drogo?"

There was a short interval of tense silence in the room. I doubt any of us considered that possibility.
"That is very unlikely, Jon," the Mountain informed his squire, "But I suppose it could happen. If it does, we'll just deal with that matter as it comes. As I said before, the Dothraki are not the important part. The dragons are."

"Yes," Cersei Lannister mumbled scathingly. "Let us delve further into that subject. When the dragons are born, how do you intend to use them against the Others?"

The tallest man in the room turned his attention to the Queen and remarked "If this sounds disrespectful, Your Grace, I beseech your pardon, but I'd have thought the solution was obvious. Think about it: the Others thrive in environments teeming with ice, and dragons breathe fire."

*I see his point. The two substances do not agree with each other.*

"I already deduced that, my lord," Cersei Lannister murmured bluntly, "What I meant was how do you propose to control them?"

"That… will be a shade more difficult," Gregor Clegane disclosed, "Again, the Targaryens will play a major role. Only they can get the eggs to hatch. Alas, even they cannot fully control the dragons. However, with proper rearing and a few experienced wargs, we can bring the dragons to serve the throne, regardless of who sits it."

"That is a risky proposition, Lord Gregor," King Robert pronounced, "But from the way you describe it, it provides our best chance of bringing the dragons under our dominion. Therefore, the small council and I will assemble a special team to see to that task."

"Aye, Your Grace," the Mountain avowed.

Lord Jon Arryn and some of the other people there still had mixed feelings about these dragons and how to train them. *If we fail to control them, the results could be just as disastrous to us as the Others.* Even so, this was an opportunity they had to follow up on. Another one would not present itself anytime soon, based on Lord Gregor's claims.

The sixth day of the conference was spent discussing ways to build up the forces of the Seven Kingdoms. At this point in time, the Seven Kingdoms collectively had around three hundred thousand individuals who could wield a sword. *At most; that is a desperately optimistic estimate. Whatever the true number is, I am certain less than half of those men have witnessed actual warfare firsthand.*

Even if there really were three hundred thousand Westerosi who could fight, there was no telling how many wights the Night's King had in his army. Probably millions. *Every wildling, black brother, or other person who died north of the Wall in the last eight millennia could rise again.* With that in mind, the Seven Kingdoms would be hopelessly outnumbered. They were in dire need of reinforcements.

It was agreed that the Dothraki would only be consulted as a last resort. Fortunately, there were plenty of other viable options available.

Over seventy thousand wildlings were still north of the Wall. There was time yet for Mance Rayder to bring them south. Of that mass, at least a third of them could fight. By consolidating them, the armies of the Seven Kingdoms would grow by about ten percent. *That is a start…*

For true strength, they would have to look across the Narrow Sea. There was no shortage of capable warriors in Essos and Slaver's Bay. The one downside was that most of these individuals
needed to be bought first.

The Unsullied were said to be the greatest soldiers in the Known World. They were bred from boyhood to be devout, fearless, and unwavering. King Robert and many of the others seemed to find them quite appealing. Others such as Lord Eddard greatly disapproved of the notion, as the Unsullied were slaves, and slavery was banned in Westeros.

The sellsword companies of the Free Cities were not as controversial. Almost no one objected to giving them some thought.

Some of the more promising companies that were considered that day were the Second Sons, the Long Lances, the Company of the Cat, the Stormcrows, the Windblown, the Bright Banners, the Stormbreakers, and the Company of the Rose. Ser Gerion Lannister even suggested they hire the Brave Companions, but only if they had no one else to turn to.

There was one group that Lord Gregor Clegane seemed especially determined to seek out. His interest in them involved more than the services they had to offer. This particular group was the Golden Company.

"I have had a vision of the Golden Company," the Mountain explained to everyone, "Like my premonition of the Long Night, this vision is one that has recurrently very often. However, while the vision about the Long Night is always exactly the same, the one about the Golden Company changes on occasion."

"Go on, my lord," Jon Arryn beckoned him.

The Mountain then disclosed "Half the time, the vision ends unremarkably. The other half of the time… it ends with the Golden Company landing on the eastern shores of Westeros."

Lord Jon was alarmed. So was nearly every other person in the room, including the members of the secret council. *It appears he has told no one else of this.*

"Might you have shared this information with the world earlier?" the Queen muttered scornfully.

"I simply did not see the need to," Gregor Clegane professed, "Since the vision had two different endings, I took that to mean that there was only a fifty percent chance that Westeros would be invaded. Furthermore, the only reason the Golden Company was so bold as to invade was because Westeros was in a very weak state at the time. At present, it is not."

*Indeed not.*

"Why did they invade in the first place?" Lady Olenna Tyrell inquired.

"Because they were laboring under the misapprehension that they were following the rightful king of Westeros," the Mountain expounded, "'Aegon Targaryen.'"

A wave of confusion passed over the room. Prince Aegon was the most confused of all. He raised an eyebrow and murmured "What?"

Lord Gregor smirked, folded his arms, and declared "I have a story to tell you all. Near the end of King Robert's Rebellion, some of the more fanatical members of the Mad King's court took extreme measures to ensure the survival of the Targaryen bloodline. They got the idea to switch the then-infant Aegon with a lookalike. They found such a babe from a family that lived along Pisswater Bend. The boy's father sold him to them for a bottle of Arbor Gold."
"The Sack of King's Landing occurred before they could do the exchange," Lord Gregor went on, "Like the rest of the world, the Targaryen loyalists all thought Aegon was dead. Be that as it may, the lookalike was still useful to them. So they transported the Pisswater boy to the Free Cities. Eventually, they met up with the exiled Jon Connington."

Jon Arryn recognized the name. Prince Rhaegar's closest friend, the former Lord of Griffin's Roost. The Lord of the Eyre had always assumed that Eddard Stark's nephew had been named for him. Now, it turned out that Jon Targaryen had also been named for his late father's best friend.

Before anyone could interrupt him, Gregor Clegane proclaimed "Despite what you may have heard, Jon Connington did not drink himself to death in exile. That was a falsehood invented to help him disappear. In actuality, the Targaryen loyalists sought him out. Connington assumed responsibility for the Aegon imposter and raised him as his son. He calls himself 'Griff' and his charge 'Young Griff'. The two of them have lived peaceably in Essos for the last fifteen years. But not alone. That is where the Golden Company enters the scene."

The Mountain paused for almost a full minute here. Then he pronounced "The imposter Aegon sincerely believes that he is the rightful King of Westeros. Connington has told him that lie so often that I would not be surprised if he has come to believe it himself. The men of the Golden Company may question his identity, but they do not truly care. So long as they are paid, they would follow anyone."

That is the defining characteristic of a sellsword company.

"This is very unnerving, Gregor," Princess Elia perceived, "Not to mention sickeningly outrageous. If there was a plan to replace my son, I would have known of it."

"I realize that, Elia," the Mountain stated, "There is no doubt in my mind that the real Aegon Targaryen is the one standing before me. Apart from that… my visions of the Golden Company differed in another way. Griff and Young Griff were only in the version that resulted in the invasion of the Seven Kingdoms. They were completely absent from the one with the unremarkable outcome."

"Then for all we know, this story could be just that and nothing more," Ashara Dayne conjectured.

"Just so," Gregor Clegane conceded, "Either way, I believe we should approach the Golden Company. If Connington and his foster son are with them, they must be informed that they are following the wrong man. And even if they are not harboring the false Aegon… they are the largest sellsword company in the Free Cities. They would complement our forces nicely."

"Perhaps they would," the King thought aloud.

The rest of that day's meeting was spent deliberating who else could be convinced to join the people of the Seven Kingdoms in the struggle against the Others. It ended rather promisingly.

The seventh day of the conference was also the last. Most of the meeting principally involved reviewing everything that had been covered over the first six days and deciding how they would follow up on it all.

Every person who attended the conference was allowed the opportunity to provide their own input on how to proceed. All the same, in every case, the verdict was ultimately made by only one of them. Just as when he was a boy, Robert has to have the final word.
The King declared that he would implement Lord Gregor Clegane's proposal regarding the Targaryens by year's end. However, he claimed he and the rest of the realm would still need assurances that the Targaryens no longer vied for the Iron Throne. As such, one of them would have to go to King's Landing and serve as a temporary hostage of the crown.

Rhaenys volunteered herself for that part. Given her impending marriage to Willas Tyrell, she was probably the most sensible choice of the three. Princess Elia Martell was understandably reluctant to part with her daughter after being separated from her for so long, but Robert and Lord Jon assured Rhaegar's widow that they would be reunited soon enough. This was merely a precautionary measure.

Robert also decreed that he would dispatch envoys to the Free Cities and Slaver's Bay. Each envoy would get as many capable fighters as they could find and bring them back to Westeros. Robert was hoping to recruit at least one hundred thousand units.

There was one small hindrance to this plan: the Royal Fleet only had so many ships.

Ser Maron Greyjoy and Lady Asha Greyjoy were able to help in that regard. They offered to write their uncle Lord Victarion Greyjoy and ask him to lend any Ironborn ships he could spare to the crown. Between the vessels of the Royal Fleet and the greater part of the Iron Fleet, they had more than enough space for a hundred thousand foreign warriors. Robert was satisfied.

Near the end of the meeting, Robert made three unexpected announcements, each more alarming and astonishing than the one before it.

Firstly, he wanted Aegon Targaryen to be the envoy to the Golden Company. While he realized there was only a slim chance that Jon Connington really was alive and sheltering a Targaryen imposter, they could not afford to assume otherwise. Before they could win the Golden Company to their cause, they would have to expose the fraud, and Robert debated that only the real Aegon Targaryen could do that.

Aegon claimed he was all too pleased to do so. For various reasons, he would travel under guard in a party composed of both Legionnaires and royal army officers.

Secondly, Robert was determined to acquire Magister Illyrio Mopatis' dragon eggs as soon as possible. As such, he would allow the wedding between Daenerys Targaryen and Khal Drogo to take place. As of yet, Drogo had not even met Daenerys or consented to marry her, but Lord Gregor insisted that the wedding was all but inevitable.

Although a hundred Westerosi were already guarding Daenerys and her brother, Robert was going to send a larger group of soldiers their way. If they'll be handling dragons soon, they'll need reinforcements. He intended for the second group to arrive just before the nuptials. Jon Targaryen would be in this group. The King contended that his presence was critical to the mission; it would be harm proof to Viserys and Daenerys that their brother's children lived and that he had sired three.

King Robert also declared that he desired a member of the Legion's secret council to head this company.

Lord Gregor was quick to put his name forth. The King was just as quick to deny his request. When the Mountain bade to know why, Robert reasoned that with everything going on in the world and the Long Night inching ever closer, Westeros could not afford to lose its Master of Order. More to the point, it could not afford to lose Gregor Clegane. He was too valuable to lose. That must be what dissuaded the King from calling for Lord Gregor's head.
The most perplexing aspect of this announcement was Robert's actual choice for the second group's leader. Instead of picking the Mountain for the role, he picked his lady wife.

No one was more stunned by that suggestion than Lady Dacey Clegane herself. At first, she adamantly opposed it. She claimed that she would make a lousy liaison to Magister Illyrio, and she insisted that her place was in the North with her lord husband and children. In fact, she and Lord Gregor had brought their daughter and two youngest sons with them to Harrenhal.

Somehow, the King managed to sway her mind. What ultimately won her over was his point about how as a warrior woman from Bear Island, she would be a superb symbol of strength and aptitude for Westeros as a whole.

In the end, Lady Dacey accepted the appointment, albeit hesitantly.

The King’s unexpected third announcement was also the final point of the meeting, and even Jon Arryn could not have forecasted it:

At the start of the next year, King Robert Baratheon wanted Lord Eddard Stark to send his daughters Sansa and Arya to King's Landing. He also wished Lord Gregor Clegane to send his eldest son and heir Rickard there at the same time.

The reason Robert wanted Ned to send his daughters south was obvious to the Hand. Although he had long ago moved past his infatuation with Lady Lyanna, the King still wished to see the Baratheons and the Starks united through marriage. He aims for Prince Jasper to fall in love with one of the girls in the capital city. While Eddard was plainly averse to the idea of sending his daughters south, he assured the King that he would give the matter some thought. Ned will do it if Robert orders him to. And he likely will.

The Cleganes were not so compliant. Rickard was too old and not high enough in status for any of the King’s daughters. They made no accusations, but it was quite obvious to Jon Arryn that they suspected their son was going to be a prisoner alongside Rhaenys Targaryen.

Robert gathered that much, as well. He hastily informed Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey that their heir would not be in the capital city indefinitely. He would only be there for a short while. He did not pretend Rickard would merely be a ward of the crown, nor did he deny that Rickard would be a hostage.

He tried to reassure them by claiming that Rickard would be allowed every right as befitted his birth. Alas, that was not enough to assure Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey that their son would be safe.

Fortunately, Prince Jasper Baratheon managed to give them such assurance. Sometime during the conference, it had been decided that Jasper too would go back to King's Landing in the near future. He and Rickard Clegane were close friends. He gave Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey his word that he would look after Rickard whilst they were in the capital city.

Since the Crown Prince had been residing at Moat Cailin for most of the last two years, the moat's lord and lady had come to know him well. They seemed comforted by the Jasper's words. Evidently, they trusted him more than his royal father. More importantly, they trusted him enough that they felt their son would be safe with him.

As such, they agreed to the King's demand.

Be that as it may, they were still not pleased with it. Jon Arryn found that immediately after the
meeting ended. When everyone filed out of the room, Lord Gregor lingered at the door.

"A word, Lord Jon?" the Mountain requested when the Lord Paramount of the Vale reached him.

"Certainly, Lord Gregor," the Hand of the King replied.

They waited until everyone else headed down the corridor. Once they were alone, Gregor Clegane turned to the Hand and muttered "You know my only desire is to see Westeros prosper, correct?"

"Of course I know that," the Warden of the East responded, "Ever since you were appointed to the small council, it has been your prime objective."

"It still is," Gregor Clegane declared. He then furrowed his brow, leaned closer to the older man, and told him in a very somber tone "However, family means more to me than anything, even the well-being of the Seven Kingdoms. So I wish to make one thing very clear. If anything happens to Rickard whilst he is in King's Landing… if I discover he has been abused, mistreated, or mishandled in any way… the Targaryens and the Long Night will be the LEAST of the King's worries."

Lord Jon was not very surprised to hear that. Although he did not take well to threats, he could pardon Lord Gregor this one. After all, he had been in the Mountain's position once before.

_I started a war for my boys, and they weren't even my sons by blood._

Jon Arryn would never forget when the Mad King sent him that message, ordering him to send Robert and Eddard's heads. Anger did not even begin to describe what he had felt at that moment. It was pure, incomprehensible fury. He had never been more enraged in his life than when he read that horrific letter. He had promptly shredded the parchment and burnt its scraps. He had even crushed the skull of the raven who had delivered the message. If the missive had been sent by rider, he would have thrown the messenger out the Moon Door personally.

"Rickard will be fine, my lord," Jon Arryn calmly asserted, "As you yourself noticed, the King is not the same man he once was. That man would have called for your execution the moment you presented Rhaenys, Aegon, and Jon Targaryen to him. The man he is now… is a better man. He is a man of reason."

A small smile crept onto Gregor Clegane's face, and all the aggression vanished from his countenance. He murmured "I suppose you are right. But as a favor to me, would you look after my son?"

"Just as I looked after my own wards," Jon Arryn professed.

"Thank you," Gregor Clegane stated gratefully.

Since the conference was now over, none of the attendees planned to remain in Harrenhal for much longer. They would stay one more night, and then they would depart before noon the next day.

Although the conference was over, one final development came up at dinner that night.

Halfway through the meal, the maester of Harrenhal was summoned to his rookery. Ten minutes later, he rushed back into the Hall of the Hundred Hearths. He came back with a raven on his arm.

A white raven.

There was only one reason the Citadel would send out a white raven.
Summer is over. Autumn has begun.

And once autumn ended…

Chapter End Notes

Note: Thus concludes the third act of this story. In the next update, the fourth act (which may very well be the longest, as well) will begin.

By the way, I'd like to establish two more points. Firstly, despite how good Robert seems to be taking the situation, the Targaryen/Baratheon dispute is not over. Not by a longshot. Secondly, although Sansa and Arya are going to King's Landing, their plotlines won't be the same as they were in the books. Sansa won't become a political hostage; Arya won't be forced to go on the lam. But them going to King's Landing will be critical to the story in another way. I won't explain how; let's just say it will concern the future of Westeros. In a literal capacity.

Until next time!
After ten long and plentiful years, the Great Summer had finally reached its end. Autumn had come to Westeros.

Most of the inhabitants of the Seven Kingdoms could generally derive some amount of pleasure from autumn, even though it was the precursor to winter. However, it was well-known throughout the realm that the following winter would be the most arduous one in eight thousand years.

_The dead are waiting in the shadows. The Sun shines now. Whilst the sky is clear, we are safe. But once the storms begin, it is another matter entirely._

There were many who believed that when the next winter came, they would never see sunlight again. Those people could not be blamed for thinking so. After all, when the Others arrived, darkness would overtake the land.

Of course, the absence of light meant little and less to those who did not possess the ability to see. Certainly, sunlight brought heat with it, but the Sun's rays did not generate much warmth this far north. _Even in summer, natural light does not affect the average temperature outside._

Aemon Targaryen's vision had started to fail him long ago. He had been completely blind for the last twenty years. Nevertheless, he was as sane and wise as ever.

Additionally the loss of his sight had also heightened his sense of hearing. The slightest wisp of
wind could not escape his ears.

At this time, Aemon was sitting at his desk in his quarters. Clydas was sitting in a chair with an old tome in his hands. The steward was reading the words aloud.

Although the maester had been unable to enjoy books on his own since long before the Year of the False Spring, he could still enjoy them with the aid of another. He found that was the best way to pass the time. Without books, his day would have been dull and eventful.

Luckily for him, Castle Black had no shortage of books. He could live another hundred years and still they would not run out of good reading material.

Currently, Clydas was giving him a lengthy account of the Andals and how they first came to Westeros. Lately, Aemon had been requesting a number of tales centered around the most historic instances of countrywide change in Westeros. Another such instance may be upon us soon. But once it passes, will any of us be left to catalogue it?

Clydas was in the midst of describing how the Faith of the Seven became the dominant religion in the Seven Kingdoms when he was abruptly interrupted. A loud knock on the door to the chamber cut him off in midsentence.

The maester slowly turned in the direction of the noise and softly called out "Yes?"

The door was opened and the guard – it sounded like Lark the Sisterman – told him "Your visitors from Moat Cailin are here, maester."

Aemon smiled a bit. *At long last, more dragons.*

Aemon turned toward his steward and told him "You may go, Clydas."

"Aye, milord," Clydas stated. Aemon heard him get up from his seat and shuffle towards the door. Clydas was almost as slow as he, due in large part to complications with his own eyes. *He should count it a blessing that he is only half-blind."

As the steward exited the chamber, more people entered it. Aemon could detect four different pairs of footsteps. As well as what sounded like the paws of a four-legged creature.

The sounds of the moving feet stopped when they were only halfway to the desk. *They await my leave to approach.*

"Sit down, please," Aemon beckoned the newcomers.

The footfalls swiftly resumed and got closer. There was dragging of chairs and settling down in them. The padding of the beast stopped at the seat nearest to the maester's side of the desk.

Then there was silence. Silence was often an unpleasant thing, especially to a blind man. Thankfully, it did not last long. A sweet feminine voice broke it with "It is an honor to finally meet you, Uncle."

Aemon grinned lightly and stated "Likewise, my dear."

House Targaryen's downfall was common knowledge in Westeros. Prince Rhaegar had been killed by Robert Baratheon at the Trident, King Aerys had been killed by Ser Jaime Lannister, Princess Rhaenys and Prince Aegon had been butchered by Ser Amory Lorch, and Queen Rhaella had died birthing her daughter Daenerys at Dragonstone. The only Targaryens to survive had been Daenerys
Stormborn and her brother Viserys. They had fled across the Narrow Sea to seek refuge in the Free Cities of Essos.

That was the traditional way in which the story was told, anyway.

Shortly before the wedding of his son Robb, Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell had visited Castle Black. At the behest of Lord Gregor Clegane, he had chosen to confide his darkest secret to Maester Aemon, Lord Commander Jeor Mormont, and First Ranger Benjen Stark, his brother.

He had provided the three men with the real version of what happened during the Sack of King's Landing. Needless to say, Lord Benjen, Lord Jeor, and Maester Aemon had been shocked to learn the truth of Rhaegar Targaryen's children.

Be that as it may, their astonishment was short-lived. After being informed that the Others will return to the world, it is difficult to find anything else as alarming for long.

The Lord Commander admired Lord Eddard's decision to entrust him and his two colleagues with this piece of hidden knowledge. Although Lord Gregor intended to make the information public before long, Jeor assured Ned Stark that they would tell no one before then. There was no question that he meant what he said. Ever since our order was founded, we have sworn to take no part in the affairs of the realm. Our only purpose is to defend it.

Benjen had been enraptured to learn that his sister was still alive. Aemon could imagine his glee. He had also shared it, as it had turned out more of his family had survived the Rebellion than he thought.

What I'd give to have my sight right now, if only for a moment.

Alas, the gods were not so good. Aemon would have to content himself with the senses he still had.

"Come closer, please," he beseeched them.

He heard the legs of three of the chairs dragging across the ground and halting when they were immediately in front of his desk. The fourth stayed still. Aemon had only expected three people in the first place. Who else is here? For that matter, what animal is that? It sounds like a wolf.

He would find that out later. For now, he wished to know more about his kin.

"You must be Rhaenys," Aemon remarked, looking in the direction the feminine voice had come from.

"That is correct," she affirmed.

Maester Aemon slowly outstretched his wrinkled hands. He extended them until they touched skin. There was no doubt that was a woman's face he felt. The feel of a woman is something no man ever forgets.

Typically, a girl would shudder to have her face caressed by an elderly man. Rhaenys, however, did not recoil. Instead, she giggled, as though she found the maester's actions endearing.

A minute later, Maester Aemon thought aloud "It would seem the viper is strong in you. You take after your Dornish mother in appearance."

"I am told so quite often," the princess remarked.
"Even so, you have your father's dragon spirit," Aemon contended. He felt her nod in agreement.

Aemon then removed his hands from Rhaenys' face, but he kept his arms extended. From her position, she was sitting in the middle with at least one person to her left. He decided to move his hands there next. He heard the next chair scoot a little bit closer to the desk.

The next face he felt was a little rougher, but he smiled when he got a full grasp of it. "Aegon, I presume?"

"Yes, good maester," a deep, masculine voice replied. "What gave it away?"

"There is a bit of the viper in you, as well," Maester Aemon disclosed, "But the dragon is more evident. You are every bit your father's son. In fact, you look almost like the Aegon who was my brother when he was your age."

"The Fortunate?" Aegon asked rhetorically.

"That was what they called him," Aemon conceded, "But after what you three have endured, it could apply to any of you just as well."

"Indeed," said a slightly softer male voice. This one was seated on the far right.

Aemon turned to that side of his desk and continued to smile. "That leaves you, Jaehaerys."

"'Jon' will suffice, ser," the other boy kindly pronounced.

Aemon murmured in acknowledgment. Once more, he reached out with his hands until he felt another face. This one was rougher than the last, as though it had been hardened by ice. All the same, there was fire within.

"The blood of the First Men and the blood of Old Valyria run through your veins," Aemon observed, "You are dragon and wolf in equal measures."

"Peculiar; I only see the wolf," Jon commented, "Had I not learned the truth of my heritage, I would never have suspected the dragon was there."

"You may resemble your mother more closely," Aemon debated, "But I assure you; your father's likeness is present, as well."

"You would know better than I," the youngest Targaryen supposed.

"You know nothing, Jon Snow," the fourth person muttered cheekily. This voice was female and rather gruff. She was seated between Rhaenys and Jon.

"In here, you can call me 'Targaryen,'" Jon informed her. She just grunted in response.

"And you are?" Aemon said inquisitively.

"Ygritte of the Free Folk," the young woman bluntly answered, "And don't you be groping my face, old crow."

"Ygritte," Jon murmured softly, as though he was chastising her.

Aemon did not mind. He merely chuckled and said "Very well."

He lowered his left arm but kept his right arm outstretched. He directed it towards the wildling girl
and asked "Would you shake my hand, at least?"

"Alright," she mumbled, taking his hand in hers and shaking it. She had a very firm grip. Then again, everyone's grip was firm to a man of Aemon's age.

The maester only meant for the handshake to last a few seconds. However, when he held Ygritte's hand in his, something about her caught his interest. He did not know what about her was so interesting, but whatever it was, it stood out to him greatly. In effort to find out what it was, he prolonged the handshake. Slowly but surely, it dawned on him.

He made that realization at just the right time. The moment he did, Ygritte sharply retracted her hand. *I must've held it too long.*

It was then that he remembered there were more than humans in the room. As he recalled, the four-legged animal had stopped to the right of Jon's chair. That meant it was practically at Aemon's side. By the sound of its footfalls, it was a large beast.

The ancient maester slid his right hand across the surface of his desk towards the beast. When his hand reached the edge of the desk, he heard a growl. The growl was soft, but the undertone was menacing. That did not dissuade Aemon. He raised his hand and extended it. The growl was a little louder now.

"Easy, boy," Jon uttered quietly. The growling promptly ceased. *So it's his beast.*

Aemon continued to reach out until he felt the animal's breath on his hand. Then he touched its muzzle. It was wet but warm. After a moment, the creature licked his hand. That was a strangely comforting sensation for his dry, wrinkled skin. *Jon is part wolf. How appropriate for him to have a real one for a companion.*

"Who might this be?" Aemon inquired.

"Ghost," Jon replied, "My direwolf."

Aemon was intrigued. *So there are direwolves on this side of the Wall after all. "Your Uncle Benjen mentioned that your Uncle Eddard found a pregnant direwolf a few months ago."

"That is correct," Jon confirmed, "She birthed six pups. My cousins and I each took one. Ghost was the smallest, but he seemed to be his mother's favorite."

"Who took charge of the mother?" Aemon enquired.

"My 'maid,'" the youngest Targaryen revealed, "She named the mother 'Lyarra' after my grandmother."

"Are they here, too?" Aemon conjectured.

"Actually, yes," Aegon answered for his brother, "They're outside, getting acquainted with the First Ranger."

*Or reacquainted, in the case of the 'maid.' "He must be delighted.*

"Not as delighted as they," Rhaenys perceived, "Benjen is undeniably happy to be reunited with his sister, but this reunion means much more to her."

"Why do you say that, Rhae?" Aegon queried.
"I can relate to Lyanna's situation, Egg," Rhaenys proclaimed, "Like me, she knew all along that her siblings were alive. Just as you and Jon did not know I was alive until recently, Benjen thought for the longest time that his sister was gone. He was able to move on, but she could not."

"That would be worse," Jon conceded, "Better to think you've lost something than to know you haven't when it's out of your reach."

*Quite so. The news that Rhaegar's children were alive was easier for me to accept than the knowledge that his brother and sister were all on their own in Essos.*

"It is still a mystery to me how a direwolf managed to get to this side of the Wall," Aemon thought aloud, "With the exception of the Nightfort, all the fortresses on the Wall are fully manned now. There is no way Lyarra could have slipped past our sentries, especially since she was carrying a litter."

"There are other ways to get past the Wall other than going through it," Ygritte disclosed, "My people have scaled it countless times. I climbed it myself twice."

"Yes, but wolves aren't the best of climbers," Aegon drily pointed out.

"Well, she could not have gone around," Jon debated, "I've seen a map of the Wall. It ends at Westwatch-by-the-Bridge and Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. The lands west of Westwatch are covered by steep, mountainous terrain that even the most skilled of hikers could not traverse. There is nothing but frigid waters to the east of Eastwatch."

"One cannot tunnel beneath the Wall, either," Rhaenys remarked, "If I remember my lessons of the Watch rightly, every attempt to do so has resulted in disaster for the diggers."

*That is true. The Wall defends itself, and not just the part above ground.*

"Could it be someone simply let her pass?" Ygritte theorized.

"We keep a record of everything that gains entrance the Seven Kingdoms," Aemon notified her, "Humans and animals alike. To my knowledge, no one has brought a direwolf to this side of the Wall."

"Maybe she snuck through," Ygritte contended.

"Unlikely," Aemon countered, "We are very particular about what comes through the gates. We search every cart, horse, and person very thoroughly. We would certainly have seen a direwolf if one came through."

"No disrespect, but you would not have seen her," Ygritte disputed.

Aemon chuckled again. "You are right, my dear. All this aside, does it really matter how Lyarra found her way into the Seven Kingdoms? She has harmed no one without cause, and she and her pups have bonded themselves to House Stark."

"Yes, they have," Jon concurred, "They are the most remarkable beasts I have ever seen. More loyal than any pet and far braver. I believe Ghost would give his life for mine if need be."

*But you hope he will not have to, obviously.*

"That is impressive," Aegon stated in fascination, "Even Aegon the Conqueror, my namesake, could not inspire such devotion from Balerion the Black Dread."
"Of course he couldn't," Aemon muttered, "Dragons were not like the other creatures of the world. Almost any animal can be brought to heel with the proper breeding. But not dragons. Even for our ancestors, dragons were very difficult to control. They were even harder to tame and nearly impossible to master."

"As it happens, Uncle, that is partly why we are here," Rhaenys claimed.

"To talk about dragons?" Aemon assumed.

"In a way," Rhaenys mumbled, "You see, dragons might not really be extinct. It is probable they have just been missing from the world."

Once more, the maester was intrigued. "Go on…"

It was Aegon who began the explanation: "As you may or may not know, there was a conference at Harrenhal last month. There were many things discussed there. Chief among them was our identities. Lord Gregor Clegane told King Robert Baratheon the truth about us."

Aemon raised a nonexistent eyebrow. "The full truth?"

"He did not reveal my mother's true fate," Jon clarified, "Apart from that, he withheld nothing."

*That may be for the best. Even if Robert Baratheon utterly adores Cersei Lannister, his love for Lyanna Stark was no secret. As long as he is alive, it must not be revealed that she is.*

"It would take too long for us to explain everything," Rhaenys professed, "There are three things you need to know. First, we have established a tentative peace with the Baratheons. There is still some enmity between our houses, but it has been set aside for the present. Second… Lord Gregor informed us of how Magister Illyrio Mopatis – the Pentoshi cheesemonger who is looking after our aunt and uncle – has three dragon eggs in his possession."

"Although the magister believes the eggs have turned to stone, the Mountain claims they are real," Aegon elaborated.

Aemon was not as stunned as one might have expected him to be. He leaned forward a bit and asked "Do you believe him?"

"If we were told by anyone other than Lord Gregor Clegane, we probably would've laughed," Jon debated, "But as outlandish as it may seem, Lord Gregor's visions are credible. They correctly forecasted the second coming of the Long Night. If the Others can return to the world, so can dragons. Furthermore, after everything else the Mountain has done for Westeros, there is no reason to assume he is misleading us or lying to us about this."

"I agree, my dear boy," Aemon proclaimed. *Lord Gregor Clegane helped to make the Watch great again. Any man who would do that must be a good one.* He folded his hands together and said "You have mentioned two of the conference's three main points. What is the third?"

"The fact that in another turn of the moon, our existence will be made public," Rhaenys responded.

Aemon was more than a little bewildered, and a little anxious. "That could yield grave consequences for many."

"As luck would have it, Lord Gregor has taken that into account," Aegon professed. "At the conference, he submitted a proposal to the King."
"What sort of proposal?" Aemon enquired.

"It would be too complicated to explain it wholly," Jon stated, "Fundamentally, he suggested that the King take the credit for our survival. In fact, the Mountain means for Robert Baratheon to claim that the idea to hide and shelter us was originally his."

"Under the right circumstances, that claim would be quite plausible," Aemon observed. *It would also gain and ensure the support of Baratheon loyalists and Targaryen sympathizers alike. But there are some who will not be pleased. Namely the Queen's father.*

"What do you intend to do once the truth comes out?" Aemon inquired.

"We'll be far from here when that happens," Rhaenys responded, "A condition of our truce with House Baratheon is that one of us will serve as ward of the crown for a time. As such, I will be going to King's Landing in a moon's turn or two."

*I expected King Robert would wish for a Targaryen hostage.*

"What of your brothers?" Aemon asked.

"We will be leaving Westeros altogether," Aegon disclosed, "The King is sending us on errands across the Narrow Sea. I was tasked to seek out the Golden Company and recruit them to our cause."

"And I will be sailing for Pentos," Jon revealed, "I am to find our aunt and uncle and bring them and the dragon eggs home."

Aemon lightly nodded his head in both approval and acknowledgment. "This appears to be a reasonable and practical arrangement. But I must know; are you three prepared for the journey that lies ahead?"

"Mostly," Aegon uttered frankly, "However, Lord Gregor suggested that we visit you before we left the North."

"He claimed doing so would benefit us all somehow," Jon added in.

*Your company alone is beneficial to me.*

"Not that we would have liked to come here to see you, anyway," Rhaenys insisted.

"I do not doubt that," Aemon asserted, "In any case, Lord Gregor told you true. I have much to offer you, and I do not speak only of counsel."

"We'd be grateful for any aid you could give," Aegon proclaimed.

Aemon lightly nodded once more. He began to turn his head to another part of the room. He had not seen his own quarters in so long, but he still knew where everything was. He focused his gaze on a bookcase near his bed. He declared "There is a small box on the third shelf of that bookcase. Bring it to me."

Aemon heard a chair scrape against the floor as its owner got up and went over to the bookcase. It must have been Jon; Aemon recognized those as his footfalls.

It only took the youngest Targaryen ten seconds to retrieve the box and place it in front of the ancient maester. As he returned to his seat, Aemon reached out to the box and pulled it closer.
When it was directly in front of him, he reached into his robe and extracted a set of keys.

When he found the right key, he brought it to the keyhole, inserted it fully, and gave it a turn. He heard the click which meant the lock was unbolted. Aemon gradually removed the lid of the box and pulled out a large stack of papers. He carefully shuffled through them, counting each one in turn.

When he got to the paper that was thirteenth from the top, he separated it from the others. He held it out to his visitors, and he apprised them "Long ago, I hid a certain treasure in Castle Black. This is a set of instructions that will lead you to it."

He felt a hand gently take the piece of paper from him. Based on the way the parchment slid slightly to Aemon's left, the hand's owner must have been Aegon.

"What manner of treasure?" Rhaenys said inquiringly as her brother unfolded the parchment.

"Go out and see for yourself," Aemon proposed, "But once you find it, come back here straightaway. I would prefer if you were not seen with it just yet."

"As you wish," Aegon avowed.

All four chairs were pushed back and the four young people rose to their feet. Before they could make for the door, Aemon reached out to the second chair from the right. He was able to touch the arm of its occupant. She shuddered at the sudden action, but she did not react hostilely.

Aemon murmured softly "Ygritte, I would like you to stay a moment."

"May I ask why?" the wildling girl demanded.

"I have a few questions," Aemon claimed, "Namely about your people and how they are faring on this side of the Wall."

That was mostly but not entirely true. In actuality, Aemon's interest was solely in Ygritte and how she was faring in the Seven Kingdoms. He did not wish to draw attention to her, though. Hence his claim. *Who would mistrust a blind man?*

"You can trust him," Jon assured her, "We'll only be gone a few minutes. Just indulge the maester and listen to his questions."

"Alright," she grudgingly conceded, "But I will not make any promise to answer them."

"Suit yourself," Jon stated, snickering.

Aemon sat and waited as Rhaenys, Aegon, and Jon filed out of his quarters. Interestingly, Ghost did not accompany his master outside. Instead, he padded over to Ygritte and laid down at her feet.

After Rhaegar Targaryen's children were out of the room, Aemon looked to Ygritte and noted "So, the direwolves did not restrict their affection to the Starks."

"Indeed not," the wildling girl agreed. He heard her reach down and scratch Ghost behind his ears. Based on the sound he made, he appreciated the gesture. "This beast is strangely protective of me."

"Why do you suppose that is?" Aemon asked rhetorically.

"It could be because of my relationship with his master," Ygritte hypothesized.
"Perhaps," Aemon stated. He then leaned closer and pronounced "It could also be because a part of him grows within you."

Even if he could not see it, he could imagine the flabbergasted expression on Ygritte's face. The fact that she did not deny his observation all but confirmed it. She murmured softly "How do you know?"

"I have been a maester of Oldtown since before your parents were born," Aemon disclosed, "I have been on the Wall for almost as long. While there are no female members of the Watch, I will never forget the anatomical differences between men and women. Just by measuring your pulse, I knew you were with child."

There was silence again. But Aemon could tell he was not the one most unsettled by it this time. This time, he was the one who broke it. He stated enquiringly "Does Jon know?"

"What makes you think he's the father?" Ygritte queried, baffled.

"Ghost told me," Aemon expounded, referring to how the direwolf behaved around Ygritte, "And if it was Aegon, you would have sat beside him instead. Yet you sat between Rhaenys and Jon."

"Right," Ygritte muttered quietly. After a pause, she stated "In answer to your question, he does not know. He knows nothing."

*You seem to be fond of repeating that aloud." Why haven't you told him?"

"He already has enough worries," Ygritte debated, "I do not wish to add to them."

"You see this child as a liability?" Aemon presumed.

"No, I see this child as mine," Ygritte rejoined.

"And his," the maester stated. *There are six dragons in the world. If the gods are good, I may live long enough for there to be seven. "Do you intend to have this child?"

"I... I do not know," the wildling girl admitted, "In my youth, I never allowed myself to get attached to anything. I always thought love was for the weak. In the time since I came south, I have realized that I was wrong. It is those who cannot love who are weak."

"Then you love this child?" Aemon stated hopefully.

"Yes," she freely admitted, "I am starting to love Jon, too. I have never felt so strongly about anyone, even though I have not known him long. I cannot explain it; this feeling. It is all so bewildering."

"Do not be ashamed," Aemon consoled her, "Love is a good thing, my child. A very good thing. Without love, there would be nothing. My fellow black brothers and I have severed all our connections to our old family and friends, but each of us has great love for the whole of the realm. That love is what keeps the Watch alive and, by extension, the Seven Kingdoms alive."

"But will my love and Jon's be enough to keep this one alive?" Ygritte wondered, referring to the life within her abdomen.

"I have no doubt it will be," Aemon proclaimed, "Still, you must tell Jon. Once you start to show, it will only be a matter of time before he finds out. It would be far better if he learned from you directly."
"Soon enough," she assured him, "But only when I see fit."

"I understand," the maester remarked, "I am not ordering you, my lady. This decision is yours."

*I just hope you will make the right one.*

Prince Rhaegar's children returned a few minutes later. When they reentered the chamber and shut the door again, Aemon turned towards them and asked "Did you find it?"

"Yes, maester," Jon's voice replied, "It was buried in that isolated piece of land behind Hardin's Tower."

*Right where the directions specified. "No one saw you?"

"No more than you would've," Aegon cockily murmured.

While Aemon found that jape amusing, it did not appease his anxiety. "Is that a yes or a no?"

"We were not seen by anyone, maester," Aegon candidly told the elderly man.

"Except our Kingsguard," Jon disputed, "They aided with the digging, and they provided cover when we moved the 'treasure' through the courtyard."

"That is acceptable," Aemon declared. *The Kingsguard have been protecting something even more precious than what I've been hiding since the Rebellion. They can be trusted with this.* Aemon patted the space before him and stated "Set it down here."

A large object was placed on the surface of his desk. Although he could not see, he knew it was a long parcel wrapped in a thick woolen blanket. After all, he had been the one to put it in the ground.

"Open it," Aemon beckoned them.

He sat idle whilst the princes and the princess untied the thick string holding the parcel together and unraveled the blanket. They soon got to the burlap cloth beneath, and they proceeded to unwrap that, too. That was when they finally got to the contents.

*What I would give to see their countenances right now. He had to gratify himself with hearing three astonished gasps.*

"These… these are…" Aegon stammered.

"Our house's ancestral swords," Aemon finished for him, smiling.

"But how…" Rhaenys mumbled in amazement, "I thought they were lost."

"To the rest of the world, they were," Aemon disclosed, "Not I. Just as there were only a select few individuals who knew what became of you three, only I knew the true whereabouts of these blades."

"But Blackfyre was last seen across the Narrow Sea," Jon thought aloud, "And Dark Sister disappeared beyond the Wall."

"That is the common belief," Aemon affirmed. He gestured to the chairs in front of his desk and muttered "Sit and I will tell you how they came into my possession."
Aegon, Rhaenys, and Jon swiftly returned to their seats. Once they were all comfortable, Aemon began his tale:

"My cousins Aegor Rivers and Brynden Rivers – better known as Bittersteel and Bloodraven respectively – were among the many bastards sired by Aegon the Unworthy. Bloodraven was gifted Dark Sister by his half-brother, King Daeron II. After Daemon Blackfyre fell during the First Blackfyre Rebellion, Blackfyre passed on to Bittersteel. The last time those swords were used against each other was at the battle of the Redgrass Field. Although Bloodraven lost an eye, it was Bittersteel who retreated. That was when he fled across the Narrow Sea and formed the Golden Company.

"While most believe Blackfyre went missing when Bittersteel commanded the Golden Company, I know for a certainty that it did not," the maester continued, "When Bittersteel was captured at the end of the Third Blackfyre Rebellion, he still had the sword in his possession. It was confiscated from him quietly and discreetly. Bittersteel ultimately escaped custody, but he did not take Blackfyre back to Essos with him. At the behest of Aerys I, Bloodraven took charge of both it and Dark Sister.

"I myself did not know of that until 233 A.C., when I joined the Night's Watch," Aemon recounted, "By then, I had already forged myself a proper chain. I took the black so that the Iron Throne would pass to my younger brother, Aegon the Unlikely. King Aegon V assigned an honor guard of two hundred men to escort me here. Bloodraven led them."

"Shortly after we took our vows, Brynden revealed to me that he had brought both Blackfyre and Dark Sister to the Wall," Aemon disclosed, "He debated that those swords had caused enough suffering in recent years, and that it would be for the good of all if they were held by the Watch until the world forgot about them. He kept Dark Sister for himself, but he tasked me with hiding Blackfyre. So I did.

"It only took Bloodraven six years to ascend to the position of Lord Commander of the Night's Watch," Aemon reminisced, "He wielded Dark Sister for another thirteen years. However, he only brought it out when he deemed it necessary. He also went out of his way to ensure that no mention of the blade was included in the Watch's archives. Then in 252 A.C., Bloodraven disappeared while ranging north of the Wall. The majority of his party did not come back, either. His squire was one of the few who did. The lad was unable to tell us what became of our missing brothers, but he did manage to bring back Brynden's weapon. He gave Dark Sister to me in private, claiming the Lord Commander's final command was for him to bring it to me. As a maester, I had no use for a blade, let alone such a fine one. I could have sent it to my brother, but there were still people in the Seven Kingdoms who remembered the Blackfyres. So instead, I hid it in the same cache as Blackfyre. Since then, neither sword has been above ground."

Until today. Aemon placed his wrinkled hands on the opened parcel. Then he professed "There were many, many occasions when I considered returning the swords to my kin in the south. The opportunity presented itself frequently, but I always found some various reason not to go through with it. Then the Rebellion occurred, and our dynasty collapsed. After that, I doubted that another Targaryen would ever brandish Blackfyre or Dark Sister again. The most I dared to hope for was that your aunt and uncle would one day return to Westeros, and I would make a gift of these blades to them. Eventually, even the little faith I had in that scenario faded. A year ago, I was prepared to leave the swords buried until the day I died and pray that whenever they were unearthed, the finder would be someone honorable and worthy of bearing them."

He then smiled as widely as his cheeks would allow him to, and he disclosed "To my good fortune, the gods answered that prayer whilst I lived. The swords are yours now."
Maester Aemon gently pushed the parcel closer to the far end of his desk. Then he pulled his hands back, placed them atop his lap, and leaned back in his chair.

Jon, Aegon, and Rhaenys must have been speechless; they did not speak for over a minute after this.

"Two swords and three of us," Jon noted in concern, "Which of us should get them?"

"That is for you to decide," Ygritte contended. *Just the response I would have supplied.*

"You two should carry them," Rhaenys proposed, "I won't have much need for a sword where I'm going."

"Maybe not," Aegon remarked, "But you're the oldest, Rhae. That should count for something."

"In Mother's land, perhaps," the princess countered, "Nonetheless, I am not about to bring one of our ancestral swords to the capital city while someone outside our family sits the Iron Throne. Especially since I may have to relinquish any weapons I carry once I arrive there."

"She has a point," Jon conceded, "Besides, Egg, you and I will need all the help we can acquire once we're across the Narrow Sea."

"I guess you're right," Aegon admitted, "In that case... I claim *Blackfyre.*"

Aemon heard metal clinking softly against the table. Aegon was picking up the aforementioned sword and removing it from its sheath. The whistle of the steel was quite shrill. *Fifty years in the ground, and the blade is as sharp as ever.*

"That would be appropriate," Aemon observed, "The first Aegon Targaryen wielded that sword in battle. It is only fitting that one of his namesakes should take it up."

"That means *Dark Sister* goes to me," Jon thought aloud, picking up the other sword and pulling it from its own scabbard. This one produced a slightly softer but equally shrill whistle. Jon stated "I read somewhere that this originally belonged to Queen Visenya Targaryen, Aegon the Conqueror's wife."

"Your source was good," Aemon verified.

"Had you been born a girl, Father would have named you Visenya," Rhaenys revealed.

"Really?" Jon said in interest.

"Yes, he told me himself," the princess proclaimed, "I think he probably hoped you would be a girl. He planned for his three heads of the dragon to have the same names as the original three."

"Do you think he would have been disappointed with me?" Jon murmured apprehensively.

"Not at all," Aegon reassured his younger brother, "He would have loved you just as much as he loved us, regardless."

"Yes, he would've," Aemon agreed. He sat up again and pronounced "During his lifetime, your father corresponded with me regularly. We discussed many things, particularly the prophecy of the three-headed dragon. He may have been obsessed with that prophecy, but there is one thing I am certain of. He did not have three children solely out of his desire to fulfill the prophecy. He also sired you because he wanted to have children."
A third interval of silence came over the room then. Unlike the first two, this one was not unpleasant for anyone. It was more bittersweet and touching.

"Thank you for saying that, maester," Jon said gratefully, "That means more to me than you can rightly imagine."

"I can imagine, my boy," Aemon proclaimed, "Even after the truth comes out, people will continue to say harsh things about your sire. Just remember that for all Prince Rhaegar's flaws, he was a caring father. He never regarded you as a mere means to an end. You and your mothers would have been the five most valuable things in his life."

_I may have ranked seventh, after them and Queen Rhaella._

Aegon, Jon, Rhaenys, and Ygritte remained in Maester Aemon's quarters for a while longer. The maester had no way to keep track of time, but if he were to estimate, they were there for around two hours.

In that timeframe, they discussed many a topic.

Aemon learned that the Targaryens intended for this temporary peace with King Robert to be a lasting one. None of them had any desire to sit the Iron Throne. Their lives had actually been fairly simple before they had come together at Moat Cailin, and although they appreciated being with more of their family, they had been very happy with those simple lives.

Alas, their lives would never be simple again. Be that as it may, they were all destined to do something meaningful now.

Rhaenys was unofficially betrothed to Willas Tyrell, the future Lord Paramount of the Reach. Lady Olenna Tyrell had already consented to the match; it would be no challenge for her to sway the mind of Lord Mace. Princess Rhaenys was eagerly looking forward to being the next Lady of Highgarden.

In addition to that, the King had agreed to rebuild Summerhall and return it to House Targaryen, along with Dragonstone. Aegon and Jon would serve as the lords of those two fortresses. It had not yet been decided who would gain the rights to which holdfast, though.

Traditionally, Dragonstone would have gone to Prince Aegon, as he was the elder of the two. However, Summerhall was much closer to Dorne, where Aegon had grown up. At the same time, Dragonstone was closer to the North, where Jon had grown up. It was also on an island, which entailed that no one would be permitted access without the lord's leave. That in turn meant Dragonstone would provide more secure accommodations, which would be ideal for people who did not wish to be discovered. People such as the supposedly late Lyanna Stark, Prince Jon's mother.

Aemon took the time to tell the princes and the princess of the most interesting events of his life, including before he joined the Watch. He made certain to tell them of how his brother Aegon – who had originally been twelfth in the line of succession – had ended up being crowned King of Westeros. _Hence his moniker 'The Unlikely.' That just shows that there is no telling which of us are truly destined for greatness._

After that, the younger Targaryens returned the favor and told their great-great-granduncle stories of their own youth.

Aegon and Jon had both grown up believing they were bastards of their uncles, men who were
brothers of their real mothers. Nevertheless, being a highborn bastard came with plenty of rights, privileges, and advantages. They had always been welcomed and embraced by their families, and no one had ever scorned them or cast them out. That made it a little easier for them to accept the truth when they were finally told it.

Rhaenys was the only one old enough to remember Robert's Rebellion, so she had always known the truth of her heritage and background. However, far fewer people had known of her existence than her brothers'. Lord Howland Reed had given her asylum at Greywater Watch, a roaming castle that traversed the swamps of the Neck. Lady Ashara Dayne had helped to raise her, as had her stepmother Princess Lyanna Targaryen. That lasted until about five years ago, when Lady Ashara arranged for Princess Lyanna to don a disguise and become Prince Jon's maid.

Aemon was curious to know more about the Reeds. Rhaenys was delighted to oblige. Lord Howland and his retainers were known as crannogmen, and they were among House Stark's oldest and most devout vassals. Life was often trying in their boggy environment, though Rhaenys had taken well to it.

The Reeds were also a superstitious folk. They still believed in all the old magical beings such as greenseers and wargs. At that point, Ygritte claimed it was not so foolish to believe in those things. She was actually acquainted with their kind.

Jon was able to validate and expand upon Rhaenys' allegations. He revealed how Lord Howland's children, Meera and Jojen, had been guests of Winterfell for the last few months. For much of their stay, they had spent a great deal of time with Bran Stark. Especially since Robb Stark's wedding.

A few times, Jon had inadvertently overheard Bran and the Reeds talking. He was never able to make much sense of their subject matter, but he distinctly remembered hearing the terms "greenseer" and "warg." One time they even mentioned something called the "Three-Eyed Raven."

That was what really caught Aemon's attention. The Three-Eyed Raven. Could it be?

This part of the conversation did not last much longer, but before it was set aside altogether, Aemon made certain to ask Prince Jon for a single favor. Jon agreed to it almost straightaway, even before the maester told him what the favor was. It is nothing too grand. In my mind, at least.

Simply put, Aemon wished for Jon to go to Lord Eddard and ask that he send his second son and the Reed children to the Wall. When Jon asked why, Aemon merely said that he believed it was imperative that he speak with Bran Stark, Meera Reed, and Jojen Reed. Beyond that, he gave no further enlightenment.

As strange as that request may have seemed and as much as it may have perplexed the younger Targaryens, Prince Jon assured the maester that he would fulfill it. Aemon was pleased.

I only met him this morning, and already I can tell he is not one to break a promise or treat it lightly. Somehow I know he will keep his word.

Aemon would not have minded if this conversation lasted all day and went well into the night. Even so, it reached its conclusion at around mid-day.

Just before the three younger Targaryens and their wildling friend left, he presented them with one final piece of advice. For this, he rose to his feet and announced:

"I have had one hundred and one namedays. I have lived a long and rewarding life. Alas, I am not much longer for this world. Any day could be my last, and I have come to terms with that. But... you three are young. You have your sight. You have your strength. You can have children of your
own. You can amass great power and great influence. You can make names for yourselves. Do not let those abilities go to waste. Once the whole world knows of you, you will begin to face your first real trials and tribulations. As such, I want you to give me your solemn vow that you will take them seriously. You must be wise, orderly, and cautious. You must not be hasty, arrogant, or reckless. The future and the restoration of our house hinges entirely on your shoulders and the shoulders of your aunt and uncle. Above all, you must not repeat your father's mistakes."

"We promise you we won't, Uncle," Prince Rhaegar's children declared in almost perfect unison.

Aemon smiled a meek smile. Out of sentiment, he outstretched his arms as far apart as his flimsy bones and muscles would allow. That was wide enough for Jon, Aegon, and Rhaenys to envelop him in a hug. They held him gently, so as not to overwhelm his fragile form.

Once they pulled away, Aemon heard Ygritte's footsteps approach. He held his right hand out, and she shook it firmly. To his surprise, she also placed a very quick kiss on his temple. Then she told him "Thank you, old crow. For everything."

Her tone was stiff, but her words were sincere. Aemon just continued smiling.

The four young adults and the direwolf proceeded to exit the chamber, once more leaving the elderly maester alone and in total of darkness.

... 

"Let us go over everything once more."

More than a few people in the room groaned. Some of them very loudly. Polliver was tempted to add his voice to the commotion. But he was not about to give Lord Gregor the impression that he was displeased or annoyed.

Anyway, why should I complain? I do not have to participate in the discussion very much. I just need to stand here.

"Gregor, we've already reviewed all our preparations many, many times," Lady Ellyn grumbled. At least once a day every day since we got back from Harrenhal.

"Then it should not take us long to review them one last time," the Mountain contended. He folded his arms and proclaimed "I realize most – if not all – of you are fed up with these talks. At the moment, I myself am not too fond of them. They have become rather frequent, rather thorough, and rather exhausting. And many of them, such as this one, have taken place in the late evening or another indecent hour. But I have not held them just to waste time. Their one and only purpose is to better the chances for every person in this room."

"Our chances are already as good as they'll ever be, Father," Master Rickard debated, "A few words will not make much difference now."

"Do not ever underestimate the impact of words, Rickard," the Mountain advised his heir, "Even words that have been repeated many times over still have their own worth."

"Lord Gregor, we have had this conversation five and forty times," Lord Tyrion Lannister sardonically muttered, "Granted, not all of us have been present at each occasion. But most of us have. Now, none of us will deny the gravity of the situation; it is a dangerous world out there. Furthermore, no one here doubts your intentions; we know you are just looking out for our well-being. However, based on these talks, one might think you do not trust us to take care of ourselves."
"Of course, I don't," Lord Gregor asserted. He rubbed his forehead in contemplative silence for a moment, and then he uttered "Let me tell you how I see the current situation."

Everyone agreed to hear that much. *He is very persuasive.*

The Mountain proclaimed "Tomorrow is the first day of the three hundredth year since Aegon the Conqueror and his sisters landed in Westeros. This time tomorrow, most of the people in this room will be at sea. Not all of them will be bound for the same destination, and there is no telling how long each of them will be away. Regardless of where our destinies lead us, we will all face many hardships on our various paths. As such… this is the last time all of us will ever be in the same room."

Every single person in the council chamber was taken aback by that last statement. The statement itself was not so alarming as the degree of certainty with which Lord Gregor spoke it. Polliver knew Lord Gregor never made any declaration with such conviction unless he was genuinely certain of it. *If he is that certain…*

Before anyone could interrupt him, the Mountain continued with "I do not think that to be true. I do not believe that to be true. I know that to be true. With all the struggles and plights that lie ahead, some of the people in this room will not live to see the Long Night. No matter how careful we are, at least a few of us are bound to die before then. There is nothing we can do to prevent that."

He paused so that the full weight of his speech could sink in. While the silence lasted, Polliver looked around the room. Based on the countenances of the others, Lord Gregor's words had had a sobering effect on every person there.

Lord Gregor then eased down slightly and stated "However, we can do plenty to try to minimize the number of us that fall. Starting with reviewing my preparatory campaign one final time."

If there was any reluctance or resentment towards that proposition before, it was nowhere to be found at this time. *I don't think they've ever appreciated Lord Gregor's diligence as much as they do now.*

Lord Gregor seemed quite pleased with how compliant everyone was being. He smirked, clapped his hands together, and remarked "Then let's get started. Everyone, divide into your preassigned groups."

Up until this point, all the people present had been scattered all throughout the room. In response to that order, there was a great deal of shuffling across the council chamber. At the end of it, they were standing in five different groups of varying size.

Polliver's group had amassed near the spot where he was posted, so he did not have to move from it. He just stood in place and kept his eyes on his lord.

Once everyone was still again, the Mountain began the debate.

As always, he approached the smallest group first. This one was composed of only four people: Ser Maron Greyjoy, Prince Oberyn Martell, Ellaria Sand and the Tickler.

"You know what I require of you?" Lord Gregor presumed. The three men and the bastard woman nodded.

"I will command the majority of the ships my Uncle Victarion lent us," Ser Maron declared, "Half of those vessels will make for each of the Free Cities, excluding Pentos. They will recruit as many
fighters who are willing to take up arms with us as they can find. The other half will sail with me all the way to Slaver's Bay and do the same. If we must resort to buying Unsullied or other slaves, we will do so, but they will be freed the moment their services are acquired."

Lord Gregor nodded in approval. Then he looked to Prince Oberyn, and the Red Viper pronounced "Ellaria and I will revisit all the connections I made during my years across the Narrow Sea. Since I made plenty of allies, I can make them our allies. I will do that through any means necessary. So long as it does not produce more enemies instead, of course."

Indeed. We already have enough of those beyond the Wall.

The Tickler was brief. All he said was "I will be there if we encounter any hostilities, if the negotiations do not go so well, and if the other parties need some convincing."

He was certainly qualified for that task. If there was one thing the Tickler knew, it was that he did know how to convince people to talk or listen. He does with tools what Lord Gregor does with words.

Satisfied with what he heard from the first group, the Mountain went on to the second one. This group was made up of five people: Princess Elia Martell, Prince Aegon Targaryen, Ser Arthur Dayne, Ser Lyn Corbray, and Lord Renly Baratheon.

"Well…?" Lord Gregor beckoned them.

It was Prince Aegon who provided all the elucidation this time. He recounted "As per the King's orders, Mother and I will take a smaller detachment of the Iron Fleet and seek out the Golden Company with two members of the secret council. Ser Lyn will accompany us to provide martial support, and Lord Renly to speak for his royal brother. As per your orders… we will ask their commanders what business one of their underlings had at your lord brother's keep. Depending on how they answer, we will either bring the Golden Company back to Westeros with us… or we will destroy them."

"Precisely," the Mountain affirmed.

The day the secret council returned from the conference at Harrenhal, Maester Kennick had come to Lord Gregor with a raven. It had originated from Clegane's Keep, as the letter it delivered bore the yellow and black seal of the southern branch of House Clegane. As they say, dark wings, dark words.

As Polliver soon learned, that saying proved all too true in this case.

Lord Gregor shared the subject of the missive at the very next secret council meeting. Polliver and many other people outside the council had been invited to attend that meeting. And every subsequent meeting thus far. Unless we had matters of greater precedence to see to, I believe we've all been present at every one.

The raven from Lord Sandor Clegane brought with it unsettling news. According to it, the Golden Company had taken an interest in the affairs of Westeros already.

One of their members – a man named Connin, if that was his real name – had infiltrated Clegane's Keep under the guise of an aspiring traveler hoping to become a household guard. There was nothing remarkable about him at a glance. However, he turned out to be a spy and an assassin. He had attempted to poison Lord Sandor and steal something from his solar.
Lord Sandor's daughter, Tyta, had caught Connin before he could succeed in either capacity. Somehow, she managed to kill him singlehandedly, though she sustained a wound in the process. Still, a girl of eight triumphed over an adept swordsman... the Hound is right to train all his children in the ways of war.

The Keep's master-at-arms, Ser Bronn, had been the one to connect Connin with the Golden Company. Not only did he claim to be familiar with them, but he had also found their insignia in Connin's pocket.

Not knowing who else to consult, Lord Sandor had chosen to write his elder brother and inform him of what had transpired.

Lord Gregor had taken this dilemma every bit as seriously as any other dilemma he had ever faced. More so than most, actually. That was not surprising, as this one directly concerned the Mountain's own family.

Initially, Lord Gregor and his companions could only speculate as to what Connin was hoping to accomplish at the Hound's holdfast. None of them could fathom what the Golden Company would possibly gain by poisoning Lord Sandor. Nor could they imagine what he may have had in his possession that the Company wished to steal from him.

Ultimately, Princess Elia offered the most plausible theory. She believed this calamity was merely an attempt to get Lord Gregor's notice. She suggested that Connin did not really mean to steal anything, and perhaps he was going to leave something instead. Specifically, he would have left his medallion behind in Lord Sandor's solar. Most likely, Connin would have hidden it where it would not have been discovered before the Hound drank the poisoned wine, but most certainly would have been found after he did so. That would have made for an ominous message. The message would have been that the Golden Company was not afraid to make an enemy of Lord Gregor Clegane.

"That just shows how far they'll go."

Although Lord Sandor was alive, the message had been delivered anyway. Predictably, Gregor Clegane was outraged. He was not the only one. Prince Oberyn Martell was downright furious. His eldest daughter Obara was Sandor Clegane's wife, and Connin had harmed her daughter Tyta. The Red Viper would not let this attack on his eldest grandchild go unanswered.

However, he would be needed in Slaver's Bay, so he could not get this retribution himself. Luckily, his sister and nephew will be able to exact justice for their family in his place.

"Whether or not the Golden Company can still be won over, what will you do if it turns out the false Aegon is among them?" Gregor Clegane inquired.

"I will try to persuade him to surrender peacefully," Prince Aegon stated. Then he placed his hand on the hilt of his new sword and added in "But if he refuses... I will kill him."

"Good," Lord Gregor acknowledged.

The Mountain went on to the third group. This one was the largest. It had eleven people: Lord Willas Tyrell, Princess Rhaenys Targaryen, Ser Oswell Whent, Theo Wull, Ethan Glover, Ser Mark Ryswell, Rafford, Eggon, Shitmouth, and Rickard Clegane.

For the longest time, young Master Rickard Clegane had been striving tirelessly to get his parents to allow him to attend the secret council meetings. When they got back from Harrenhal, his wish
was finally granted. He was one of several individuals that joined the secret council when they convened in the Meeting Tower the following day. So were his aunt Lady Ellyn and her husband Lord Tyrion.

At the first post-conference meeting, the three of them were the only attendees who were unaware of what really happened to Prince Rhaegar's children. That was remedied fairly soon. Lord Tyrion, Lady Ellyn, and Master Rickard handled the news quite well, all things considered. In fact, Rickard seemed thrilled by the knowledge that two of his best friends were princes. Lady Ellyn was amazed by the risks her brother took, and Lord Tyrion was fascinated by how there were more dragons in the world.

Just as Lord Gregor had predicted, all three of them could be trusted with this crucial knowledge. *Alas, the Imp's father will not take the news so favorably.*

"When we reach King's Landing, I will play the part of the dutiful hostage," Princess Rhaenys asserted, "I will show the Baratheons they have nothing to fear from us, and that my brothers and I have neither desire nor intent to shatter the peace we've all worked so hard to establish."

"Likewise, I will prove to the King and Queen that House Clegane of Moat Cailin is loyal to the crown," Master Rickard proclaimed, "I will do nothing to suggest otherwise, and if ever they ask for a demonstration of our loyalty, I shall give one."

"I will provide direct correspondence between the Legion and the Iron Throne," Lord Willas muttered firmly, "I will also ensure that Rhaenys, Rickard, and Sansa and Arya Stark are cared for, and I will advise King Robert that the crown's relations with the Reach will be directly proportional to his treatment of them. At the same time, I will make certain we do nothing to try his patience."

"And I will do everything in my power to keep all of these wards of the crown safe," Lady Ashara professed. She then gestured to the seven other persons in their group and added in "As will these gentlemen here."

Lord Gregor had assigned Rafford, Eggon, and Shitmouth to be part of Rickard's personal escort. Ser Oswell was still serving as Princess Rhaenys' sworn shield. Although Ser Mark, Ethan, and Theo had been protecting her since the Rebellion, they were Northmen by birth. Therefore, they were compelled to look out for Rhaenys, Rickard, Lady Arya, and Lady Sansa in equal measures. Then again, the Stark sisters would also have their direwolves nearby. Lord Willas had his own honor guard, which was made up primarily of Reachmen.

Lord Gregor then stepped up to the fourth group. There were ten people in this one: Lady Dacey Clegane, Prince Jon Targaryen, Ygritte, Ser Gerold Hightower, Lady Lyanna Stark, Ser Lothor Brune, Ser Brynden Tully, Lord Tyrion Lannister, Lady Ellyn Lannister, and Tobbot.

Lady Dacey looked to her husband and professed "I will take what remains of the Iron Fleet and sail for Pentos. My party will join up with Allard and the rest of our companions who are currently guarding Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen. Ser Lothor and Ser Brynden will speak for the secret council, and I will speak for our house. I will be your eyes, ears, and voice, my lord."

That utterance of "my lord" may have been formal, but it was said with warmth.

"I will be there to prove to the Targaryens that not all Lannisters are as bloodthirsty and unreasonable as my lord father," Lord Tyrion drily uttered, "Although I am not a practiced diplomat, I cannot deny that I am far better-suited for the task than any other member of my family."
"I will be there to represent our family," Ellyn apprised her elder brother, "According to you, the Targaryens have grown inquisitive about our house and its rapid rise in status in recent years. Since they have the famous 'Gregor Clegane' to thank for their survival, it is likely they might expect at least one Clegane to meet with them before they sail back to Westeros. With you forced to remain in the Seven Kingdoms and Mother and Sandor in the Westerlands, that just leaves me. My marriage to Tyrion could also be used to convince them of his argument."

Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn had only recently enlisted in the Legion without Banners, and already Lord Gregor was entrusting them with one of the most important missions any Legionnaire would ever go on. He must honestly believe in his sister and her husband. However, as a precaution, the Mountain had decided to lend them one of his best men, Tobbot, to be part of their household guard.

Prince Jon then pronounced "I will give my aunt and uncle assurances that the Baratheons are our allies now. In addition to that, since they will likely receive word of the King's announcement before we reach them, they may require some evidence of our existence before they can believe in it. If so, I will be the proof they need to appease their minds."

"For the good of all, I will keep a low profile," Lyanna Stark murmured plainly.

Lady Lyanna was still posing as Myrna the maid. Like Ygritte the wildling and Ser Gerold Hightower, she was determined to go wherever her son Jon did. Once she was across the Narrow Sea, it would have been safe to remove her disguise. After all, there were few in Essos who would recognize the look of a Stark. Even so, she was not going to drop her façade unless there was absolutely no likelihood of her being recognized. Alas, the possibility of that is next to none.

"And most of all?" Lord Gregor bade them continue.

Lady Dacey replied with "We will not tell them the truth of the dragon eggs until after Magister Illyrio gifts them to Daenerys Targaryen at her wedding. Once she has the eggs, we will gather her, her brother, and all the rest of our people, and we will depart Pentos as quickly as possible."

"But only if she decides not to marry Khal Drogo," Jon elaborated, "If she does… we will send for more of the Iron Fleet to accommodate the khal's horde. If need be, we will accompany the khalasar all the way to Vaes Dothrak. In any case, our primary objective will be to get them onto our ships and across the Narrow Sea as soon as possible."

"Our secondary objective will be to question everything the Red Woman tells us," Tyrion added in, "And, if necessary, eliminate her as a threat."

Lord Gregor was satisfied. He advanced towards the fifth and final group. This was the group the Mountain himself was a part of. Including him, there were six people in it. The other five were Tormund Giantsbane, Smalljon Umber, Ser Gerion Lannister, Samwell Tarly, and Polliver.

"Where are we bound, gentlemen?" the Mountain asked rhetorically.

"Nowhere, my lord," Samwell Tarly responded blankly.

"Precisely," Gregor Clegane confirmed, "While I am under orders not to leave the Seven Kingdoms until further notice, the rest of you are under no such restrictions. Even so, you will be staying at the moat because you would be of best use to me here."

"You need me to keep the Free Folk on good terms with the kneelers," Tormund Giantsbane observed.
"You need me to help you manage and uphold the Legion's growth and influence in the North," Smalljon Umber remarked.

"You need me to oversee the construction of the printing press," Samwell Tarly declared, "Among other things."

"You need me to maintain decent relations between the Legion and the rest of House Lannister." Ser Gerion Lannister perceived.

Lord Gregor looked to each of those men when spoke, and he subsequently nodded when each was done speaking in turn. Finally, he turned to Polliver, who spoke last: "You need me to keep the moat secure."

"Yes," the Mountain commented, nodding one last time.

Long as I hold this spear, it will be secure.

Polliver had been fighting for Lord Gregor Clegane longer than any other living person. While Ser Gerion Lannister was the first person to become an official Legionnaire, Polliver had become the Mountain's very first man-at-arms when the latter was just a lad of five and ten. I ultimately joined the Legion, anyway. Of course, they'll accept anyone. Only a certain… type of character can serve House Clegane. Polliver was also one of the very few who knew the truth of the Targaryens from the very beginning. Out of fidelity to his lord, he had never divulged that information to anyone who did not know. Furthermore, ever since Lord Gregor was given Moat Cailin, Polliver had been the captain of his household guard.

So far, he had done quite well for himself in that role. It proved to be rewarding in more than one way. Guarding the Mountain and his family had earned him their love and respect. It had also improved his life socially.

Several years back, Polliver had gotten involved with a northern girl named Ros. She had been a whore when he met her. She no longer was one now. She had given up her trade to be with him. I was that good. With Lord Gregor's permission, he had married her a few years back. Since then, she had given him two lovely children.

At least by remaining here, I will not have to be apart from them. Still, I will miss the others.

Lord Gregor had had dozens of men-at-arms who had served him since before Robert's Rebellion. There were eight in particular that stood out as his best men. These eight formed a close-knit band. Polliver was one of them. The other seven were Rafford the Sweetling, Eggon, Tobbot, Chiswyck, Dunsen, Shitmouth, and the Tickler. Mates for life; that's what we are.

So far, Dunsen was the only who had died. His head had gotten lopped off by an axe during the final battle of Greyjoy's Rebellion. At least Lord Gregor was quick to return the favor to the Ironborn scum who did the deed.

Chiswyck was one of the hundred Westerosi currently guarding Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen in Pentos. Tobbot would be joining him soon. Shitmouth, Eggon, and Rafford would be escorting Master Rickard to King's Landing. The Tickler would be employing his services in Slaver's Bay.

Polliver was the only one who was not being sent away. A dour person such as Dolorous Edd Tollett might have supposed that that was because Lord Gregor did not trust him to do his job anyplace else. While Polliver had never been a very smart man, he knew better. In actuality, it was because the Mountain thought very highly of him. He could claim he just doesn't want to bother
Reasonably convinced that everyone present knew what was expected of them in the coming months, Lord Gregor grinned, gazed around the room, and announced "Alright, meeting adjourned."

Most of the others breathed a sigh of relief. Polliver just scoffed. Once they see what they're up against, I wager that these meetings will seem preferable to the ordeals they were meant to prepare us for.

Before anyone could go anywhere, Lord Gregor pronounced "Now, it is already quite late. So I want you all to go straight to your quarters and get a good night's rest. It may be the last one most of us will have in a while."

No one protested that suggestion. Nearly every person there was very fatigued. Polliver was an exception. He was wide awake. In fact, he felt as though he could remain on his feet until dawn. That was good, considering the circumstances.

His wife Ros had made friends with some of the spearwives of Moat Cailin. Currently, she was having a night out with them. While she was with her mates, their son Clatton and their daughter Marga were staying overnight in the Children's Tower.

Polliver effectively had the night all to himself.

Alas, he was not certain what to do. He could have stopped by the Drunkard's Tower and had a few rounds. No, I'd be best if I'm sober when everyone departs tomorrow. He could have gone to Merchant's Square and looked for some elegant gown for Ros or some toys for his children. No, they already have plenty to keep them happy, and they don't need any more distraction. He could have gone to the training yard and gotten in a duel or two. No, who would be available to spar at this hour?

Polliver found himself in a rather ironic situation. He had hours to kill, yet because it was this particular night, his options on what to do were very limited. It was almost hysterical. Perhaps I should consider learning how to read. Then the library would become a possibility.

While Polliver contemplated his options, the others proceeded to file out of the room. Before long, only four people apart from him were left. These four were Lord Gregor Clegane, Lady Dacey Clegane, Prince Oberyn Martell, and Princess Elia Martell.

Polliver's thoughts were interrupted when the Mountain came over to him and inquired "Any plans for tonight, Polliver?"

"Funny you should ask, m'lord," the tall bearded man flatly remarked, "I feel as though I could stay up all night, but I cannot decide a way to pass the time."

"Then allow me to offer one," Gregor Clegane proposed, "Come up to my bedchamber."

Polliver was perplexed. "What would that accomplish?"

"Oh, I don't know..." Gregor Clegane slyly murmured, "Maybe I can show you a very good time."

Polliver felt his breath halt, his heart stop, and his face drain of color. For a moment, he almost thought he was going to go into shock.

Then the Mountain exploded into roaring laughter. Polliver's confusion only lasted a few seconds
Longer. Once his lord stopped guffawing, Lord Gregor told him "Relax, Polliver. I'm just fucking with your mind."

Long as it's not with me... Polliver was willing to die for Lord Gregor without any hesitancy whatsoever. That was how close he was to the Mountain. Be that as it may, he was unwilling to get that close.

At any rate, he quickly calmed down.

"All japes aside, would you mind accompanying me up to my bedchamber?" Lord Gregor said inquisitively, "I would like you to stand guard outside my door tonight."

"What's wrong with the regular guards?" Polliver enquired.

"Nothing; I just gave them the night off," the Mountain informed him, "Tonight, I need someone discreet to stand guard. Someone reliable, who can keep a secret."

That's me, alright. "May I ask why?"

"I'll tell you when we get there," the Mountain claimed, "Should you accept, that is."

Polliver shrugged and muttered "Very well, m'lord."

Lord Gregor was pleased. He turned to the remaining three people present "Dacey, Oberyn, Elia, he's in. Let's go."

Polliver's confusion returned. The Cleganes and the Martells are having a clandestine meeting in the Mountain's quarters. What are they up to? He decided not to ask.

The five of them exited the council chamber and departed from the Meeting Tower. They swiftly made their way to the adjoining Lord's Tower.

As they made the long ascent to the top, Dacey turned to Polliver and said "So, how is Ros?"

"As good as ever, milady," he answered her.

"And the children?" she asked.

"Quite well," he disclosed, "Clatton just started learning to swordfight, and Marga is talking in complete sentences."

"Those are good ages," Lady Dacey contended, "You've got a great deal to look forward to."

"Indeed," Polliver conceded. They continued to climb quietly for a bit. Then he turned to the Bear Islander and stated "By the way, for my curiosity's sake, will Master Rickard be the only one of your children who is leaving the moat?"

"Actually, no," she apprised him, "Only Vallory and Larys will stay here with Gregor. However, Torrhen hasn't been weaned off my breast yet. So I'll be bringing him to Pentos. Alyver will be coming with me, as well. While Rickard will be the one to inherit the moat, Alyver will be his chief vassal when they are men grown. As such, his father and I believe he should know and see more of the world."

Those are all very good reasons.

Not long after this exchange of words, they reached the top floor of the Lord's Tower. Sure enough,
the other guards who were normally on-duty were nowhere to be seen.

They all stood in silence for a few seconds. Then Polliver murmured "So, Lord Gregor, what is this about? Why did you and Lady Dacey call the three of us up here?"

Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey turned to each other and smirked wickedly. Then without any warning whatsoever, they stepped up to the Martell siblings, Lord Gregor placed his hands on Prince Oberyn's face, Lady Dacey placed her hands on Princess Elia's face, and they both pulled the respective person close. The Mountain kissed the Red Viper full on his lips; the Bear Islander kissed the former Crown Princess of Westeros full on hers.

It was hard to tell who was most stunned by this sudden display: Prince Oberyn, Princess Elia, or Polliver himself.

When Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey pulled away, they continued to grin. Prince Oberyn and Princess Elia retained their perplexed facial expressions for a moment. Then they both grinned deviously, as though they had suddenly realized what was going on.

"Does this mean…?" Princess Elia assumed hopefully.

"Maybe," Lady Dacey cockily muttered, "Gregor and I spent a long while discussing this matter. At first, we refused to even consider going through with it. Now, given the circumstances, we thought the idea was worth revisiting."

"Quite so," Lord Gregor debated, "You two having been trying to gain our notice for years. Perhaps it's time you finally had something to show for it."

It was then that Polliver realized exactly what was going on. They're finally giving in?

"So, are we or are we not…?" Prince Oberyn muttered enquiringly.

"Well, we won't find out if we just stand out here talking all night," Dacey Clegane professed.

Gregor Clegane nodded in agreement. Then he opened the door to the bedchamber, held his hand out, and coaxed them with "After you."

That was all the encouragement Prince Oberyn and Princess Elia needed. They casually sauntered inside the bedchamber. Lady Dacey followed them. Lord Gregor began to enter after them. Just before he shut the door all the way, he turned to his captain of the guard and told him "No interruptions, Polliver. None."

Despite the flurry of mixed emotions going through his mind at this time, Polliver saluted the taller man and proclaimed "Aye, m'lord."

The Mountain grinned, nodded his head, and closed the door.

For the whole of the night, Polliver stood out in the hallway all on his own. He tried to keep his mind occupied by thinking of various subjects, such as the latest report on the moat's defenses. Are the walls strong enough? Do we have enough guards? Enough weapons? Enough provisions?

That lasted a while. Alas, his mind kept drifting to what was going on in the next room. He tried his hardest not to think on that, but it was hard not to. There was once a time when thinking was a chore for me. Those days seem like such bliss now...

He was tempted to peer through the keyhole or press his ear against the door, but he resisted the
urge to do either. He could not bring himself to go anywhere near the entrance to the bedchamber. *It is none of your business, Polliver. None whatsoever. What happens between a lord and his wife... and their... guests is strictly between them.*

Although the Long Night would not be for another couple of years, that was probably the longest night of Polliver's life.

Thankfully, it eventually came to an end. The next morning at daybreak, the door to the bedchamber opened, and Lord Gregor, Lady Dacey, Princess Elia, and Prince Oberyn exited altogether. They all seemed quite radiant. Their smiles extended the length of their faces.

Polliver noticed they were all wearing the same clothes they had worn the previous day. That was to be expected with Prince Oberyn and Princess Elia. Not so much in Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey's case. It was their bedchamber, after all. *What could that mean?*

As Lord Gregor was smoothing down the front of his doublet, he coolly proposed "We should head to the Banquet Tower and break our fast. You've all got a long voyage ahead of you. And I have work of my own to do."


The three of them headed down the stairs. Before he went down with them, Lord Gregor turned to the captain of his guard and nonchalantly offered "Coming, Polliver?"

The tall bearded man stood up straight and declared in as serious a tone as he could muster "Certainly, m'lord. I... I find myself... famished... yes, quite famished all of a sudden."

In actuality, he was yearning more for a tankard or two of ale. *Probably three. However many it will require to take my mind off this affair.*

Lord Gregor Clegane began to descend the Lord's Tower. Polliver was quick to follow. He willed himself not to gaze back into his lord's bedchamber as he passed it. After that, he was able to calm down, and he proceeded down the stairwell without giving the previous night another moment's thought.

Chapter End Notes

Note: So, yeah. THAT happened. However, I deliberately did not go inside Gregor's bedchamber for a reason.

For a while now, a few of my more loyal readers have been asking for a love scene between Gregor, Dacey, and Elia. I personally did not care much for the concept when it was first presented, but I thought that with the right buildup and circumstances, I could pull it off and keep it relevant to the main storyline.

Then there was the matter of Oberyn and his stubbornness. I thought that would make things even more interesting.

However, the way I see it, no matter what arrangement I had, a lot of people would be displeased. Then I arrived at the perfect solution. I could just keep what happened inside there up to the readers' imagination.
Basically, whatever YOU think happened in the bedchamber of the Lord's Tower, it happened. If you think Gregor, Dacey, Elia, and Oberyn screwed each other all night long, it happened. If you think Gregor and Dacey just let Elia and Oberyn watch them, it happened. If you think Elia and Oberyn wanted to see what the Targaryens got out their traditional marriage habits, it happened. If you think they got really drunk and experimented, it happened. If you think they just drank all night, it happened. If you think there was nothing sexual whatsoever and they just spent the night talking with and confiding in each other, it happened. If you think nothing transpired between them at all, it happened.

Oh, and some of you may argue that what I did with Blackfyre and Dark Sister (i.e. assuming Aemon had them all along) was a bit of a longshot. That may be, but at this point, I think it's fair to assume that neither sword will be very significant in either the book or the show. So I just did what I did with Brightroar and invented a reasonably credible backstory for House Targaryen's ancestral swords.

See you in another week and a-half!
Chapter Notes

Note: Despite the note I left at the end of the last chapter, some people were gravely displeased for obvious reasons. So, to reiterate my last author's note, you'll never know what actually happened in the bedchamber. Never. All I will say is that whatever took place in there, it brought Gregor, Dacey, Elia, and Oberyn closer to one another (And keep in mind you don't have to fuck someone to get closer to them). And if you think someone will get pregnant because of this, don't. I already established that neither Gregor nor Dacey will have any more children. Elia is still barren, and she is not going to miraculously become fertile again. So, Oberyn is the only one of them who might have more children someday.

I'd also like to address how a lot of people assumed that the warning I posted might have been about some horrible disaster or death. That's another point I have to establish: any time I give another warning, it will not be to prepare you for a major character death. I will never give any direct tipoff when characters are about to die. Remember the start of Chapter 32, when I mentioned that I was planning something that would be just as shocking and tragic as the Red Wedding? Well, I have not forgotten that, and that is still going to happen. But there will be no warning of when it's going to come whatsoever. Just wanted you to be ready for that.

Oh, by the way, prepare for a wildly out-of-character yet highly entertaining moment from a certain fan favorite near the end of this chapter.

"So it's true," Viserys Targaryen mumbled, staring at the missive in his hands.

"Yes, it is," Allard Seaworth drily affirmed, folding his arms, "I believe we established that this morning."

"Don't make it any easier to believe after just a few hours," Dolorous Edd Tollett murmured.

Allard looked to him. *I've known about this affair far longer than that, and I still have a difficult time believing it myself.*

Daenerys seemed just as astounded, but much more willing to believe. Viserys… he looked as though he did not want to believe it.

That morning, a raven had flown in from the west. It had brought with it a very large roll of parchment. By its seal, it had originated from King's Landing. It was no ordinary message; it was a royal decree.

As the leader of the Westerosi soldiers stationed in Pentos, Allard was the one to receive the decree. If he wished to, he could have read it by himself before he shared it with anyone else. He had ultimately chosen to present it to the others straightaway. Thus, he had assembled all his colleagues in the courtyard of Magister Illyrio's manse, and there he read aloud the news from their king.
For the most part, the decree was a sanctioned acknowledgement of the revival of House Targaryen in Westeros. The chief points were all centered around a stunning revelation. Mainly, Rhaegar Targaryen's children had not followed him to the grave. Not only were they still alive; there were three of them.

There were the two he had with his first wife, Elia Martell. Those were Rhaenys and Aegon, whom everyone knew of. The third was with his second wife… Lyanna Stark, the woman Rhaegar had reportedly kidnapped and raped. Even more alarming was the third child's identity. Jon Snow, Lord Eddard Stark's bastard nephew by his brother Brandon, was actually Jon Targaryen, his trueborn nephew by his sister Lyanna.

Apparently, King Robert Baratheon and Lord Gregor Clegane had been sheltering Prince Rhaegar's sons and daughter since the end of the Rebellion. That news came as a shock to all the Westerosi in Pentos, including the Legionnaires. *I can only imagine how this declaration was received back home.*

It had been several hours since Allard announced the decree to his associates. At the present, he was in the lounge of the manse, going over the finer details of the decree with some of his fellow Legionnaires and Viserys and Daenerys. *Even now, some of us are still coming to terms with this information.*

"Other Targaryens alive after all this time…" Alysane Mormont thought aloud, "I never would have thought it possible."

"What astounds me is King Robert's claim that he was the one who ensured their survival," Ser Malcolm Branfield remarked.

"It is only a claim," Allard Seaworth revealed, "The plan was Lord Gregor's all along. The idea for the King to take the credit for it was his, as well."

"How do you know that?" Ser Bonifer Hasty inquired.

"He confided in me," Allard replied simply, "Months ago, in fact."

"Yet you did not confide in us," Viserys spat heatedly.

"Allard is a member of the Legion's secret council," said Ser Malcolm, coming to the younger man's defense, "As such, he has the privilege to be better-informed than the rest of us, and he's sworn not to share his knowledge of certain things with others."

Allard nodded in confirmation. He commented "Even then, there are certain things I do not know that my commander does. Lord Gregor did not tell me the truth of your niece and nephews until I asked him, and even after he decided to oblige, he was very reluctant to do so."

*That was the impression I got from those messages he sent, anyway.*

"Why would the Mountain have the Usurper claim to be the one who saved our brother's children?" Daenerys said inquisitively, "Moreover, why would Robert go along with that ruse?"

"For show, of course," Lady Melisandre debated, "In all likelihood, the King was actually unaware of Rhaegar's children until recently. When Lord Gregor told him the truth, he must have suggested that arrangement as a solution to their problems."

"That does sound like one of Lord Gregor's proposals," Ser Malcolm proclaimed, "Even in the most difficult of predicaments, he has a talent for pleasing most of the involved parties, if not all of
them. This one is a prime example. By designating the King as the savior, everyone who is already loyal to him will only love and admire him even more, everyone who still favors the Targaryens will come to respect him, and House Baratheon and House Targaryen will finally begin to make amends with one another."

"Everyone has something to gain," Alysane perceived.

"Except the Mountain," Viserys disputed, "What would he get out of all this?"

"The right to keep his head, his position, his titles, and everything else he owns," Allard Seaworth contended, "Doubtless, the King was furious when he discovered his Master of Order was lying and scheming behind his back for the last seventeen years. Knowing Lord Gregor, he was able to talk Robert into letting him remain in power."

"Even for him, that could not have been simple," Dolorous Edd Tollett stated, "Especially since all this plotting was centered around House Targaryen. I needn't remind you all how the King feels about that lot."

"Indeed," Ser Bonifer conceded, "That's another topic that should be addressed. It is well-known that King Robert has hated the Targaryens since he launched the Rebellion to overthrow them. He hated them with a burning passion, in fact. No one is going to dismiss that."

"Lord Gregor has already accounted for that, too," Allard informed the others, "The King's disdain of the Targaryens is being passed off as an act meant to reassert his dominion over the Seven Kingdoms. In other words, he 'feigned' hatred of the dragons so that no one would view him as soft or unwilling to go to extreme lengths. Meanwhile, he was harboring Rhaegar's children in secret, waiting for the day they were old enough to prove their loyalty to the new Baratheon dynasty. Once that day came, the Targaryens would be accepted back into the Seven Kingdoms."


"Not entirely," Viserys argued, "What about the hired knives the Usurper sent after me and Dany?"


"Suppose they had," Viserys spat bitterly.

"They did not," Bonifer Hasty firmly refuted, "That is all what matters. No point in lamenting on the issue. You and your sister are still alive, and so are your niece and nephews. You should count that a blessing."

"We spent a good part of our lives running from the Usurper," Viserys pointed out in disgust, "Now we're expected to praise him for a kindness he did not do?"

*What kindness have you ever done?*

"For the sake of everything we've worked for, we all must go along with this charade," Allard declared, "It is the only way we can ensure the continued stability of the realm."

"The Usurper's realm, you mean," Viserys countered, "The same realm which is rightfully ours."

"Was rightfully yours," Bonifer Hasty disputed, "The Seven Kingdoms may have belonged to the Targaryens once. No longer. They are now the Baratheons' by right of conquest."
"And did you not hear the message?" Edd Tollett murmured glumly, "Rhaenys, Aegon, and Jon have all bent the knee to King Robert. They've sworn their fealty to him."

"They do not speak for all Targaryens," Viserys claimed. Neither do you. On that note, the world might be a more agreeable place if you did not speak at all.

Allard did not say that aloud. Now would be a good time for a transition. He smirked and muttered in a somewhat sly tone "Soon enough, you just may add your voice to theirs. Dany might add hers, too."

"What are you talking about, Allard?" Daenerys inquired curiously.

"There is more to the decree than what is printed there," Allard stated, gesturing to the roll of parchment in Viserys' hands. He then reached into his doublet and extracted another piece of paper. This one was smaller and folded instead of rolled up. He held it up and pronounced "This came in shortly after the decree. It was Lord Gregor Clegane who sent it."

"What is it?" Ser Malcolm enquired.

"Basically, a list of a series of events to come that concern the Targaryens," Allard Seaworth disclosed, "Among them are the various steps that will be taken to reestablish the presence of House Targaryen in the Seven Kingdoms."

"Such as?" Dolorous Edd beckoned him to go on.

"First, two holdfasts will be set aside for them," Allard professed, "Naturally, the Baratheons have no intention of yielding the Iron Throne, so King's Landing is not one of them. Nonetheless, the King will allow the Targaryens to retain their old titles. Aegon, Jon, and Viserys are still princes; Rhaenys and Daenerys are still princesses. In addition to that, King Robert is going to withdraw his family's hold on Dragonstone and return it to House Targaryen. Furthermore, he is going to rebuild Summerhall and make a gift of it, as well."


Allard expected Viserys to voice strong displeasure over how his house was only being afforded two strongholds. However, while the blond man was by no means satisfied, he did not complain. He just shrugged and muttered "It's a start. What else is there?"

The second son of the Onion Knight gazed down at the missive and declared "You will also be given domain over half the Crownlands. All the houses of those lands will become your vassals. Those include the Velaryons, the Celtigars, the Stauntions, both branches of the Brunes, the Rykkers, the Chelsteds, the Thornes, and the Gaunts."


Allard was a little impressed. For all his faults, he certainly has a remarkable memory. Or maybe he only remembers everything that 'should be his.'

"They will stay the Baratheons' bannermen," Allard revealed.

Again, Visery's reaction astonished him. The blond man murmured "I thought as much. If the Usurper parted with all the Crownlander lords, he would have no vassals of his own nearby. Whereas we would have them all. Even if we behaved ourselves, he would always wonder about
us. Wonder if we were plotting behind his back. Before long, his suspicions would consume his mind. When that day comes, people will think twice about calling my **father** the Mad King."

*When did he get so observant? Am I even talking to the same man?* Ser Bonifer Hasty and Alysane Mormont seemed to be equally perplexed. *Oh, well. I suppose every person has their moments of genius.*

"We can go over the rest of the points involving the restoration of House Targaryen later," Allard thought aloud, gazing down at the missive once more, "For now… there is something more pressing we should discuss."

"What might that be?" Daenerys said enquiringly.

"The imminent whereabouts of your kin," Allard clarified, holding the paper up again, "According to this, the King has given your niece and nephews tasks of their own to accomplish. Tasks of great import, it would seem."

"What tasks?" Ser Malcolm asked in interest.

Glancing at the paper, Allard proclaimed "Rhaenys is going to King's Landing to serve as a ward of the crown for a while. Aegon is going to travel around Essos to seek out and hire the Golden Company. Jon… is coming here to meet his aunt and uncle and – when the timing is most ideal – to bring them back to Westeros."

"'When the timing is most ideal?'' Dolorous Edd Tollett repeated in bewilderment.

"Lord Gregor provided some apt clarification of what he meant by 'most ideal,'" Allard Seaworth notified the Valeman, "Right now, however, I cannot elaborate any further on this subject. At least not until Jon and his party arrive."

*It may require even more time than that, depending on how this business with the Dothraki goes. Still… dragons. Real dragons will return to the world. At the same time, the Others will make their comeback, as well. This truly is an extraordinary era we live in.*

"About how long will it be before they get there?" Daenerys inquired.

"Let me see," Allard thought aloud, studying the missive, "It appears Jon and his half-siblings departed from Moat Cailin on the same day King Robert revealed their existence to the rest of Westeros. The average raven requires over a week to travel between Westeros and Essos, but never more than a fortnight. Assuming Lord Gregor and King Robert sent those letters immediately after the latter issued his decree, and assuming Jon's detachment is sailing straight for Pentos, he could be anywhere from a quarter to halfway across the Narrow Sea by now."

"Then he should be here in about two or three weeks," Melisandre contended. *Or near enough that it makes no matter.*

"How many are coming with him?" Ser Malcolm inquired.

"The letter does not specify," Allard disclosed, "But it says we can expect a great host."

"I imagine he'll be coming under heavy guard," Dolorous Edd supposed, "None of us can ever be too sure or too safe. Particularly those of us whose family name is 'Targaryen.'"

*No way to argue that.* "In any case, we'll have more than ample reinforcements."
"Does it say who is commanding the host?" Alysane asked.

"It does," Allard affirmed with a light grin, "A prominent officer of the Legion is leading Jon's company. As it happens, it's someone you are rather close to, Alysane."

Initially, the She-Bear was confused. Then she quickly realized what Allard was insinuating, and she grinned.

"Is it the Mountain himself?" Daenerys presumed, somewhat excitedly.

"No, Lord Gregor Clegane has too much work to do in Westeros to afford a trip to the Free Cities," Allard apprised her, "Be that as it may, we'll be getting the next best thing."

"Just who would that be?" Viserys asked impatiently.

"Lady Dacey Clegane," Allard pronounced, "Lord Gregor's wife."

"And my elder sister," Alysane added in.

Viserys did not make some demeaning remark about how women were unfit to head a company, as Allard expected him to. All he did was raise an eyebrow and ask "Is this Dacey Clegane qualified to be a leader of men?"

"Of course, she is," Bonifer Hasty asserted, "She's been a Legionnaire longer than any of us. She was one of the Legion's top officers even before she wed the Mountain. She is also a mother of five, and she manages to find time for all her children."

"Just so," Allard conceded, turning back to Viserys, "I have worked with Lady Dacey for fifteen years. Over half my life. If there are two things I have learned of her in all that time, one is that she is a natural leader, and the other is that she balances her duties to her organization, her household, and her family perfectly."

"I will not believe that until I meet her in person," Viserys commented bluntly.

*Always the skeptic.* "It won't be long before that happens. She and your nephew will be here within the next turn of the moon."

Viserys said nothing. He just lightly nodded his head in acknowledgment. *He is notoriously impatient, but he can accept that Lady Dacey and Jon will not get here sooner if he simply wills them to. Could it be he is finally starting to think and behave like a human?*

After dismissing that thought, Allard Seaworth gazed back down at the missive Lord Gregor had sent him. Before he could address the next point, Magister Illyrio Mopatis entered the room. Allard looked up and greeted the Pentoshi with "Good day, Magister."

"Master Allard," the obese man rejoined cordially. He looked around the room and acknowledged the other Legionnaires with "Master Eddison, Ser Bonifer, Ser Malcolm, Lady Alysane."

Each of them politely nodded in turn. Lady Melisandre stood by with her arms folded.

"Forgive this interruption, but I must borrow Viserys and Daenerys for an hour," the magister announced, "It is time for their meeting with the khal."

Allard had known Khal Drogo was coming that day. He and the rest of his comrades had been aware of that appointment for months. Early that morning, even before the ravens arrived, Viserys
had Daenerys bathe thoroughly and dress in the finest fabrics Illyrio had to offer. He wanted his sister to look absolutely beautiful for the horselord. Not that she wasn't beautiful already.

Viserys grinned wickedly, set aside the roll of parchment, got up out of his chair, and stated "Then let us not keep him waiting."

Daenerys tentatively rose to her feet, being careful not to wrinkle her gown.

Allard looked around at his companions. At a glance, he could tell all four of them were getting the same idea as him. He folded Lord Gregor's missive, tucked it back into his doublet, and stated "We're going with you."

"That will not be necessary," Magister Illyrio declared, "I am confident this will not be a violent affair. Soldiers will not be necessary."

"We are not only here as guards," Allard contended, "We're here to represent the interests of our King, as well. We must see this khal before we decide to form any type of alliance with him."

"If you insist," Illyrio murmured, "But I caution you to be mindful of your actions. If you do anything to anger the khal, I will not be responsible for you."

"We thought as much," Dolorous Edd Tollett mumbled frankly. The Westerosi soldiers may have been guests of the magister, but unlike the Targaryens, they did not have his protection. Luckily, we're armed.

Allard Seaworth, Eddison Tollett, Alysane Mormont, Bonifer Hasty, Malcolm Branfield, Melisandre, Viserys Targaryen, and Daenerys Targaryen followed the obese man through the halls of his manse.

"So, where is the Khal?" Malcolm Branfield queried.

"Near the city's southern entrance, by the harbor," Illyrio disclosed.

"That close?" Alysane Mormont remarked, bewildered, "I thought he commanded forty thousand Dothraki screamers."

"He does," Viserys affirmed.

"I haven't heard any galloping outside the city walls," Alysane pointed out, "Or screaming, for that matter."

She has a point. A company of that size would hardly be silent. Yet it's been rather quiet today.

"His khalasar is camped along the outskirts of Pentos," the cheesemonger disclosed, "Only the khal and his bloodriders are here now."

"Good," Bonifer Hasty remarked, "Then our numbers will be more evenly matched."

"Are you planning to start a fight?" Dolorous Edd said worriedly.

"No, but I'm always ready for one," Ser Bonifer responded.

"You and the Dothraki have that much in common, good ser," Illyrio Mopatis observed.

But little else, I wager.
Soon they reached the gates of the manse. Magister Illyrio’s litter had already been prepared for him by a score of his servants. As he and the Targaryens climbed into it, the Pentoshi whispered something to three of the servants. Those three swiftly left the vicinity.

The five Legionnaires and the Red Woman stood still for a few minutes. After that, Dolorous Edd inquired "Are we waiting for something?"

"Horses," Illyrio revealed, "For the six of you."

"We appreciate that, magister," Ser Bonifer claimed, "But you needn't bother."

"Yes, the harbor is less than a thousand feet away," Malcolm Branfield pointed out, "We could easily make that distance on foot."

"Trust in my counsel," Illyrio recommended, "You will want to go on horseback."

"Very well," Melisandre conceded.

Soon, the three servants returned with half a dozen sturdy geldings. Once Allard and his accomplices were mounted, the gates to the manse were opened. Magister Illyrio’s servants picked up his litter and carried it out. The five Westerosi and the Red Priestess followed close behind.

As they made their way to the harbor, Dolorous Edd brought his horse alongside Allard's. He asked him "How do you think this'll go?"

"It could go one of a number of ways," Allard admitted, "I'll be content as long as it does not result in bloodshed."

*On our side, at least.*

"That would be a rarity," Edd murmured drearily, "Dothraki are known for speaking more with steel than with their tongues."

"They're also known for going into battle half-naked," Allard pronounced, "They may be fiercer, but we're better armed. The Dothraki don't have any practical form of armor. They don't even wear chainmail."

*Whereas we're all wearing it right now. Except Lady Melisandre, of course.*

"Now there's a thought," Edd remarked, seeming a little relieved.

"Just stay calm, Edd," Allard advised his friend, "No ill will befall us today. The purpose of this meeting is merely to acquaint Dany with Drogo, and he with her."

"Well, then let us hope he likes her," Edd Tollett commented.

"Yes, let's," Allard concurred, "If not, we'll deal with that as it comes."

"Right," was all the Valeman said in reply.

Before long, they reached the southern gates of the city. Once outside, they rode to the east, towards the sea.

Although most of Pentos' harbor could only be accessed from inside the city, part of it was open to the public. That section was separated from the rest of the marina by a stone wall. A gate on that wall could be opened from inside to allow passage between the two sections, but it was only ever
opened at day. Unless there was some manner of emergency, the gate was to remain shut at night.

The section of the harbor that was open to all was mostly used by fishermen, merchants, and travelers who were simply passing through. As well as certain Dothraki khals.

In the event that Pentos was ever besieged, there was no way to defend the uncovered part of the harbor. That was why only the most daring of seafarers tended to make use of it. Everyone else was unwilling to take the chance that they would be raided or assaulted by foreign hostiles whilst their ships were docked in near-open water.

*I doubt we'll be attacked today. But as Ser Bonifer said, it helps to be prepared for the possibility of a fight.*

Allard and his party did not go down to the marina. Instead, they assembled on the platform that overlooked it. That area was connected to the docks and ground below by a sloped walkway. The surface of the walkway was angled so that men, carts, and horses alike could ascend and descend it with equal safety and ease.

Once they got to the platform, Magister Illyrio, Viserys, and Daenerys emerged from the litter. Allard and his companions prepared to get down from their horses, but Illyrio gestured for them to stay where they were. Although they were under no obligation to, they chose to comply with his suggestion.

Alysane brought her gelding over to Allard and muttered "What is this all about? Does Mopatis think the Dothraki will be more pleased if we're mounted or something like that?"

Allard shrugged and remarked "Based on what we know of them… it would not surprise me if that was the case."

"I don't see how that would matter all that much in the long run," Alysane thought aloud.

"I guess we'll find out if does," Dolorous Edd Tollett contended.

At this time, there was no one else on the platform, apart from a handful of Pentoshi soldiers standing guard.

"I thought you said Drogo was here," Viserys said to Magister Illyrio.

"I said it was time for our meeting with him," the obese man recounted, "I did not say he would arrive before us."

*There is a difference.*

They stood in silence for a while. The Magister, his servants, and the Targaryens stood, anyway. Melisandre and the Legionnaires sat. After a few minutes, Viserys turned to Illyrio Mopatis and demanded "Where is he?"

Illyrio calmly answered him with "The Dothraki are not known for their punctuality."

They only had to wait a minute more. After that, they heard the noise of approaching hoofbeats. The noise originated from lower altitude, and it rapidly got louder as it got closer. Then four men astride four large destriers suddenly appeared at the base of the walkway. They solemnly rode up the hill one after the other.

When they got the platform, Illyrio Mopatis stepped forward with his arms raised and spoke in
guttural Dothraki. The Legionnaires did not know what exactly the magister was saying, but Allard was reasonably certain it was just a standard greeting and introduction.

Allard took a moment to look over the Dothraki. This was the first time he had seen any in person. All four of the men before him had copper-toned skin, dark almond eyes, the upper half of their torsos bared, combed black beards and mustachios, and long braided black hair. The one at the front of the group – whom Allard assumed was Khal Drogo – had hair that went past his waist.

A moment later, Magister Illyrio spoke in the Common Tongue: "May I present my honored guests: Viserys of House Targaryen, prince of the Seven Kingdoms, and his sister Daenerys of House Targaryen."

Thank the Gods he left out that 'rightful king of Westeros' nonsense. We don't need to be passing along any misinformation to the Dothraki, even if it's just for the sake of embellishment.

Illyrio then proceeded to introduce Allard, his fellow Legionnaires, and Melisandre. That was probably unnecessary, as the Dothraki did not seem especially intrigued by the presence of the other five Westerosi. One or two of them raised an eyebrow at the Red Woman, but dismissively turned away from her after that.

As Illyrio continued speaking, Viserys placed his hand on Daenerys' arm and pulled her close. He told her softly "Do you see how long his hair is? When Dothraki are defeated in combat, they cut off their braid so the whole world can see their shame. Khal Drogo has never been defeated."

Neither has Gregor Clegane. Except for that tilt against Lord Jorah Mormont in the tourney at Lannisport. Still, I wonder…

While Khal Drogo was a fascinating specimen of a warrior and a man, Allard would have bet his life that the Mountain could have easily beaten him in single combat, whether mounted or on foot.

Viserys then told his sister "He's a savage, of course, but he's one of the finest killers alive."

He better hope the Dothraki do not speak the Common Tongue.

The blonde man finished in a very hushed tone: "And you will be his queen."

That remains to be seen. Anyway, that title would only be valid on this side of the Narrow Sea. We can't have more than one queen in the Seven Kingdoms. Especially since our current queen would greatly disapprove.

Magister Illyrio turned back to Daenerys and beckoned her "Come forward, my dear."

Daenerys hesitated for a moment. A sharp nudge from her brother was all it took to coax her into moving. She slowly walked toward the khal, who watched her every step intently.

Allard, Ser Bonifer, Ser Malcolm, Dolorous Edd, and Alysane eyed the blond girl and the mounted horselord closely. There was no way of telling how this encounter would turn out. They made ready to draw their swords at a moment's notice. But they kept their hands away from the hilts, lest they seem aggressive or threatening.

No words were exchanged between Daenerys and Khal Drogo. He simply glared at her for at most twenty seconds. Then he brought his horse around and trotted away.

As Drogo and his bloodriders galloped down the hill, Viserys rushed forward and asked frantically "Where is he going?"
"The ceremony is over," Illyrio informed him.

"But he didn't say anything," Viserys pointed out, "Did he like her?"

"True me, Your Grace," Illyrio assured him, "If he didn't like her, we'd know."

That appeared to appease Viserys. He grinned and inquired "What happens now?"

"Now, we wait for Drogo to set a date," the magister professed.

_Hopefully Dacey and the others will be here by then._

Viserys nodded in acknowledgment. Then he walked over to the edge of the platform and stared out into the distance.

Illyrio stepped beside him and declared "It won't be long now, Your Grace. Soon you will sail cross the Narrow Sea and reestablish your family's place in the Seven Kingdoms."

"I had hoped to reclaim my father's throne," Viserys grimly thought aloud, "But it seems that's lost to me. So I suppose I will have to settle for what the Usurper has already agreed to grant us."

*Robert could have decided not to allow your family back into Westeros at all. You should count yourself fortunate he did not.*

"The people drink secret toasts to your health," Illyrio claimed, "They cry out for the end to the dragons' exile."

Allard rolled his eyes. _Some of them may do that. No one I know does._

Viserys solemnly turned away from the sea and began to walk along the rail of the platform. Illyrio remained at his side, and Daenerys followed them. Allard and his companions stayed on their horses, but they kept close to the magister and the Targaryens.

"When will they be married?" Viserys inquired.

"Soon," Illyrio responded, "The Dothraki never stay still for long."

"Is it true they lie with their horses?" Viserys said curiously.

"I wouldn't ask Khal Drogo," Magister Illyrio advised him.

"Do you take me for a fool?" Viserys spat crossly.

Allard scoffed. _If not, he's the only one._

"I take you for a prince," Illyrio remarked, "Princes and kings lack the caution of common men."

*Rhaegar could attest to that.*

"My apologies if I've given offense," Illyrio hastily added in.

"I know how to play a man like Drogo," Viserys insisted, "I give him a queen, and he gives me an army."

Daenerys then stopped and stated "I don't want to be his queen."

Illyrio and Viserys halted and turned to her. She softly told them "I want to go home."
By her tone, she was probably referring to the manse, but one could be forgiven for assuming otherwise.

"So do I," Viserys proclaimed. He was speaking gently, but that could change quickly. "I want us both to go home. But they took it from us."

"They've given it back now," Daenerys stated, as though he had forgotten Robert's decree.

"Maybe," Viserys commented, "But we cannot return empty-handed. They would laugh at us and ridicule us for our helplessness. So, tell me, sweet sister, how do we go home with nothing to show for the last fifteen years?"

Daenerys thought on that for a few seconds. Then she admitted "I don't know."

"We go home with an army," Viserys contended, "That will show the Seven Kingdoms that even in banishment, the Targaryens are powerful. That will earn us back the respect and prestige we lost."

_He is a monster, but I have to admit Viserys is cunning in his own way._ The blond man then rubbed his hand against Daenerys' temple. Although that may have been meant as a comforting gesture, what Viserys told his sister next was not: "Khal Drogo's army will do just that. I would let his whole tribe fuck you. All forty thousand men and their horses, too, if that's what it took."

Bonifer Hasty bristled at that and urged his horse forward. Allard swiftly reached out and took ahold of the older Stormlander's arm. When Ser Bonifer looked to him, Allard firmly shook his head. Ser Bonifer promptly eased down, though his fury was still very much evident.

Viserys placed a delicate kiss against his sister's forehead. Then he turned around and walked away, leaving her in unpleasant silence.

Allard trotted forward until he was beside Daenerys. When she looked up at him, he told her "Do not despair, my princess. In the last message he sent, Lord Gregor offered a solution to this predicament."

That was enough to pacify Daenerys' qualms for the present. She would want more details of the Mountain's solution later, but those could wait.

"Are we done here?" Malcolm Branfield abruptly asked.

"Yes," Magister Illyrio affirmed, "We can return to the manse whenever it pleases you."

Just about every other person there seemed eager to get back to the other side of Pentos' outer wall. However, Allard was not ready to go back just yet. He announced "While we're here, I'm going to seek out the harbormaster."

"Why?" Alysane enquired.

Allard enlightened her and the others with "It will only be a few weeks before Lady Dacey and her company get here. As such, we need to allocate sufficient space in the marina for a small fleet of Westerosi ships in the near future. When our people get here, we wouldn't want them to have to keep to the water after such a long voyage."

"That's a good point," Bonifer Hasty admitted.

"You want us to come along?" Dolorous Edd offered.
"No, I can manage by myself," Allard Seaworth asserted, "You all go ahead without me. I can find my own way back to the manse."

Everyone seemed to find that a fair arrangement.

It was there that the second son of the Onion Knight parted ways with Magister Illyrio and his company. He had his horse take him down to the marina. He trotted across the docks. Soon he got to the wall that separated the uncovered section from the section within the city's walls, and he passed through it.

It took Allard an hour to find the harbormaster. Unfortunately, the man could only speak High Valyrian.

Allard required another full hour to look for someone who could speak the Common Tongue and High Valyrian. Finding such a person was easy enough; the real challenge was finding one who was also willing to function as translator in the conversation between him and the harbormaster.

Yet another hour was spent negotiating. Since Allard was unable to specify how many Westerosi ships were coming, how many passengers would be on them, or when they would arrive, he could not make any final reservations. In the end, he had to reserve a huge portion of the private docks for an indefinite amount of time. The harbormaster was not thrilled to set aside so much dock space for so long, but Allard managed to work out an agreement with him.

After three long hours, Allard was finally able to leave the harbor. Given his position at the time, he did not have to go all the way back to the south gate. The east gate connected Pentos to its port, and it was much closer. So, Allard reentered the city through that entrance instead.

When he got to the other side of the east gate, he came across an unexpected party. He was quite surprised to see her there. She, however, did not seem surprised at all.

"How long have you been up here?" Allard queried.

"How long have you been down there?" Melisandre rejoined.

"About three hours," he apprised her.

"There you go," she said candidly.

Allard gave no external indication of discomfort, but inwardly, he shuddered. *She's either a stalker or unhealthily persistent. Either way, she's determined to see me.* He sighed and asked "What do you want, my lady?"

"Only to talk," the Red Woman claimed.

"About what?" he enquired.

"Mainly, the missive you received from your commander," Melisandre expounded.

"Then talk," Allard uttered disinterestedly, "But do it as we ride."

"Very well," the priestess conceded, turning her own horse around.

As the two of them headed back into Pentos, Melisandre began a new conversation. She started by asking Allard "How much of the rest of that missive are going to share with your colleagues?"
"Only what they need to know," he notified her, "There are parts of it Lord Gregor has entrusted solely to me. Once I discuss the other parts with my companions, I intend to burn the missive."

"As you should," she told him approvingly. *I wonder if she would be as pleased if I told her I would just shred it.* "I assume you will not tell anyone that Jon Targaryen is not really an orphan?"

"Correct," Allard confirmed, "Lord Gregor confided the truth of Lyanna Stark to me. He debates that it would be for the best if the world continued to believe that she was dead, and I am very much in agreement."

*I have no desire to see King Robert royally pissed off. Should he learn his former betrothed still lives, that is all but guaranteed to happen.

"Quite so," Melisandre contended, "But would I be right to assume Lyanna Stark is coming here with her son?"

"No, Jon's maid 'Myrna' is coming with him," Allard slyly countered, "See that you remember that."

"I shall," she stated knowingly. After a pause, she said inquisitively Has Lord Gregor finally told you what that 'advantage' of the Targaryens' is?"

"He has," Allard affirmed. *It is hard to fathom, but he would not mislead me.*

"You do not seem very astounded by it," Melisandre perceived.

"Why should I be?" Allard said casually.

"It is not every day you hear that dragons will return to the world," Melisandre replied softly.

Allard was dumbfounded. He sharply turned to face the Red Woman and murmured demandingly "How could you possibly know of that?"

"How do you think I know?" she asked rhetorically.

"You'd probably claim it was R'hllor at work again," he drily presumed. "A few months ago, I would've believed you. Now I know better. There is far more to it than that."

"How do you mean?" Lady Melisandre questioned. For once, she looked genuinely baffled.

"Your red god may be to thank for some of your intimate knowledge of the world," Allard contended, "But I know full well he cannot be credited for *all* of it. Oh, no; you have another source."

"What source might that be?" Melisandre asked in fascination.

"The same as Lord Gregor Clegane," Allard pronounced, "You are aware of a great many events that could or will come to pass. Or would've, under different circumstances."

Melisandre scoffed. "Where did you get that absurd idea? Did the Mountain feed it to you?"

"Actually, I was the first to suspect," he illuminated, "It was nothing more than conjecture at first. But I shared my suspicions with Lord Gregor, and he said my belief may have had some merit to it. After all, it is one thing to be able to predict the future. It is another entirely to know how the world would have turned out if things had happened differently. Now that Lord Gregor has verified that
several of the things you claimed might have come to pass actually **would have** come to pass in another lifetime, I am convinced I was right about you."

For the first time since Allard met her, Melisandre was speechless. He felt a queer sense of satisfaction from that.

He then leaned over and placed a hand on the priestess' shoulder. When she turned to him, Allard gently told her "You and I may not get along very well, but we have very similar motives. We both want what is best for the world. So, we should at least attempt to cooperate with one another."

She rubbed her temple and murmured "Perhaps. What do you propose?"

"We could start by trying to establish some degree of trust," Allard suggested, "I entrusted you with the matter of Lyanna Stark. Now I ask you to entrust me with a secret of your own. So, tell me; am I right about you? Do you have another source apart from the Lord of Light?"

Melisandre did not reply right away. She seemed to be contemplating her words. Ultimately, she firmly nodded her head and declared "I do."

"Then you and Lord Gregor have something in common after all," Allard observed, grinning a bit, "How about that? All this time you've been cautioning me against putting too much faith in the Mountain. Yet as it turns out, you and he have been having the same visions all along."

That appeared to amuse Melisandre. She chuckled and muttered "Visions? Is that what he told you they were?"

Allard was perplexed. "Yes. Why? Have you seen those events through some other method?"

"As it happens, I have only **seen** some of them," she informed him, "Others… I have read about instead. So has Lord Gregor."

"You've 'read' about them?" Allard mumbled in confusion, "What in the name of the Seven does that mean?"

"I do not speak in the name of your false gods," Melisandre sternly reminded him, "I speak for the Lord of Light."

"Just answer the damn question," Allard spat irately.

"I will once you remember that I-" she began.

"Answer the damn question!" he yelled.

"Alright," she stated calmly. She took in a deep breath, let it out slowly, and disclosed "I will not deny that I myself have had plenty of visions over the years. But there is much more to Lord Gregor's source than a series of visions. In actuality, he and I have been aware of the Long Night and every other tragedy in recent history for far longer than we've let on."

"How much longer?" Allard inquired.

"Since the moments we first came into this world," Melisandre claimed.

"You've known since birth?" Allard presumed, stunned.

"That's right," she affirmed, "Additionally, you should know that the source has its limits. The
more Gregor Clegane and I change the world, the less useful our source becomes overtime."

That's a disturbing thought. That source is what has gotten us this far. Another thought occurred to Allard. "My lady, have you ever met Gregor Clegane?"

"Unlikely," she debated, "But there is a chance I might have encountered him once before. I couldn't say for a certainty until I saw him in person."

Oh, one would never forget meeting a man like the Mountain That Rides.

"You still haven't clarified what you meant by 'reading' of events of the future," he pointed out.

"That would be very difficult to explain," Melisandre claimed, "Even if I tried to, I doubt you would believe me. In your position, I would not believe it either."

"Then you needn't tell me just yet," Allard asserted, "But I would like to know more of this eventually. Maybe once we rendezvous with Lord Gregor in Westeros, you and he could indulge me and the rest of the secret council."

"Perhaps we could," Melisandre thought aloud, "Of course, I can make no promises that your commander will comply with your request. Even so, I will give it some serious consideration."

"I think that's fair," Allard perceived.

He and the Red Woman rode the rest of the way to Magister Illyrio Mopatis' manse in silence. Allard spent that time reflecting on what he had just discovered.

They can read about historical events that have yet to occur. I have never heard of such a thing. It almost sounds like the work of the Conclave. But as far as I know, neither Lord Gregor nor Lady Melisandre has ever been to Oldtown. There must be some other explanation for this source of theirs.

As to what this other explanation could be, Allard could not guess.

…

177… 178… 179… 180.

Once three minutes had elapsed, Lyanna Stark removed the towel from around her head. Then she picked up the small looking glass at her side and gazed into it. As always, the poultice had done its job; her mask had come off with it.

"Feel better, Mother?" Jon presumed, smiling at her from across the room.

Lyanna turned to her son, smiled back, and nodded. "Very much."

It had been about four months since she had told Jon the true nature of their relationship. Even so, she still felt a bit of a rush whenever he called her 'Mother.' Rhaenys used to call her that plenty when they lived at Greywater, and she had adored it just as she had adored her stepdaughter. But to be called that by her own son brought her inexplicable glee and pleasure.

"Does the façade bother you?" Jon asked in concern.

"Not really, but I could do without it," Lyanna told him, "I have had this other face for most of the last five years. I may have grown accustomed to wearing it, but I jump at any chance to take it off."
"I can understand that," Jon remarked, "I much prefer your true appearance, anyway."

"Thank you, Jon," Lyanna said appreciatively.

Currently, the wolf woman and her son were on board the *Zenith*, the flagship of the private, little armada owned by the Legion without Banners. The two of them had been given their own cabin, which they were sharing with three others. Only one of those three was human. That was Jon's paramour, Ygritte. The other two were Jon's direwolf, Ghost, and Ghost's mother, Lyarra.

At first, Ygritte had been unsure about sleeping in the same room as the direwolves. Lyanna and Jon had ultimately managed to sway her mind and reassure her that she had nothing to fear. Most likely, fear actually had little to do with Ygritte's reluctance. *As long as they don't shit all over the floor, I'm certain she can tolerate their presence.*

Lyanna was in the process of grooming Lyarra. She used a thick brush to remove the tangles and fleas in the mother direwolf's fur. Jon and Ygritte were playing with Ghost on the other side of the cabin. Jon was holding a bone a few feet in the air. Ghost did not appear interested in the bone, but Lyanna knew he was just waiting for the right moment to pounce. At the same time, Ygritte was rubbing the white wolf on his back, which he enjoyed. Ghost had really warmed up to the redhaired wildling since Jon had gotten intimately involved with her.

"How does that thing work?" Ygritte enquired, gesturing to the poultice at Lyanna's side, "You just press it against your head and your face changes?"

"For the most part, that's all there is to it," Lyanna affirmed, "Lord Howland's family supplied it and the instructions on how to use it. I am not entirely certain how it works, but all that really matters to me is that it does."

"Could the face have belonged to another person once?" Ygritte conjectured, "I've heard of people in the world who take the faces of others and wear them to assume their identities."

"You're thinking of the Faceless Men of Braavos," Jon notified her, "The Reeds do not do that. They are simply masters of camouflage."

'Simply' is not how I'd describe them.

"Does your facial disguise… become you?" Ygritte said inquisitively.

"Yes, it does," Lyanna disclosed, "It is much more than a mere mask. Whenever someone or something touches my face, I can still feel it underneath."

"Can you sweat over it?" Ygritte queried.

"I can," Lyanna replied, "That way, I do not overheat."

"Do you have to take it off to sleep or bathe?" Ygritte inquired.

"No," the wolf woman declared, "The face paint and hair dye are completely waterproof, and they don't rub off. To my knowledge, the poultice is the only thing that can alter them."


"They had to," Lyanna uttered, "Otherwise I could not have left Greywater."

"I really must thank Lord Howland the next time I see him," Jon thought aloud.
That may not be for a very long time, given how seldom he leaves the Neck.

Lyanna soon finished brushing Lyarra's coat. Now it was smooth, clean, and free of parasites. Lyanna patted the mother direwolf on her side, rose to her feet, and announced "I'm going out on deck for a while."

"Without your mask?" Jon noted.

Lyanna nodded and reassured her son with "Don't worry, Jon. Most of the crew has already bedded down for the night. The only people who are still awake at this hour already know the truth."

"Alright," Jon conceded, "Just please be cautious, Mother. I'd hate for you to be seen by anyone who doesn't know."

*I would hate for that to happen, too. "I'll only be out for an hour."

Jon seemed content with that. Ygritte must have been content, as she told him suggestively "We can get a lot done in an hour."

He smiled deviously and stated "Sounds fine to me."

*Looks like I would've had to step outside, anyway.*

As it happened, the direwolves were not the most complicated aspect of their living arrangements. The biggest problem was that a young man who had just come of age was sharing a room with his mother… and his lover. While the room had plenty of space for all of them, it was still just one room.

Fortunately, Lyanna had come up with a simple and practical solution. Whenever Jon and Ygritte wanted to be "alone," she voluntarily left the room. Every time they got intimate, they always let Ghost out of the cabin. The white direwolf would typically linger outside the door until they were done. Lyanna would know when it was alright to go back into the cabin if Ghost was not out in the hallway when she returned to it. So far, since the beginning of the voyage, Ghost had been spending a lot of time out in the hallway.

Lyanna exited the cabin with Lyarra and Ghost. After closing the door behind them, she came face-to-face with her son's sworn shield.

"Good night, Ser Gerold," she bade him.

"Good night, Princess Lyanna," he returned genially. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Yes, up top," she answered him, "I need some fresh air."

He nodded and said "Enjoy yourself."

*I shall," she proclaimed. *He could use some, as well. Actually, what he could really use is some sleep.* Lyanna had never seen Ser Gerold Hightower rest. Even when he was not guarding Jon, he always seemed to be on his feet. *Maybe perpetual wakefulness is just a requirement of the Kingsguard.*

The Reachman glimpsed over at the door to her cabin and asked "Are they…?"

"Yes," she promptly said in response. *This must be the part of the job he dreads the most.*

"It is not my place to judge," Ser Gerold pronounced.
"Nor is it mine," Lyanna contended, "My son is old enough to make his own decisions."

At least he's older than I was when I wed his father. Hells, he's older than when I had him, too.

"I'll be back in an hour or so," Lyanna informed the old knight.

"I'll be here when you return," Ser Gerold Hightower declared. I'm counting on that.

Ghost sat down beside his master's bodyguard. Like Ygritte, Ser Gerold had grown used to the direwolf's presence. At times, he somehow managed to ignore Ghost entirely and remain focused on his duties to Rhaegar's youngest child.

Lyarra was still as protective of Ghost as she had ever been. That was the main reason she had been brought along. It also helps that she and I have become rather fond of one another.

Despite how attached Lyarra was to her youngest pup, she could be made to go a certain distance away from him for a time. There was no question that Ghost loved his mother, but like Jon, he needed to have some time to himself every now and then.

"Come on; let's let our boys alone for a while," Lyanna whispered to the mother direwolf, scratching her behind her neck. Lyarra clearly understood her, as she left Ghost's side and came to her mistress's.

Lyanna Stark and Lyarra the direwolf swiftly headed up to the command deck. When they arrived, they found it mostly deserted.

Lady Dacey Clegane, Lord Tyrion Lannister, Lady Ellyn Lannister, Ser Brynden Tully, Ser Lothor Brune were near the center of the bridge.

All of them were armed, but Ser Lothor was the only one who carried more than a blade. He had a quiver of arrows strapped to his back and a long, sturdy ironwood bow in his hands. The others were gathered along the starboard side of the deck.

"Alright, what next?" he asked no one in particular.

At that, the others looked directly up. Lyanna followed their gaze, and she spotted a flock of seagulls hovering about thirty feet overhead. The only light in the vicinity was provided by the moon and a number of braziers spread throughout the bridge. Even with that illumination, Lyanna had to squint to make out the shapes of the birds flying over the Zenith.

"The one in the very middle," Lord Tyrion remarked, pointing with his small hand, "That one. I challenge you to shoot it straight through its beak."

"Done," Ser Lothor proclaimed. He looked around at his audience and proposed "Any bets?"

"Five golden dragons that you miss," Lord Tyrion announced.

"Ten that you don't," Lady Ellyn countered.

"Nine that you shoot the bird, but not in its head," said Ser Brynden

"Twelve that the arrow lands more than three feet away from you, regardless of what it hits," Lady Dacey offered.

Ser Lothor took note of all those wagers. Then he reached into his quiver, drew an arrow, notched it on his bow, pointed upward, aimed, and loosed.
A few seconds later, the arrow came back down, bringing the target seagull with it. They both landed about a foot from where Ser Lothor was standing. He had not moved an inch from that spot since he fired.

Ser Lothor picked up the dead bird and held it up for everyone else to see. Lyanna saw that the arrowhead had impaled the bird's mouth.

The four spectators applauded politely, even though three of them had lost the wagers they had placed.

"That was amazing!" a young boy's voice exclaimed.

It was then that Lyanna realized that there were more than adults on the bridge. Lady Dacey's sons were with her. Alyver was sitting next to her, and Torrhen was bundled in her arms. In addition to that, Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn's son was seated on top of a barrel in-between his parents.

"Now I owe Ellyn some," Ser Lothor thought aloud, "The rest of you, pay up."

Between his three wins and his one loss, Ser Lothor had made a profit of sixteen golden dragons from that demonstration. Had she participated in the wager, Lyanna would have bet the same as Lady Ellyn. Lothor Brune was said to be the best archer in all of Westeros. After what he just pulled off, I do not think anyone could contest him for that title.

Even here, on a moving vessel in near-total darkness, he could single out one particular seagull from its flock, shoot it through the top of its head, and have it land immediately beside him.

As Ser Lothor gave ten golden dragons to Lady Ellyn and collected his winnings from Lord Tyrion, Ser Brynden, and Lady Dacey, Lyanna Stark decided to approach them. She and Lyarra made their way over to the large group.

Lady Dacey was the first to take notice of the wolf woman. "Hello, Lyanna."

"Evening, Dacey," Lyanna Stark rejoined.

Figures she would be the first to recognize me with my true face.

Rhaegar Targaryen's second wife and the Lady of Moat Cailin had been friends when they were girls. They had never been especially close friends, though. Some would think that was because Lyanna was three years Dacey's elder. That was not the reason. My only son is four years older than her eldest, and they get along famously.

The real reason was that Dacey had grown up on an island, and thus, she was unable to travel to Winterfell as often as the highborn girls who lived on the mainland. Still, the Mormonts had paid homage to the Starks often enough that Dacey could identify one at a glance. As such, when Lyanna first came to the moat to serve as Jon's maid, one of her concerns was that Dacey might have seen through her façade. Thankfully, even she bought my disguise.

"You are rather bold to come out here without your other face, Your Grace," Ser Brynden observed.

Lyanna grinned and stated "You can just call me 'Lyanna,' ser. Oh, and I agree. I like to think of myself as a bold person, but this is far from the boldest action of my life."

"It may be the riskiest," Ser Brynden debated.
"No, this wouldn't even place among the top five riskiest things I've ever done. "This may seem irresponsible, but I urge you not to worry. I am confident my cover will not be compromised."

"I would have to agree with her," Dacey professed, "Every person on this ship is a lifelong vassal of House Mormont, House Stark, or the northern branch of House Clegane. Even if they were to see Princess Lyanna right now, they can be persuaded and trusted to hold their tongues."

"That may be," Lord Tyrion contended, "But you cannot say the same of everyone else in our small fleet. Suppose we get too close to one of the other vessels, or someone on board those ships has a far-eyes? There is also the fact that most of those vessels are manned by Ironborn. Outside of the Legion, there are few from the Iron Islands who can keep such a secret."

"Relax, my love," Lady Ellyn reassured her husband, "It's the middle of the night. Most of the convoy is asleep by now. Anyway, there is only enough light for us to see everything immediately around us. That is hardly bright enough for anyone to see our faces up-close, let alone at a distance."

"Lady Ellyn has the right of it," Ser Lothor uttered in agreement, "For the moment, I believe Princess Lyanna is in no danger of exposing herself. Given the lateness of the hour, it is quite improbable that anyone else will see her."

Strange to hear that from the man who just shot a seagull through the beak in near-total darkness.

Be that as it may, Lady Ellyn and Ser Lothor's observations seemed to appease Lord Tyrion and Ser Brynden's qualms. That's a relief. I'd hate to go back down to the lower decks so soon after coming up here.

Ser Lothor was still holding the seagull he had shot down. He extracted the arrow from its head and returned it to his quiver. He was about to cast the dead bird overboard, but before he did, his gaze fell across Lyarra. After a bit of deliberation, he tossed the seagull in her direction instead. The mother direwolf caught it in her jaws and chomped on it heartily. Ser Lothor grinned. As did Lyana. Ser Lothor has always been a charismatic person. I can see why; he knows how to gratify both people and animals.

"I haven't been outside since this morning," Lyanna Stark thought aloud, "Has anything exciting transpired today? A change in heading, maybe?"

"Not since yesterday," Brynden Blackfish disclosed, "We're continuing on the same course as before."

"Any idea of when we'll reach our destination?" the wolf woman enquired.

"We estimate it'll be another fortnight," Dacey Clegane commented, "No less than that, but not much longer, either."

That is fortunate. We're that much closer to Pentos. Soon Jon will finally meet his aunt and uncle.

Alyver Clegane then got up off the ground and walked over to Lyarra's four-legged accomplice. By now, Lyarra had ingested every bit of the seagull, including the bones. The young boy fearlessly approached her and rubbed her behind the ears. The mother direwolf appreciated that friendly gesture, based on the contented growl she made. It would seem I'm not the only bold person here.

Like his mother and her affiliates, Alyver was armed. His sword was shorter than any of theirs and nowhere near as sharp, but it could still kill people.
After he was done petting Lyarra, the second son of Gregor Clegane turned to the mother direwolf's mistress and asked her "Are you looking forward to when we get there, Princess Lyanna?"

"Yes, Al," Lyanna replied, smiling kindly.

Alyver was the only one there who had not attended the secret council's last meeting at Moat Cailin. Nonetheless, his parents had chosen to tell him the truth about the woman who had served as Jon's maid. Although he was still at the age where children tended to repeat the things they heard, Alyver would never violate the trust of his family.

As Lyarra returned to her side, Lyanna looked down at the tall boy and asked him in turn "Are you?"

"Oh, yes," Alyver murmured eagerly. He drew his shortsword and waved it in the air dramatically. Then he said audaciously "I can't wait to kill some Dothraki."

Lyanna chuckled at his enthusiasm, as did Ser Lothor, Lady Ellyn, and Lord Tyrion.

Although Lady Dacey seemed amused by her son's behavior, she was quick to put a stop to it.

"Hold it right there," she interjected in a warm yet stern tone of voice. She knelt to Alyver's level and told him in that same tone "If there's killing, you won't be doing any of it, I promise you,"

"Aside from that, we're not engaging the Dothraki in battle," Brynden Tully pointed out, "We're simply going to a Dothraki wedding."

"I know," Alyver proclaimed, keeping his sword raised, "Father told me that people always die at Dothraki weddings."

Lyanna did not know that. "Is that true?"

"Generally, yes," Lothor Brune informed her, "The Dothraki tend to celebrate the grander events in life with death. That includes their weddings. You can expect that at least some of the guests will expire throughout any Dothraki wedding."

"Only the ones worth noticing, you mean," Lord Tyrion disputed, "The Dothraki give no regard for nuptials that produce no bloodshed. If one or two people die, the wedding is still deemed tedious. Three, and it is viewed as acceptable. Basically, the more heads that roll, the more attention and praise the wedding receives."

"No one died when I married Rhaegar. Be that as it may, many, many deaths resulted from our wedding."

"I'm assuming the Dothraki have no concept of guest right," Lady Ellyn supposed.

"I would be surprised if they had any concept of guests," Lady Dacey pronounced.

"Fair point," Ellyn Lannister conceded, "Still, to kill people at a wedding… that is disgraceful and barbaric beyond words. Can you imagine someone doing that in the Seven Kingdoms?"

"I'd like to think that would never happen in Westeros," Tyrion muttered bluntly, "However, I cannot deny that there are people who – under certain circumstances – would resort to such atrocities. Namely my lord father."

"Yes, I can see Tywin Lannister slaughtering guests at a wedding feast. He would probably be too
craven to even do the killing himself. Likely, he would just find some even less honorable lord to do the deed for him.

"Well, this wedding is supposed to be a big deal," Alyver commented. As he sheathed his blade, he looked up at Lyanna again and queried "How many people do you think will die at it, Princess?"

"I don't know," Lyanna wryly remarked, "Around a dozen or so. Maybe more."

"In any case, we may not stay long enough to learn the final tally," Lady Dacey conjectured.

Lyanna was confused. "How so, Dacey?"

"I predict we'll have to make a hasty departure," the younger Northwoman remarked, "We'll probably have to leave the wedding even before it ends."

"Why's that, Mother?" Alyver inquired.

"Yes, tell us what you mean, my lady," Ser Lothor bade the Bear Islander.

Lady Dacey gradually rose back to her full height, looked around at the present company, and told them "Gregor's directives were very explicit. The wedding between Daenerys Targaryen and Khal Drogo must happen. It MUST. Magister Illyrio Mopatis will not bring out the dragon eggs until the ceremony. However, the moment the eggs are given over to the Targaryens, we can withdraw from Pentos."

"Not so fast, my lady," Lord Tyrion argued, "Lord Gregor only said we were to evacuate if Daenerys did not wish to wed the khal."

"Oh, she won't want to marry him," Dacey firmly avowed.

"You do not know that," Tyrion contended.

"Yes, I do," Lady Dacey insisted, "Viserys Targaryen arranged this marriage without asking his sister's consent or opinion. Daenerys is being auctioned off as a slave by her own brother. No one deserves a fate such as that. Furthermore, Drogo is over ten years her elder, as well as an infamous killer and a brute. He would look a giant beside her."

"That last point might be more convincing," Ser Lothor perceived. He hastily added in "If it did not come from the woman who married the Mountain That Rides."

That's a fair argument. Lord Tyrion and Ser Brynden seemed to agree.

"That aside," Dacey continued, disregarding the legendary archer's remark, "I can all but guarantee that Daenerys will want out of her marriage to Drogo as soon as an opportunity to escape becomes available to her."

Tyrion Lannister stepped forward, gazed up at the Bear Islander, and stated "While I can understand why you'd believe that, my lady, I would caution you against making premature assumptions."

"In this situation, I don't see how I could," Dacey Clegane disputed.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," Lord Tyrion contradicted her, folding his arms. He paused for a moment, and then he began to pace in front of the others. He looked around at them and murmured "We all know Daenerys was forced into this marriage. She did not ask for it. If she had a choice, she would
have refused it. Most likely, she would accept our offer of rescue if we gave it now. Be that as it may, the wedding will not be for another fortnight. Plenty of time for her to change her mind."

"Why would she change it?" Lyanna said enquiringly.

"Oh, I can think of many reasons why," Tyrion debated, "To begin, she could do much worse than a khal. Say, for instance… a dwarf."

Lady Ellyn seemed taken aback. She said sardonically "I happened to be married to a dwarf. Happily married at that."

"Oh, no one can dispute that, my love," Tyrion slyly muttered, gazing up at his wife, "However, would I be right to assume that the concept did not always appeal to you? Be honest."

All eyes were on Lady Ellyn as she contemplated an answer. She did not seem all that eager to give one. Who can blame her? No one likes being put on the spot like this. Ultimately, she sighed and confessed "Well, when the match was first proposed, I will admit to having mixed feelings about it."

"I would have expected you to," Tyrion stated nonchalantly.

"But I quickly overcame my reservations," Ellyn asserted, "And I am extremely glad that I did."

"That is just the point I am trying to make," Tyrion professed. He looked around at everyone there and told them "The majority of the people in the world are opposed to marrying a dwarf. I myself would cringe at the idea. In that matter, Ellyn proved to be a better person than I. She gave me a chance, and she looked past our difference in height and everything else. Furthermore, although she and I did not wed until she was eight and ten, she was only three and ten when she agreed to marry me. That is almost three years younger than Daenerys Targaryen is right now."

He paused for a minute so that everyone could absorb everything he had just said. Lyanna had to admit Tyrion made an extremely compelling case. By their countenances, the others thought much the same.

So far, plenty of good has come from Tyrion's marriage to Ellyn. Not the least of which is their little boy, Duncan, who just might be Lord of Casterly Rock someday.

"Alright, Tyrion," Dacey Clegane thought aloud, "I will acknowledge the possibility that Daenerys will decide to go through with her marriage to Khal Drogo. Nevertheless, the dragon eggs are still our top priority."

"I understand," Tyrion affirmed.

Still, an alliance with a Dothraki khalasar would have its benefits. Even so, three living dragons would be invaluable to us.

The bridge was immersed in quietness for a short while. That ended when Dacey looked down at her second son and told him "I think it is about time that you were getting to bed, Al."

Alyver opened his mouth to protest, but all that came out was a loud yawn. He held his left hand over his mouth for a moment, and then he mumbled tiredly "Yes, Mother."

Lady Dacey smirked.

Lady Ellyn then picked up her son and said to her husband "We should put Duncan down for the
night, too."

Lord Tyrion nodded in agreement.

Alyver perked up a bit. He approached the dwarf and the giantess, and he suggested "Uncle Tyrion, Aunt Ellyn, how about we go downstairs together?"

"Certainly, my boy," Tyrion answered his nephew with a smile.

Lyanna snickered a bit. While most of the world was innately wary of Lannisters, Lord Tyrion's wife's family adored him. All of Gregor Clegane's children had interacted with the Imp during his stay at Moat Cailin, and all five of them had become fond of his company. Alyver, in particular. He enjoyed simply being near the dwarf.

In the past few weeks, Lyanna herself had gotten to know Lord Tyrion, as well. He had made her rethink many of her preconceptions of Lannisters. Many of the negative ones, that is.

As Alyver made his way over to the door that led to the lower decks with Tyrion, Ellyn went over to Dacey and whispered to her "We'll see that he gets to sleep."

Dacey grinned at her sister-by-law and told her gratefully "Thank you."

Lyanna watched as Alyver went below deck with his aunt, uncle, and cousin. For the moment, the only individuals who were still on the bridge were Ser Lothor, Ser Brynden, Lady Dacey, her son Torrhen, Lyanna, and Lyarra.

"Well, I think I've done enough shooting for the night," Lothor Brune thought aloud, holding his bow up with both hands, "I'm going to put this away."

Brynden Tully nodded, and then he declared "I'm going to get to the wheel and check our position. Make sure we aren't veering off course and such."

"Right," Lyanna commented blankly.

The Crownlander and Riverlander representatives of the secret council rapidly departed from the vicinity.

Now Lyanna was left alone with Dacey. Of course, Lyarra and Torrhen were there, too, but neither of them was much of a conversationalist.

Interestingly, Dacey had suddenly become rather silent, as well. Presently, she was standing at the aft side of the Zenith, cradling her youngest child close and staring out into the horizon. She almost appeared to be in a trance.

Concerned for her, Lyanna stepped closer and asked "Does something trouble you, Dacey?"

The younger yet taller Northwoman promptly regained her senses and turned to face her friend. She hastily stated "Oh, no, not at all, Lyanna. I was just… pondering."

Pondering? At first, Lyanna was bewildered. Then she looked into Dacey's eyes, and she immediately knew what the problem was. She recognized the expression on the Bear Islander's countenance. The wolf woman had frequently worn that very same expression on her own face during her time at Greywater Watch.

"Thinking about Rickard?" Lyanna presumed.
Dacey was astonished. "How could you tell?"

"Your eyes gave it away," Lyanna disclosed, "I was in your position for the first eleven years of Jon's life. No one knows how you feel more than I."

Dacey drearily sighed and turned back to the sea. She stated dimly "Then can I ask how you coped with the feeling?"

"I never really did," Lyanna admitted, "If I was able to cope with being separated from my son, I would not have gone to Moat Cailin."

"Understandable," Dacey conceded. After a pause, she murmured "Vallory and Larys are at Moat Cailin with their father, so I know they'll be safe while I'm away. But Rickard... I'm so worried about him."

"I cannot fault you," Lyanna said bitterly, "King's Landing is an absolute rat's nest. My father and brother died there. My stepson and stepdaughter almost died there. If that wasn't bad enough, the place is full of thieves, liars, murderers, and some of the worst filth to ever walk on two legs. Not to mention countless lowlifes who would stab you in the back if it suited their interests."

Dacey glared at the older Northwoman and mumbled "Lyanna, if this is your attempt to ease my conscience, you're doing an abysmal job."

"I wasn't finished," Lyanna calmly went on, "What I was about to tell you was that in spite of everything I just said, I am confident Rickard will overcome the many obstacles of King's Landing. He is every bit as strong as his parents. I know he will endure. Robert may be keeping him as a hostage to the crown, but Rickard will only be a ward of the throne for a couple years at most."

"Aside from that," she went on, "The King is not the man I was once betrothed to. He is a much better man now. Robert Baratheon has ruled from that city for the last sixteen years. He has managed to make Westeros a far better place than it ever was under Targaryen rule. As long as he continues his reign as he has, he would never allow any harm to befall an innocent boy in his care."

Once those words set in, Dacey quickly eased down. She seemed much less tense than she did a minute earlier. It appears my words accomplished what I hoped they would.

"Thank you, Lyanna," Dacey told the older Northwoman appreciatively, "That's just what I needed to hear."

"Anything for an old friend, Dacey," Lyanna asserted, patting the Bear Islander on the back.

After a few seconds of peace and quiet, Torrhen started to fuss a little. In response, Dacey gently bounced him and shushed him softly. He quickly settled down after that.

Lyanna felt somewhat envious of her friend. Dacey had five children, and she had raised all of them from birth. Jon was only a few days old when Lyanna had to part with him. She never got to take care of him when he was Torrhen's age. I would give anything for the opportunity to raise him properly.

Just then, the quiet atmosphere was interrupted by a humming sound. It sounded like humming, at any rate. It was very faint and difficult to discern.

Dacey must have heard it, too. She muttered inquiringly "What is that?"

Lyanna listened a little more closely, and she thought aloud "It sounds like... singing?"
They looked around for the source of this commotion. It appeared to originate from the stairwell that led to the lower decks.

A moment later, Jon appeared on deck. He looked as though he was dancing, and he had an uncharacteristically wide smile on his face. He also had a bottle of wine in his right hand. Ghost and Ser Gerold Hightower came up soon after him.

It turned out Lyanna was right; that noise was singing, and Jon was the one doing it. Her son was singing one of Lord Gregor Clegane's songs:

"This is what I live for. Darling, you're my open ro-oa-oa-oad. You can take me anywhere the wind blows, right into the great unkno-ow-ow-ow-own. We can through our hands up as we ride along. This is what we live for!"

Lyanna snickered at the scene. I don't think I've ever seen him so ecstatic.

Jon would have continued singing, but before he could go on, he spotted his mother and Lady Dacey. He shakily sauntered over to them, and he lightly kissed each of them on one cheek. Then he pronounced vividly "Hello, my fair ladies. How are you faring on this wonderful eve?"

"We are fine," Lyanna told her son.

"Excellent," Jon acknowledged, "That is just excellent."

Lyanna resisted the urge to laugh. Dacey just stared at him in bewilderment.

"Jon, are you drunk?" the Bear Islander conjectured.

"I don't think so, my lady," Jon told her, "But sometime before daybreak, I might be."

"Why is that?" Lyanna queried in interest.

"Oh, no reason except that I'm just so ecstatic, Mother," Jon slyly claimed, "Or should I call you Grandmother?"

Now it was Dacey's turn to laugh and Lyanna's turn to be confused. The latter lightly shook her head and bluntly muttered "Jon, I was already quite young when I gave birth to you. I am nowhere near the right age to be your grandmother."

"No, but you're old enough to be somebody's," Jon stated cheekily.

Lyanna was downright baffled now. "Sweetheart, what are you talking about?"

Jon became serious long enough to enlighten her. He stood up perfectly straight, looked his mother in the eye, and informed her "Ygritte just told me she's with child."

Lyanna softly gasped. She practically felt herself freeze in her stance. Did I hear him correctly? Jon, my precious little boy... got a girl pregnant? After standing still for about ten seconds, she grinned and asked excitedly "Really?"

Jon solemnly nodded his head. He smiled again and revealed "It gets even better that that. I asked her to marry me."

That was even more astounding. Lyanna did not quite know how to react to it.

"What did she say?" Dacey Clegane muttered inquiringly.
"She said she needed some time to think about it," Jon recounted. After a brief pause, he continued with "Two minutes, to be precise. After that, she accepted my offer."

"That soon?" Dacey muttered in amazement, "I didn't see Ygritte as the marrying type."

"Neither did I when I first met her," Jon disclosed, "But people can change, I suppose."

*Very true. I used to be wild and unpredictable. Then parenthood changed me for the better. As I'm certain it will change Jon for the better.*

Lyanna was not surprised at all that Jon asked Ygritte to be his wife. He was not the type of man to sire a bastard. *He grew up believing he was a bastard. I just knew he would not want his own child to live as one.* However, she hoped that was not his only reason for asking her.

"You aren't just asking Ygritte to marry you because you got her pregnant, right?" Lyanna assumed hopefully.

"Of course not," Jon assured her, "I asked her because I genuinely want her to marry me."

"Are you certain of that?" Lady Dacey enquired.

"I doubt I've ever been more certain about anything in my life," Jon promptly responded. *He sounds certain. That is sufficient to convince me that he is.*

Jon then held up the bottle of wine in his hand and declared "I thought maybe you'd like to celebrate with me."

"That's what you were doing?" Lady Dacey muttered in amusement, "Celebrating?"

Jon nodded and remarked "I figured I could afford one night of celebration before I go back to being my usual somber self."

*Maybe he is drunk.* At any rate, Lyanna decided to humor her son. She accepted the bottle of wine and took a sip from it. Then she handed it to Dacey.

As the Bear Islander had a drink, Lyanna asked curiously "Where is Ygritte, anyway?"

"Sleeping," her son notified her, "As you can imagine, she needs her rest."

*Naturally.*

"Just wait until after," his mother advised him, "She'll really need it then."

"I can validate that," Dacey proclaimed.

"I'll remember that," Jon asserted. After Dacey gave him back the bottle of wine, he turned to his sworn shield and offered "Care for a drink, Ser Gerold?"

"Not when I'm on duty, Your Grace," the Reachman politely refused.

"Oh, come on," Jon beckoned him, "It's not every day I learn that I'm going to be a father. Let me indulge you just this once."

The old knight stood thinking for a few seconds. Then he held out his hand and stated "As you wish."
Jon handed Ser Gerold the bottle, and the Kingsguard took a very long, very deep swig from it. Then he returned it to his charge and told him gratefully "Thank you."

"Anytime," said Jon.

Lyanna was impressed by how well Jon was taking the scenario. Evidently, he thought a great deal of this fatherhood business. They really do grow up so fast.

Lyanna may not have looked it, but she was just as thrilled as the average mother would love to be told that she was going to be a grandmother, her joy would generally be marred by the sensation that age was catching up to her. Lyanna Stark was not one of those mothers. In fact, the news that Jon would soon be a father had given her a renewed sense of vigor. This is just what all of us need; Jon, Ygritte, and myself.

Even though she had missed most of her own son's childhood, Lyanna Stark would definitely be there to help him with her first grandchild. Now we can finally make up for all that lost time.
"There it is," Ser Mark Ryswell thought aloud.

Willas Tyrell stepped closer to the bough of the Iceberg and gazed at the city. He could not deny King's Landing made for a beautiful sight. He reminded himself, *this is just the back of it from the sea. I wonder what the front from land looks like.*

"Never thought I would see this place again," Ethan Glover mumbled, "Nor did I wish to, after what happened last time."

*Who could blame him?*

Before the Rebellion, Ethan had been Brandon Stark's squire and one of the men who had accompanied the Wild Wolf to King's Landing. Their goal had been to rescue Lyanna Stark and take Rhaegar Targaryen's head. *That did not quite go according to plan.*

Brandon's recklessness had resulted in all their deaths, as well as their fathers'. Yet for whatever reason, the Mad King had spared Ethan. *Perhaps his father was already dead, and Aerys was unwilling to kill one without the other. Even the insane have their own bizarre kind of logic.* Instead of death, Ethan had been confined to the Black Cells of the Red Keep. He remained there until the Westerlords seized King's Landing and freed him. *I can only imagine what a harrowing experience that must have been.*

"I know the feeling, Ethan," stated Rhaenys Targaryen, who was standing next to Willas with her arms folded, "I have very few memories of this place. Only one of them is of my grandfather, and it is not even remotely pleasant. Then again... neither are any of the others."

Willas was not surprised. *She, her brother, and her mother were every bit as much a prisoner as Ethan. The only difference was that their cell was in the Maidenvault.*

Rafford the Sweetling was leaning on his spear behind them. He stepped forward and said jokily "None of them, Your Grace?"

Rhaenys chuckled and cheekily muttered "Alright, maybe a couple of them, Raff."

"I assume I'm there?" Rafford asked rhetorically.

"Yes, you **and** Lord Gregor," Rhaenys disclosed, "Strangely, you don't seem as big as you were then."

*Likely because you were only three at the time.* Rafford laughed in amusement.

"What about my father?" Rickard Clegane queried curiously. He was standing on the other side of Willas. "Does he look as massive now as he did back then?"

"As it happens, Lord Gregor looks even larger these days," Princess Rhaenys claimed. One may have thought she meant that as a jape, but by her tone, she was being serious.

"I can relate," Willas commented slyly, "I first met Lord Gregor when I was three and ten. Although I've grown over a foot since then, I still feel as though I have to look up even higher than before just to make eye contact with him."
"That's my lord father," Rickard murmured, snickering, "The human optical illusion."

That was a rather quaint observation, but it applied rather well. The Mountain is also an illusion in that there is always more to him than he lets on.

The Iceberg swiftly pulled into the harbor of King's Landing. The area was bustling with all manner of activity. Ships from all over the realm and outside of it were there. Each vessel bore its own banner. The stag of the Baratheons and the lion of the Lannisters could be seen in abundance. Despite belonging to the Legion without Banners, the Iceberg had a banner of its own. This one depicted the lone mountain of the northern branch of House Clegane.

Three prams that displayed both the stag and the lion met the Iceberg in the center of the waterfront. The prams ushered the Legionnaire vessel to the highborn port. Before long, the Iceberg was close enough that its passengers could discern the faces of the people on the docks.

"There's Jasper!" Rickard declared, pointing inland.

Willas and the others followed his finger, and indeed, they saw the black-haired Crown Prince standing at a vacant mooring.

Prince Jasper Baratheon was not alone. At least three dozen others were with him. Two of them must have been Kingsguard, judging by their white armor. Most of the others were Lannister men and Baratheon men.

Interestingly, there were some Stark men there, too. Willas was somewhat bewildered by their presence. Perhaps they are here to greet Rickard. Then he noticed a young girl among Jasper's company. A large, moving bundle of fur was at her side. Oh, it is not they who are here to greet him. They are simply here to guard the one who is.

"It appears Lady Arya is part of our welcoming committee, as well," Willas observed.

"Quite so," Rickard conceded, breaking into a wide grin. That smile reminded Willas of the expression he himself usually donned when he was with Rhaenys.

Lord Eddard Stark's daughters had set sail from White Harbor at around the same time the Iceberg departed Moat Cailin. Although the moat was geographically closer to King's Landing, it was not as accessible as the Manderlys' ancestral home.

Once the Starks' vessel was clear of the Bite, it could freely navigate all the way to Blackwater Rush through the Narrow Sea. The Iceberg followed mostly the same route, but before it could even reach the Bite, it had to sail down the Cut. Having to traverse a narrow riverway which extended across miles of overgrown marshlands was a difficult endeavor. Especially since we had to wait on a fleet of Ironborn ships before we could leave.

In any case, the Stark girls could not have arrived much sooner than the Legionnaires. They likely only reached King's Landing a few days earlier. I wonder how they are doing so far. Lady Sansa would fit in well with the highborn ladies of the south. Lady Arya, on the other hand, was not one to adhere to southron customs. Unless they're Dornish customs, that is.

As the Iceberg pulled up to the empty mooring, Rickard waved at his friends on the marina. Jasper merrily waved back. Arya waved with less enthusiasm, but she seemed no less pleased to see Rickard.

When the Iceberg was within spitting distance of the docks, they dropped anchor, and the
gangplank was extended to the wharf. Ropes were tossed by the crew to the dockhands, and the vessel was tied securely to the mooring.

Rickard was the first to exit the Iceberg. Willas and Rhaenys climbed down after him; Lady Ashara Dayne stepped off after them. Willas did not take note of who followed Lady Ashara. He was too preoccupied with the sensation of walking on stable ground. After weeks at sea, it is nice to feel solid land beneath my feet again. In all technicality, he was not really on land. But soon enough, he would be.

Rickard Clegane speedily approached Jasper Baratheon. When he was close enough, the heir to Moat Cailin extended his arms, and the heir to the Iron Throne did the same. The two boys embraced each other warmly, as though they were brothers. Willas felt that was an indicative sign of their friendship. The Crown Prince would not hug just anyone in public.

After that, Rickard exchanged pleasantries with Arya. He did not try to embrace her. That was prudent of him; Lady Arya Stark was not known for her affection. She rarely hugged her own family members, unless it was her cousin Jon. She did, however, firmly shake Rickard's hand and clap him on the back.

Still, even Nymeria was more receptive than her mistress. The direwolf allowed Rickard to scratch her behind the ears and rub the underside of her chin.

"We hadn't expected to see you here, Your Grace," Lady Ashara remarked.

"I would not be a very good king if I did not receive a group of very important envoys," Prince Jasper debated, "Especially when a future Lord Paramount and my best friend are among that group."

Willas was oddly flattered by that. He smiled at the Crown Prince appreciatively.

"Rickard is your best friend?" Rhaenys noted in perplexity.

"Of course, he is," Jasper affirmed.

"Just as Jasper is mine," Rickard added in.

As I suspected. In the North, Jasper and Rickard had been part of a group of six friends. While they were very close-knit, Willas had observed that each of the six tended to be closer to one of his five friends than he was to the other four.

Jon and Samwell, Robb and Theon... that would leave Rickard and Jasper. That's quite beneficial, considering Rickard's reason for being here.

"Never mind," Rhaenys hastily mumbled.

"Very well," Jasper muttered. He gazed around at the passengers of the Iceberg and announced "I'll escort you back to the Red Keep. Horses have already been prepared for the lot of you."

"Excellent," Shitmouth stated brusquely, "After three fuckin' weeks on that fuckin' bugger of a ship, it'll be fuckin' nice to travel on something else for a change."

"My thoughts exactly," Willas conceded. Only I would not be quite so crude.

Willas did not know what Shitmouth's real name was. But it would not surprise him if that was his real name. The man spoke vulgarities with such nonchalance, as though they were a part of normal,
As much as I respect Lord Gregor, I cannot help but question his decision to send the most foulmouthed of his soldiers to watch over his young – and still somewhat impressionable – son. Then again, at least Shitmouth was not violent or a drunk. He was actually one of the more agreeable of Gregor Clegane's men-at-arms, despite his unrefined language.

At any rate, Jasper soon led everyone over to the stables adjoining the harbor. As he said, dozens of horses had been readied in advance. Willas mounted a salt-and-pepper courser. Rhaenys climbed onto a rose red palfrey, and Rickard took a pitch black destrier. Jasper, Arya, Lady Ashara, and most of the others went on garrons of various colors.

The horses shied away from Nymeria as she approached them. Arya's nearly threatened to throw her off, but the Northern girl managed to keep her mount calm. The other horses gradually eased down, as well. After that, they swiftly began the ride to Aegon's High Hill.

As the group made their way through the River Gate, Nymeria padded alongside Arya's horse. The Northern girl kept a careful eye on the beast. That was likely one of the conditions of bringing the direwolves to King's Landing; their owners had to take full responsibility of them.

When they reached River Row, Rhaenys' horse was beside Willas'. He noticed she was watching the interaction between Arya and the direwolf. There was an odd look of longing in her eye. Willas knew what it was. She misses having a pet.

Rhaenys Targaryen used to have a cat named Balerion. He had been with her since the last time she was in King's Landing, and she had taken him with her to Greywater Watch. Willas had gotten acquainted with Balerion during his first official meeting with the princess. While he preferred hounds, he found he liked the cat.

Unfortunately, Willas did not get to know Balerion very well. Cats did not live as long as humans, and Balerion was already an elderly tom when Willas met him. He had died shortly after the last meeting at Moat Cailin. Before the Iceberg left, his mistress had buried him in a small patch of land outside of Moat Cailin. Although that was weeks ago, she still missed him.

Willas did his best to comfort Rhaenys. That was one thing he was superb at doing: brightening people's spirits. So far, his attempts had been successful. Rhaenys was certainly much more cheerful now than when they left the moat. She still yearned to have a pet of her own again, but Willas knew she would get over that eventually. After all, once her brothers returned, the three of them would each take charge of a certain creature that was believed to be extinct. Let's just hope they'll find a way to hatch the eggs. Lord Gregor never said how they're supposed to do that.

Rickard brought his horse up next to Arya's. When they were side-by-side, he asked her "Where's Sansa?"

"Lunching with the Queen," she informed him, "I ate earlier, but they were still eating when I left the Red Keep. They're probably done by now."

At the Street of Steel, Jasper was in front of the two Northerners. He looked over his shoulder and stated "I think they are, but Sansa is quite possibly still with my mother. Since she got here, Sansa has been spending much of her time with the Queen and her ladies-in-waiting."

"Is that why she didn't come to the docks?" Rickard presumed.

"Well, that, and she hates riding," Arya drily uttered, "What's worse; she keeps trying to drag me
Of course. Although Sansa and Arya Stark were the daughters of Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn, they had little else in common. Sansa constantly focused on becoming the ideal highborn lady, whereas Arya preferred the activities that were traditional of men. Even their appearances were different. Sansa took after their mother; Arya took after their father.

"Maybe you should indulge her," Willas proposed.

Arya glared at him in surprise. "Why?"

"She's your sister," Willas replied, "You shouldn't have such distance between you. You should try to establish some form of compromise with her."

"Compromise?" Arya repeated.

"Agree to attend some of Sansa's appointments with Queen Cersei," the Reachman suggested, "In exchange… you could teach her how to fight with a sword or shoot a bow."

"That's a good idea," Jasper conceded, "Against the threat of the Others, our numbers are too thin. Thus, everyone should be learning to fight, regardless of sex."

"While I agree with the sentiment, that's not the point I'm trying to make," Willas contended, "My point is that family is the most valuable and irreplaceable thing in the world."

"I know that," Arya claimed, "The words of my mother's house are Family, Duty, Honor. I know it is not without reason that family is listed first."

"Just so," Willas agreed, "Now, you and your sister have your differences. There is no harm in that. It is perfectly natural for siblings to disagree. It is also natural for them to quarrel. Even so, they should not resent or detest each other."

"Did I give you the impression that I hate my sister, my lord?" Arya crossly assumed.

"Certainly not," Willas asserted, "But you might come to, and so might she. Unless you both find some common ground. Hence, the compromise."

Arya thought on that. Then she shrugged and murmured "Alright. I'll see if I can 'compromise' with Sansa. But I won't promise anything. If I know her, she would spit at the thought of holding a weapon."

"It would still be in your best interests to try," Rhaenys advised the younger girl, "Time with your sister is something that should be treasured."

"I mean no disrespect, but how would you know, Princess?" Arya enquired, "You don't have any sisters."

"No, but I have two brothers," Rhaenys pointed out. One of whom is Arya's cousin. "Growing up, I hardly knew them or my mother. Nonetheless, I thought of them every single day of my life until I was finally reunited with them. If you were apart from your family, you would quickly realize just how much they really mean to you. Enough time away from Sansa, and I guarantee you would give almost anything to see her again. If ever that happens, it would be better if you and she were on good terms."

For once, Arya Stark was speechless. Evidently, she had never once considered the possibility that
she would be separated from her family. There were hundreds of miles between her and Winterfell, but she was still there with her sister, her father's men, and two direwolves. Rhaenys had just incited her to imagine what it would be like if she had come to King's Landing alone; no guards, no wolves, and no sister. Must be a terrifying thought.

"I'll reach a compromise with Sansa," Arya proclaimed, "If you really think it'll work."

"Trust me, it will," the heir to Highgarden asserted, "I would know. The Legion without Banners deals in compromise all the time. That is why it is so successful."

"But most of those instances are between rivals or allies," Lady Ashara remarked, "How many family disputes have you resolved through compromise?"

"Oh, a fair share," Willas revealed, "Including a few with my own siblings. I convinced Garlan to be the Reach's liaison to Dorne in exchange for his betrothal to Arianne Martell, I convinced Loras to wait to enlist in the Legion until he was knighted, and I convinced Margaery to give life in the North a chance. Though the last one was not too difficult."

"I can see why; she got plenty out of that arrangement," Arya uttered slyly.

"Indeed," Rickard concurred, "Robb did, too. Take it from me; I saw him the morning after."

"Let's not go there," Willas bluntly mumbled. Robb Stark was a decent man, and Willas Tyrell was fond of him, but he did not wish to imagine what the Young Wolf and his little sister had done together on the night of their wedding.

Up until now, the party had ridden through the city with little obstruction. However, when they got to the end of the Street of Steel, they came out onto Fishmonger's Square. There they encountered a fair amount of traffic.

A pair of Lannister guards rode ahead a little and yelled "Make way for the Crown Prince! Make way for Jasper Baratheon!"

Jasper groaned. He is well within his rights to be displeased. Some people did not enjoy being the center of attention. Jasper usually was, regardless of whether he wished to be.

Although the guards succeeded in clearing a path, they also managed to draw a fair amount of attention to themselves and their companions. A number of the smallfolk stopped what they were doing and turned towards the entourage. Most eyes fell on the dark-haired boy in the center. That was unsurprising. The public jumps at a chance to spot a member of the royal family.

While the people on the ground stayed out of the mounted group's way, they started to crowd the sides of the road. Many of them began to call out to Jasper and his associates. Most of the things they shouted sounded genial in nature. Every now and then, something not so pleasant was heard, but that was to be expected. No man was ever loved by all. Even the best of us have critics.

Willas looked around at the gathering masses. He noticed the people seemed to be in good health and good spirits. Clearly, King Robert was taking very good care of them. He's done much more for them than his predecessor ever did.

"I wonder if any of these people know who I am," Rhaenys murmured softly.

"I'm certain some of them do," Jasper stated, "It's been three weeks since my father issued that decree. There may be a few people in the realm who still have yet to receive the news, but by now, everyone in the city knows of it. As such, they must be aware that you were coming here,
"But most of them haven't seen her before," Ashara pointed out, "The few who have would only remember a little girl."

"Yes, and those people may recall that even back then, I favored my mother in appearance," Rhaenys disputed, "That hasn't changed in the time since."

"If you're worried about how the people will react, you can ride between me and Willas," Rickard offered, "That should keep you hidden from anyone on the ground."

"Or she could pull her hood up," Arya recommended.

"Good idea," Rhaenys commented. She took the hood to her cloak and drew it up over her head. Her hair and the back of her head were covered, but her face remained exposed.

"Tell me, Your Grace," Ashara requested, "How was the decree received?"

"Fairly well, I suppose," Jasper professed, "Lord Varys claims a lot of the smallfolk are questioning my father's reasons and motives for 'saving' the Targaryens. Some are beginning to wonder if it really was his idea to begin with. So far, no one has suspected it was Lord Gregor's, though. Overall, reception has been quite positive."

"Would you say everyone is content with the news?" Willas stated inquisitively.

"More or less," Prince Jasper supposed, "Many are actually indifferent to it. It's little more than a new source of gossip to them. However, most of the rest are commending my father for giving asylum to the children of the man he killed. Furthermore, almost no one seems displeased by the knowledge that there are more Targaryens in Westeros. In fact, I don't think there is any need for you to travel in disguise, Rhaenys."

"Thank you for your assurance, Your Grace," the Targaryen princess said gratefully, "But for the moment, I'd feel more comfortable if I kept my face concealed."

"Your choice," Jasper contended candidly.

The group made their way through Fishmonger's Square. That was when they got to the Hook. There were less people there, but there was also less space. The Lannister guards at the front of the party needed a minute to clear another path.

Once they were underway again, Willas looked to Jasper and enquired "What manner of reception can we expect at the Red Keep?"

"Well, as soon as we get there, my father will summon all of you to the throne room," the Crown Prince disclosed, "Most or all of the small council will be there, too. All of you have already sworn your fealty to the crown, so you won't be required to bend the knee. Be that as it may, it would not hurt to dip your head when you enter."

"Noted," Willas stated. Several of the others muttered their agreement.

"Who all is on the small council, again?" Rickard Clegane enquired. "Refresh our memories."

"Other than my parents and your father, there are seven others," Jasper Baratheon announced, "Lord Jon Arryn is Hand of the King, Lord Stannis Baratheon is Master of Laws, Ser Kevan Lannister is Master of Coin, Rodrik Greyjoy is Master of Ships, Ser Barristan Selmy is Lord
Commander of Kingsguard, Marwyn the Mage is Grand Maester, and Lord Varys is Master of Whisperers."

"Anyone we should watch out for?" Rhaenys queried.

"All of them," Jasper promptly answered, "That's something you learn quickly in this city. No one is your ally."

"Unless they want something in return," Lady Ashara countered.

"Precisely," Prince Jasper the prince's advice was sound, it was somewhat redundant to Willas. After ten years in the Legion, he was innately wary of everyone. That policy should apply everywhere in the world.

"What I meant was… anyone in particular?" Rhaenys clarified.

Jasper thought a moment. Then he pronounced "You have nothing to fear from Lord Jon or Ser Barristan. They may be closer to my father than anyone else, but they would never condone the slaying of innocent people. Grand Maester Marwyn is no threat, either. He is one of the few holders of the title who actually is loyal to the whole realm, not just part or most of it. Lord Varys may seem a shifty figure, but he tends to keep to himself most of the time."

"What about Lord Stannis?" Rickard conjectured, "Or Ser Kevan?"

"You'll be pleased to know my Great Uncle Kevan is more like my Great Uncle Gerion than my grandfather," Jasper revealed, "In addition to that, he treats his hostages well. He even married one: Lady Dorna of House Swyft. My Uncle Stannis… well, I would be careful around him if I were you. He supports my father's decision to restore the Targaryens to nobility, but only out of duty. Doubtlessly, he does not approve of it. It would also be best not to mention Dragonstone around him."

"We'll keep that in mind," Rhaenys avowed. "What about Rodrik Greyjoy? All I know of him is that my cousin's husband maimed him at Seagard."

_The same cousin who shares a name with Arya Stark's direwolf._

"Oh, he's an ass," Jasper replied straightforwardly. Willas snorted at the abruptness of that statement.

"More of an ass than Theon?" Rickard jested.

"Much more," Jasper told his best friend, "You know how we're always joking about how Theon should try to be more like his brother Maron? Well, I would not be jesting when I say it would be a huge improvement if Rodrik was more like Theon."

"Damn," Rickard mumbled, grimacing, "He's that bad, huh?"

"Only when he's in a foul mood," Jasper claimed, "Unfortunately, that's almost half the time. Nevertheless, he has some powerful friends in the city. A lot of them are other Ironborn. However, sometime while I was away, he somehow became affiliated with Janos Slynt, the commander of the City Watch."

"I've heard of Slynt," Rickard thought aloud, "For years, my father has been trying to convince yours to replace him."
"Lord Gregor is right to do so," Jasper claimed, "Slynt is a crook, and everyone knows it. My father just won't admit it. Or won't be bothered with it. In his mind, as long as Slynt keeps the people of this city safe, there is no need to strip him of his office."

"Maybe the problem is that the Legion has never had a strong presence in King's Landing," Willas theorized, "That's due to how the royal family is not subject to its justice."

"Is there anything we could do about that, Willas?" Rickard asked hopefully.

"I believe so, Rickard," Willas Tyrell debated, 'I'll keep an eye on Slynt while we're here. If I manage to catch him in the act of doing something dirty, I could use my authority as a Legionnaire officer to get him removed from his position."

"If you believe you can pull that off, my lord, be my guest," Jasper bade him, "But I urge you to be cautious. There is no telling who in the city is in Janos Slynt's pocket."

"Until I ensnare him, I'll simply assume everyone is," Willas proclaimed. Trust no one."

"Excellent," Jasper said approvingly.

"So, all things considered, we can expect a lukewarm greeting?" Rickard asked rhetorically.

"That sounds about right," Jasper confirmed, "No one will be overjoyed to see any of you, but none of them will be offended by your presence, either. Some of them might offer you a hand. If so, take it and shake it."

"Got it," Jasper acknowledged, "Nothing more than handshakes, right?"

Jasper nodded. At the same time, Rhaenys smirked and cheekily commented "You won't have to worry about anyone kissing you, Rickard."

Willas and Lady Ashara Dayne chuckled. Rickard just rolled his eyes and mumbled "Relax, Rhaenys. I don't expect every person in the world to greet me the way your mother did."

"Hold on..." Arya Stark interjected sharply, gazing at the tall boy, "Princess Elia Martell kissed you?"

She had been so quiet these last few minutes, Willas had almost forgotten she was there. Apparently, so had Rickard. I'll bet he wishes she wasn't here right now. The expression on his face implied as much.

"No..." Rickard claimed softly. Arya continued to glare at him. A few seconds later, he sighed and confessed "Yes."

"Where?" she asked, a little demandingly.

"At Moat Cailin," he answered her.

"That's not what I meant," Arya muttered incredulously. Doubtless he knew that.

"Fine," Rickard murmured frankly, "It was on the lips."

"Why are you only telling me this now?" Arya inquired.

"Because you asked," he sardonically retorted, "And I did not see the need to tell you."
"Well, I thought you and I weren't keeping secrets from each other," Arya argued sharply.

"That doesn't mean we have to share everything," Rickard countered, "Anyway, I wasn't the one who... initiated the kiss. I just planned to shake her hand. It was she who wanted to give a more intimate greeting."

"I can vouch for him," Rhaenys pronounced, "If it makes any difference, Arya, my mother greeted Lord and Lady Clegane the same way. In front of myself and many other witnesses, she kissed Rickard and his parents."

"She did it without asking our permission, I might add," Rickard hastily mentioned.

Arya was genuinely confused. "Why?"

"That's just the way Elia Martell greets people," Ashara Dayne claimed, "You can take my word as her best friend."

Willas, Rickard, Rhaenys, and Jasper all laughed at that. Arya did not laugh, but she did grin. *At least she is no longer sullen.*

"You're not jealous, are you, Arya?" Rhaenys supposed.

Arya's frown immediately reappeared. "Why would I be jealous?"

"If I did not know better, I would say you did not want other women kissing Rickard," Rhaenys observed.

"No, it doesn't matter to me whom he kisses," Arya claimed. *She does not sound very convincing.*

"Are you certain of that?" Rhaenys disputed.

"Of course," Arya promptly replied. After a pause, she tentatively remarked "Or, I think, at least. Why are we even talking about this?"

"Just wait a couple years," Rhaenys advised her, "By then, you'll understand my meaning."

"Right," was all the Northern girl said in response. This discussion ended there, but Willas could not miss the look Arya threw Rickard's way. That expression was uncharacteristically warm. *She may not need a couple years. She may not even need a couple weeks.*

A few minutes later, they got to the end of the Hook. That was when they finally reached the Red Keep. Seeing it up close, Willas noticed it was smaller than he originally thought. Even so, it was an impressive structure.

"Alright, this is it," Jasper sternly declared, "Best of luck to all of you. Just stay close to me, and everything will be fine."

*I certainly hope so.*

After giving their mounts over to the boys of the royal stables, Willas and everyone his party followed Prince Jasper into the Red Keep.

The march to the throne room was both quiet and brief. They only needed five minutes to get there. When they arrived, they found another direwolf at the entrance of the room. That was Lady, the one that belonged to Sansa Stark. Nymeria bounded over to her older sister and nuzzled her playfully. Lady returned the gesture happily.
The two direwolves get along better than their mistresses. Of course, that would probably change soon, assuming Arya was serious about reaching a compromise with Sansa.

The majority of the people in Willas' company were required to remain outside the throne room. In fact, the only ones who were permitted entrance were Lord Willas, Princess Rhaenys, Lord Rickard, Prince Jasper, Lady Arya, Lady Ashara, Ser Oswell Whent, and the two Kingsguard who had accompanied Jasper to the harbor.

Inside the throne room, the king and the small council were already assembled, just as Jasper forecasted. Lady Sansa Stark was there, too. She was standing close to Queen Cersei.

King Robert Baratheon was seated on the Iron Throne. He sat up straight with his hands folded. He looked quite dignified and regal, like a proper and just monarch. \textit{But one mustn't go by looks alone.}

Willas and his companions gradually yet unceasingly approached the Iron Throne. When they were close enough, they stopped and tilted their heads to the King. They held that stance for a few moments. Then the King beckoned them "Rise."

They all stood up straight once more. Sansa then went to stand by Jasper, who grinned at her genially. She flushed and smiled back.

Nothing much happened after that. Introductions were made between both parties, King Robert officially welcomed his new guests to King's Landing, the terms and conditions of their stay in the capital city were listed out, and that was the end of it. \textit{I do not sense any threats thus far. Be that as it may, I am not about to lower my guard.}

Within twenty minutes of their arrival, Willas and the others in his group were dismissed. That was when they all parted ways.

After regrouping with their direwolves, Arya asked Sansa if she could speak with her in private. Thankfully, the elder Stark sister agreed to the younger's request. Jasper invited Rickard to spar with him in the training yard, and the heir to Moat Cailin was quick to accept. Lady Ashara went to talk to Ser Barristan Selmy, of all people. \textit{I wonder what business she would have with Barristan the Bold?}

Willas was left alone with Rhaenys. That was fine with him. In fact, he was hoping for that. This was the first opportunity the two of them had to be alone with each other in three weeks. The last instance was just before they got on board the \textit{Iceberg}. \textit{Not many options for privacy on an overcrowded galley.} Then again, in all likelihood, privacy would not be any easier to come by in King's Landing, what with Lord Varys and his little birds. \textit{At least here, we have more space.}

"Would you care to go for a walk, my lady?" Willas offered his intended.

"Ordinarily, I'd be happy to go on one, my lord," Rhaenys told him, "But I would like some time to get settled first. Would you mind?"

"Not at all," Willas assured her, "I'm a little fatigued myself. It was a long and tiring voyage."

"Quite so," Rhaenys conceded, stretching her arms and her back, "I'm going to go lie down for a while. Once I'm rested, I'll be open to doing something. So maybe we could go get together sometime later today?"

"Absolutely," Willas affirmed, "How about this: you come to my chamber tonight, and we'll have dinner."
"I'd love that," Rhaenys said favorably. _I knew you would._

"It's a date then," Willas declared officially.

He kissed the princess on both cheeks and once on the lips. That was how they preferred to say "hello" and "goodbye" to one another. They parted ways then, but they would see each other again before long. Shortly after Rhaenys left to get settled, Willas went to do the same.

Of all the people who had arrived on board the Iceberg that day, Willas Tyrell was the highest in status. As such, he received the finest accommodations. He was given a spacious suite in Maegor's Holdfast. It came with a large bed, a desk, three wardrobes, two bookcases, a golden tub, a full-length looking glass, a dining table with four chairs, and a balcony which offered a superb view of both the city and the sea. He was loath to admit it, but these quarters were even better than his private apartment in the Captains' Tower at Moat Cailin.

_Still, I'd chose the moat over this city any day._

When he got off the Iceberg, Willas had been wide awake. Yet now he felt strangely fatigued. He decided to take a short nap to reinvigorate himself for when he and Rhaenys had dinner.

Willas removed his sword, his cloak, and his doublet, and then he laid down on top of the bedsheets. It did not take long for him to fall asleep.

He woke up about two hours later, feeling revitalized. That was when he began to prepare for his evening.

First, he went to the kitchens and told the chefs to make a three-course meal for two, and he arranged for the servants to bring it to his bedchamber. Then he went down to the wine cellars and found a bottle of Arbor Gold and Dornish Red each. After that, he sought out a pair of minstrels; one who could play the lute, and one who could play the drums.

Willas spared no detail; he wanted everything to be perfect. _Rhaenys deserves nothing less._

Once he saw to all that, Willas returned to his quarters. There he took the time to bathe, trim his beard, adorn his most formal ensemble, and set everything else up.

Shortly after he finished, the minstrels arrived. The servants appeared soon after with the food. To save time and get rid of them sooner, Willas ordered them to place all three courses on the dining table at once.

Not five minutes later, Rhaenys appeared, clad in a flowing gown of orange, red, and gold. _The colors of her mother's house._ Willas already thought Rhaenys was beautiful beyond words. Nonetheless, she looked inexplicably stunning in the colors of House Nymeros Martell.

Ever the chivalrous one, Willas pulled out Rhaenys' chair for her, and pushed it in after she sat down. Then he sat down beside her, and they began to eat.

The minstrels stood off to the side, playing their instruments and singing their songs. They were mostly there for ambience. Neither Willas nor Rhaenys paid much attention to them.

However, shortly after they finished the main course, Willas asked Rhaenys for a dance. She eagerly accepted, and the two of them moved out to the balcony.

Willas then requested a certain song from the minstrels. This one he had learned from Lord Gregor. He felt it perfectly described how he felt towards Rhaenys, and he wanted her to know it.
The minstrels did not sing this one. Instead, Willas did. As he held Rhaenys close to him, he sang to her:

"As the Sun goes down waking up my dreams, and in my mind, you're with me once again. Out of my heart, into your head. And inside my heart, there's a place for you. And in my mind, I'm with you once again. Out of my heart, into your head."

The song had the intended effect; it brought Rhaenys into a state of euphoric bliss. Willas wondered if she adored the lyrics or his voice more. *Could be both, I guess.*

They soon returned to their chairs for the dessert course. Once their plates were clean, Willas dismissed the minstrels. Now he and Rhaenys were alone once again. *This time, I don't want us to be disturbed.*

"That was wonderful, Will," she told him appreciatively, leaning on the surface of the table, "I'm so glad we did this."

"As am I, Rhae," he claimed, reclining in his chair, "This went even better than I planned. I honestly don't think this evening could get any better."

"Oh, I think I might know one way it could," Rhaenys wryly contended.

Willas' curiosity was piqued. "How?"

Rhaenys did not reply verbally. Instead, she slowly rose from her chair, stepped up to Willas and pressed her lips against his.

*She has me there. Kissing does make everything better.*

However, it turned out Rhaenys had more than kissing in mind. While her lips were still against his, she extended her right arm and gently cupped the front of his breeches. Willas felt himself stiffen at her touch. The action was so sudden that he pulled his mouth away from hers.

"What are you doing?" he nervously asked, even though he pretty much knew the answer to that question already.

"Finding out just how much reach a Reachman has," she cockily replied, continuing to rub her hand against his crotch, "If you are any indication, it's quite a lot of 'reach.'"

"I… I suppose," he conceded.

This was so unlike Willas Tyrell. He never became tongue-tied whilst talking to members of the fairer sex. Then again, no woman had ever been this close to him before. He always knew he would have to get that close to the lady who would be his wife. But he assumed that would not be until *after* the wedding.

*Since my bride is half-Dornish, I probably should have seen this coming.*

Willas tried his hardest to dissuade Rhaenys. He took a hold of her shoulders, gently pushed her back, and told her softly "Rhae, as much as I would love to take your maidenhead, we should hold off for now."

"Why, Will?" she pouted, "Sooner or later, it's going to happen, anyway. May as well make it sooner."
"That is a good argument. "But it wouldn't be right."

"It would certainly feel right," she countered.

"Wouldn't make it right," he insisted.

"Oh, come on," she bade him, pressing her hand against his manhood more firmly, "You said it yourself; you wanted this night to perfect. Let's make it the perfect night."

Willas was really starting to weaken. Still, he had exceptionally strong resolve. Ignoring the throbbing in his lower body, he adamantly shook his head.

Rhaenys saw he was not about to give in. She removed her hand from his clothed erection, and then she proposed "Could you at least do it for me?"

"What do you mean?" Willas asked, bewildered.

"The last time I was here, I almost died," Rhaenys apprised him, "Even with Ser Oswell and all my other guards, I don't feel safe here. You can help me overcome that apprehension. If I were to fall asleep in your arms and wake up in them just once, I would feel safe for as long as I'm here."

That swayed Willas' mind. He could tell Rhaenys was not trying to get him in bed solely for her own benefit. It was no longer just a matter of intimacy. Now it was one of security, as well. For the first time in his life, Willas Tyrell disregarded his restraint.

"Alright," Willas proclaimed, "We can go to bed with you in my arms. I'll just consider everything that comes before that a 'prerequisite.'"

Rhaenys nodded and grinned widely. "I like the way you think."

Willas grinned back at her. He then picked up Rhaenys in his arms and carried her over to the bed. They both proceeded to shed their clothing. As lovely as Rhaenys looked in her red, orange, and gold gown, Willas was more eager to see what was underneath.

As he unlaced his breeches, he asked her deviously "Are you ready for this, my beautiful dragon?"

"Quite ready, my strong rose," she friskily rejoined, slipping out of her bodice.

"Good," he remarked. I'll show her just how long this rose's stem truly is.

…

"Now turn to the left!" Lord Gregor Clegane called out.

At this time, the lord of Moat Cailin was less than a dozen feet in front of Samwell Tarly. The heir to Horn Hill could hear him perfectly. Even so, he could not see him.

This damn contraption is blocking my view of everything.

After many days of sweat and toil, they had finally finished construction of the printing press. It had already been designed, built, torn apart, rebuilt, and tested. Now it just needed to be relocated to higher ground.

Lord Gregor wanted the printing press on the same floor as the library. Unfortunately, that was three stories above their heads. Samwell was much stronger than when he first came to the moat, but transporting the printing press was no easy feat. Gods, this thing is heavy.
Luckily, he and the Mountain were not undertaking this endeavor on their own. Four other men were aiding them. To Samwell's right, Smalljon Umber and Polliver were holding the underside of the body of the printing press. To his left, Tormund Giantsbane and Gerion Lannister were doing the same. Samwell had a firm grasp on the roller carriage at the tallest part of the body. Gregor Clegane was at the head of the machine, steering it when needed and guiding the others.

They were six men, three of whom were among the strongest people in Westeros. Alas, moving a device as massive and cumbersome as the printing press was still a challenge. *Don't buckle. Just keep your hands steady.*

In any case, Samwell shifted his weight to the right so that he could rotate the printing press to the left. The other men turned it at nearly the same pace. They crossed into the next hallway and continued on the predetermined path.

*At least we don't have to worry about people getting in the way.* Lord Gregor had cleared their route ahead of time so that no one would impede their progress.

"We're approaching the stairwell," Gregor Clegane declared.

Samwell suppressed the desire to complain. Polliver and Tormund did not bother with that small courtesy. They both groaned quite vocally. All the same, they did not give up.

"Now comes the fun part," Smalljon Umber sarcastically muttered.

Gregor Clegane paid no mind to that remark. He remained focused on getting to the stairwell. That took less time than Samwell expected it to, which was both good and bad in his mind.

When Lord Gregor's foot was on the first step of the stairwell, he looked around at the other five men and asked them "Everyone got a stable grip?"

Samwell and the others claimed that they did.

"You're sure?" the Mountain asked, as though he did not believe they were.

"Yes, my lord," Ser Gerion asserted, somewhat irately. The others mumbled in agreement. Each of them seemed a little irate, as well. *At least they can see. I'm walking blind here.* Samwell tried not to sound displeased, but the strain in his voice betrayed him.

"Alright," the Mountain announced, "Let's do this."

They swiftly began the ascent. They only had to go up three flights of stairs, but the distance felt much greater than that. *It's like climbing the Wall.*

Samwell quickly realized that the most frustrating aspect of the printing press was not its size. It was its shape. It was four feet wide and six feet long. The body was only about three tall, but the head was nine feet at its highest point.

The stairwell was wide enough for three grown men to walk up or down it alongside each other. They would even have plenty of breathing room whilst doing this.

Two grown men and a man-sized device presented an entirely different situation. The printing press could not bend, fold, or crease in any way. It could not be disassembled, either. Thus, once it was completed, it could only be moved in its final state. As a result, there was not much space for Samwell and his companions to work with on the stairwell.
As they made their way up the first flight of stairs, Lord Gregor yelled "Here we go… Pivot! Pivot! Pivot!"

Samwell and the others followed his orders and rotated the printing press slightly to the right as they ascended. With each step they rose, Lord Gregor bellowed "pivot" again. Samwell noted that every time he said 'pivot,' he pronounced it in a slightly different tone of voice. Some of his annunciations were somewhat amusing. *Perhaps he's trying to be humorous. I'd welcome that.* Some humor would be a nice distraction from the pain in my arms.

After Lord Gregor called out "pivot" for fifteenth time, Ser Gerion Lannister moaned and muttered heatedly "My lord, please!"

Straightaway, Gregor Clegane stopped shouting "pivot." He turned to the blond knight and murmured "My apologies, Gerion. I've just always wanted to do that."

"Scream 'pivot' while carrying a large, heavy object up a flight of stairs?" Polliver presumed.

"Yes," the Mountain affirmed.

"That's a queer goal to have," Tormund observed.

"Well, I saw another group of people do it once," Lord Gregor explained, "It was quite hilarious, actually. Their situation was much like ours. Only theirs ended with one of them telling the person yelling 'pivot' to 'shut up' thrice. That made it even more comical."

"I was certainly tempted to tell you to shut up, Gregor," Smalljon Umber drily remarked. I'll wager he was not the only one.

"All japes aside, can we focus on getting this fucking thing upstairs?" Tormund proposed exasperatedly.

"Of course," Lord Gregor said in response. The six men promptly resumed climbing up the stairs. A few seconds later, he declared "We just reached the second floor. We're a third of the way there."

*We're not even halfway.* Again, Samwell did not complain, despite his strong urge to. *Keep your head together, Sam. You must not give up now.*

Over the next thirty seconds, the six men ascended in total silence, aside from the occasional grunt or groan.

After that, Smalljon sardonically wondered aloud "Whose brilliant idea was it to put the library on the fourth floor, anyway?"

"The architects'," Lord Gregor revealed, "I personally would have put it on a lower level, but for some reason I cannot fathom, they thought the fourth floor was most ideal. I think it's because the largest room in this tower is on that level, and how nearly every wall in that room has shelves carved into it. Then again, that was their doing, as well. Perhaps I signed off on those blueprints a little too hastily."

"Why didn't we just move the library?" Polliver conjectured.

"If you can think of another practical use for all those shelves in the largest room on the fourth floor…" Lord Gregor countered.

"Fair argument," Gerion Lannister admitted, "But suppose we renovated the first and fourth
"To do that, the Knowledge Tower would have to be closed off for months," the Mountain debated, "Most of the building would be inaccessible, including the rookery. Not to mention all the time it would take to carry the books, tables, chairs, and extra bookcases downstairs."

"That would be rather obstructive," Samwell observed, "Aside from that, I would hate for the library to be closed down for a single day, let alone a few months."

"I would, too," Smalljon contended. Samwell was astonished. I didn't take him for much of a reader. "Even so, is it really necessary for us to take this damn thing all the way up there?"

"Of course," Lord Gregor confirmed, "With the printing press, we'll be making scores of books daily. Each book needs its own place. At the rate we'll be turning them out, we should ideally find a place to put them as soon as they are printed."

*That would be easier with the printing press in the very next room to the library.*

"Well, remind me again," Tormund requested, "Why didn't you just build this thing on the same floor as the library to begin with?"

"Because all the construction materials are on the ground floor," Gregor Clegane elaborated, "Most of the devices we create do not even stay in the Knowledge Tower upon completion. They're usually moved to other parts of the moat instead. This, however, is one of the few exceptions."

"Suppose that instead of carrying the whole printing press up to the four floor, we only took up the resources required to make it, my lord," Samwell hypothesized, "Once we had everything gathered, we could have built it up there. That would have been considerably less strenuous."

"Maybe," the Mountain argued, "But it would have been no less time-consuming, Sam. Keep in mind how much trial and error we went through to produce a functional printing press. We encountered half a dozen failures before we finally succeeded. Now imagine carrying seven loads of the lumber, nails, and tools we needed to build a printing press up these stairs. Would you prefer that over this?"

"When you put it that way… no, that would not be a better alternative," Samwell drearily pronounced, "Now that I think on this, it would also be very disruptive. All that carpentry would surely have disturbed everyone in the library next door. In my mind, people deserve some peace and quiet when they want to read."

"Well, there are some who can read in a loud environment," Gerion Lannister pointed out, "Be that as it may, I agree with you. Silence is more appealing."

"You should tell my wife that," Polliver jokily remarked.

Samwell and the other four laughed heartily at that jape.

"Does anyone else have any further grievances to share?" Gregor Clegane inquired. When no one gave a response, the lord of Moat Cailin proclaimed "Then while we're on the subject of how pleasant silence can be, let's not talk any more until we reach our destination. We'll only expend more energy and distract one another. Anyway, we just passed the third floor."

*I would say that's a relief, but we've still got one flight of stairs to go.*

By this point, Samwell's legs were aching badly, and his hands were beginning to cramp. Since he
was at the back of the group, he felt as though the full weight of the printing press was being forced upon him.

At the very least, the printing press had not gotten stuck in the stairwell. He hoped it would stay that way. Given the dimensions of the stairwell, it would have been fairly easy for the printing press to get wedged in this enclosed space. Especially with six grown men all around it.

Thankfully, Samwell and the other men managed to avoid getting trapped by the printing press. They also managed to avoid dropping it, banging it against the wall, or smashing each other with it. In fact, the last phase of the ascent was rather simple, and it went by without incident.

Until they finally reached the fourth floor.

Due to his position in the group, Samwell was still moving with zero visibility. He could not even look down to check his footing. That was not an issue when walking down a hallway or climbing up a stairwell. Stepping onto a flight of stairs or getting off it, however…

Samwell could tell when they reached the fourth floor when the angle he held the printing press at started to decrease. That was a clear indication that they were coming onto flat ground again.

The more the press's incline lessened, the more relieved Samwell felt. Soon enough, Lord Gregor, Ser Gerion, Smalljon, Tormund, and Polliver were all on the fourth floor.

Then Samwell Tarly himself got there. Unfortunately, he misjudged the distance between the top step of the stairwell and the one below it. He meant to put his foot down in the center of the top step, but he ended up stepping onto the very ledge of it instead.

"Woah!" Samwell exclaimed as he tripped over the top step. He struggled to remain on his feet, but he lost both his balance and his grip on the printing press. Suddenly, he was falling straight backwards. For a split-second, he feared he would land on his head and crack his skull. Or worse.

Fortunately, no grave injury befell him. Before Samwell could tumble down the stairwell, an arm shot out from around the printing press and seized him by the front of his doublet.

Samwell fumbled with his feet for a moment, and before he could register what had just transpired, he was standing on solid ground again.

Samwell saw that the hand that had grabbed him still had a hold on his doublet. The arm belonged to Smalljon Umber, who was grinning at him. The heir to Last Hearth released the younger man and uttered slyly "Mind your feet, Sam."

"Thank you," the heir to Horn Hill gasped, leaning against the wall to recover from his shock.

"Everyone alright?" Lord Gregor Clegane asked in concern.

"Yeah," Tormund Giantsbane replied, "We're fine over here."

Despite this sudden burst of activity, the other men had managed to prevent the printing press from falling onto the floor. That's impressive, seeing as it lost three of the twelve hands that were holding it up.

This momentary loss of a quarter of the group's manpower was controllable. In fact, the group had prepared for setbacks such as that. When they decided how they would transport the printing press, the six men had arranged themselves in a fashion such that if one or even two of them buckled, the others would still be able to support the press's weight and continue forward without them.
"You're all doing magnificently," Lord Gregor declared, "A few dozen more feet and we're there."

"Right," Smalljon Umber commented, taking ahold of his side of the printing press with both hands once again.

As the same time, Samwell approached the back of the press. Before he could lift that end of it, Gerion Lannister told him "If you're tired, Sam, you don't have to trouble yourself. We can manage from here."

Samwell's arms and legs were aching all over. They were practically screaming to him for a reprieve. Aside from that, Ser Gerion did not sound condescending or presumptuous. He sounded genuinely concerned for Samwell's well-being.

Nevertheless, Samwell Tarly was not about to give up. *Not when we're so close to achieving our objective.*

"That won't be necessary, Ser Gerion," Samwell professed, "I just tripped on the stairs. I can assure you that won't happen again."

"Are you certain of that?" Polliver inquired, anxiously. *He expects me to mess up again.* Samwell could discern that much from the other man's tone. That was similar to the tone Samwell's father normally used with him. *Only Polliver's tone is not so aggressive or demeaning.*

"Yes," Samwell muttered firmly, "I helped design and build this thing. I'll be damned if I do not help bring it to its final resting place."

His five associates appeared surprised by the determination in Samwell's voice and actions. He nearly surprised himself. Normally he was not so assertive. *Even I take pride in my work, I suppose.*

"I believe he can handle it," Gerion Lannister perceived.

"I know he can," Gregor Clegane affirmed, "Reassume your original position, Sam."

"Aye, my lord," Samwell acknowledged. As before, he moved to the back of the printing press and picked it up on that end. The six men made their way down the adjoining corridor.

"Still, be careful where you step," Smalljon Umber advised, "And I am not speaking only to Sam. If we get careless, any one of us could slip and smash his head against the ground."

"I don't think we're in any danger of that, Jon," Gregor Clegane commented frankly.

"One can never be too sure, Gregor," Smalljon debated, "As you yourself said, some of us are going to die. All the same, there is no need for any of us to die in such a disgraceful and undignified manner."

The Mountain let out a deep sigh and murmured irately "You are looking too much into my words. Anyway, we're not going to die because of this machine."

"Well, it could fall on one of us," Polliver supposed.

"It hasn't so far," Gerion Lannister countered. *No, and it's also too heavy to push or drop onto someone.*

"If we stay here much longer, it might," Tormund Giantsbane snapped impatiently.
"Tormund has a point," Smalljon perceived.

"Indeed," the Mountain conceded, "So let's move on. We can continue this discussion when we get to the library."

"Right," Samwell said plainly.

Five minutes later, the six men arrived at their destination.

The library encompassed most of the fourth floor of the Knowledge Tower. There were a number of smaller rooms around it. These rooms were essentially large closets that served as storage space.

Earlier that week, one of those storage closets had been emptied of its contents. That was where Samwell and his fellow Legionnaires brought the printing press. Getting the machine through the doorframe was a simple enough task. After that, all they had to do was bring the press to the back of the room and set it down against the wall.

That was when they were finally able to rest their arms and catch their breath.

"All in favor of never doing that again…" Gerion Lannister drily uttered, rubbing the palms of his hands.

"I'm for that," Polliver proclaimed, stretching his back.

"The fuck is this thing made of, anyway?" Tormund spat, glowering at the printing press.

"If you'd really like to know, I have the schematics right here," Samwell proposed, reaching into his doublet and taking out a short pile of assorted papers, "Complete with a list of very explicit directions for assembly and maintenance."

"I think I'll bypass that offer," Tormund mumbled superficially.

"As you say," Samwell calmly stated in acknowledgment. He lowered his hand and gazed around the room. He and the other five men stood around in relative quietness for about a minute. After that, Samwell turned to the tallest person there and stated "So, Lord Gregor, now that the printing press is officially in commission, we should put it to use."

"Quite so, Sam," Lord Gregor concurred, "I plan to do so immediately."

Samwell beamed in excitement. "What will be the first thing you'll have it print?"

"You're holding it right now," the Mountain replied.

Samwell looked down at his hands, somewhat perplexed. "The press's instruction manual?"

Gregor Clegane nodded in confirmation. "The printing press will be the greatest breakthrough Westeros has seen since Valyrian steel was first introduced to it. As such, there should be more than one of it in existence. I propose we send a copy of the manual to each of the Great Houses, as well as anyone else of high birth who expresses interest in having one."

"I rather like that idea, my lord," Gerion Lannister muttered in approval.

"So do I," Smalljon Umber remarked, "Before long, the realm would have more books than it knew what to do with."

*Oh, one could never have too many books.*
"Let's get started then," Gregor Clegane declared.

Samwell walked over to the Mountain and handed him the printing press schematics. Lord Gregor brought the schematics over to the printing press itself. He placed them in the platen, and he set the till to the appropriate setting. A length of parchment had already been loaded into the roller carriage. Once everything was ready, he pressed down on the bar. In response, the coffin and stone pressed down on the blank parchment, and the movable type went to work.

Within minutes, the first complete copy of the press instruction manual was produced.

Although Samwell had been there when Lord Gregor tested the printing press, this was the first time Polliver, Smalljon, Tormund, and Gerion witnessed a demonstration of its abilities. They all seemed impressed to some degree.

"How long can it do that before it stops?" Tormund inquired.

"So long as there is parchment in the roller carriage," Lord Gregor apprised him, "As of now, it has enough parchment to print over a hundred more copies of the manual before it has to be reloaded."

Tormund was fascinated. He stepped closer to the printing press and commented "I think I'll just stay here and watch it for a while."

"I'd like to observe a little, too," said Ser Gerion Lannister.

"Enjoy yourselves," Smalljon stated cheekily, "I think I might join you. Before then, there is something else I'd like to address."

"What might that be?" Gregor Clegane enquired.

"I would like to pick up where we left off in the hallway," Smalljon Umber pronounced.

Lord Gregor seemed confused. "Elucidate, please."

The heir to Last Hearth did just that. He told the Mountain "At the last secret council meeting, you gave that speech about how some of the people who attended it will not live to see the Long Night."

"So I did," Gregor Clegane confirmed, "If you are wondering, that speech was not merely a means of motivation. I honestly believe a few of the people who were at that meeting will die before the Others march south."

"I would call that cynical," Gerion Lannister contended, "But cynics are usually righter than most."

"And it is a dangerous world out there," Polliver pointed out.

"True, and true," Smalljon Umber uttered, "Tell me, Gregor. Who do you think will be the first to go?"

The Mountain did not seem to understand. "Excuse me?"

"Ever since the meeting, I've been wondering which of its attendees will die first," Smalljon clarified, "Who do you think it'll be?"

Samwell was astounded by that query. Lord Gregor seemed repulsed by it. He barked "What kind of question is that?"
"A purely speculative one," Smalljon insisted, "I mean, if you really are so certain some of us will not survive to the next winter, there must be someone in particular you expect to die. Is that right?"

Lord Gregor grimaced and turned away from his colleague. "I do not wish to have this conversation."

"Maybe you don't," Smalljon countered, "I'd like to, though. And I think we should. It would give us all a better idea of where our chances stand."

"Enough!" Gregor Clegane bellowed furiously, "We're not going to converse this topic, and that is final."

Samwell and the other men were alarmed by that outburst. When Lord Gregor raises his voice, things are definitely serious

"Very well," Smalljon Umber grudgingly stated, "But I'll be ready and willing to talk on it if ever you change your mind."

That's unlikely. But not impossible. With the Mountain That Rides, almost nothing is impossible.

Smalljon Umber then went to stand by the printing press with Ser Gerion and Tormund. Polliver rubbed his hands together and thought aloud "As interesting as the press is, I'd prefer to spend the rest of the day with more intimate company. Such as my wife."

"I understand, Polliver," Gregor Clegane told his captain of the guard, "You have my leave to go."

"Thank you, milord," the tall black-bearded man said appreciatively. He quickly exited the room.

After Polliver left, Gregor Clegane announced "I'm going to come back here in an hour or whenever the parchment in the press runs out. Anyone who wishes to stay and watch it work is free to do so. Everyone else, just go about your business."

Tormund Giantsbane, Gerion Lannister, and Smalljon Umber all chose to remain with the printing press for a while. Samwell Tarly and Gregor Clegane were the only ones who went elsewhere.

They did not go very far; just into the adjoining room. They opted to simply linger in the library until the printing press needed its parchment supply refilled.

The library at Moat Cailin was rarely ever empty. For good reason, of course. It was also one of the largest rooms in the whole of the moat. It could seat over one hundred people, and thrice as many could move about it all at once. At this time, there were about thirty or forty others standing or sitting in various spots around the area.

Shortly after he and Lord Gregor entered, Samwell spotted two small children sitting by themselves at a table in the middle of the library. Actually, "small" was not the right word to describe them. They were certainly small next to any adult, including dwarfs. Even so, they were larger than almost all other children their ages. Just as their brothers before them are, and the one after.

Despite their size, Vallory Clegane and Larys Clegane were not so large that they could not share a single chair. That was how they were seated now. Vallory had an arm around Larys, and she was holding an open book in front of him. Samwell could not tell if she was actually reading to him or just trying to catch his attention. Larys was turning the pages at a rather fast pace.

At any rate, their father decided to join them. Samwell Tarly quickly followed Gregor Clegane as the latter approached his only daughter and his third son. Whatever was in Vallory and Larys'
book, it must have been engrossing. They did not look up from it until the Mountain's shadow fell across them.

"Good day, Father," Vallory greeted him. Vallory was her mother reborn in nearly every way, including appearance. She was very pretty, and not just "little girl pretty." She would undoubtedly be a vision of loveliness when she became a woman grown. Less than a month ago, she had seen her seventh nameday. But one might think it had been her ninth or tenth instead. Samwell wondered how long it would be before she began her transition into womanhood. *At the rate she's been growing, she could be blossoming by her next nameday.*

"Papa!" Larys exclaimed giddily. Larys was perhaps the most active of Lord Gregor Clegane and Lady Dacey Mormont's brood. However, out of all of them, he had weighed the least at birth. He was just over ten pounds when he came into the world. Although he would still be taller than the average man when he grew up, he would likely be the most normal-sized of the Mountain's children. *Maybe some of us will be able to look him in the eye.* He had seen his fourth nameday less than a fortnight earlier. He had been a little upset that his mother and brothers were absent from the celebration, but his father, sister, and friends managed to keep him entertained and happy.

Lord Gregor Clegane smiled at son and daughter. When he reached them, he knelt down to their level, and he asked in a stern yet fatherly voice "Shouldn't you two be at your lessons?"

"We were," Larys claimed, "But not anymore."

"Why is that?" Lord Gregor inquired.

"Maester Kennick let us out early," Vallory apprised him.

The Mountain raised an eyebrow. "Why did he do that?"

"He was needed elsewhere in the moat," Vallory revealed, "There was an accident in the Recruits Tower."

"'Accident?'" Lord Gregor repeated inquisitively.

"Someone got hurt," Larys explained, "I don't know who."

"Why wasn't I told?" Gregor Clegane asked.

"I think the injured person was one of the Legion's newest members," Vallory recounted, "Their injuries were not very serious, either. I guess the maester did not think the accident was important enough to tell you about."

"I suppose he made the right call," Lord Gregor admitted, "After all, if I was summoned every time one of the inductees damaged himself or someone else, I would be spending about half the day in the Recruits Tower or the training yard."

*He also would have spent much more time with me during my first few weeks at the moat.*

"The maester could not say how long he would be gone, so he dismissed us," Vallory pronounced.

"That is fair," Lord Gregor contended. He then turned to the book his children had in their hands. "What's that you're reading?"

Vallory and Larys did not answer right away. Ultimately, the former told their father "Well, we're not really reading it. We're more looking at it."
By this point, Samwell had only seen the cover of Clegane children's book. He stepped around them and glimpsed at the page it was open to. As Larys continued to turn the pages, Samwell got a good look at what was printed on each of them.

*Just as I thought.*

Whatever book it was, it had pictures on nearly every page. *They're not invested in the words, clearly.* Samwell could fault Vallory or Larys. They were still at the age when children were more captivated by pictures than text. *Not that there's anything wrong with images.*

In Samwell's mind, illustrations made for decent visual aids every now and then, but too many of them could prove very distracting from the written contents of the book. Samwell much preferred books with occasional illustrations or none at all.

"Can I look with you?" Gregor Clegane asked hopefully. His eagerness was obviously feigned, but he succeeded in convincing his children that he shared their interests in the book.

"Yeah!" Larys called out excitedly.

"Of course," Vallory stated, more calmly.

Samwell expected Lord Gregor to sit down beside Vallory and Larys. Instead, he picked up both of his children, sat down in their chair, and set both of them on his lap. Intriguingly, there was more space for them to sit on their father's lap than there was on the chair. Vallory and Larys also seemed to enjoy that arrangement more. Lord Gregor a strong grip but a gentle embrace. He tenderly held his children close to him.

Samwell observed the two children interact with their father, and he could not help but envy them. His own father had never been so affectionate. *What I'd give to have a father like theirs.* Truthfully, he felt Lord Gregor was more of a father to him than Randyll Tarly had ever been.

"Oh, I just remembered, Father," Vallory thought aloud. She reached into a pocket on her breeches and pulled out a few rolled-up pieces of parchment. She displayed them to Lord Gregor, saying "In case he did not get back until later, Maester Kennick wanted me to give you these."

Lord Gregor took the small scrolls from his daughter and asked her "What are they?"

"Just some letters that came in today," she notified him.

Lord Gregor took a minute to look the letters over. He commented in as somewhat gloomy tone "I may have to answer some of these straightaway. As such, I'm afraid we'll have to cut our bonding time short."

Vallory and Larys seemed dismayed by that. Their father was always a busy man, but lately, he had been so busy that he was barely able to make time for them outside of meals. As such, the three of them had come to treasure every moment they spent together.

"Or not," Samwell hastily countered. He sat in the chair next to the Cleganes and held out his hand. He proposed "I could read and reply to them for you, my lord."

Lord Gregor was taken aback yet flattered. "I would greatly appreciate that, Sam. You wouldn't mind?"

"Think nothing of it," Samwell bade him, "I am your notary, after all."
"That you are," Lord Gregor affirmed. He then extended the hand with the letters and muttered "Very well."

Samwell took the papers and set them on the surface of the table. Then he reached into his doublet and pulled out a small box. *It pays to carry a spare quill pen and ink set at all times.* After placing down a sheet of parchment, an inkwell, and a feather quill, Samwell declared "Let us begin."

Over the next five and forty minutes, Lord Gregor Clegane "enjoyed" his children's book with them. At the same time, Samwell Tarly read aloud Lord Gregor's letters and – under the Mountain's dictation – drafted an appropriate response to each of them.

Most of them were summary reports of missions done by Legionnaires throughout the realm. Since the start of autumn, civil unrest had risen in parts of Westeros. The Legion without Banners was called upon to resolve any disputes that had arisen because of it. So far, all of these disputes had been dealt with quickly and quietly. None had gone beyond the region of its origin, and all had been put down within a week. The responses to all of these messages were quite brief; they were little more than simple acknowledgments of the missions' successes.

A few particular letters stood out from the others.

There was one from Castle Black. Apparently, Lord Jeor Mormont was planning a great ranging north of the Wall. Before he and his black brothers set out, they were going to take the time to methodically decide on final preparations. The purpose of this letter was to invite Gregor Clegane to partake in those preparations.

Lord Gregor's response was candid. He informed Lord Jeor that while he appreciated the gesture, he would most likely be unable to answer the summons. He argued that he was still far too preoccupied with everything going on in the Seven Kingdoms. As it happened, Lord Gregor had been aware of this great ranging for weeks. His sister and her husband had informed him of it when they got back from their visit to the Wall. He personally was not in favor of it, but at this point, there was little he could do to deter Lord Jeor and his rangers from going through with it.

There was also a letter from King's Landing. This one was written in Rickard's hand. In it, the heir to Moat Cailin informed his father and siblings that he, Willas Tyrell, Rhaenys Targaryen, Sansa Stark, Arya Stark, and Ashara Dayne had arrived in the capital city safely. So far, their stay had been a pleasant one, and the King had been a very gracious and accommodating host.

Vallory, Larys, and Lord Gregor were delighted to hear from Rickard. From the moment he sailed away on the *Iceberg*, the three of them had been very worried for him. To hear that he was faring well in the capital city was quite reassuring for them. Samwell shared their relief, as Rickard was one of his closest friends. He was very glad to know that Rickard was doing alright in the south.

There was still no word from Lady Dacey, though. That was unfortunate, but not discouraging. *I'm certain we'll hear from her soon enough. Her convoy should arrive in Essos sometime within the next fortnight.* Although Vallory and Larys were undeniably happy to be with their father, they still missed their mother.

The last letter in the pile was from Clegane's Keep.

Lately, Lord Gregor had been thoroughly investigating the attempt on Lord Sandor Clegane's life. He was determined to uncover what possible motive the Golden Company might have had to try to murder his brother.

To further his examination, the Mountain had corresponded with his family in the south on a
regular basis. He had asked them to tell him of everything that had happened at or around Clegane's Keep in the last year. It was his belief that perhaps something pertaining to a recent event would yield a clue.

So far, that was turning out to be nothing more than wishful thinking. Be that as it may, Lord Gregor Clegane was not about to give up. He firmly believed there was some hidden detail that would unearth the Golden Company's interests in the Cleganes of Clegane's Keep.

"Apparently, there is one piece of information Lord Sandor has withheld up until now," Samwell pronounced, looking over the letter, "He claims he omitted it because he did not think it mattered. But, at your insistence, he has changed his mind and decided to share it."

"I'm listening," Lord Gregor declared.

"There is a certain man who has taken up residence in the keep," Samwell disclosed, "No one can account for who this man is or where he came from. He was one of the hostages Lord Sandor saved from that raid a few months back. However, no one involved in that fiasco could tell Lord Sandor anything about the man. They believe he is Essosi. Beyond that, he is a mystery."

"What is his name?" Gregor queried.

Samwell held the Clegane's Keep letter closer to his face and stared at it intently. "It's a very odd name. I need a moment to try to see if I can pronounce it correctly… Alright... Jackin Hager. No… Jaccen Hogar. No, that's not it. Perhaps it's-"

"Jaqen H'ghar?" Lord Gregor interrupted. He spoke in a very quiet and very unsettled voice.

Samwell lightly nodded his head and gazed up from the parchment. Noting the expression on the Mountain's face, he muttered nervously "Do you know him, my lord?"

"I do," Gregor Clegane replied.

"How?" Samwell inquired curiously.

Lord Gregor placed his daughter and his son on the floor. He told them softly "Vallory, Larys, why don't you go into the next room for a few minutes? Maybe you'd like to take a look at the printing press."

"Sure, Papa!" Larys stated enthusiastically.

Vallory chuckled at her brother's reaction. Then she took his hand in hers, gazed up at their father, and requested "Please tell us when we can come back, Father."

Gregor Clegane firmly nodded. He watched his children as they headed to the closet that held the printing press. Once they were gone, he turned back to his notary.

"Well, my lord?" said Samwell, hoping for some clarity.

"Jaqen H'ghar is a Faceless Man of Braavos," Lord Gregor notified him, "The only reason he'd be in Westeros is if he meant to kill someone."

That could be good or bad. "Who do you suppose his target is?"

"I couldn't say," Lord Gregor confessed, "The Faceless Men do not choose sides in wars or other conflicts. They only kill people they are hired to kill. Or told to kill by those they owe favors to."
"Was he in your visions?" Samwell conjectured.

"Yes, he was in several," Gregor Clegane confirmed, "Under the right circumstances, he could be a useful ally to us. I wonder… is there anything else about him in that letter?"

Samwell looked over the piece of parchment again, and he professed "This may interest you: Jaqen H'ghar seems to have gotten quite close to your niece, Lady Tyta Clegane. Especially since she stopped that Golden Company spy from poisoning and robbing her father. He is as cryptic with her as he is with everyone else, but she seems to have come to understand him better than anyone else at Clegane's Keep."

Lord Gregor Clegane thought on that for a minute. Then he stated "Draft a note to my brother, Sam. Tell him that I want him to send Tyta and Jaqen H'ghar to Moat Cailin at once. If at all possible, I'd like him to accompany them."

Samwell was stunned. "Might I ask why, my lord?"

"Despite what Sandor told me, I believe Tyta did not kill that assassin all on her own," the Mountain expounded, "She may have delivered the killing blow, but it is quite probable that Jaqen H'ghar interceded sometime before that. He must have had a reason for doing so. Perhaps he sees potential in her."

"What sort of potential?" the heir to Horn Hill enquired.

"I couldn't say just yet," Lord Gregor told him, "My niece and Jaqen H'ghar should come her before I rush to any conclusions."

Samwell started to nod his head in agreement. In the midst of his nod, a disturbing thought abruptly occurred to him. "Hold on a moment, my lord. Could it be possible that you are the person Jaqen H'ghar means to kill?"

Lord Gregor seemed astounded. "Huh. I never thought of that. I admit it's a possibility. But not a very likely one. While I cannot claim to know how the Faceless Men think, it would have made no sense for him to infiltrate Clegane's Keep just to get here. Aside from that, Moat Cailin is closer to Essos, and it is relatively open to the public."

"Maybe he's aware that you know of him," Samwell supposed, "If so, he may have anticipated that you'll deduce that he saved Lady Tyta, and he expects to earn your trust as a result."

Lord Gregor shook his head and contended "If he does know me, he would know that no one earns my trust that easily, even if they save a member of my family. Furthermore, I would never place all my trust in assassins. Trust is not even the main issue here."

"Indeed not, my lord," Samwell Tarly conceded, "The main issue is the probability that you are his intended victim."

"I'm not," Gregor Clegane sternly proclaimed, "Of that much, I am certain."

The conviction in Lord Gregor's speech was sufficient to ease Samwell's mind. "If you say so, my lord, I will take your word for it. Even so, please be cautious."

"I am cautious always," the Mountain debated. He leaned forward and placed a comforting hand on the Reachman's shoulder. "You can relax, Sam. I know what I'm doing."

"I never thought you didn't," Samwell proclaimed, looking the tall man in the eye, "I was just
thinking about what Smalljon said earlier. As mortifying as his argument was, he did have a point. Any one of us could die at any time. As such, we should not tempt fate any more than absolutely necessary."

"I agree with the sentiment," Gregor Clegane admitted, "I was no more comfortable with Smalljon's talk than you were. But you're right; he did have a point. Some of the people who were present at the secret council's last meeting are going to die. However, think on this: of the five groups were broke up into, ours is in the least amount of danger. Moat Cailin is considerably safer than King's Landing, the Free Cities, Slaver's Bay, and anywhere else in Essos. Every part of it is guarded and manned all day long, and an comprehensive record of all its activities is kept and updated hourly. Therefore, I do not believe the first victim will be anyone who is currently at Moat Cailin."

"I wished I shared your conviction," Samwell glumly commented.

Lord Gregor grinned gently and stated "You mustn't despair, Sam. You and I will get through this. I know that for a fact. Do you know why I know that? Because-

Samwell never found out why Lord Gregor was so certain both of them would live to see the Long Night. Before the Mountain could tell him that, an earsplitting boom penetrated the quiet atmosphere.

The boom sounded like an explosion. The entire room shook, and Samwell was thrown from his chair, as were many of the other people in the room.

It was loud, too. Immediately after it, Samwell felt a ringing in his ears. At that time, he was deaf to all sound around him.

He managed to pull himself up off the ground and turn towards the Mountain. He saw Lord Gregor's mouth moving, but he could not hear any words come out of it.

After about a minute, his hearing returned. Lord Gregor was asking him "Sam, are you alright?"

Samwell Tarly lightly nodded his head and mumbled "Yes... I... I'm alright. W-what just happened, my lord?"

"I don't know," Gregor Clegane responded. He slowly looked over at a corner of the library and added in "But it came from over there."

Samwell turned in that direction, and he felt the color drain from his face. "My lord... that's where the printing press is."

Lord Gregor's jaw dropped and he stared in shock. That was when Samwell remembered. _Something more valuable to him than the printing press is in there_. The Mountain speedily helped Samwell off the ground and told him "Come on."

The two men rushed over to the storage closet with the printing press.

The room was an absolute mess. All the torches had been snuffed out, and much of the ceiling had caved in. There was rubble, soot, chunks of stone, and fragments of seared parchment everywhere.

Miraculously, the printing press was intact. Even so, every copy of the instruction manual had been obliterated completely. Tormund Giantsbane was propped up against the side of the press. Ser Gerion was kneeling before the wilding, struggling to revive him. Vallory, Larys, and Smalljon were nowhere to be seen.
Lord Gregor started looking frantically around the room. As he did that, Samwell went to assist Ser Gerion with Tormund.

The wildling came around a few seconds later. He rubbed his head and sharply muttered "What the fuck was that?"

"I'd like to know that myself," Samwell remarked.

"I'm not entirely sure," Ser Gerion confessed. He tried to sound collected, but the tension was evident in his voice. "One moment, we were waiting for the printing press to run out of parchment. The next… we heard the door open. I turned around just in time to see a small barrel get thrown inside."

"Who threw it?" Samwell enquired.

"I have no idea," Gerion confessed, "Whoever he was, he just opened the door and tossed the barrel inside."

The remnants of this barrel were near the center of the room. Lord Gregor stopped to examine them. He noticed a type of residue on the ground. For a few seconds, he studied this residue with his eyes. Then he scraped it up with a finger, sniffed it, and pressed it against the tip of his tongue.

"Black powder," he announced grimly.

Samwell knew what that meant. Someone just tried to destroy the printing press. And they were willing to kill every person in this room to do it.

"Were Vallory and Larys in here?" Lord Gregor asked anxiously.

"Yes, they were," Gerion tentatively answered.

"Did you see what happened to them?" Gregor Clegane inquired, almost demandingly.

"Yes, Smalljon grabbed them," Ser Gerion disclosed. He stood up, pointed to a certain part of the room, and pronounced "He ducked into that corner with them in his arms."

Samwell looked to where the Westerlander knight was pointing. There was a tremendous amount of debris in that corner. Enough to completely bury a grown man and two children.

Lord Gregor hurried over to the rubble and began to push it away.

"Help me!" he yelled hysterically, "Please!"

Samwell, Tormund, and Gerion rushed to aid the Mountain. As fast as they could, they cleared away the huge slabs of stone. Please, gods, don't let them be… I beg of you.

Soon enough, the rubble was moved away. Beneath it, they found Smalljon Umber lying on his stomach. He was holding something close to his chest. Something or someone?

Lord Gregor, Ser Gerion, Tormund, and Samwell gently rolled the heir to Last Hearth onto his back. Sure enough, he was holding Vallory and Larys Clegane in his arms. For a moment, they were as still as Smalljon. Then, they opened their eyes and took in some deep breaths.

"Papa…" Larys whimpered.

"Father…" Vallory said quietly.
Gregor Clegane reached forward, picked up both of his children, and hugged them tightly. He looked as though he was going to weep. *I think I might weep.*

"Smalljon, thank you," the Mountain panted admiringly, "Thank you so much."

"Good move, mate," Tormund praised his friend, punching him on the shoulder.

Samwell expected Smalljon to punch Tormund's shoulder back. That was something of a friendly habit of theirs.

But Smalljon did not punch back. He did not even move. That was when Samwell and the other men became concerned.

"Smalljon?" Gerion said nervously, patting the Northman's face roughly, "Are you alright?"

Tormund started shaking his friend by his side and told him "Come on, this is not amusing."

Samwell was the first to begin to realize the truth. He muttered desperately "Oh, no. No, please, no…"

He leaned forward and placed his ear against Smalljon Umber's chest. He heard nothing. There was no heartbeat whatsoever.

Samwell slowly brought his head back up and stared at the wall in shock. That was when he finally and fully embraced the reality of the situation. *We're not safe. None of us. Not at all.*
"By no means can I force you to remain on this side of the Wall, Lord Jeor," Ned admitted, "Even so, I cannot condone your decision not to, either."

"No disrespect, my lord," the former Lord of Bear Island said gruffly, "But your approval is not what I require of you."

"Then what is it you require?" Lord Eddard Stark asked.

"A few minutes of your time," Jeor Mormont replied. He folded his arms and declared "All you know of this expedition is the concept of it. Perhaps once I explain it to you in further detail, you will better understand our reasons."

*I understand them perfectly. I simply do not share them. Nor do I expect to.* Eddard was under no obligation to listen to anything Lord Jeor had to say. As it happened, he had not come to Castle Black to talk about the upcoming great ranging. He was there for two entirely different reasons. The first was to pay his respects to the Wall and the brotherhood that manned it. The other concerned his second son.

Of course, at some point during this visit, Eddard would have had words with the Lord Commander and his brother. However, he would have preferred to have spoken with them separately. He also would have preferred it if a deserter was not present.

At this time, the Lord of Winterfell was in the Old Bear's solar. Lord Jeor was seated at his desk. The First Ranger, Benjen Stark, sat to his right. Standing against the adjacent wall was the self-styled King-beyond-the-Wall, Mance Rayder himself.

Apart from the men in that room, no one at Castle Black knew Mance was here. A few days earlier, another group of wildlings had been brought south of the Wall. Mance had been among them, travelling with the appearance of a different man. He had not removed his disguise until about ten minutes ago, just after Benjen escorted Eddard to the solar.

Mance Rayder's crimes against the Watch still remained unpardoned. The penalty for his desertion had been temporarily set aside due to "extenuating circumstances." In Ned's mind, no circumstances justified breaking one's vow and delaying one's punishment. Even so, his jurisdiction ended at the Wall. Although they were technically still in the North, they were gathered on the southern face of the Wall. As such, Lord Jeor and Ben had full authority to convene with Mance Rayder. So for now, Eddard would not protest.

*Long as they ultimately remember what he's done and what they must do.*

When Eddard first heard about Jeor's great ranging, he thought it was only one potential option the Watch was considering. When Benjen informed him they were actually going through with it, he became concerned. *They know what's out there, but they're going after it. I do not see any logic in that approach.*

He had told Benjen as much when the First Ranger visited Winterfell for Robb's wedding. Evidently, Ben had shared Ned's reservations with his commander when he returned to his duty. Now the two Stark brothers were alone in a room with Lord Jeor Mormont and Mance Rayder. *They mean to sway my mind. Or maybe they only wish for me to see this situation from their point of view.*
Eddard did not think either outcome was very probable. Nonetheless, he would be at Castle Black for at least the rest of the day, and Bran and his friends were preoccupied elsewhere. As such, he could afford to take the time to listen to what his brother, the Old Bear, and the "king" of the Free Folk had to say. It certainly would not hurt to hear them out.

"Very well, my lord," Eddard conceded, sitting down in a chair before Jeor Mormont's desk, "I will give you one hour of my time."

Benjen smiled widely. Clearly, he was pleased. The Old Bear and Mance Rayder were, as well, though their satisfaction was less obvious. Ben always was the cheeriest of us.

"Where shall we begin, my lord?" Lord Commander Jeor inquired.

"Let's start with 'why,'" Eddard proposed, leaning his head on his wrist, "Why are you committing to this ploy?"

Mance Rayder was the first to supply a response. He answered that question with one of his own: "How many people do you suppose have died north of the Wall in the last eighty centuries, Lord Eddard?"

Eddard Stark thought on that for a moment, and then he shrugged and proclaimed "I could not even begin to guess."

"Try to," Mance bade him.

Eddard rubbed his temple, and then he thought aloud "Several hundred thousand, at least."

"For such a grim man, that is a rather optimistic estimate," Mance Rayder stated, "You must account for all those of the Free Folk, the Night's Watch, and other parties who expired since the first Long Night. Many of them were buried under snow before their bodies could be properly burned. After eight thousand years… there would have to be tens of millions of corpses throughout the lands beyond the Wall."

"And every one of them a prospective soldier for the Night King's army," Benjen contended, "The population of the Seven Kingdoms is what… anywhere between one and ten million? Whatever the number, only about half can fight; no more than two thirds."

"All the more reason for you to stay here," Eddard argued, "Our numbers are few enough as things stand. The Watch may be withdrawn from the affairs of the realm, but the people of the Seven Kingdoms have the same interests in the coming war as you. We must hold together for when the White Walkers arrive, not break up our forces before then."

"Numbers are not the only factor that matter," Lord Jeor disputed, "That goes for their side as well as ours. For all we know, there could be a hundred wights out there for every wildling and black brother. All the same, a fraction of our forces could severely weaken the Army of the Dead."

"Apart from eliminating a fraction of theirs, I do not see how you could make any difference at all," Eddard bluntly commented.

"Oh, you would be surprised, Ned," Benjen told his brother, "We have nothing to gain by remaining idle. If we wait for the Night King to march south, we will be little more than prey. Currently, that is all he sees us as; animals to be hunted down and slaughtered. We should change his perspective. As such, we must bring the fight to him."

"And save the hunter the burden of catching the prey?" Eddard dourly muttered.
"No," Mance Rayder countered, "We'll show him the prey can fight back. Better yet, it can strike first."

Eddard scoffed. "While it is true that numbers are not all that matter, I do not think the Night King will be impressed by your boldness."

"We care not if he is impressed," Jeor Mormont proclaimed, "We are not vain, Lord Eddard. We realize no display of force on our part would ever intimidate the Night King. The loss of his soldiers means nothing to him. Regardless of how many of the Others and their wights we put down, he will keep sending more of them against us. However… it is another story entirely if we put an end to him."

The Lord of Winterfell raised an eyebrow. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"That is the true purpose of the ranging, Ned," Benjen apprised him, "The Army of the Dead only exists because of the Night King. None of them – including the White Walkers – would ever have risen without him. Thus, it would follow that if we take out the Night King, his entire army will crumble. In every way."

"You honestly believe it is that simple?" Lord Eddard mumbled in astonishment. He did not need an answer; he could tell they did believe that. Truthfully, a part of him wanted to believe it, too. It would be a relief if we actually could prevent the Long Night after all. But he was not about to give his hopes up.

"The Night King was a man once," Jeor Mormont pointed out, "He was a black brother once. He was the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch once. He may be dead, but he can be destroyed."

"All that would require is for one of us to get close enough to him with a Valyrian steel blade, a dragonglass weapon, or a lit torch," Mance Rayder argued, "A single blow of any of the three would get the job done. Once he is consumed by fire, all our problems will be remedied."

Not yours, deserter. Eddard would see to that once the Long Night was over, if not before.

"This does seem an appealing and prospective tactic," Eddard perceived, "But not an entirely doable one. Tell me how you propose to reach the Night King."

"Once we locate the Army of the Dead, the Night King will ideally be at the head of the column," Benjen supposed, "We can expect to find him leading his forces into battle, just like other commanders."

"You forget he is not like other commanders," Eddard Stark disputed, "The dead have no honor or sense of worth. The Night King kills and reanimates without prejudice. And even if the Others and their wights do not truly know how important he is to them, he does. Thus, you cannot guarantee he will be at the front of his army. He could be at the back, or, worse yet, the center of it."

"We have prepared for that possibility, my lord," Jeor Mormont disclosed, "My fellow black brothers and I will not be out there on our own. Mance has assembled a larger host of the Free Folk. They will join up with us after we clear the haunted forest."

"With no insult to the wildlings, how will that help?" Eddard queried curiously.

"We will have more than men in our company," Mance Rayder revealed, "And I am not speaking only of women. We will also have giants, wargs, and mammoths. All of which are very useful at clearing away huge crowds. If need be, we could use them to cut a path through the Army of the
Dead all the way to the Night King."

"How many giants and mammoths do you suppose have died in Westeros' history?" Eddard rejoined, "Furthermore, for all we know, the Night King can counter the powers of any warg. He may even have a few of them in his ranks."

"Fire will bring them all down just the same," Benjen insisted.

"There may not be enough fire to go around," Eddard conjectured. He looked to Jeor Mormont and asked him "How many black brothers are going on this ranging?"

"Five and twenty hundred," the Old Bear pronounced. *Half the Watch's power.*

"North of the wall, their company will be augmented by another ten thousand of my people," Mance Rayder added in.

"And how many obsidian and Valyrian steel weapons do you have?" Eddard enquired.

"Enough to adequately supply every man on the Wall," Lord Jeor professed, "But not nearly enough to even partially supply the Free Folk. Or the population of just one of the Seven Kingdoms."

*Just as I feared.* "In other words, not every man who goes on this ranging will have a proper armament on hand. Those who carry regular steel will be the first to fall. When your warriors realize how small a chance they actually have against the undead, who's to say they will not turn tail and flee?"

"The wild does not breed cravens," Mance Rayder sharply retorted, "Despite what you may think of us, we do not retreat so easily."

"Neither does the Watch," Jeor Mormont asserted, "I will personally strike down any man who dares to turn his cloak. But while I am prepared to do that, I do anticipate that I will have to. My men know their duty."

"Did Ser Waymar Royce know his?" Eddard Stark countered.

That brought a brief yet tense silence to the room.

"Ser Waymar has nothing to do with this, Ned," Benjen said firmly.

"Oh, but he does," Ned sternly claimed, "I recall how eager the boy was to join the Watch when he first arrived in the North. For the duration of his stay at Winterfell, all he talked of were the great deeds he would achieve as a black brother. Then, not half a year after he swore his vows, my men caught him attempting to flee south. He did not struggle or resist when they arrested him. I looked the man in the eyes before he died. All the fight had gone out of him; he had all but lost the will to even live. He was little more than an empty shell, but he was still sane enough to tell me why he abandoned his post. Although I beheaded him that day, seeing the Others had already killed him within."

Ned paused here so the other three men could reflect on all that. Then he said inquisitively "Can you tell me with absolute certainty that the same thing will not happen to the men of your company?"

"That may happen to some of them," Benjen contended, "But not many. A dozen, at most."
Jeor Mormont nodded his head and stated "Indeed. The men accompanying us are not like Ser Waymar. Ser Waymar Royce, while a knight, was a green boy, unbloodied and untested in war. He insisted upon having his own command, and the first time we gave him one, the mission ended in disaster. However, Ser Waymar and his party did not know they would encounter the wights when they went out. The members of this ranging do know, yet every one of them is a willing volunteer. A great many of them fought in Robert's Rebellion or Greyjoy's Rebellion. Additionally, all of them have ranged north of the Wall at least thrice before. A fair amount of them have already seen the Others with their own eyes. But that has not dissuaded them from going back out there."

"I can vouch for my people, too," Mance Rayder avowed, "There are no green boys in my forces. I can assure you of that, my lord."

That did not surprise Eddard. They hardly ever have any green at all up there.

"Alright, let us say everything goes well," Eddard Stark hypothesized, "Your men hold their ground. There is enough obsidian, Valyrian steel, and fire to fight off the Army of the Dead. You somehow break through their ranks and reach the Night King. But even if you manage all that… what if you were to fail, my lord?"

"Why would we fail?" Lord Jeor queried.

I could list the ways how, but that would take too much time. Lord Eddard remarked "That is beside the point. For the sake of argument, just suppose you do. What then?"

The Old Bear thought on that for a minute. Ultimately, he sighed and declared "Then hopefully my successor will have better luck defending the wall than I did fighting the Others."

Benjen interceded here. He proclaimed "You do not need to tell us how much is at stake, Ned. We've known that for a while. We only have one chance at success. If we botch it, we will not have enough manpower to launch another ranging of this magnitude. And even if we did, the remaining watchmen would likely not have the will or resolve to go through with another one."

"Then why go through with it at all?" Eddard inquired in perplexity.

"Because it is better than doing nothing," Mance Rayder candidly replied, "And because there is a genuine likelihood that we will succeed. Be that as it may, we are not so ignorant as to assume that it will."

"Even if it does, how do you know you will come back from it?" Eddard inquired.

"We don't," Lord Jeor confessed, "For many of us, this will be a one-way mission. I myself do not expect to come back alive. But I've made my peace with that."

"So have I," said Benjen.

"We all have," Mance Rayder claimed, "Free Folk and crows alike."

"I know you are willing to die," Eddard bluntly remarked, "But should you fail, something worse than death awaits you. After your defeat, you might come back to the Seven Kingdoms. In the ranks of the Night King's army. You cannot mean to tell me you can accept that."

That last statement gave the other men pause. For a brief moment, Eddard thought he may have finally raised a point that made them rethink this great ranging. Alas, that moment passed, and Benjen disclosed "The possibility of that occurred to us, Ned. It is our worst fear, as there is no way to avoid returning as wights if we fail."
"What if you burned your dead immediately after they fell?" Eddard hypothesized.

"That cannot be done, my lord," Mance Rayder disclosed, "The obsidian and Valyrian steel will be useless against still corpses, and the Night King will not revive the casualties on our side until after the battle ends."

"How would you know?" the lord of Winterfell said inquiringly.

"Some of my people have seen him do it," Mance informed him. As Theon and his kin claim, what is dead may never die.

"We don't want to become wights, Ned," Benjen assured his elder brother. I never thought you so mad, Ben. "But that's a risk we will have to take."

"What if the Army of Dead only becomes stronger as a result of this ranging?" Eddard Stark supposed.

"That is why we wished to see you in the first place, my lord," Lord Commander Jeor Mormont stated.

Ned was confused. "Enlighten me, if you would."

"If we are unable to destroy the Night King, the Wall is all that stands between him and the Seven Kingdoms," Mance Rayder clarified, "As such, the Free Folk and the Watch will need all the support they can get to defend it."

"But there may not be enough of us left to cover all three hundred miles," Benjen went on, "So we were wondering if you'd be able to lend us the strength of the North?"

"Of course I would," Eddard said almost promptly, "My bannermen know as well as I what happens if the Wall collapses. For that reason alone, they will send you aid if I command it of them. But I cannot force any of their vassals to enlist in the Watch."

"We will not require them to," Jeor Mormont stated, "We just need them to man the Wall until the Army of the Dead reaches the Seven Kingdoms."

"That is acceptable," Ned proclaimed, "Even so, you should know there is a limit on how many soldiers the Northern lords can spare. They have their own interests to look out for."

"We understand, my lord," the Old Bear assured him.

Benjen nodded in agreement and murmured "Winter is coming."

"Winter is coming," Eddard concurred. Soon enough, it'll be here.

About five minutes later, there was a knock on the entrance of the solar. A rather heavy knock, Ned noted.

Mance Rayder hastily stepped into the shadows so he was hidden from view of the door. After that, Lord Jeor called out "Come in."

The door opened, and a very large man entered the room. Lord Eddard grinned when he saw who. It was his childhood friend Walder. That was what we called him then, at any rate. Now, he went by a different name.

"What is it, Hodor?" Ned inquired.
"Hodor," the man muttered gleefully, approaching the Lord of Winterfell. He gently tugged on Eddard's sleeve, as though he wanted him to stand up.

"Do you want me to go with you somewhere?" Eddard assumed.

The stableboy nodded his head, saying "Hodor, Hodor, Hodor."

"Is it Bran?" Eddard asked rhetorically.

More nodding, followed by more "Hodor, Hodor, Hodor."

Eddard turned to Jeor Mormont and asked him "Are we done here?"

"We are, my lord," the Old Bear affirmed.

At that, Eddard Stark rose from his chair, turned back to Hodor, and beckoned him "Lead the way."

"Mind if I join you?" Benjen requested, "I haven't seen Bran since Robb's wedding."

"Certainly," Eddard replied. In his mind, it was always better to have more Starks together. The lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.

The two Stark brothers followed Hodor out of the Lord Commander's solar, and he led them to the wooden keep beneath the rookery, where Maester Aemon's chambers were located.

I suspected he would bring us here.

The maester of Castle Black was the great-great-granduncle of Eddard and Benjen's nephew, Jon. Jon and his elder half-siblings had left the North about a month ago. A couple weeks before that, they had gone to Castle Black to speak with their ancient relative.

On their way back to Moat Cailin, Jon had stopped at Winterfell and told his uncle that Maester Aemon wished to meet Bran. He was unable to supply a reason as to why, but he insisted that the maester would not be wasting anyone's time.

As it happened, Bran had dreams of joining the Night's Watch himself. Alas, he had a long way to go yet. Eddard and his lady wife Catelyn had told him they would not allow him to go to the Wall until he could at least fend for himself. He was already more than adequate with a sword, a shield, and a bow. But he is not nearly ready to endure man's constant struggle with nature.

Jon had once considered enlisting in the Watch, too. Yet lately, his ambition in that pursuit had greatly decreased. His interests had begun to change when he became involved with the wildling girl Ygritte. The startling discovery of the truth of his heritage had discouraged him even further. Then there was the whole affair of revealing that secret to Robert, and how the King meant to return House Targaryen to nobility in the Seven Kingdoms. If all went well, Jon would even be named the prince of Dragonstone. At this point, I doubt he even remembers his aspiration to join the Watch.

When Hodor brought Eddard and his brother to Maester Aemon's chambers, they found the elderly Targaryen conversing with Bran and the Reeds. Summer was seated at the base of Bran's chair. However… someone else was there, as well.

This person was almost as short as Bran. At a glance, Eddard could not tell if the individual was male or female. It also had gray skin, and its hair was fashioned in a very stiff and expansive manner. Although it was shaped like a human, Ned could not tell if it really was.
"Who are you?" Benjen asked, more out of curiosity than misgiving.

"My name is Leaf," the short person responded. Its voice sounded feminine.

"What are you?" Eddard asked. *That's the more relevant question.*

Although anyone in the Seven Kingdoms would have thought that a rude thing to ask, the female creature before him did not seem offended. She calmly told him "I am older than any person in this room, including the maester. Yet your people regard me and mine as children."

Despite the vagueness of that statement, it was enough to provide an answer to Eddard's query. He immediately realized who and what was standing before him. He uttered softly "You're one of the children of the forest."

Leaf lightly nodded her head. She observed "You do not seem surprised by that."

*In a world where dragons are returning, giants live among men, and the dead walk, this hardly even qualifies as surprising in the slightest amount.*

"Indeed not, my lady," Eddard affirmed, though Leaf was clearly no lady, "Might I ask what business you have on this side of the Wall?"

"It is business of the highest precedence, my lord," Jojen Reed declared.

"Actually, it's business with us, Father," Bran interjected, "But what Jojen said is true, too."

That response did not provide any real clarity. If anything, Ned was just more baffled than he was before. He commented "I believe we need some more clarification."

"Perhaps we should just show you, my lord," Meera Reed proposed.

"Show me what?" Ned said enquiringly.

Meera, Jojen, and Leaf all turned to Bran, who kept his gaze on his father. He told Lord Eddard "What you are about to see, Father, is something I only learned to do very recently. No one other than the people in this room knows that I can do it. It would be best if we kept it a secret for now."

"Very well," Ned declared. He was interested to learn what this so-called special ability was.

"We won't tell a soul, Bran," Benjen conceded.

"Hodor," said Hodor.

The second son of the Lord of Winterfell then looked down at his four-legged companion. He stared intently at the beast for a few seconds, and nothing remarkable happened at first. After that… Bran's eyes went white and he fell back in his chair. Summer erratically convulsed for a moment, and then he rose from the ground and stood perfectly still.

Eddard and Benjen watched as the direwolf padded over to them. When he was at their feet, he sat down on his haunches and gazed up at them. Then he extended the paw of his right front leg, as though he wanted them to shake it.

Benjen was the first to reciprocate the gesture. He knelt to Summer's level, took ahold of his paw, and lightly shook it. Then he stepped back, and Eddard did the same, albeit hesitantly. Shaking the direwolf's paw was a queer sensation. *Is it possible to actually teach a direwolf tricks?* If this was a trick, it was a more elaborate type. It almost felt like shaking hands with an actual human being.
Summer then bounded back over to his master. Bran's eyes returned to their normal coloring, and he sat back up in his chair, respiring heavily. Meera patted him on the back to help him regain his composure.

"What just happened?" Eddard wondered aloud.

Maester Aemon finally spoke. He uttered quietly "Your son is a warg, my lord."

Again, that reply just raised more questions. Although Eddard was baffled, Benjen seemed fascinated. He queried in interest "Since when?"

"Since the night of Robb's wedding, Uncle Benjen," Bran recounted, "I know it sounds strange, but I can explain. After the feast, I went to the Broken Tower to meet with Meera and Jojen. I was climbing up the outer wall-"

"After your mother explicitly told you no more climbing?" Eddard drily interrupted, folding his arms.

"Yeah…" Bran admitted, staring at his feet. He has the decency to look ashamed, at least. He then looked back up at this father and continued with "While I was climbing, I had this terrible, terrible headache. It only got worse as I went higher. But I did not give up. When I reached the top… I saw something that wasn't really there."

Eddard was intrigued. "What did you see?"

"I do not really know," Bran responded, "But I believe it was the Queen and her brother, wrapped in a tender embrace."

"That's rather odd," Benjen Stark commented, "Ser Jaime and Queen Cersei did not attend Robb's wedding."

"As far as I know, neither of them has ever even set foot in the North," Eddard amended.

"I said it was not real," Bran repeated, "But it looked real. My head hurt worse than ever then. It was so bad I almost fell, but Meera and Jojen caught me. That was when I… awoke."

"When you gained the ability to warg, you mean?" Ned presumed.

"That's right," Bran confirmed.

"I was trying to tell your son for weeks beforehand that he was both a greenseer and a warg, my lord," Jojen proclaimed, "He was quick to deny it, and he did not choose to believe me until that moment."

"Ever since then, Jojen has been teaching Bran how to use these new gifts," Meera disclosed.

Eddard merely nodded his head in acknowledgment. Benjen, however, was visibly captivated. He stated eagerly "What all can you do?"

"I can warg into Summer's head and become him for a while," Bran revealed, "I can also warg into smaller animals, such as ravens, dogs, and rats. But I prefer being Summer. The best time for warging is when I am asleep. That is also when the green dreams come. The dreams are always unclear, but Jojen insists they are messages from the gods."

"I insist nothing," Jojen debated, "They are messages. But the gods are not the only ones who send
"Who else would have the power to send you such premonitions?" Benjen enquired.


"The what?" Eddard mumbled, baffled.

"That was another thing we talked about at the Broken Tower that night," Bran notified his father. "There is one person in the world who sees everything at once. He is the ultimate greenseer, the ultimate keeper of truth."

"That would be the Three-Eyed Raven," Jojen professed, "Our father told me and Meera of him. Although he has never met or seen the man, he never doubted or questioned his existence. He believes the Three-Eyed Raven must be consulted sometime before the Long Night begins."

Lord Howland Reed was one of Eddard Stark's closest friends, and he trusted the man with his own life. Even so, he could not help but question his motives for seeking out this mysterious Three-Eyed Raven. If this matter was that important, surely he would have told me of it. Then again, Howland had always been a withdrawn and private man.

"May I ask why you believe that?" Eddard enquired, "What would you hope to gain from this... individual?"

"Most of us would gain nothing," Jojen contended, "However, there is much he'd have to teach your son. As of now, Bran's abilities are untrained and undisciplined. The Three-Eyed Raven can give him the guidance he would need to take full advantage of his powers."

"How can you be so sure?" Eddard inquired, "You do not even know this man."

"Indeed, they don't," Maester Aemon muttered, "But I do, my lord. I knew him before he became the Three-Eyed Raven. He is my cousin, Ser Brynden Rivers."

Eddard could not tell whose eyes widened more: his or Benjen's. That aside, his brother pointed out "Lord Commander Brynden Rivers died almost fifty years ago, maester."

"So they say," the elderly black brother remarked, "But that was never confirmed. I would remind you that no one saw Ser Brynden die. He simply disappeared on a ranging north of the Wall, and his body was never recovered or burned. Everyone else believed him dead, but I never gave up on him. Now, thanks to Lady Leaf here, I have discovered that he is in fact very much alive."

"I am no lady," Leaf stated plainly. "Just as Aemon is no lord." But that is the truth of the matter. I was there when my people found Ser Brynden in the wilderness. He was in a very weak state and on the verge of death. He had more wounds than we could count. Whether they had been inflicted by animals or other men, or even himself, we could not say. But that did not matter. From the moment we met him, we knew he was different from the other tall men. He had the gift you call greensight. As such, we elected to save his life."

"How did you accomplish this?" Benjen asked. "I would like to know that myself. If Ser Brynden really was on the verge of death."

"We have no maesters, or any conventional types of medicine," Leaf disclosed, "But we have a special connection with the weirwood trees of Westeros. They are more than relics and altars to the Old Gods. They have extraordinary healing properties, too. North of the Wall, there is one particular tree that grows above a cave. Its roots can be found inside the cave. They are so huge that
a man could become encompassed in them. That was where we brought Ser Brynden. The tree’s roots have kept him alive since."

"That is quite remarkable," Eddard muttered sincerely, "But what would happen if Ser Brynden was disentangled from the heart tree?"

"He would die," Leaf promptly answered him, "The tree’s roots can sustain him almost indefinitely. But should he remove himself from them, his old wounds would reopen, and his body would expire. Apart from that, he has already lived far longer than any other member of your race."

"In other words, he cannot come south of the Wall?" Eddard presumed.

"Correct," Leaf affirmed, "He cannot even leave that cave."

"Then how do you propose to introduce him to Bran?" asked the Lord of Winterfell.

"That should be obvious, my lord," Maester Aemon softly pronounced, "My cousin cannot go to your son, due to physical restrictions. However, those same restrictions do not apply to your son."

Eddard immediately realized where this discussion was headed. He furrowed his brow and snapped "No. Absolutely not."

"We expected you to disapprove, Lord Eddard," Jojen Reed calmly remarked, "But you must not dismiss this matter so readily. Perhaps once we have discussed this better-"

"There is nothing to discuss," Ned sternly countered, "You are asking me to send my son, who has yet to see his tenth nameday, to an unforgiving land overrun with all manner of dangers. The deadliest of which has conquered even death. What kind of father would consent to that?"

"The kind that has the interests of all his children at heart," Meera debated, "This would be for the good of all, my lord."

"I know what's out there, Father," Bran declared, "I will not lie to you; I am afraid of it. But I'm far more afraid of what will happen if the Others overrun Winterfell. I do not want that."

The thought of that greatly unsettled Ned, too. In his head, he got the image of Catelyn and their children being killed by the Others and coming back as wights. That is something I would never allow to happen.

"I don't want that either, Bran," Ned told his second son, "But how would you seeking out the counsel of a long-lost former Lord Commander of the Night's Watch prevent it?"

"Even the Three-Eyed Raven will not live forever, my lord," Leaf interceded, "He must have one to continue his work. Since the day my people rescued him, he has been aware of that. Not long ago, he looked into the future and saw that one of the Starks would be his successor. He knows for a fact that your son Bran will be that Stark."

"Did he send you here to retrieve Bran?" Benjen supposed.

"He did," Leaf disclosed, "Originally, Ser Brynden was going to sit by and wait for Bran to go to him on his own. But the world is different from what it once was. Things have changed, due in large part to the deeds of your vassal, Lord Gregor Clegane. Thus, Ser Brynden deemed it necessary to approach you directly.

"That is why I am here," she went on, "This is the first time I or any of my people have been south
of the Wall since it was erected. We never planned to cross back over to this side of it. We made an exception because it was the only way we could reach out to your son and take him back with us."

"Do you plan to do so against his will?" Eddard mumbled accusingly.

"No, Ser Brynden's instructions were quite clear," Leaf revealed, "We were to convince him to head north through words, not force. We were not to return until we managed to sway both him and you. Naturally, the Three-Eyed Raven knew he would succeed."

*That remains to be seen.*

"So, perhaps Bran is meant to replace Ser Brynden," Lord Eddard contended, "Be that as it may, you still have yet to tell me what makes the Three-Eyed Raven's capabilities so worthwhile."

"Like Ser Brynden, Bran will be able to see everything," Meera professed, "Think on the possibilities, my lord. He could uncover the identity of the person who set off that explosion in Moat Cailin the other week. He could learn the history of the Night King and the Army of the Dead. He may even find out just where Lord Gregor Clegane gets those visions of his."

Those were all appealing prospects. Eddard had always been curious to know more of Lord Gregor Clegane's visions, and any knowledge pertaining to the Army of the Dead was certainly useful.

The explosion at Moat Cailin was one matter that Ned personally wished to see resolved. He had been shocked when he heard that someone had tried to destroy Lord Gregor Clegane's newest creation, and Smalljon Umber had been murdered in the process.

On his way to the Wall, Eddard Stark had stopped at Last Hearth to offer his condolences to Smalljon's family. Lord Greatjon Umber and his other sons and daughters were all beside themselves with grief. But they appreciated their liege lord's comfort and support.

The perpetrator of the crime was still at large. Nevertheless, Ned gave the Greatjon his word of honor that whoever killed his firstborn son would not escape justice. Lord Gregor Clegane had promised him the same. Both men fully intended to honor that pledge.

"Bran would also be able to hone his warging powers exponentially," Jojen argued, "With the right guidance, he could control anyone and anything. Including creatures that have been absent from the world."

Initially, Eddard was perplexed. Then Maester Aemon announced "I told them of the dragons, my lord."

"What dragons?" Benjen muttered in confusion.

"The dragons Jon is bringing back alongside his aunt and uncle," Eddard told his brother, "Three, to be exact. As of now, they are only eggs. But once they hatch…"

"Then the Night King's problems will dramatically increase," Meera finished for him.

"Especially once Bran masters warging," Jojen added in.

"Quite so," Maester Aemon conceded, "Dragons are not like other creatures of the world; they cannot be subjugated or brought to heel. None of my ancestors ever fully tamed their dragons. However, with the right discipline and focus, a warg could do what the Targaryen dynasty could not."
Benjen whistled in amazement. "The Army of the Dead would not stand a chance against three dragons."

Indeed not. If Bran actually could learn to solve mysteries and control dragons from the Three-Eyed Raven, the benefits of him going north greatly outweighed the risks. All the same, Ned still had certain reservations.

"Suppose I agreed to this," Eddard conjectured, gazing down at Leaf, "Would Bran be expected to go beyond the Wall with no one other than you for company?"

"Of course not," she assured him, "As you said before, he is still a boy, my people are 'children,' and the path to the cave of the Three-Eyed Raven is not deserted. We would definitely need protection of some sort."

"Summer will be there," Bran announced, scratching his direwolf behind the ears. *I can certainly count on him to guard Bran with his life.*

"Meera and I will join them, too," Jojen declared.

"You needn't ask our lord father's permission, Lord Eddard," Meera proclaimed, "He has already given us leave to go wherever we must."

*Howland must know what 'wherever' constitutes. Otherwise, he is unknowingly allowing his children could to place themselves in grave danger.* Perhaps Howland Reed was simply more confident in his children's ability to survive on their own than Ned was in his own children's ability.

"I might be able to send a detachment of rangers to accompany you," Benjen proposed, "They would have to regroup with the rest of our company once you arrived at your destination, though."

"I can spare twenty of my household guard," Ned offered, "They will stay with you the whole time you're beyond the Wall."

"That should be more than enough," Leaf proclaimed, "We cannot bring too many men. The cave of the Three-Eyed Raven can only house so many."

"Where is this cave, anyway?" asked Meera.

"I'll show you," Leaf pronounced, "Do you have a map?"

"I thought your people predated maps," Benjen commented.

"We did," the child of the forest stated, "Even so, we've had millennia to learn how to read them."

The First Ranger nodded in understanding.

Maester Aemon opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a map. Although he could no longer read them, he kept a few on-hand if ever anyone had need of one.

As he spread the map out on his desk, everyone else gathered around. Ned noted it was one of their more detailed maps. *Likely, it was made with the combined efforts of both the Watch and the Free Folk.*

Leaf studied the map closely for about a minute, and then she placed her finger down and declared "There is where we must go."
Everyone leaned in closer to get a better look. Except Maester Aemon, of course.

"I know of that area," Benjen thought aloud, "It's not that far at all. It's still within the confines of the haunted forest. Only…"

"Only?" Ned beckoned him continue.

"No one has ventured there in over a year," Benjen uneasily revealed, "That land was one of the first places the White Walkers were spotted. It could be overrun with the dead by now."

"It is," Leaf said bluntly, "My people are small; we managed to slip by without the wights noticing. You, however, are larger and less discreet. Getting you to the cave will be harder."

"Will you even be safe once you reach the cave?" Eddard asked, almost as a demand.

"Yes, we will," Leaf reassured him, "The cave is a large, underground labyrinth of caverns. It is charmed so that nothing undead can enter. Because of that, my people and I have dwelt there unharmed for centuries. It is perhaps the only place in the whole of the world where one could find sanctuary from the Night King and his forces."

"You are certain of that?" said Ned, as though he did not believe her.

"I would not gamble with your son's life, my lord," Leaf responded firmly, "Ser Brynden does not mean for him to stay in that cave forever. One day, Bran will return to you. He may be a different person when next you see him, but he will still be Brandon Stark."

"This is the only way, Father," Bran stated, "The Three-Eyed Raven needs me, and I need him. Otherwise, we are all doomed. Please, for the love you bear me, let me go to him."

There was the longest interval of silence in that chamber. Eddard Stark never thought he would have to make a decision such as this one. It was harder than any other dilemma he had ever been faced with. Lying to Robert about the fate of Rhaegar Targaryen's children was far easier than this.

A piece of him was extremely reluctant to part with Bran at all. He had already sent his daughters to King's Landing. While the capital city was a notoriously unsafe place, at least the dead did not pose a threat there. Apart from that, if Bran left, it would mean three of his five children would be away.

There was also the issue of how Catelyn would react. His wife would be outraged if he sent one of their sons north of the Wall without her consent. But I would rather have Cat furious at me than made into a wight. Then again… perhaps I don't have to tell her where Bran is.

Eddard could easily have told his wife that Bran was staying at Castle Black for an unspecified period of time. If she asked why, he could claim Bran was seriously considering joining the Watch, and he had decided to live among them for a while to see how appealing the prospect truly was. I just wish I would not have to lie to her again. I remember how displeased she was when she found out Jon is actually a Stark on his mother's side.

Ultimately, Eddard Stark let out a sigh and declared "Alright. I will permit Bran to go north."

Bran grinned, rose from his chair, and embraced his father. He muttered softly "Thank you, Father. I promise I will make you proud."

You already have. You're the bravest boy I've ever known. Eddard wrapped his arms around his son, as though he never meant to let him go. But I have to.
"One last thing," Eddard announced, gazing down at Bran, "I want you to take Hodor with you."

For once, Bran did not argue at all. He just nodded and said "Alright, Father."

_He's fond of the stableboy, just as Hodor is of him._ That worked out quite well. Ned better trusted Hodor with Bran's safety than he did any of the guards he planned to send with them.

Hodor had been standing by the entrance to the chamber this whole time. When he heard his name, he grinned and giddily muttered "Hodor."

Leaf chuckled. "A man of few words, is he?"

"Yes, he is," Ned muttered. _But a man's worth should not be measured in his words alone._

... "I give you my word; I'll take good care of them," the Northern maid pledged. _For a wolf in sheep's clothing, she makes a superb maid. And right now, that is all she is; Myrna the maid and nothing else. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, Lyanna Stark is dead._

"We know you will," Ellyn Lannister stated with a smile.

Dacey Clegane nodded in agreement and said "If all goes well, we'll see you soon."

"And if it doesn't?" Myrna conjectured.

"Then we'll see you a lot sooner," Lady Dacey wittily contended. _Whatever the case, I do not intend for any of us to die today._

"Alright then," Myrna acknowledged, snickering a bit, "Your boys will be waiting for you when you get back."

"Thank you," Dacey and Ellyn chorused.

Dacey handed her youngest son over to the maid, and Ellyn gently placed her only son down on the bed.

Lyarra was lying on her stomach beside the bed. She tilted her head up when Lady Ellyn set Duncan down. The mother direwolf sniffed at the Westerlander boy, and then she licked him once. He giggled playfully.

Ellyn grinned at this interaction. Dacey grinned with her.

Although most mothers would not dare to leave their children in the same room as a direwolf, Lady Dacey Mormont and Lady Ellyn Clegane were exceptions. They had been wary of Lyarra at first. They both realized how easily she could have harmed their sons. Most normal wolves would have done so without hesitation. Be that as it may, such indiscriminate savagery was not in Lyarra's nature. Interestingly, she was rather fond of human children. _Just as her mistress is._

After entrusting their boys to the care of the princess-in-disguise, Dacey Mormont and Ellyn Clegane left the cabin. Then they made their way up to the command deck of the vessel.

The bridge was nearly empty when they got to it. In fact, there were only two people there: a young boy and a dwarf. Both of whom Dacey recognized the moment she saw them.

"You got here just in time," Alyver said wryly when he saw his mother and aunt. He seemed eager
to disembark.

"You didn't have to wait on us," Dacey told him.

"We weren't waiting," her son informed her, "We were looking for Uncle Tyrion's saddle."

It was then that Dacey realized Lord Tyrion Lannister was holding a large bundle under his arm, which indeed turned out to be a saddle.

"What would you need with a saddle, my love?" Ellyn asked her husband.

"When dealing with Dothraki, you always bring a saddle, my dear," Tyrion advised his wife.

"Do you expect to do much riding?" Dacey Clegane said inquiringly.

"Not necessarily," Tyrion Lannister claimed, "But no harm ever came out of being overprepared."

"I agree," Alyver remarked. He placed his left hand on the hilt of his shortsword, and he added "That's why I'm not taking this off until the next time we board this ship."

Dacey was incited to both smile proudly and roll her eyes. She resisted the urge to do either. Instead, she gazed down at her son and mumbled patiently "You won't need your sword while we're here, Al."

"Oh, you never know, Mother," Alyver Clegane disputed, "After all, in your experience, how often have things gone according to plan? I mean entirely according to plan."

Lady Dacey thought on that. In her head, she reflected on several of her previous missions in the Legion without Banners. Although she knew full well that things rarely ever went as planned, she was surprised to realize how many had involved at least one major or minor setback. Even though most of those setbacks had been remedied by a contingency plan which had been organized beforehand, the most ideal circumstances had hardly ever transpired in any of the Legion's assignments.

Dacey's first mission to the Vale had been a complete success. However, the world was supposed to regard that one as a failure. Only those of us on the secret council know that the true purpose of that mission was not to ensure Baelish's survival. The true purpose was to eliminate him as a threat to the stability of Westeros.

"Alright, fair point," Dacey admitted, "If the situation calls for it, Al, you can brandish your sword. But whenever you do, promise me that you will stay close to me."

"I will, Mother," Alyver told her. That was enough to assure the Bear Islander. Still, if fighting broke out, she would be ready for it. Although the dragon eggs were the target of the mission, Dacey's first priority was to protect her son and her companions. She was sufficiently prepared to do that. Bearswrath, her Valyrian steel longsword which she had acquired at Lannisport, was strapped to her side. The slightest sign of trouble, and I'll draw it.

A moment later, Allard Seaworth appeared at the port side of the vessel. When he got off the gangplank, he announced "We're ready whenever you are."

"Right," Dacey Clegane uttered. She, her son, and the Lannisters went over to where the Stormlander representative of the secret council was standing. The five of them swiftly got off the Zenith and crossed over to the docks below. We're officially in Essos now.
They had been at sea for more than a whole turn of the moon. After enduring that tribulation, it felt good to be on some flat, even terrain, even if it was in a foreign land.

Dacey had been on deck when the *Zenith* sailed into Pentos. She had gotten an exquisite view of the city whilst the vessel pulled into the harbor. She could not deny that it was a rather beautiful place.

However, Dacey was not wholly interested in the city itself. She was far more invested in a certain event that would take place just outside its walls. *An event we almost did not arrive in time for.* Fortunately, their arrival could not have been better timed. The gods had been good enough to bring Dacey and her company to Pentos on the very same day that event was scheduled to occur.

A few seconds after she stepped onto the marina, Dacey looked to the north, and then she looked to the south. In both directions, there were Westerosi vessels as far as the eye could see. The majority of them were Ironborn in make. Regardless of where they had originated from, they all served the same purpose at present. They composed the fleet Gregor and the King had dispatched to Pentos. *And each and every person aboard them is under my command.*

"Have the ships been cleared?" Dacey Clegane enquired.

"For the most part," Allard apprised her, "As per your orders, we've left a skeleton crew on each one. Just enough people have stayed behind to keep the vessels properly managed and maintained. There numbers will be spread thinly but efficiently. You'll also be pleased to know that even with all the additional responsibilities going around, the crews will still be able to prepare the fleet for departure at a moment's notice. Or even sooner."

"Excellent," Dacey commented in approval. *Depending on how our meeting with the khal goes, we may have to make a quick getaway.* "Where will the ceremony take place? I mean, I know it will be outside the city, but where exactly?"

"A couple miles to the south, along the shoreline," Allard Seaworth disclosed, "Drogo's entire *khalasaar* is camped there. They're very hard to miss."

"Alas, I didn't glimpse towards the south when we pulled into the harbor," Dacey revealed, "But I'll take your word for it."

"You'll see the Dothraki horde soon enough," Allard asserted, "Actually, you'll *hear* it before you see it."

*Oh, is that what that faint rumbling sound in the distance is?*

Allard glanced down at Tyrion Lannister. When he saw what was in the Westerlord's hands, he grinned and slyly perceived "I see you came prepared, my lord."

"I always do," the dwarf proclaimed, "Now, if you would be so kind as to direct us to the horses…"

"Certainly," said the second son of the Onion Knight.

Allard hastily led Dacey and her companions to the southern end of the docks. On the way there, Ellyn queried "Where is everyone else?"

"They've already ridden out to the Dothraki encampment," Allard Seaworth replied.

"Again, as I ordered," Dacey commented. She had gotten the idea for her forces to scout around and study Drogo's. *Maybe we can somehow surround the khalasaar. Then again, they outnumber*
us four-to-one. Still, it would be ideal for us to establish a network around the horde in case we actually have to fight our way out of Pentos.

"So, has everyone gone ahead without us?" Alyver said inquisitively.

"Not quite everyone," Allard explicated, "A select few insisted on waiting for you."

_I wonder who._

Dacey Clegane found that out a minute later, when they reached the end of the marina. Prince Jon Targaryen was standing there with his direwolf, his sworn shield, and his lover. Eight sturdy coursers were gathered behind them. _I thought he might linger._

In all likelihood, Jon was the only one of them who sincerely wished to stay behind. After all, Ghost, Ser Gerold Hightower, and Ygritte hardly ever left his side. If not for him, the three of them would already be headed south.

Jon gave Dacey a friendly smile when she and the others reached him. _I hope they weren't waiting too long._

"So, are you ready, my lady?" he asked rhetorically.

"Yes," the Bear Islander promptly stated. "Are you?"

The young man who had been her lord husband's squire looked Dacey Mormont in the eye, firmly nodded his head, and told her "Ready as ever."

He sounded plenty confident, so he probably _was_ ready. _He's about to meet relatives he did not even know he had until a few months ago. How does one get ready for something like that?_ "Then let's get down there," Dacey recommended. No one objected.

They needed a few minutes to tend to the horses. Lady Ellyn helped her husband fasten his special saddle onto his courser. Lord Tyrion was able to mount the beast on his own, however. He did not require any aid in that respect. But someone else did.

Dacey watched as Jon and Ser Gerold assisted Ygritte onto the back of her horse. For obvious reasons, the task had become difficult for the wildling girl lately. She was still a fair rider of horses, but getting on and off them was starting to be a challenge for her. _Before long, she won't be able to ride at all._ Dacey had been through that process five times before. In the last three months of each of her pregnancies, Gregor had insisted that she keep off of horses. In the last month, he had all but forbidden her to even go near one. _Much as I appreciate how much Gregor cares for me and our children, I could have done without him treating me like an invalid whenever I was heavily with child._

Once there were all ahorse, they proceeded towards the south. Since Allard was the only one who knew where exactly they were going, he rode at the head of the group. For most of the way, Dacey rode alongside him and talked to him.

"When does the ceremony begin?" she queried.

"It already has," Allard notified her. "But worry not; you didn't miss much. It will last the whole day."

"It will?" Ellyn murmured in interest. She and Tyrion were riding behind the two members of the
secret council.

Allard looked over his shoulder at the Lannisters and nodded his head. He professed "Dothraki weddings are not like any in the Seven Kingdoms. To get an idea of what they're like, think of a typical Westerosi wedding. Could be the Old Gods, the New Gods, the Drowned God… doesn't really matter which faith. In any case, imagine that the conventional wedding ceremony itself was absent. Now imagine that the wedding feast was the ceremony, and it lasted from dawn to dusk."

That's a peculiar arrangement. Hard as Dacey tried, she could not visualize such a thing in her head. She just could not see it happening. Some of the others could, though.

"With those conditions, one would not need an excuse to be drunk during the ceremony," Tyrion Lannister cheekily observed.

Ellyn Lannister laughed at her husband's jest. After that, she looked to Allard and inquired "So, when are the vows spoken?"

"As far as I can tell, there are no vows," the Stormlander disclosed, "The bride and groom hardly even exchange any words throughout the entire ceremony."

Ellyn was stunned. "Really?"

"Yes," Allard confirmed, "From what I've gathered, the Dothraki culture places much more value on actions than words. In fact, while they are a very loud and aggressive people, they are surprisingly laconic."

Then I suppose we'll do all the talking. That could work to our advantage.

"So, the whole wedding is just one day-long feast?" Ellyn presumed, as though she had a hard time picturing such a thing.

"Essentially, that is the case," Allard informed her, "There is a little more to it than that. Some procedure is involved. I would tell you more, but truthfully, I myself am not that familiar with it. Magister Illyrio Mopatis would know more than I. If you want to know more of these strange nuptials, you should ask him."

"Alright, we'll do that," Dacey pronounced.

They rode on in quietness for about two minutes. After that, Allard leaned closer to Dacey and whispered "By the way, there's something more you should know. I should've mentioned this to you earlier: it probably wasn't a good idea to bring Alyver along."

Dacey turned to him and asked in perplexity "Why not?"

"Well…" Allard tentatively began, "Has he ever seen a naked woman?"

I held him to my breast for the first fifteen months of his life. But I suppose that does not count, as he wouldn't even remember it. Ultimately, she responded with "Not that I know of. Rickard probably has, though, given how much time he spends with Theon Greyjoy."

"It's Alyver you should be concerned about now," Allard informed her. Dacey flashed a glare at him. At least Alyver is here with his mother. Right now, Rickard is with neither of his parents. "That's one thing you'll quickly learn about the Dothraki. Modesty is not one of their virtues. Often the men wear nothing over their chests. At weddings and similar events… so do the women."
"Oh…" Dacey murmured, realizing what he was indicating, "Does that apply to all the women?"

"No, only some," Allard responded, "But it gets worse than that. Does Alyver know what women usually do with men when their clothes are off?"

"Alas, Gregor and I have not yet had that talk with him," Dacey Clegane revealed, "So, likely he does not. If he does know, it was not from us."

"Then I would advise you to be careful," Allard Seaworth recommended, "Because otherwise, he's about to receive a firsthand lesson in that subject."

Dacey turned to face the second son of Davos Seaworth and asked uneasily "What are you talking about?"

"The Dothraki have no concept of privacy, either," the Stormlander told her, "They believe all things of meaning should be done in plain sight and out in the open. That includes sex. Whenever they wish to mate with one another, they do so wherever they are. Regardless of who else is present at the time. According to the magister, weddings are an especially popular occasion for them to… 'bond.'"

Dacey felt herself pale. That is appalling. In actuality, it was not the concept of seeing a man and a woman get intimate with each other in public that disturbed her. What really unsettled her was the thought that her young son would witness such a thing.

"Do you want to send Alyver back to the Zenith?" Allard proposed.

Perhaps I should. Dacey peered over her shoulder and saw that they had already put at least a mile of space between themselves and Pentos. Or maybe not.

"No, I wouldn't want him going back on his own," the Bear Islander thought aloud, "And I am not about to ask anyone here to escort him back there, even as a favor to me. Aside from that, I know he'll behave himself."

"Oh, no one is questioning that he'll behave," Allard remarked, "But some of the Dothraki women are very loose. While the majority of them are decent enough not to make advances on children, they could easily mistake Alyver for someone older."

*Given his height, his build, and the sword at his side, I would not be surprised. He looks closer to three and ten than nine.* "Don't worry about Alyver, Allard. That's my job. I'll keep a watchful eye on him."

"If you'd like, Dacey, we could keep an eye on him, too," Ellyn offered.

Dacey gazed over at her sister-by-law and her husband and smiled at them, saying "I would be very grateful for that."

"Think nothing of it," Tyrion bade her, "We love the boy. We aren't about to let our nephew fall victim to some horse-worshipping temptress."

Dacey and Ellyn chuckled at that remark. Allard soon joined in, as did Tyrion.

Thus far, Alyver, Jon, Ygritte, and Ser Gerold had been trotting at a lesser pace behind Dacey, Allard, Tyrion, and Ellyn.

When the laughter died down, they were all caught up. Alyver appeared at Dacey's side and said
inquiringly "Something amusing, Mother?"

"No," she claimed, "We're just talking."

"Alright," Alyver murmured. After a bit of quietness, he asked no one in particular "So, what will happen when we get there? Do we need invitation or approval to get in?"

"As it happens, Dothraki weddings are generally open to the public," Allard Seaworth pronounced, "Anyone can attend, so long as they pay homage to the khal."

"Are we required to present him with a gift or anything?" Dacey queried. Let's hope not; we have nothing to offer. At least, nothing that I think he'd like or we'd be unwilling to part with.

"No, gifts are unnecessary," Allard assured her, "A formal introduction will suffice. As soon as we arrive, we should present ourselves to the khal. Since Drogo does not speak the Common Tongue, Magister Illyrio will announce us."

"Very well," Dacey muttered, "What happens after that?"

"After that, you're free to do as you please," Allard replied, "When will you know whether or not we'll be leaving before the ceremony ends?"

"That will depend," Dacey stated, "First, I'll have to speak with Princess Daenerys."

"Why just Daenerys?" Prince Jon Targaryen asked.

"Because this wedding was not her choice," the Northwoman elucidated, "Whether she'll go through with the marriage should be."

"I see," Jon remarked.

"At any rate, once I find out Daenerys' decision, I will inform the rest of you," Lady Dacey announced.

"Very well," Allard proclaimed, "Whatever you decide should happen next, we'll be ready to follow your orders."

Dacey nodded in acknowledgment. Hopefully, none of our people will become too engrossed in the festivities, as we may have to act fast.

The rest of the ride was spent in silence.

Relative silence, anyway. Allard was correct; they really did hear the khalassar well before they saw it. The further the group rode, the louder their surroundings got.

When they finally reached the Dothraki encampment, the noise was practically unbearable. The sight, however, was almost overwhelming.

There were tents, horses, and people spread across a vastness that spanned miles. With the possible exception of the tourney at Lannisport, Dacey doubted she had ever seen so many people in one place. There may have been even more people there. All the same, even the combined might of the Seven Kingdoms did not look nearly as fierce and impressive as this immense Dothraki horde.

Although most of the people in the encampment were Dothraki, people of all backgrounds and trades were among them. Merchant princes from Qarth, clothing peddlers from Myr and Lys, slavers from the far east… the diversity was astounding.
Dacey also saw many of her fellow Westerosi in the crowd. All of them had either been in Pentos for the past year with Allard or arrived in the city that very morning, just as she had. Some of her countrymen and countrywomen were partaking in the merriment, but from the look of things, they were all still on their guard. *That is fortunate. We do not need anyone getting distracted.*

Allard brought them to the western end of the encampment. Apparently, everyone of precedence was gathered there.

A number of high-ranking Legionnaires could be found in that general area. Ser Brynden Tully and Ser Lothor Brune were accounted for, as were Ser Malcolm Branfield, Ser Bonifer Hasty, Eddison Tollett, and Alysane Mormont, Dacey's younger sister. Allard Seaworth led Dacey and the others over to them.

Alysane was the first to notice the mounted group, the first to smile at them, and the first to approach them. She called out "Hey there, Dace."

"I see you're doing well, Aly," Dacey told her sister, smiling back and holding out her hand.

Alysane took Dacey's hand and shook it firmly. Then she gave it a very powerful squeeze. Dacey scoffed. *Even now, she still tries to crush my hand.* She had been doing that since they were girls.

Alysane then turned her attention to her nephew. She walked up to him and stated gleefully "Alyver! My, how you've grown."

"Thank you, Aunt Alysane," Alyver wryly uttered, smirking, "So have you."

Alysane chortled at that. *It never took much to make her laugh. The Free Cities have not changed her at all.*

While her sister and her son interacted, Dacey looked to the male Legionnaires on the ground. She gave a friendly nod and murmured in acknowledgment "Gentlemen."

"Always a pleasure to see you, my lady," Malcolm Branfield proclaimed.

"Likewise," Dacey rejoined, "Have you passed along my instructions?"

"We have," Brynden Tully answered her, "Our people are in position and awaiting further orders. Whatever those orders may be, they will carry them out. As will we."

"Good," Dacey commented. *Now I can focus on the purpose of this assignment. Regardless of how this scenario plays out, we can handle the aftermath of its resolution.*

Dacey Clegane spent about thirty seconds gazing around the camp. With the exception of Tyrion, Ellyn, and some of their retainers from Casterly Rock, no one there was clad in red.

"Where's the priestess?" the Lady of Moat Cailin enquired.

"She was asked to stay at the magister's manse," Bonifer Hasty disclosed.

"For her safety as well as ours," Eddison Tollett glumly expounded, "It would seem the Dothraki do not look kindly on those who practice magic, the dark arts, and whatever the hell the followers of the Lord of Light do."

Dacey snickered. *How I've missed Dolorous Edd's dry humor.*

"It's just as well," she thought aloud, "In the long run, she would only interfere in our plans."
"Considering what all the Red Woman knows, I would have to agree," Allard Seaworth conceded, "She's an obstruction we can do without."

_She might prove herself useful later, though. We'll just have to see how the day turns out._

Jon reigned up beside Dacey and queried "Do you still mean to speak to Princess Daenerys?"

"Absolutely," the Bear Islander affirmed. She looked down at her colleagues and asked them "Do you any of you know where the Targaryens are?"

"Over there," Bonifer Hasty responded, pointing to the southwest. Dacey followed his finger and saw a huge platform made entirely of clay at the far end of the encampment.

There were two levels to this platform. A tall man and a blonde woman sat on the upper level. One glimpse was enough for Dacey to infer that they were the groom and his bride.

There were five men seated on the lower level. Three of them were on the left, just below Khal Drogo. They were clearly Dothraki, so they must have been the khal's bloodriders. The other two men were on the right, just below Princess Daenerys Targaryen. One was a blonde man in his early twenties and a morbidly obese man in his middle years. Obviously, they were Viserys Targaryen and Magister Illyrio Mopatis.

Half a dozen more Dothraki stood guard around the base of the platform. Apart from them, no one else was within ten feet of it.

"Shall we offer the bride and groom our congratulations?" Tyrion drily suggested.

"That was the idea," Dacey remarked blankly.

She was about to take the reins of her courser and direct him towards the clay platform. Before she could, Lothor Brune stepped in front of her and declared "You should get off your mounts first."

Ygritte seemed taken aback. "Why?"

"It would be a sign of respect towards the khal," Ser Lothor stated, "Believe it or not, the Dothraki do have a system of protocol."

"That is true," Ser Malcolm confirmed, "It is something of an unwritten rule. When the khal sits on ground, no one approaches him on horseback."

"I suppose that's not unreasonable," Jon debated. No, it is not.

"Long as we don't have to kneel to him," Ygritte mumbled. Jon and a few of the others laughed, even though the wildling girl had been totally serious.

Dacey and the seven who had ridden there with her swiftly dismounted. They joined her sister and the other five men on the ground. Their horses were led away by Magister Illyrio's servants.

Together, the fourteen Westerosi made their way through the encampment. That in itself proved to be a bit of a hassle; scores of Dothraki stood between them and the clay platform. Many of them were unwilling to move aside. Saying "excuse me" or "pardon me" did nothing to sway them. **Even if they spoke the Common Tongue, I doubt they even know what those phrases mean.** Before long, the Legionnaires had to resort to pushing and shoving. That turned out to be a much more effective solution.
So far, Dacey noticed, everyone was fully clothed. Then again, perhaps not fully clothed. At least nothing is hanging out yet.

Be that as it may, the atmosphere was definitely starting to get suggestive. Already, some of the men and women were dancing sensually. The men were groping the women's breasts, and the women were groping the men's crotches. It will not be long before someone's attire gets cast aside. If and when that happened, Dacey Clegane intended to lead Alyver away from the scene as quickly as possible. He will not learn of intimacy from this lot.

When they were thirty feet from the platform, Dacey felt someone grab her wrist. She turned to her left and came face-to-face with a sneer.

The sneer belonged to a Dothraki man. This man was huge. His arms and legs bulged with muscle, and his abdominals were larger than his hands and feet. His eyes were filled with what was undoubtedly desire.

Dacey tried to pull her wrist away, but he would not let go. She glared at him and nonchalantly muttered "Do you want something?"

He said nothing; he only looked her up and down. That may have been his answer to Dacey's question. She took it as such and snorted in disgust. She spat "You cannot have it."

The Dothraki paid no mind to that. Instead, he brought his other hand up and reached for Dacey's bosom. She saw his arm coming and grabbed it with her free hand before he could grab her. "Are you stupid? Or just Dothraki?"

He did not like that one bit. But before he could try anything else, Alyver rushed forward and punched the Dothraki in his abdomen. In response, the man released Dacey and stumbled back a few paces. Dacey looked down at her son and smiled at him. He smiled back.

When he regained his full balance, the Dothraki scowled at Alyver. The boy folded his arms and fearlessly warned the horselord "Keep your hands off my mother. Or else."

The man marched closer to Alyver and drew his weapon. Almost instinctively, Dacey pulled out hers, too.

The man's arakh was not even halfway in the air when Bearswrath knocked it out of his hand. Before the Dothraki could attempt to recover his blade or even look to see where it had landed, Dacey drove her longsword through his chest cavity.

The man stood utterly still for a few seconds. Then he slumped backward and dropped to the ground.

Almost immediately, there was a roar of fury. Dacey turned to the source and saw another armed Dothraki coming her way. She did not panic. Instead, she held Bearswrath in the air and urged this new adversary on with "Come at me."

That he did. He rapidly waved his arakh at any part of her body he could reach. Dacey managed to counter or dodge each of his blows just in time.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Alyver move to draw his sword. But Alysane stopped her son and advised him "Stay out of this. Your mother can handle this."

Indeed, I can. In less than a minute, Dacey was the one delivering blows instead of receiving them. She studied her opponent's form for weaknesses, and within seconds, she spotted one. When he
raised his arakh high over his head, she threw an underhand cut to his lower body. The Dothraki promptly dropped his weapon and clutched his midsection with both hands. He was bleeding profusely from the opening Dacey had carved into him.

Fortunately for him, Dacey Clegane was not one to make her enemies suffer too long. She grabbed his head by his braid, pulled it back, and used her sword to slice his throat. Death was almost instantaneous.

Now there were two bodies at her feet. One more and this wedding will start to get interesting for the Dothraki.

Dacey then realized that everyone in the immediate area had stopped what they were doing to watch her fight. She smirked and jibed daringly "Anyone else want a go?"

Her reply came in the form of a Dothraki archer. This archer was about forty feet to the northeast. By the time Dacey spotted him, he had already drawn an arrow, notched it to his bowstring, and pointed it at her.

As always, Dacey's reflexes did not fail her. She dodged the arrow just before it reached her. It ended up flying straight into the waters of the Narrow Sea.

The archer reached into his quiver again. Just as he extracted an arrow, another arrow of a different make appeared in his throat. He dropped his bow and gasped frantically for breath. Then he collapsed onto his stomach.

Dacey peered over her shoulder and saw Ser Lothor Brune with his bow in the air. His gaze met hers, and he nodded in her direction. She just smiled knowingly. I'm damn lucky he never misses. I'd much rather have the Dothraki shooting at me than he.

After that, no one else dared to attack Dacey again. Thus, she sheathed Bearswrath, and she and her companions were able to resume their previous heading.

Khal Drogo had seen every bit of that deadly encounter. He did not seem the least bit displeased. If Dacey did not know better, she would have thought he was impressed.

Seeing him up close, Dacey realized that Khal Drogo was younger than she thought he would be. He could not have been much older than she was. Perhaps they were actually the same age. He is certainly younger than Gregor.

At any rate, Dacey, Alyver, Jon, Ygritte, Ser Gerold, Tyrion, and Ellyn stepped up to the platform. Allard Seaworth went over to where Illyrio Mopatis and Viserys Targaryen were seated.

"Brought more of your associates, have you, Master Allard?" Mopatis supposed.

"Yes, Magister," the Stormlander affirmed, "These are the last of them, I assure you."

Illyrio Mopatis nodded and beckoned him "Proceed."

As he made that announcement, Magister Illyrio translated it for Khal Drogo and his bloodriders to understand.

Dacey noticed Viserys bristled when Tyrion and Ellyn were introduced.

He rose from his seat and snapped at Allard "Lannisters? You brought Lannisters here?"

"No, I did," Dacey calmly refuted, "But do not hold their heritage against them. Lady Ellyn is my lord husband's sister. Only Lord Tyrion is a Lannister by birth, and he is nothing like his father."

But I see a bit of yours in you.

That did little to lessen Viserys' anger, but at least he seemed more tranquil now.

In any case, Daenerys did not seem bothered by the presence of Lannisters. She seemed much more interested in another member of their group. Specifically, the dark-haired boy from the North.

Daenerys gazed down at Jon and presumed "So, you're our brother's third child?"

"That is what I've been told," Jon candidly replied, "I am delighted to meet you both."

"Sure, you are," Viserys said sarcastically.

"I am," Jon insisted, "For the longest time, I thought my only family was in the North. When I was finally told otherwise, I was shocked at first. So, believe me; I know how you must feel."

"You know nothing, Jon Targaryen," Ygritte interjected.

Dacey, Alyver, Tyrion, and Ellyn snickered at that. Jon just placed his hand against his forehead and shook his head. Even she acknowledges his true background now.

"How do you know you are indeed a Targaryen?" Daenerys questioned. Dacey would have expected that question to come from her brother, but not her.

Ser Gerold Hightower stepped forward and declared "You may not remember me, Princess Daenerys, but you do, Prince Viserys. I was the Lord Commander of your late father's Kingsguard. I can validate that Prince Jon is indeed the issue of your brother Rhaegar."

That was enough to appease Daenerys. Viserys was not quite convinced, but this evidence would do for now.

Just then, Ghost appeared at Jon's side. Nearly every person on the platform flinched at the sight of the direwolf. Khal Drogo was the only one who did not move. Instead, he eyed the beast with intense fascination. Maybe he is pondering on the best way to make a trophy out of Ghost. If so, Jon should not let Ghost wander too far away.

Jon would have more time to get acquainted with his aunt and uncle later on. Currently, he was in no rush to do so. As such, he and almost everyone else in his company went to join in the wedding activities. Dacey was the only one who did not.

Now that introductions were out of the way, the Bear Islander stepped closer to the platform and announced "If it would please the khal, I would have words with his bride."

As she hoped, Magister Illyrio repeated that statement in Dothraki. Everyone then looked to the khal as he sat contemplating a response. Ultimately, Drogo bellowed in his native language.
Again, the magister was kind enough to interpret: "The khal says that normally, he would allow no one – man or woman – to speak privately with his khaleesi until the ceremony ended. However, you, my lady, have so impressed him that he will make an exception for you."

Dacey grinned merrily. "Please thank him for me."

"I would," the cheesemonger claimed, "Alas, the Dothraki have no word for 'thank you.'"

.Of course they don't.

Dacey cautiously walked up to the platform and approached Princess Daenerys. The blonde girl politely moved to make room for her.

Once the Northwoman was seated, Daenerys enquired "What would you like to talk about, my lady?"

Dacey checked to ensure that no one was eavesdropping, and then she whispered "What if I were to tell you that I could get you out of this?"

Daenerys was more than a little baffled. "How do you mean?"

Dacey did not answer straightaway. Instead, she muttered "I will explain further. However, you must promise not to react too conspicuously to anything I am about to tell you."

Despite the oddness of that request, Daenerys nodded and said "Alright."

Dacey then began with "I assume you are aware of an 'advantage' my lord husband claims you and your brother possess?"

"Yes, I am," Daenerys affirmed, "We still have no idea what it is, though. Do you?"

"I do," the Northwoman revealed, "Strictly speaking, you do not possess the advantage just yet. But by the end of the day, you will."

"Go on, please," the Targaryen princess bade her.

"Sometime during the wedding feast, Magister Illyrio will present you with three dragon eggs," the Lady of Moat Cailin expounded, "He believes the eggs have turned to stone. He is wrong. They're real."

Remembering Dacey's request not to draw attention to herself, Daenerys did nothing more than raise an eyebrow. But her astonishment was evident. "You mean…?"

Dacey Clegane nodded and stated "One day, hopefully very soon, they will hatch. Then we will be able to use them against the Night King and the Army of the Dead."

"How can you be so certain of that?" Daenerys Targaryen inquired.

"This information came from my lord husband," the older woman disclosed, "If he says the eggs are real, they must be. After all, that is the whole reason we are here: to acquire the dragon eggs. As well as to bring you and your brother home."

"What about the Dothraki?" Daenerys uttered enquiringly.

"We are prepared to transport them back to the Seven Kingdoms with us," Dacey stated, "However, you, Viserys, and the eggs are the priority. Therefore, it is not critical that we bring
them to Westeros. That works out well for you; you need not go through with this marriage."

Daenerys was stunned by that. "What are you implying?"

"We can get you out of this marriage," Dacey proposed, "All you have to do is say you want out, and our people will extract you and your brother. But only once we have the dragon eggs and not a second before."

"What about the Dothraki?" Daenerys pointed out.

"Don't worry about the Dothraki; we'll deal with them," Dacey Clegane proclaimed, "All that really matters is whether you can see yourself finding happiness with Khal Drogo. If you cannot, my fellow Legionnaires and I will liberate you from this prison sentence of a marriage. If you can…"

Daenerys said nothing. Could it be she actually can? Was Tyrion right all along?

"You do not have to decide just yet," Dacey contended, "The ceremony will last all day. It could be hours before the magister presents the eggs. Plenty of time for you to consider your options. Just know that whichever one you pick, we will support."

No more words were said after that. Dacey simply left Daenerys to meditate on the situation. Again, the princess was alone with Drogo. Alone with the man who may or may not stay her husband after today.

The wedding ceremony went on without any further interruptions. The entire time, Dacey waited for the dragon eggs to appear. Those were her foremost concern. Nonetheless, she decided to enjoy herself. This is a celebration, after all.

For the entire duration of the wedding ceremony, Khal Drogo and Princess Daenerys never moved from the upper level of the clay platform.

Every now and then, someone from the assembly – usually clad in fine robes and smelling of strong perfumes – would step onto the lower level, bow respectfully, and set an offering in front of Drogo and Daenerys. As soon as the giver stepped off the platform, one of the six guards would move to pick the gift up, place it off to the side of the upper level, and promptly return to his post after.

Although the wedding had already had its obligatory three deaths to be deemed interesting by Dothraki standards, those were not its only victims. At least nine other men died that day. Fortunately, Dacey did not have to kill any of them.

Dacey spent most of the day mingling with her fellow Legionnaires. They ate, they danced, they laughed, and they had a fair deal of fun. Who would have thought the Dothraki knew how to have fun?

There were a few things she could have done without. Chief among them were all the instances of public mating. It seemed every five minutes or so, some random man seized some random woman and made violent love to her on the spot. Whenever that happened, Dacey hastily got Alyver away from the area as quickly as possible.

Sometimes the solution was not that simple. On four different occasions, the problem concerned Alyver more directly.

*Once more, Allard was correct.* As the Stormlander had conjectured, a few of the Dothraki women thought her son was old enough to lie with them. It did not help that he was fairly handsome for his...
age, too. *He gets that from me and Gregor.*

Dacey actually had to "rescue" Alyver from those four women. She was able to reason with three of them. The fourth one was a little more persistent. She almost Alyver his first kiss. But before her lips could meet his, they met Dacey's fist. That was when the Dothraki woman backed away.

Finally, in the last hour of the ceremony, Magister Illyrio had four of his servants bring forth a large cedar chest.

Dacey watched from afar as Daenerys accepted the magister's gift.

Although Dacey had been allowed to speak privately with Daenerys once already, she was not about to abuse her favor with the khal by asking for that privilege a second time. So she did not climb onto the clay platform. Instead, she just approached the platform and waited for Daenerys to notice her.

Once she did, Dacey wordlessly gestured over at Khal Drogo with her eyes. It only took the princess a moment to catch on. She realized the Northwoman was waiting for an answer to the issue at hand.

Daenerys spent a minute looking back and forth between the dragon eggs and Khal Drogo.

Ultimately, she looked back over at Dacey Clegane and nodded her head.

Dacey was astonished. Princess Daenerys Targaryen, an innocent girl of five and ten, was actually going along with a marriage she had been forced into. *She must realize what she is consenting to.*

Daenerys did not strike her as an unstable or insane individual. *Her brother on the other hand…*

Regardless of all that, Dacey had assured Daenerys that she would respect her decision. Even if her decision was a questionable one. *Whatever reasons impelled her to give this marriage a chance, I must find out what they are later.*

On the plus side, the inhabitants of the Seven Kingdoms would now have forty thousand Dothraki screamers to join them in the war against the Others. *That's another advantage.*

At the very end of the ceremony, Khal Drogo presented Daenerys with a young silver mare. He helped her onto the horse, after which he mounted his own red stallion. The two of them rode out of the encampment on their own.

Dacey Clegane was with Allard Seaworth and Lothor Brune at the time. The three of them watched as the bride and groom went off to consummate their marriage. *I pray she doesn't come to regret her choice. Or that we do, for that matter.*

In spite of that, Dacey was in a very good mood. "It would appear everything worked out for the best."

"Quite so, my lady," Allard conceded, "Three dragon eggs, two Targaryens, and a Dothraki horde. We bagged a spectacular prize."

Dacey nodded and commented "Best of all, this time tomorrow, we'll be on our way back home."

Lothor and Allard gave her a pair of strange looks. She raised an eyebrow and said "What?"

"I'm afraid it will not be that simple, my lady," Allard informed her.
"Indeed not," Lothor confirmed, "Whenever a Dothraki khal takes a new bride, he must present her to the Dosh Khaleen at Vaes Dothrak."

Dacey folded her arms and inquired "How far is Vaes Dothrak?"

"It is all the way on the other side of the Dothraki Sea," Allard Seaworth pronounced "That is at least a fortnight's journey from here."

"If one was to march straight there without delay," Lother Brune argued, "Alas, the Dothraki are never in a hurry, and they tend to stop frequently."

"So, how long a trip can we expect?" Dacey asked.

Allard and Lothor stood thinking on that for a minute. After that, the latter stated "Most likely… three months."

"Two if we are lucky," the former supposed, "But no less."

Dacey let out a dreary sigh and mumbled "I might have known."

In Dacey Clegane's experience, conflict resolution was a very intricate process. In any scenario that employed it, all it took was one tiny impediment for everything to go wrong. This was one rare occasion when nothing had gone wrong. Alas, even when everything turned out just fine, an unforeseen dilemma had arisen. *Even with the most fortunate of outcomes, things never go according to plan.*
Representing Interests

Chapter Notes

Note: Good evening, all. Well, Season 7 is over. Any thoughts on it? I personally thought it was outstanding. For a while, I felt as though the first scene would be the highlight of the series. Now I'm thinking the next-to-last scene (the one that took place in a certain cabin on a certain ship) is. Finally, my OTP is canon!

Anyway, I have some good news. After weeks upon weeks in the job market, I FINALLY got a better job. Interviewed for it on Tuesday, got accepted on Wednesday, and was officially hired on Thursday. Yesterday was my last day at my old job. I start training for my new job on Wednesday.

Until I have gotten the hang of my new job, future chapters are going to be a little shorter (ideally, less than ten thousand words apiece), but I'm going to try to go back to updating this story on a weekly basis. Since Season 8 won't come for another two years, and there is no telling when Martin will finally publish "The Winds of Winter," I'm in no rush to finish this story.

"Anything?" Prince Aegon Targaryen asked his companions.

"So far, nothing but dead ends," Lord Renly informed him.

"My scouts have fared no better," Princess Elia Martell said glumly. She sighed and muttered "Perhaps coming to Volantis first was a mistake."

"We had to start our search somewhere, Mother," Aegon told her assuredly, "Volantis was the most logical choice, as the last known sighting of the Golden Company was just outside the city limits."

"Yes, but that was three months ago," Ser Loras Tyrell murmured irately, "That was over a fortnight before we even left Moat Cailin. In the time since then, we could have already visited Tyrosh and Lys."

Elia rolled her eyes at the Reachman. He tended to annoy her quite often. His sister is the wife of my stepson's cousin, one of his brothers could marry my niece, and his other brother will soon be my son-by-law. He's the only one of Mace Tyrell's children who will not be part of my family. Perhaps I should be thankful for that.

"No use brooding on missed opportunities, Loras," Renly told his squire. Then he advised the group at large "We mustn't despair. Although we were given a clear objective, no one ever said the path to accomplish it would be straightforward. Our journey has only just begun."

If only the rest of us could share his optimism.

"I know that," the Knight of Flowers proclaimed, "Still... we've been here four days, and what have we to show for it? I've yet to hear the locals say a word about the Golden Company."

Well, the Company was only spotted on the outskirts. No one said they ever actually entered the city. Elia did not give voice to that thought, as she did not want to dampen the others' spirits. Gods
knew, they were already low enough.

"The real problem could be our approach," Ser Arthur Dayne contended.

"Why's that, Ser Arthur?" Aegon enquired.

"The natives of Volantis believe every person of importance should not get around by foot," the Sword of the Morning elaborated. People of status instead travel in a hathay or by palanquin. Those who walk about on their own feet are seen as lesser beings."

And we've been doing that since we arrived. Elia grimaced.

"Is that true, Mother?" Aegon inquired, looking to the Dornishwoman.

Elia thought on that a moment. Until last week, she had never been to the Free Cities. Oberyn had, though. He was the adventurous one, not I. Nonetheless, their sister-by-law Mellario had told Elia much about the Free Cities. She had referred to Volantis as the oldest and proudest of the Nine. She had also mentioned the city's social hierarchy, particularly with regards to transportation.

"I believe it is," Princess Elia Martell answered her son, "Walking around the city can impair the way one is viewed by native Volantenes and foreign captains alike."

Ser Loras grumbled and looked to Ser Arthur. "You probably should have brought this up before we got off our ships."

"There is no way I could have," Arthur Dayne contended, "I myself was not aware of it until yesterday."

"How is it you learned of this very critical detail and we did not?" Renly Baratheon queried curiously.

"While the rest of you have been preoccupied with talking to the Volantene, I have been listening," the Sword of the Morning responded.

"Are you implying that we do not listen?" Loras Tyrell grimly assumed.

"No, but unlike you four, I have only spoken when it is required of me," said Ser Arthur, "You may not realize this, but quiet people tend to make better listeners. It also makes them more observant. Those qualities are especially desirable for a Kingsguard such as myself. I hear things most others would simply phase out or disregard, when in actuality some of these things may yield useful information."

Elia raised an eyebrow in intrigue. Even in his later years, he is still as vigilant as he is deadly.

"I don't suppose you heard any mention of the Golden Company?" Lord Renly presumed hopefully.

"If I had, I would have said so," Arthur Dayne asserted.

"How can we be certain of that?" Ser Loras snappily uttered. I sense an accusation in his tone.

Aegon quickly came to his sworn shield's defense. He pronounced "The fault is not Ser Arthur's. By holding his tongue and only giving counsel when it is asked of him, he is but doing his duty. It is not his place to tell us how to conduct our business."

The Reachman gradually stood down. Renly patted him on the back and muttered "I'm as frustrated
as you, Loras. All the same, we cannot let the apparent hopelessness of the situation get the best of us. We must be patient."

Patience is not the foremost quality of the Knight of Flowers.

"I have no issue with making progress slowly," Loras Tyrell claimed, "So long as we're actually making progress. What progress have we made since we got here?"

"None," Elia Martell admitted, "Allow me to offer a compromise. When the sun sets, it will mark the fifth full day we have been in Volantis. If we do not find a definitive lead before then, it will also be the last."

"I think that is reasonable," Aegon stated. The other three men seemed equally content with her proposal. For once, they agreed on something. Elia was relieved by that.

Men can be so troublesome at times. Thank the gods I was put in command of this company.

"We have already searched the entire city, anyway," Aegon thought aloud.

"Not the entire city, Your Grace," Ser Arthur Dayne countered as politely as possible, "We did not dispatch any of our colleagues to the buildings along the east bank of the Long Bridge."

"None of us did, you mean," Renly pointed out, "As I recall, Lyn said he'd be taking a group through that general area today."

"Do you suppose he's still there?" Aegon said inquisitively.

"Given the size of the Long Bridge, I would expect him to be there all day," Elia thought aloud.

"Maybe we should head that way," Ser Loras proposed.

"I wouldn't recommend that," Elia refuted, "The day is almost over. If Ser Lyn is not finished with his search by now, he will be soon. So, if we leave for the Long Bridge now, we might chance him coming to the rendezvous point while we're gone. Then he'd be here and we'd be there."

"That truly could happen," Renly conceded, "Knowing Lyn, he might get the same idea. If so, his group and ours would be going back and forth between the two areas for quite a while."

"Or until one of us decided to just stay put," Aegon debated, "I propose that we be that group. So, let's go ahead and save ourselves a whole mess of trouble by simply remaining here and waiting for Ser Lyn to report in."

There were no objections. Then we're not going anywhere.

Not knowing how long they would be waiting on Ser Lyn Corbray, they elected to get comfortable.

Five days ago, approximately seventy-five hundred Westerosi had sailed to Volantis. The vessels that brought them there had been their living quarters for the last ten weeks. Even whilst docked, those ships continued to serve as shelter to the majority of that number. However, a select few had taken up temporary lodgings in the city.

Princess Elia and her companions were among those who were currently residing in the city. They and about three dozen of their retainers had booked rooms at the Merchant's House, the largest and finest inn in Volantis. The Inn had also been designated as their primary rendezvous point. In the event of an emergency, the harbor was their secondary rendezvous point. Thus far, we haven't
encountered an emergency of any sort. I pray it stays that way.

For the duration of the prior conversation, Princess Elia, Prince Aegon, Lord Renly, Ser Loras, and Ser Arthur had been standing close together in a corner of the Merchant House's common room. They had gathered there so that they could speak without being overheard. Our business in Volantis is not a secret to the world, but it does not hurt to be careful. In this city of countless tongues and cultures, one never knows who could be listening.

At this time, they were not the only Westerosi in the common room. Most of their retainers were there, as well. Almost all of them were Stormlanders, Reachmen, or Dornishmen. They were sworn to Renly Baratheon, Loras Tyrell, and Elia Martell respectively. There were thirty of them altogether. Likewise, the remaining six were Valemen, and they were sworn to Lyn Corbray. As such, they would not return to the Merchant House until he did.

When he does return, hopefully it will be with good news. Or bad news. At this point, I'll be content with any news at all.

Although Elia was not certain of the time, it had to be either the late afternoon or the early evening; the common room was starting to fill up. It was never fully empty, but suppertime was when the Merchant House saw the most business.

"We should find a table before they all get taken," said Ser Loras.

The others were quick to follow his suggestion. We've been walking all day; it would be nice to sit for a bit. In the center of the room was a table large enough to accommodate at least eight. Ser Arthur managed to reach it before anyone else could claim it. Ironic, seeing as Arthur rarely ever sits.

Elia sat at the head of the table; Aegon settled down in the chair to her left. Renly and Loras did not take seats just yet, and Ser Arthur predictably stood guard behind Aegon.

"Well, I for one am famished," Lord Renly thought aloud. "I'm going to get some food."

"I'll accompany you, my lord," Ser Loras declared. The Lord of Storm's End just smiled at the Knight of Flowers.

Elia watched as the two men went to speak with the nearest serving wench. They caught her attention easily enough. Getting the notice of women was a natural talent both Renly Baratheon and Loras Tyrell possessed.

There was already enough noise in the common room that Elia could not hear what they were saying. Based on the confused expression on her face, she did not know the Common Tongue. Fortunately, she did not have to; the House specials were the same in every language.

The serving wench listed the dishes of the day for the two noblemen, and Renly and Loras picked whichever one most appealed to them. That was what Elia assumed, at least. Since she could not hear what they were saying, she did not know that for a certainty.

She could, however, tell that the serving wench seemed delighted to take Renly and Loras' orders. For as long as she was with them, she smiled widely and spoke sweetly. She even made a few evocative gestures, hoping to catch their notice. Alas, your efforts are wasted, my dear.

Renly Baratheon and Loras Tyrell were always chivalrous towards women. But their chivalry did not extend to romanticism. They greatly enjoyed being fawned upon by the fairer sex. Nonetheless, anyone with the sense of a goat could plainly see that neither man was capable of returning such
Officially, Loras was Renly's squire and nothing more. Unofficially... the blade at Renly's side was not the only sword of his which Loras tended to.

Furthermore, the two of them were sharing a room at the Merchant's House. This particular room only had one bed. *I doubt Loras sleeps on the floor or in the tub.*

Of course, Elia was not one to judge. *I would be a hypocrite if I was.* Like many of her countrymen, she liked men *and* women. Granted, Renly and Loras' taste was a little different. There were those who were partial to both sexes and those who only liked their own. Regardless of one's preferences, everyone respected each other's tastes in Dorne.

Elia turned to her son and asked "Would you like something to eat, Aegon?"

"No, I'm not hungry right now, Mother," Aegon informed her, "I could use something to drink instead."

"Now that you mention it, so could I," Princess Elia murmured. She waved another serving wench over to their table. Fortunately, this one could speak the Common Tongue. Elia asked her for a jug of hippocras. Most taverns would not carry such an exotic vintage. But the Merchant's House was a touch above the average tavern.

This serving wench took note of Elia's order and claimed she would be back with it soon. Just before she left, she passed by Aegon, halted in front of him, and flashed him a sultry smile. He politely smiled back, but did nothing more. *He must either be oblivious or disinterested.* Elia would have guessed the latter.

Most mothers, especially those of high birth, would frown upon the idea of a commoner flirting with their children. Elia had no such reservations. In Dorne, baseborn children and trueborn children were treated the same. Apart from that, Aegon was a man grown. Whoever he chose to mingle with was his choice and only his. *It is a little too late for me to take charge of who Aegon courts. After all, not too long ago, he believed I was his aunt.*

Be that as it may, Elia still had every right to be invested in her son's personal life. Particularly when it concerned the future of his house. *Even though his house is no longer mine.*

"Do you like her?" Princess Elia said inquiringly.

Aegon looked perplexed. "Like who, Mother?"

"The serving wench," she clarified, "She seemed nice."

He shrugged. "If you say so. But she spoke not a word to me."

"She smiled at you," Elia pointed out.

"That could mean anything," Aegon disputed, "You smile at me all the time."

*That is true. Even so, I would never smile at you like that.*

"Her true intentions may involve more than smiling," Elia conjectured.

"If they do, I will tell her I am not interested," Aegon uttered bluntly.

*I would expect him to. Aegon is not the type to lay with a woman the same night he meets*
her. "While we're on this subject, is there anyone who has caught your interest?"

"You mean is there any woman I have or have had my eye on?" Aegon asked rhetorically.

Elia nodded in conformation.

"Not at the moment," Aegon told her. He glanced over his shoulder, and after ascertaining that no one other than Ser Arthur was nearby, he turned back to his mother and whispered "At present, I still have yet to lay with a woman."

As it happened, Elia already knew that. She had been with Aegon for almost every day of his life. In fact, the only exception was when he, Rhaenys, and Jon had ventured to the Wall to visit their great-great-granduncle. Princess Elia had not accompanied them there.

Unless he spent the night with a Mole's Town whore before or after he visited the Wall, there is no way he could have done the deed anywhere in that interval.

Despite Dorne's rather loose guidelines on sex, there was nothing wrong with being a virgin. In fact, Elia had saved herself for Rhaegar. All the same, she had had other lovers after he died. And one before. I'll never forget that night he and I spent with Lyanna. Just as I'll never forget that night Oberyn and I spent with Gregor and Dacey. Of course, very different things had happened on those two nights. But that was beside the point.

"Maybe we should talk on this matter," Elia recommended.

Aegon's eyes widened. "You want to discuss my intimate life?"

That would be a very short conversation. Elia chuckled and reassured him with "No, I want to discuss the obligation that often comes with intimacy."

Aegon promptly realized where she was headed with this. He said candidly "I haven't given any further thought as to who I would like to have as my bride, Mother."

"Didn't you have a list of prospects?" Elia presumed.

"Yes," he affirmed, "A short list, though. In the time since I composed it, I have deemed several of the candidates ineligible."

"Which ones?" Elia enquired curiously.

"Truthfully, nearly all of them," Aegon confessed, "Sansa Stark's parents were reluctant enough to send her to King's Landing. Unless they mean for her to marry Crown Prince Jasper, there is no possibility that she would ever wed anyone other than a Northman. Arianne will likely marry Ser Garlan Tyrell. Of that, I am fairly confident. Alyssa Arryn and Shireen Baratheon are both far too young for me. If ever I do get married, I plan for it to be sometime before either of them comes of age."

"Who does that leave?" Elia inquired.

"Joy Lannister," Aegon apprised her, "She only has twelve namedays, so she is still too young. Nonetheless, she was pleasant company back at Moat Cailin. She was kind to me, even when she thought I was a bastard."

"She used to be one herself," Elia reminded him.
"I know," Aegon muttered, "Furthermore, a match such as Joy and myself could go a long way to repairing the strained relations between House Lannister and House Targaryen."

"Yes, it would," Elia conceded, "She is also the daughter of Ser Gerion Lannister, the most reasonable of Lord Tywin's brothers. That in itself could be a promising sign."

"If any sign at all," Aegon commented, "Other than Joy, I cannot think of any other girl from the Great Houses whom I might cloak in the near future."

"Including mine?" his mother countered. When she saw the look of bewilderment on her son's face, she illuminated "As you know, it is not uncommon, especially in Dorne, for cousins to marry. Tell me; what do you think of Tyene?"

"I think I grew up believing she was my elder half-sister," Aegon drily retorted.

"You grew up thinking I was your aunt," Elia pointed out.

"That's different," Aegon insisted, "For all my life, you've been a mother figure to me. I always thought of you as my mother, even before I learned you really were. But in the case of Tyene, it is difficult for me to see her as anything other than a sister. Even though I know now that she is actually my cousin."

"I understand," Elia asserted. She could not blame Aegon for continuing to have that mindset about Tyene. *The idea of him and his cousin together would mean to Aegon what Jon and Rhaenys together means to me.* In any case, the Dornishwoman was relieved that her son had no desire to consider taking up the incestuous practices of his father's family.

Elia leaned back in her chair and stated "Aegon, someday, after we return to the Seven Kingdoms, you'll be given Summerhall. Or Dragonstone, depending on what arrangement you and Jon come to."

"Honestly, we've pretty much already agreed that he will get Dragonstone and I will get Summerhall," Aegon disclosed.

"I see," Elia muttered. After a pause, she resumed with "Now, once Summerhall is restored to House Targaryen and you become the stronghold's prince, you will be expected to find a princess for it."

"Is now really the best time to talk about this, Mother?" Aegon mumbled.

"No," Elia admitted, "However, the best time might not be until after the Long Night. I do not intend to wait that long to have this conversation. We may as well have it now, now that it's already been addressed."

"Very well," Aegon glumly remarked, folding his arms. There came another round of quietness, and then he said "I know full well that I will have to take a bride one day. I do not intend to remain a bachelor indefinitely, Mother. You needn't be worried on that."

*I wasn't. "Oh, I have every confidence that you will marry someday. I personally believe you will make some fortunate lady a wonderful husband."

"Thank you," Aegon said gratefully, "If only I had an inkling as to who this 'fortunate lady' might be."

"That is entirely for you to decide," Elia asserted, "And I mean entirely. Although Rhaenys'"
betrothal to Willas Tyrell was first proposed by Lord Gregor Clegane, it would never have been sanctioned if she had not given the match her consent. Additionally, Jon could have chosen any girl in the Seven Kingdoms. He chose one from outside of them, and no one has given his choice so much as a word of protest. For all we know, he might even end up marrying Ygritte."

Assuming she believe in commitment, that is. The wildlings – or Free Folk, as they liked to call themselves – did not have a very high view of marriage. There were some exceptions, though. Mance Rayder, the self-proclaimed King-beyond-the-Wall, was said to have a wife named Dalla. Every king needs a queen. Had Rhaegar won the war, he might have had two.

"So, you are not going to tell me who to marry, Mother?" Aegon supposed.

"Do you want me to?" Princess Elia asked rhetorically.

Her son shrugged and thought aloud "It would make the selection process easier for me. But like you said before, there are many advantages to choosing one's own spouse. Most highborn boys and girls are not afforded that luxury. Since I am, I should not squander that privilege. Instead, I should embrace it for the valuable opportunity it is."

"Just so," Elia stated approvingly, "Then it is settled. The decision of who you marry is yours and yours alone. I will not advise you to favor any particular woman. Nor will I force you to pick one as your bride. All I will ask of you is that you have an open mind. It is very well possible that the ideal woman could be anywhere in the world. You just have to be ready for her."

"I'll keep my eyes open, Mother," Aegon slyly proclaimed, "If such a woman comes along, I'll be prepared to sweep her off her feet."

Spoken like a man of true Dornish descent. Elia snickered at her son's statement. So did Ser Arthur, who up until now had only stood by silently. Aegon then added in a more serious tone "For now, though, we should focus more on our chief objective of finding the Golden Company."

"I fully agree," Elia concurred. I don't think we need say any more on this topic.

Not long after the conclusion of this discussion, Lord Renly and Ser Loras returned to the table and sat down. A few minutes later, so did the serving wenches. The one who had taken Renly and Loras' orders was not so warm to the two men this time. Evidently, she had caught on to their preferences. Or perhaps she had simply lost interest.

The one who took Elia's order smiled at Aegon again. This time, instead of smiling back, he looked her over, as though he was not certain how to react. I doubt she is the 'ideal woman.' Aegon must have arrived at the same conclusion, as he merely gave a dismissive nod.

The serving wench was not dissuaded, though. She just turned from Aegon to Ser Arthur and focused her smile on him instead. Alas, the Sword of the Morning only had a cold glare to offer her. Arthur was never one for warmth. That was the first thing Ash told me of him.

Eventually, the serving wenches went to see to the other patrons.

Over the next half-hour, nothing much happened. Princess Elia and Prince Aegon drank their hippocras, Lord Renly and Ser Loras ate their food, and Ser Arthur stood watch. All in relative silence.

Once thirty minutes had elapsed, they received some company. Lyn Corbray and his half dozen Valemen finally appeared. Ser Lyn's subordinates went to interact with their colleagues from the Stormlands, the Reach, and Dorne. Ser Lyn himself sauntered over to the table Elia and the other
men were gathered around. He sat down in the chair to the right of Lord Renly, and then he cheerfully pronounced "Good evening, dear associates."

There are times when I find it difficult to fathom that he was the one who killed my uncle. In spite of that, Elia did not feel any resentment towards Lyn Corbray. Prince Lewyn Martell had died fighting alongside Rhaegar at the Trident. That was the way he always wanted to go.

"Nice of you to grace us with your presence, Ser Lyn," Aegon remarked sardonically.

"You seem rather chipper, Lyn," Renly observed.

"I am, and for good reason," the Valeman confirmed, "I come bearing great news,"

"You've acquired some knowledge on the whereabouts of the Golden Company?" Loras assumed, a bit of excitement in his tone.

"No," Lyn revealed, "But I found a definite lead."

"Go on," Elia beckoned him. Everyone else, including Ser Arthur, leaned in a little closer.

By now, Renly was finished with his meal, though he had not eaten everything. Lyn reached over and helped himself to the remnants of his plate. As he gnawed on a chicken leg, he professed "The Golden Company was indeed in this part of Essos three months ago. Like we suspected, they never actually entered the city. The bulk of their forces didn't, that is. The officers, on the other hand, did. It just so happens they were hosted here for one full night. By one of the triarchs, no less."

"Which one?" Aegon muttered inquisitively.

"The tiger, Triach Malaquo Maegyr," Lyn Corbray expounded.

"How did you find that out?" Elia queried, "Did you see the Triach?"

"No, but I did see one of his enemies," Lyn Corbray professed. He then took the jug of hippocras, poured himself a glassful, and downed a large sip. Then he continued with "Before you ask, no; it was not one of the other triarchs."

"Then who was your source?" Loras inquired restlessly.

"A red priest by the name of Benerro," Ser Lyn replied, taking another swallow of hippocras, "He is one of the most influential people in Volantis. Every day, he gives sermons at the Red Temple. Among other things, he publically condemns slavery and those who practice it. Since there are four times as many slaves as there are free inhabitants in Volantis, the nobility see him as a threat. The triarchs in particular."

"Why don't they just use the tiger cloaks to eliminate him?" Elia said enquiringly.

"Because too many of the tiger cloaks worship R'hllor," Ser Lyn disclosed, "Due to the issue of conflicting loyalties, the triarchs dare not use their own soldiers to deal with Benerro. Be that as it may, they have no qualms about getting others to do their dirty work."

"So, Benerro believes Triarch Maegyr tried to hire the Golden Company to kill him and his followers?" Renly supposed.

"No, he knows the Triarch did so," Lyn Corbray contended, "He claimed to see Maegyr's meeting with the Company's officers in his flames. Apparently, that was R'hllor's way of alerting him to the
possibility of danger to his person."

"Seeing as that was three months ago and Benerro is still alive, I'm guessing the Company didn't
give the triarch their swords," Loras drily uttered.

"Indeed not," Lyn affirmed, helping himself to a boiled potato from Loras' plate, "Unfortunately,
Benerro was either unwilling or unable to tell me where the Golden Company went after their
meeting with the triarch. However, he insists the Maegyrs have at least some idea."

"And you think we can trust him?" Renly stated skeptically.

Lyn shrugged and remarked "I don't see what possible reason the Red Priests would have to
deceive or mislead us. They may be no one's allies, but remember; it was one of them who brought
us here."

True. Had Melisandre not shown up at Magister Illyrio's manse, my children would probably still
be in hiding.

"Then it appears our next course of action is clear," Loras Tyrell thought aloud, "We must call
upon Triach Maegyr and his family."

"That will be no easy task," Lyn Corbray commented, draining his glass of hippocras, "The triarch
is a busy man."

"Well, as of now, he's our only worthwhile lead," Renly Baratheon pointed out, "We must try to see
him, all the same."

"Oh, we'll try," Elia proclaimed, "And we're not leaving this city until we succeed."

She spoke in a voice that brokered no argument. Luckily, none of the men offered any.

Princess Elia Martell and her affiliates had already been in Volantis for five days. It took them
another five days to get into the Maegyrs' manse. That was the soonest they could schedule an
appointment with Malaquo Maegyr. That was rather unusual. Normally, people had to wait a full
turn of the moon or longer to see the triarch. Why are they making an exception for us?

Whatever the reason, they chose not to question their good fortune. After all, that was only the
second bit of luck they had had since they began their quest. The first being Lyn's discovery. Let us
hope this streak of luck will continue and the triarch will have something useful to tell.

On the day they were summoned to the triarch's manse, they did not go there on foot. Instead, they
chose to listen to Ser Arthur's counsel, and they rented a palanquin. With the palanquin came a
group of slaves to carry it. Much as the Westerosi despised slavery, there were times when certain
necessary evils were required.

They also brought along a greater detachment of their forces. This was done in effort to make them
appear stronger and more powerful. In any part of the world, more retainers typically equals more
prestige. So, it never hurts to travel with a large entourage. About five hundred of their comrades
from the Seven Kingdoms marched alongside the palanquin.

The only ones who actually rode in the palanquin were Elia, Aegon, Renly, Loras, and Lyn. There
was room for Ser Arthur, but the Sword of the Morning insisted on going by horseback. It never
ceases to amaze me how quick he is to deny himself any comfort.

The trip from the Merchant's House to the Maegyr manse only took about twenty minutes, but to
Elia, it felt considerably longer. She felt the ride itself was alright. Her travelling companions, on the other hand…

Lyn Corbray had even less interest in females that Renly Baratheon or Loras Tyrell, and he was far more flamboyant than the other two men combined. It was remarkable how Aegon was the only one of the four men there who liked women. Of course, I like women, too. But at present, neither Aegon nor I have access to any. That's a pity; another woman might liven up this ride.

Although Princess Elia Martell had been working with Ser Loras, Ser Lyn, and Lord Renly for weeks, she found that being in close quarters with them was not so appealing. They all but ignored her. They made no advances on Aegon, thankfully, but she was certain the thought of it had at least occurred to them.

Eventually, they arrived at the manse. Once they got there, Ser Arthur helped Elia, her son, and the three cock-lovers – as Elia had affectionately begun to regard them as in secret – out of the palanquin. After that, the six of them approached the main gate. There they encountered the manse's steward, who admitted them onto the grounds.

The other five hundred Westerosi soldiers were told to remain outside. Whether that was because they had walked or because the steward simply did not wish to overcrowd the manse, Elia could not say. I doubt they'll be needed, anyway. The triarch has nothing to gain by capturing or harming us.

When they got to the front entrance of the manse, Elia expected the door guards to confiscate their weapons. Strangely, they did not. They noticed the Westerosi's swords, but they said and did nothing about them. After that, they opened the doors and allowed them inside. Elia thought that queer. Back in the Seven Kingdoms, only the Kingsguard were allowed to carry arms in the presence of the King. Triarchs must either be bolder than kings or more laidback.

The steward led Elia and her associates to the manse's sitting room. There were three people there, two men and one woman. All three of them were around Aegon's age, with a difference of a year or two between one another. The older man had short black hair. The younger man had long black hair tied in a ponytail. The woman had long black hair that went well past her shoulders. Based on that and their other similarities in appearance, they must have been siblings.

The older man stepped up to the group and extended his hand. He stated "On behalf of my family, I bid you welcome to Volantis, Westerosi."

Elia was the first to take his hand. She shook it firmly and said gratefully "Thank you, ser. My name is Princess Elia of House Nymorous Martell. With me are my son, Prince Aegon of House Targaryen, Ser Lyn of House Corbray, Ser Loras of House Tyrell, Lord Renly of House Baratheon, and Ser Arthur of House Dayne."

Each of her male companions shook hands with the Volantene nobleman in turn. After that, he said "Now that I know who you are, allow me to return the favor. My name is Vereld Maegyr. These are my brother Hollistor and my sister Talisa."

The other two Volantene nobles stepped forward and shook hands with the six Westerosi.

"Will the triarch be joining us soon?" Lord Renly asked abruptly.

"I'm afraid our grandfather is indisposed at present," Hollistor Maegyr pronounced. "Anything you wished to discuss with him you may discuss with us."
"Do you conduct your grandfather's affairs alongside him?" Lyn Corbray conjectured.

"When he asks us to," Talisa Maegyr revealed, "Our father and uncles are his chief aides. However, they include us at most of his meetings."

"We do more than merely observe our grandfather's activities," Vereld Maegyr proudly declared. "We frequently have input of our own to offer. Input he values very highly and very often makes important decisions off of."

"No one is questioning your qualifications to speak for Triarch Malaquo," Elia asserted, though she could not speak for all of her companions, "We are honored just to be received by his family."

She must have sounded sincere enough. Vereld beamed and muttered "Then we would be pleased to indulge you and your cohorts, Princess Elia. Have a seat, please."

Elia, Aegon, Renly, Loras, and Lyn swiftly settled down in some comfortable chairs. The three Maegyrs shared a cushioned bench. Talisa sat in the middle. Hollistor sat to her right and Vereld to her left.

Playing the part of the receptive host, Vereld sent for bread, fruit, and wine. The steward left the sitting room and swiftly returned a minute later with a platter and a jug. He placed both items down on a glass table positioned between all the seats.

As everyone helped themselves to refreshments, Hollistor asked "So, tell us; what can we do for you?"

Of all the ways to approach this topic, Elia chose to utilize the most direct one. She folded her hands together and stated "We are searching for the Golden Company. We are hoping you might know something of their whereabouts."

"Why do you believe that?" Talisa enquired.

"Because not too long ago, the Company's officers were here," Lyn Corbray proclaimed, "Yesterday, I acquired some information that they were guests of your grandfather about three months ago. Is that true?"

"It is true," Vereld straightforwardly disclosed, "They were here for one night only. They left the following morning, even before we broke their fast."

"Whilst they were here, Grandfather only met with them once," Talisa recounted, "The three of us were invited to attend that meeting, and we did. However, we did not do much talking at that one. Neither did our grandfather, for that matter."

"How do you mean?" Renly Baratheon asked.

"The only reason our grandfather saw them was that he was hoping to hire them," Hollistor stated, "He wanted them to get rid of a red priest for him. This priest has been speaking out against the slave owners of this city. About the only thing Grandfather, Triarch Doniphos, and Triarch Nyessos all agree on is that he is an enemy of theirs."

"At any rate, Homeless Harry Strickland was quick to refuse our grandfather," Vereld professed, "He's the Commander of the Golden Company, if you did not know already. That was when he and his colleagues revealed their true intentions for coming here."

"What might that have been?" Loras queried.
"They wanted us to lend them the tiger cloaks," Hollistor replied.

Elia was stunned. "They wished to hire your soldiers?"

"Yes," Talisa confirmed, "When we asked why, the explanation they provided was vague. For reasons unknown, the Golden Company has been taking on a great many new recruits lately. They're accepting anyone who can hold a sword, sit a horse, or string a bow. In the last year, their numbers have swelled to thrice the usual amount."

That's almost thirty thousand units.

"What motive do you suppose they might have for doing this?" Lord Renly queried.

"As to that, we can only speculate," Vereld murmured, "It is my belief that they are planning an offensive or siege of some sort."

"Why would sellswords launch such a campaign?" Lyn wondered aloud.

"Typically, they wouldn't," Talisa debated, "Unless, of course, someone was paying them. But as far as we know, the Golden Company has not signed a contract with anyone."

Or perhaps they have. The world just doesn't know of it.

Elia leaned forward and asked "Apart from Homeless Harry Strickland, who all from the Golden Company came to see your grandfather?"

The three Maegyrs thought on that for a minute. It was Hollistor who ultimately answered: "There were five others. Three of them were Black Balaq, the commander of the company archers, Lysono Maar, the company spymaster, and Gorys Edoryen, the company paymaster."

"And the other two?" said Lord Renly.

"They were a father and a son," Talisa finished for her brother.

"Could you tell us more of those two?" Loras requested.

"Well, the father was not quite in his middle years yet," Vereld recalled, "The son was a little younger than me and Holl, but about the same age as Talisa. He also looked more than a bit like you, Prince Aegon."

"Really?" Aegon was intrigued. Elia was suddenly anxious.

"Yes," stated Vereld, "In fact, he looked almost exactly like you. The only notable dissimilarity between the two of you is your hair. The son's hair was dyed blue, as was his father's."

"What names did they go by?" Elia inquired.

"They both had the same name, actually," Talisa elucidated, "The father was called Griff and his son Young Griff."

It was just as Elia feared. Gregor was right about the extremists all along. Right then, she understood precisely what was going on.

"Oh, fuck," Renly Baratheon mumbled. By their expressions, the others all thought much the same.

"Is something wrong?" Vereld asked in concern.
"We know who those two really are," Lyn Corbray uttered bitterly.

"Who?" asked Hollistor.

Elia apprised them with: "The man is my late husband Rhaegar's best friend, Jon Connington, the exiled lord of Griffin's Roost. The boy is no product of his loins, but a lowborn who was sold by his real father as a babe. Worse yet, the boy believes he is my son."

The Maegyrs were astonished. Talisa asked in bewilderment "Why would he believe that?"

"It would take too long to explain," Elia claimed, "But that is the real reason Harry Strickland refused your grandfather. The Golden Company already has a contract. With Connington."

"That's a fantastic assumption, Elia," Renly contended, scoffing a bit.

"Indeed," Loras agreed, "Just what coin is Connington paying them with?"

"At present, none," Elia Martell argued, "He doesn't have to pay them now. He could pay them after they have fulfilled their part of the bargain."

"What bargain, Mother?" Aegon enquired.

Elia looked around the room and announced "They're organizing an invasion of the Seven Kingdoms."

To say the others were shocked was an understatement. They looked one step shy of mortified.

"How could you possibly be sure of that?" Lyn muttered quietly. If he is almost speechless…

"It is the only explanation that makes complete sense," Elia debated, "Think of everything the Golden Company has been up to recently. Their rise in new recruits, their elusive behavior, the fact that they are rallying behind the supposed rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms… all that together points to only one fathomable outcome: wide-scale conquest of Westeros."

That theory may have seemed a longshot, but Elia felt it was reasonably well-founded. To her fortune, Aegon, Lyn, Renly, Loras, and the three Maegyrs all seemed as though they were starting to admit there was some logic in her argument. Alas, not every person in that room was so convinced.

"You may presume too much, Princess," Ser Arthur disputed, finally loosening his tongue, "It is quite possible the officers know that Young Griff is a fraud. Why would they follow a false king?"

"I don't think that matters to them, Arthur," Elia contended, "If they all tell the world he is Aegon Targaryen, people will be inclined to believe them."

"Not all people," Renly countered, "There are plenty of people out there – including those of us in this room – who know that the real Aegon is sitting beside you."

"Of course, he is," Elia frankly remarked, "But it is my word against Connington's. When two people say contradictory things, no one chooses to believe both of them. Ultimately, it is up for them to decide who they think is the real Aegon."

"We have the backing of Lord Gregor Clegane and King Robert, Mother," Aegon pointed out, "By now, all of Westeros knows that I am Rhaegar's son."
"I realize that, sweetling," Elia told him reassuringly, "However, if he so desired, Connington might persuade all of Essos that Young Griff is you. Were that to happen, one continent believes one thing, and another would believe another. The people in this part of the world might not care who sits the Iron Throne, but they can be swayed to favor one contender over another."

"She's right," Renly conceded, "Suppose Connington was to tell the inhabitants of Essos that if they help put Young Griff on the Throne, he will give them something in return once he is crowned king. Even if only a fraction of the Essosi lent him their support, the consequences of such a scenario would be devastating."

_I doubt anyone could ever marshal all the forces of Essos into one united fighting force. Let us hope not, at any rate. The Seven Kingdoms doesn't have the means to repel the combined might of Slaver's Bay and the Nine Free Cities. Especially with the approaching threat to the north, which trumps all other threats._

"I'd never allow that to happen," Aegon firmly pronounced, placing his hand on the hilt of Blackfyre, "I will kill the imposter before Connington can make a puppet of him."

"As long as you leave Connington to me," Renly cheekily muttered, smirking wickedly but speaking seriously, "The man may have been your father's best friend, but he was a Stormlander by birth. He betrayed my brother when he sided with the Mad King during the Rebellion. I'll not give him the chance to betray the rest of Westeros, as well."

"Aye, my lord," Loras Tyrell commented, "Your brother Stannis _did_ say Robert's choice to let Jon Connington live in exile was too lenient."

"For once, I agree with Stannis," Renly Baratheon wryly remarked.

Lyn Corbray chuckled. "I never thought I'd hear you say that, Renly. Then again, it is not the first unprecedented thing I've witnessed since I joined the Legion."

Just then, Aegon cleared his throat. Everyone looked to him, and the prince sternly told his fellow Westerosi "I could be wrong, but it is poor etiquette for us to talk solely amongst ourselves when we are in the presence of others. Especially when those 'others' are our hosts."

As it happened, Vereld, Hollistor, and Talisa had not spoken a word in the last few minutes. Elia had not forgotten they were still there, but Loras, Lyn, and Renly looked as though they nearly had.

Elia hastily murmured "Our apologies for our rudeness. We did not mean to so blatantly disregard your company."

"It is quite alright, Princess," Vereld assured her and the others, "But while we are on this subject, and now that we have your attention once more, perhaps you can clarify something for us."

"What?" Elia said inquisitively.

"How do we know that this Aegon is the real one?" Vereld inquired.

Elia was outraged. _What gall he must have._ She uttered softly "What?"

"We mean no disrespect; it is only a question," Talisa calmly stated, "One that warrants asking. After all, until a couple months ago, the world believed Aegon Targaryen to be dead. Now, all of a sudden, there are two who could be him."

Elia placed her hand on her son's shoulder and proclaimed "He is the real Aegon. I have been with
him nearly every day since he was born."

"So have I," Arthur Dayne supplemented.

"Words might suffice for most," Hollistor casually muttered, "We will require more than that."

"What do you care who the real Aegon is, anyway?" Loras sharply snapped.

"Honestly, we don't," Hollistor claimed, "Even so, we don't like being lied to."

Aegon promptly jumped to his feet. He glared at the Maegyrs and spat heatedly "Are you calling my mother a liar?"

"No," Vereld insisted, "We are simply asking if she is certain of herself."

Elia gently placed a hand on Aegon's arm. He turned to look down at her, and she gestured for him to ease down.

Aegon was about to return to his chair, but before he sat back down, he happened to glimpse over his shoulder. Instead of sitting, he stood back up.

Elia looked to where her son's gaze had fallen, and she spotted the fireplace on the far end of the sitting room. Aegon then donned a peculiar countenance. Elia would have described it as one of devious cleverness. He turned back to the Maegyrs and declared "If it is proof of my identity you desire, I will give you proof."

Princess Elia and the others watched her son as he crossed the sitting room. There were two braziers above the fireplace, both currently unlit. Aegon removed one of them from its sconce, knelt down in front of the hearth, and lit the brazier in the flames.

After that, Aegon made his way back over to the center of the room. He stopped just before his mother, their companions, and the Maegyrs. He stood up tall and straight.

"They say fire cannot harm a dragon," Aegon proclaimed, gazing down at the three Volantene nobles, "If our words will not convince you, perhaps this will."

He then rolled up the sleeve of his left arm. Once that arm was bare, he extended it in front of him. Then he took the brazier and held it directly beneath his arm.

Although Elia knew her son would be alright, she felt an instinctive urge to stop him. She willed herself not to. *The Maegyrs need to see this.*

The flames of the brazier licked at Aegon's bare flesh. Yet there was no indication that they were either hurting or harming him. He just nonchalantly lowered his arm into the fire. At some point, he ensured the fire touched every part of his arm from his bicep to his fingertips.

Several times during that demonstration, Elia stole a glance at the Maegyrs. This ploy seemed to be working; Vereld, Hollistor, and Talisa were indisputably flabbergasted.

Eventually, Aegon lowered the brazier, but his arm remained in the air. He kept it up as he stepped closer to the Maegyrs. When he was directly in front of the three Volantene nobles, he bade them "Go ahead. Touch me."

Hollistor was the first to oblige. He tentatively reached out with his right arm. After a bit of hesitation, he brushed his palm against Aegon's forearm. He withdrew it almost instantaneously.
After that, he became a little more emboldened and took a slightly firmer grip of Aegon's appendage.

"He's not even warm," Hollistior informed his siblings.

At that, Vereld moved closer and put his hand on Aegon's bicep. When he confirmed the truth of his younger brother's declaration, he muttered in awe "What magic is this?"

"No magic," Aegon assured him, "Just the blood of the dragon. It courses through my veins."

"Astonishing," Talia murmured. She had her turn to touch Aegon's arm. She conducted a much more thorough examination than her brothers. To Elia, it looked as though she was searching for any physical traces of physical damage. She won't find any, of course.

"There is nothing wrong with his arm," she proclaimed, "It is as though was never burnt."

"It never was, my lady," Aegon disclosed, "Try that on anyone other a Targaryen, and all you'll get is charred flesh. However, heat does not affect me and my kin the way it affects everyone else. Our bodies absorb it, channel it, insulate it. The only way we ever sweat is through exertion. Even the Sun's hottest rays cannot burn our skin. If you wish for further proof, I will go outside and stand somewhere without cover from the Sun for the rest of the day. Then, once the Sun sets, I will come back here and show you my skin."

He'll actually do that, if need be. Aegon was every bit as determined to get the Maegyrs on their side as Elia and the other Westerosi were.

"No, that will not be necessary," Vereld decreed.

Hollistior nodded and stated confidently "You are Aegon Targaryen."

"Forgive us for ever having doubted you," Talisa beseeched Aegon.

At this time, she was still holding his left arm with both her hands. He smiled down at her, took her right hand in his left one, and lightly pressed his lips against her knuckles. He assured her "You have done nothing that requires my forgiveness, my lady."

Talisa blushed, removed her hands, and looked away. In response, Vereld snickered, and Hollistior rolled his eyes. Just like that, he's won all three of them over. That must be his Dornish heritage at work.

Aegon took a moment to return the brazier to its sconce above the fireplace. Then he made his way back over to the center of the sitting room. He remained standing as he faced the Maegyrs. He folded his arms and stated "Now that we have established the truth of who I am, can we expect your full cooperation?"

"That will depend," Vereld debated, "What exactly do you want from us?"

"As my mother told you at the beginning of this conversation, we are searching for the Golden Company," Aegon professed, "Your grandfather is last person to meet with them. That we know of. So, tell us; did Harry Strickland or any of his subordinates say anything about where the Company might have gone after that meeting? Anything at all?"

Again, Hollistior, Talisa, and Vereld needed a minute to reflect.

"As a matter of fact, they did," Vereld responded, "It was only in passing, but I distinctly remember
hearing Lysono Maar suggest to 'Griff' – or, according to you, Jon Connington – that the Company make for Ghoyan Drohe once they departed Volantis. Griff seemed to sign off on that idea."

"Ghoyan Drohe?" Elia Martell thought aloud, "That's not far from Pentos."

"Then perhaps Lady Dacey's company will encounter them," Ser Loras theorized. That was an unpleasant thought. *If the Golden Company really has grown as large as the Maegyrs claim, they outnumber Dacey's company three-to-one.*

"I would not count on that," Lyn Corbray argued, "It is quite possible that Lady Dacey and her units are already on their way back to Westeros."

"And if it turns out they are still in Pentos, they will have merged their forces with Khal Drogo's by now," Renly Baratheon contended, "If so, Dacey is much safer than we are. Even the Golden Company would not be so brash as to attack a Dothraki *khalasaar.*"

*Whatever the case, Dacey can take care of herself and her own. We needn't worry about them for now.*

Not wanting to get off-topic again, Elia turned to the Maegyrs and asked them "Why do you suppose the Golden Company would go to Ghoyan Drohe?"

"Many reasons," Hollistor hypothesized, "It is due west of where the Rhoyne and the Little Rhoyne converge. Plenty of fresh water and fertile land. Very good place to host a large army."

*Fair argument. Strickland would need to keep his soldiers fed somehow.*

"It is also located on the quickest path to Braavos," Vereld revealed, "If they get to Braavos, they could take out a loan from the Iron Bank. That would remedy the problem of finding enough coin to pay all their soldiers. For a while, at least. They could also seek the services of the Faceless Men."

*Not likely. A dozen of those assassins would be more expensive than the entire Company.*

"Ghoyan Drohe is also on the most direct route to Lorath," Talisa proclaimed, "Lorath is the most isolated of the Nine Free Cities. It would make an ideal haven for anyone who wished to vanish from the world."

*That could be how the Golden Company has managed to elude anyone's notice lately.*

It was here that Elia rose from her chair. She clapped her hands together and pronounced "Regardless of their intentions, what matters is that we now know where the Company is going. Or rather, where they were going. Either way, I have decided the next step of our plan. Come the morrow, we will make for Ghoyan Drohe."

"As you say, Mother," Aegon acknowledged. Renly, Lyn, and Loras expressed their approval of that idea. Arthur, as usual, made no sound.

Elia turned to the Maegyrs and told them sincerely "Thank you for your time and for your assistance. I don't know how we could repay you."

At first, the Maegyrs said nothing in response to that. Then over the next minute, Vereld, Hollistor, and Talisa looked around at each other. It was as though they were having a silent conversation with one another. Soon after, they turned back to the Westerosi, and, at the exact same instant, they all got to their feet.
"As it happens, there is one way you can," Vereld proclaimed.

"I'm listening," Elia told them.

Vereld folded his arms and declared "We would like to accompany you."

Elia had not known what sort of request the Maegyrs would present, but she was not expected that. She was perplexed. "To Ghoyan Drohe?"

"And beyond that," Hollistor illuminated, "Maybe all the way back to Westeros."

"If you'll have us," Talisa quickly added.

Initially, Elia did not know what to say. What does one say to an offer such as that? Ultimately, all she said was "May I ask why?"

"We are willing to supply plenty of reasons why," Hollistor professed, "However, all of those reasons can be compacted down to three major ones."

"The first, I'm ashamed to admit, is somewhat out of selfishness on our part," Vereld confessed, "My siblings and I have always thirsted for adventure, excitement, and the ability to do things for the greater good. Even here in Volantis, we have heard of the wondrous deeds performed by the Legion without Banners. It would be an honor if we could be an accessory to those deeds."

"I can relate," Renly slyly remarked, "That was what drove me to enlist in the Legion in the first place."

"Me, as well," Loras stated. Though Renly's presence may have been an additional incentive.

"I joined more to make a profit," Lyn brazenly disclosed. When he saw the incredulous looks the others gave him, he bluntly said "Not out of my own greed; my house was impoverished. Anyway, soon after I joined the Legion, I found it had things far more fulfilling and rewarding than gold to offer."

Like protection and stability for the realm. Things that are far more important, as well.

"You mentioned three reasons," Aegon remarked, "That's one. What are the other two?"

"The second is more for your benefit," Hollistor expounded, "We are well-aware that we would not be the first Essosi – or even the first Volantenes – to work alongside the Legion without Banners. We would not even be the first to join it. However, would we be right to assume that most of the people in your party are not originally from this part of the world?"

"Yes, you would," Elia affirmed, "As far as I know, every person who accompanied us here is a native of the Seven Kingdoms."

"That could pose a problem," Hollistor contended, "After all, you have no way of knowing how long you'll be searching for the Golden Company. You might end up chasing them all over Essos. If so, you will need people who know the land. People like us."

"You three think a lot of yourselves," Ser Arthur Dayne observed, "May I ask how old you are?"

"I am nine and ten," Hollistor replied, "Vereld is twenty. Talisa is seven and ten."

The same age as Aegon.
"We may be young, good ser," Hollistor pronounced, "But we have been all over Essos. We've visited each of the other eight Free Cities at least once, and we can tell you all the smoothest, safest, or fastest routes. No one in your company holds such knowledge, I'd wager. Whereas we... we can help you to traverse the land."

A guide would certainly be beneficial. Three would be outstanding.

"If you think we'll be a burden to you, we do not intend to be one," Talisa contended, "We belong to a very large and wealthy family. We have our own ships, our own provisions, our own soldiers. You needn't expend any of your own resources on us. We have the means to provide for ourselves."

"Also, if you were wondering, this is not something we decided on a whim," Vereld revealed, "Before you came, we discussed this subject thoroughly with our parents and our grandfather. They did not think much of it at first. But we talked them into seeing it from our point of view. So they ultimately gave their consent."

"Even if they did not, we are old enough to go wherever we please," Hollistor commented.

"This is a fairly compelling argument," Aegon thought aloud.

"Quite so," Elia concurred, "And the third reason?"

"Apart from our knowledge of Essos, we each possess certain skills that would be of great use to you," Talisa debated, "Vereld is a formidable warrior. He has mastered over a dozen different fighting styles and is equally deft with a sword, a spear, an axe, and any other melee weapon. Hollistor is a scholar through and through. He can speak six languages, including Dothraki and High Valyrian, and he knows even the most mundane details about every culture between Slaver's Bay and the Narrow Sea."

"And you, my dear?" Elia inquired.

Talisa did not reply straightaway.

Vereld interceded with "You'll have to excuse her; she isn't one to boast of her own accomplishments."

"We, on the other hand, have no such reservations," Hollistor remarked, "Talisa is a healer, and a damn fine one at that. She knows as much about medicine as any of your Oldtown maesters. I've seen her save a man who was literally on the brink of death. All by herself, I might add."

Talisa flushed at her brothers' praise. "They exaggerate. All I did was cleanse him of an infection. It was not even a lethal infection."

"Only because you purged it," Vereld countered, "If you hadn't, it could have killed him."

"I guess we'll never know," Hollistor cockily muttered. Talisa just giggled.

Elia could not help but smile. They remind me of myself, Doran, and Oberyn when we were children.

"Alright," Elia muttered, placing her hands on her hips, "I am convinced you three would make an excellent addition to the Legion. But before I agree to take you with us, there is one more thing I must know. When and how did you decide you wanted to join our party?"
"We made that decision the moment you first tried to see our grandfather," Vereld disclosed, "I do not know if you are aware of this, but whenever someone arranges to see a triarch, they usually have to wait for weeks and weeks before an appointment can be scheduled."

"So we've heard," Aegon commented, "Oddly enough, we did not even have to wait one week."

"That was our doing," Hollistor admitted, "When we find out you were from the Seven Kingdoms and who you represented, we were determined to make your acquaintance as soon as possible. It was we who convinced our grandfather to move you ahead in his agenda."

Then it wasn't fate on our side. It was these three. In time, that might prove just as good.

"It is merely by happenstance that he was not available to see you himself," Talisa remarked, "Of course, had he been here, this meeting would have been conducted in a slightly more professional manner. Then again, his absence does simplify this part."

"Essentially, you were going to ask us to take you with us, regardless of what transpired here?" Aegon presumed.

"That's about right," Hollistor claimed, "Even when we doubted who you were, we found the prospect of working with the Legion without Banners too tempting to bypass. From the moment this meeting began, we were looking for the most ideal moment to address the topic."

"Which brings us to where we are now," Vereld contended, "There is no point in putting it off any longer now. So, what is your answer? Will you allow us to join your party, or do you intend to abandon us to the tedium of Volantis?"

Everyone turned to Princess Elia Martell. She could not claim to be surprised by that action. In fact, she saw it coming. Since she was in command of the Westerosi company, she was expected to make all the most important decisions. Decisions such as who to trust, who to consult, and who to invite into the fold.

Elia spent a good five minutes debating on the advantages and disadvantages of bringing the Maegyrs and leaving them behind. Both options came with plenty of highs and lows.

In the end, she chose to welcome to the Maegyrs into their company. We'll need all the help we can get if we're going to find the Golden Company before they set sail for Westeros. These three could turn out to be invaluable to us in that pursuit.

When Elia announced her decision, Vereld, Hollistor, and Talisa were very vocal in expressing their appreciation. Vereld and Hollistor even kissed her on the cheek. Talisa did not kiss Elia. She did, however, kiss Aegon. This kiss was only on the cheek, too, but Elia could tell her son enjoyed it.
Note: I just wanted to say that I love my new job. LOVE it. Of course, since it's a full-time job, it is a little time-consuming. As such, I will have less time for writing. So, it might not be possible to keep updating on a weekly basis. At least for a while. Still, I will aim to post new chapters as often as I can. I'm not retiring from fanfiction any time soon.

Also, I want you to be aware; I'm not too thrilled with this chapter. Personally, I find it a little dull. Maybe that's because I had to cut out some of the more amusing or descriptive parts. Those edited parts will be included in a future chapter, though. In any case, I promise future updates will be more exciting than this one.

By the way, some of you are probably yearning to see more of Gregor. For those of you who are, you needn't wait much longer; the next chapter will feature him.

Although Westeros was in the midst of autumn, every place south of the Neck was still exhibiting fairly warm weather. That included King's Landing. Right now, the Sun was bathing the whole western side of the Red Keep. Some of its rays managed to pass through the windows of the throne room, giving the occupants a fair idea of what the climate outside must have been like.

It is too pleasant a day to spend indoors. But work must come first.

Robert Baratheon had learned the truth of that statement when he first ascended to the Iron Throne. In his youth, he had been one to enjoy the pleasures of life and disregard the responsibilities of it. He became the Lord of Storm's End at the young age of six and ten, when his parents died at Shipbreaker Bay, within sight of the Baratheon stronghold. Even then, he had not shown much interest in ruling.

Then the Rebellion happened. The realm was never the same after that. Neither was I. By the time Lord Robert Baratheon became King Robert Baratheon, he had learned the importance of duty, prioritization, and restraint. Personally, Robert still did not care much for ruling, but the Seven Kingdoms needed a king, and the people had chosen him. Like as not, he would wear the crown for the rest of his life.

At this time, Robert was seated in the Iron Throne, leaning on his arm. Cersei sat to his left in a smaller throne made of wood and lesser metals. Lord Jon Arryn stood at his right hand, just as he had for the last sixteen years. Four of the Kingsguard were present, as well. Ser Barristan Selmy and Ser Mandon Moore were positioned near the base of the throne. Ser Meryn Trant and Ser Arys Oakheart were at the far end of the room. Ser Boros Blount, Ser Preston Greenfield, and Ser Theo Frey were guarding Robert's children elsewhere.

It was nearly midday. Robert had spent most of the morning receiving petitioners. Many of them had gone away satisfied. A few had gone away displeased. Some had still not gotten their troubles resolved. A great number of petitioners were still waiting to see the King. Alas, Robert did not have time to see them all. One more, and then I'll end this session of court.
"Send in the next one," the King commanded, as his latest petitioner, a pair of squabbling knights, left the throne room. One exited a little richer than when he entered; the other a little poorer. Once they were gone, another man came in.

The last petitioner of the morning was a middle-aged man clad in the robes of a septon. Robert noted he bore a bit of a resemblance to Ser Theo. Could they be related?

He got his answer a moment later, when the herald called out "Septon Luceon to see the King."

It was then that Robert remembered. Although most of Walder Frey's sons had children of their own, his fifth son had never even been married. Luceon Frey had opted to devote his life to the Seven instead. He no longer carried his family name, and he had severed all ties to his family, but he had retained that look which was characteristic to the Freys. The look of duplicity. Although Freys were generally more honest and trustworthy than they had been before Greyjoy's Rebellion, it would likely be a while before that look went away.

As Luceon gradually approached, Robert gazed down at him and asked "How might the crown service the Faith, good Septon?"

"I come on behalf of his Holiness, the High Septon, Your Grace," Luceon declared, dipping his head respectfully, "He wishes to appeal for your authority to revive an old faction of the Seven."

"An old faction?" Robert repeated inquisitively.

"Two, actually," Septon Luceon disclosed, "The Poor Fellows and the Warrior's Sons."

That revelation produced murmurings from the people gathered in the court. Most of them sounded alarmed, stunned, or appalled. Robert fully understood their unease. He was inclined to share it. The Faith Militant had not been around in two and a-half centuries. They were disbanded for a very good reason.

Robert sat up in his throne and queried "What reason do you have for submitting this plea?"

"Only the best interests of the Seven Kingdoms," Luceon pronounced, "For years, the whole of Westeros has been preparing for the Long Night. Recently, many of its inhabitants have turned to us and our gods for salvation. We have said a prayer for them all. Alas, our prayers to the Seven can only accomplish so much. Only a fool would believe they would be sufficient to stop the undead. As such, we of the Faith are obligated to take up arms alongside the rest of the realm."

Noble objective, but questionable means of accomplishing it. "You do not have to rely on the Faith Militant to achieve that goal. I would be willing to provide you with weapons and armor from the royal armory, and you have my leave to train with the soldiers of the royal army."

"While we are very much appreciative of the gesture, Your Grace, we cannot accept," Luceon stated, "I swore my life to the Seven, as did my brothers and sisters of the cloth. To use the weapons, armor, and training of the crown would be a violation of our scared vows."

"Even if your purpose was to save the realm?" Lord Jon Arryn presumed. And, by extension, every believer in the Seven?

Septon Luceon nodded his head and proclaimed "I am afraid no exceptions are permitted, Lord Hand. The Seven forbid us from following the king's generals into battle. We can only fight alongside them. That is why we seek to revive the Faith Militant. Everything which pertains to combat, including discipline and leadership, must come from within our own ranks."
Robert had never been much of a religious man. Neither had his brothers, for that matter. Stannis had all but renounced his own faith when the vessel carrying Father and Mother sank in Shipbreaker Bay, and Renly's personal interests were somewhat frowned upon by the Faith.

All the same, the king could not deny that the septon presented a compelling argument. People always fight better when under the direction of those they know personally as well as professionally. That is why if a threat to the realm ever came about, I'd place my trust in the Stormlords before anyone else, including the Crownlords.

Nevertheless, he reminded himself why the Faith Militant had been disbanded. In the end, they were almost as great a danger to the people of the Seven Kingdoms as the Mad King had been. Then again, it was the Targaryen's incestuous practices that had incited their uprising. Robert would never engage in such a shameful activity, so the Faith would never turn on him for that reason.

Still, it was not without cause that religion and politics were kept separate. The one was not armed; the other was. Arm them both, and trouble could arise. Especially if they ever came into conflict with each other. Although the Seven and the Iron Throne currently had no quarrel with one another, anything was possible in these changing times. Should any such feud arise, my subjects would have to decide whether piety or fealty is more important to them.

Robert decided he would rather not risk forcing that decision upon the people of the Seven Kingdoms. He was about to announce his refusal of the septon's plea. Then Cersei leaned over and whispered to him "Before you speak, I beseech you to consider the advantages of this arrangement, my love. If we accept Septon Luceon's petition, we would be in the Faith's good graces. They will not forget that so easily. So long as we continue to pay homage to the Great Sept, we could also look to the Faith Militant to reinforce order in this city."

Oftentimes, Cersei's counsel was as valuable as Lord Jon's. That was why he usually had her attend court with him. Her analytical mind was a tremendous asset to him in many complex situations, such as this one. In this instance, she had succeeded in convincing him to rethink his decision. We cannot rely too heavily on the gold cloaks to keep the peace. That aside, people are more apt to give religious men their cooperation.

Ultimately, Robert gazed at the priest before him and announced "I will consider your plea, good septon. Before I elect to grant it, I would have an audience with the Most Devout."

"I understand entirely, Your Grace," Septon Luceon remarked, "His Holiness anticipated as much."

Then at least he knows not to expect too much of the crown.

"Tell the High Septon he can expect a summons sometime in the next fortnight," Robert told the priest, "Until then, he would do best to make himself available at all hours of the day."

"As you command, Your Grace," Luceon avowed. He bowed again and swiftly departed from the throne room.

Once the septon was gone, Robert rose from his throne and declared "Court is now adjourned until this afternoon. Whichever petitioner is next in the queue will be seen first then."

He heard a few grumbles in the back of the assembly, but no one was impertinent or imprudent enough to protest the King's announcement. Many of the gathered lords and ladies had other matters to attend to, anyway. Apart from that, it would be time for luncheon soon.
Before the midday meal, however, Robert wanted to get in some exercise.

As the gathered nobles exited the throne room through the main entrance, Robert, Cersei, Lord Jon, and the Kingsguard left through the private side doors. Once they were away from the masses, Robert said to his queen "Cersei, where are your cousins? I have need of them."

"Probably off galivanting with their peers, Your Grace," the Queen replied. *I was not aware those two had any peers apart from each other.* "If not, they are likely in the training yard."

"What reason would they have to be there?" Jon Arryn muttered in perplexity.

"The same reason as any man," Cersei contended, "They want to improve their combat prowess."

"Hopefully, they are there," said Robert. *Not because I expect them to become better swordsmen. For them, that endeavor is practically a lost cause.* "I plan to stop by the yard myself, and if they're there, it would save me the trouble of seeking them out."

"Then shall we head there, Your Grace?" Jon Arryn supposed.

"Well, your presence is not required there, Lord Jon," Robert stated, "Neither is yours, Cersei. Of course, you are both welcome to accompany me, should you wish to."

As it happened, they both wished to. Lately, specifically since the conference at Harrenhal, Jon and Cersei had been spending more time with Robert than they had before. They could either have been out of concern or out of genuine affection. Robert did not think to ask. Their presence was always welcome.

The King, the Queen, the Hand, and the four Kingsguard quickly made their way through Maegor's Holdfast. Soon enough, they reached the training yard. They found it rather crowded when they got there.

Lord Willas Tyrell was sparring with Ser Oswell Whent, the sworn shield of his intended, Princess Rhaenys Targaryen. Princess Rhaenys herself was observing the duel from the sidelines with her guardian, Lady Ashara Dayne. It was hard to say who the victor would be. Both men were adept with a blade. *Whoever wins will be the one who truly is the most qualified to protect Rhaenys.*

Nearby, Willas' cousins, Ser Horas Redwyne and his twin brother Ser Hobber, were sparring with Rickard Clegane. The Redwyne twins had been hostages of the crown longer than the heir to Moat Cailin had been alive. Even so, he proved to be more than a match against the two men of the Arbor. *He must have a superb master-at-arms.*

As Cersei suspected, her cousins Lancel and Tyrek were present, as well. The two of them were up against Crown Prince Jasper Baratheon. One single glance, and Robert could tell his son would be the winner of this duel. *That bout was over before it began.*

The Stark girls were drilling, as well. Arya was armed with that small, thin sword she always carried it around. *Needle, she had named it.* She was practicing on a wooden dummy. Sansa was at Arya's side. She seemed to be studying her sister's movements and form. Sansa was still very new to swordplay, but she was willing to learn. *Ned feared they would be at each other's throats for their entire stay. I imagine he will be thrilled when I inform him that they have begun to get along.*

The direwolves were there, too. They were not ten feet from their mistresses. Even they were fighting, albeit their style was more playful than tactical. They were simply tackling each other and tugging at each other's fur. Both Lady and Nymeria were careful not to inflict any harmful damage
onto her sister.

There were several other duels going on. Three of them involved Rafford, Eggon, and Shitmouth. They were up against Ethan Glover, Theo Wull, and Ser Mark Ryswell. While those bouts and a few others were somewhat exciting, the three in the center of the yard were the ones that Robert paid especial attention to.

Willas ultimately beat Ser Oswell, but just barely. Rickard fared even better; he soon defeated Hobber first and Horas not long after. As for Jasper… by the time the Crown Prince was done with his second cousins, they could not stop shouting "Yield!"

Robert smirked. It was difficult to fathom that those two were Tywin Lannister's nephews. *They are lucky they are only his nephews. They would never have lasted this long if they were his own sons.*

Still, Robert pitied Ser Kevan; it must have shamed him to have a spineless craven as his eldest son. In that regard, Ser Tygett was perhaps the more fortunate of the two. He may have been long dead, but he had not lived to see what a poor specimen of a son he had sired.

Once those three duels ended, Robert Baratheon stepped into the training yard. Every person promptly stopped what he or she was doing and turned to him. Robert would have beckoned them not to stop sparring on his account, but that would not have made any difference. Bowing in the presence of the king was something most of them, if not all, did involuntarily.

Robert gradually approached the center of the yard. He stopped in front of Willas Tyrell, Rickard Clegane, and Jasper Baratheon. As the three young men tilted their heads to him, he told them approvingly "I'd be the first to congratulate you three on your victories."

"You have my thanks, Your Grace," Rickard declared.

"Mine, as well," Willas commented.

"Child's play, Father," Jasper insisted. *In your case, I agree.* Lancel and Tyrek were several years Jasper's elder, but they may as well have been Tommen's age.

As the Lannister cousins struggled back to their feet, Robert sharply stated "You two, get off your lazy arses and fetch my arms and armor. I mean to join the dueling ring."

Cersei's cousins hastened to carry out his demands. As they went to retrieve his equipment from the arsenal, Willas Tyrell inquired "Anyone in particular you wish to fight, Your Grace?"

"Oh, yes," Robert answered the Reachman. He did not say anything more. He simply gazed back and forth between Willas, Rickard, and Jasper.

The three younger men quickly caught on, and they seemed surprised.

"You lot are in peak condition today," Robert debated, "Besides, I am curious to see more of what they teach you in the North."

"We'd be honored to indulge you, Your Grace," Rickard claimed. Willas nodded in agreement, and Jasper grinned wickedly. He looked as though he was plotting something. *Of course, he'd jump at the chance to attack his father. Then again, who wouldn't?*

Lancel and Tyrek returned a couple minutes later. *Not as quickly as I would have liked, but at least they actually came back this time.* As inept as those two were as swordsmen, they functioned much
more adequately as squires.

They proceeded to put Robert's honor on over his doublet and trousers. His squires dressed him in his breastplate, his greaves, his gauntlets, and his helm. This was the very same set of armor he wore during both his rebellion and Greyjoy's. Although he had put on a little weight since seizing the throne, it still fit him quite well.

Once Robert was fully armored, Lancel gave him his warhammer. Like his armor, this weapon was kept in pristine condition. It had taken the lives of many, including Rhaegar Targaryen himself. Robert had hardly ever fought with anything else since then. To ensure that he never lost his style, he made certain to pick it up and train with it at least once every month. This would be twice in the last turn of the moon.

Robert gripped his hammer tightly in both his hands, and he turned to face his three young opponents. All of them had already assumed a different offensive or defensive stance. By their form and posture, each one of them clearly knew how to handle his sword. Robert was greatly looking forward to see how they actually fought with those blades. Swords may be the weapon of choice for most. But in the right hands, a hammer gets the job done just as well.

"Alright, lads," Robert pronounced, raising his hammer into the air and keeping his eyes on his youthful adversaries, "You may attack when ready."

The three did not move at first. Willas was in the middle of the three. He gestured for Jasper to fan out to the right and Rickard to fan out to the left. They did so slowly and cautiously.

They intend to surround me. Clever.

When Rickard and Jasper were on the very edges of Robert's field of vision, Willas made his move. He rushed forward with his sword raise and delivered a blow from above. Robert quickly blocked it with the body of his warhammer. As he parried, he raised his foot and dealt a solid kick to Willas' midsection. Willas stumbled backward, but he did not fall.

As Willas recovered, Jasper and Rickard advanced simultaneously. Timing their approaches carefully, Robert countered Jasper's attack first and Rickard's a split-second later. That was when Willas reentered the fray. Robert dodged his next blow just in time.

Over the next several minutes, Robert was locked in combat with the heirs to Highgarden, Moat Cailin, and the Iron Throne. They had the attention of every other person in the vicinity. No one else there dared to avert their eyes from the king and his rivals.

Jasper was the first to fall. His father lured him into a false sense of security. When Jasper thought he finally gained the upper hand, his father swung his hammer below his legs. Jasper tripped and fell flat on his face.

As the Crown Prince retreated, Willas and Rickard doubled their efforts. Loath as Robert was to admit it, both of them were better swordsmen than his son. Still, he was not about to be bested by green boys.

Again, Willas and Rickard tried to overwhelm the King by attacking him through opposite sides. That technique might have worked, had they coordinated their advances more effectively. The king parried their blows on both ends and pushed back Rickard. While the Clegane boy rebounded, Robert moved in on Willas. He waved his hammer at him four times. The Reachman countered the first three blows, but the fourth one got him full in the abdomen and knocked the wind out of him.
Now it was down to just Robert and Rickard. Despite being the youngest of the three, Rickard seemed to be the deftest swordsman. Other than the king, he was also the tallest person in the training yard. Both of those characteristics were clear indications of his Clegane and Mormont heritage.

Be that as it may, even the eldest son of Gregor Clegane was no match for the man who had gained the Iron Throne through right of conquest. After three solid minutes of exchanging blows, Robert finally brought the duel to an end.

He kept attacking with the head of his hammer. When Rickard's attention was focused solely on where the head went, Robert launched a blow with the butt of the hammer's handle. With it, he struck Rickard full on the side of his face.

In response, Rickard groaned and held his head with his free hand. Somehow, he managed to avoid dropping his sword. He did not appear to be bleeding, but there had to be a bruise where the butt of the hammer's handle hit him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Robert spotted Arya Stark trying to rush into the dueling ring. Sansa Stark held her sister back and whispered something in her ear to pacify her.

Arya was not the only one there who was worried for Rickard's well-being. Lord Willas, Princess Rhaenys, Lady Ashara, and everyone else who had sailed to King's Landing with Rickard seemed equally perturbed. Lord Jon Arryn looked borderline mortified. Even Cersei appeared slightly astonished.

Jasper went to his best friend's side and placed a hand on his shoulder. He beckoned him "Let me see it."

As Rickard moved his hand away, Robert saw a large purple spot on the side of his face. He had left a mark. It would only be a temporary mark, but had Robert used the head instead of the butt, it could have been far worse. I could have given him his first battle scar. Worse yet, I could have made an enemy of the Mountain That Rides.

Robert tentatively walked over to the two boys. He asked the taller of them "Are you alright, Rickard?"

"I… I believe so, Your Grace," the heir to Moat Cailin quietly responded. He sounds like he is in a lot of pain. Indeed, the wound looked quite painful, too. Concerned, Robert stepped a little closer. That was when Rickard's frown abruptly changed to a smirk and he told Jasper "Now!"

The two of them speedily bent over, and they each grabbed the king by one of his legs. They pulled his feet out from under him and flipped him backwards. Before Robert knew what was happening, he released his hammer and landed on his arse.

As the king lay on the ground, Jasper and Rickard burst into laughter. So did almost every other person in the training yard. So did almost every other person in the training yard. Before too long, Robert joined them. Although they were chuckling at his expense, every man needed to laugh at himself every now and then. That aside, it was a somewhat amusing stunt. These boys are more cunning than I gave them credit for.

When everyone stopped guffawing, Jasper and Rickard moved to Robert's sides, reached down, and took ahold of his arms. As they pulled him back to his feet, Jasper cockily muttered "We yield to you, Father."

Robert scoffed at that and cheekily remarked "I accept your surrender."
When Robert was standing up again, Willas picked up his hammer and returned it to him. Once it was back in his hands, Robert told them "Very good match, lads. You do your family names proud."

"Naturally," said Jasper with a smile.

"My brother Garlan is the true swordsman of my house, Your Grace," Willas proclaimed, "He would have given you a better fight than I."

"Oh, you did fine enough," Robert pronounced.

"Did I?" Rickard said inquisitively.

"Absolutely," Robert declared, "You are indeed your father's son."

That was meant as a compliment, as Gregor Clegane was the only man to ever best Robert Baratheon in combat. Twice.

By now, everyone else in the training yard had gone back to doing what they were doing before the king entered the yard. All of a sudden, my presence has become less interesting to them. Not that he had any issue with that. There were times when even he grew tired of being the center of attention.

King Robert removed his helm, wiped his brow, and murmured "Well, I think that is enough of a workout for now."

"Then we're of like minds, Your Grace," Rickard conceded, "The rest of us have already been at this for over an hour."

"In fact, just before you got here, we were talking about taking a break," Willas disclosed.

"Anyway, it's nearly time for lunch, I believe," Jasper thought aloud.

Or luncheon, depending on how elegant you're feeling.

"So, it is," Robert remarked, "However, I was hoping to have words with the three of you sometime today. Along with Princess Rhaenys and Lady Ashara. Since all five of you are currently accounted for, I propose that we do so now."

"Is this a request or an order, Father?" Jasper inquired.

"Which would you prefer?" Robert uttered sardonically.

Willas interceded and declared "We'll converse with you now, Your Grace."

Jasper and Rickard made no objections. They are wise as well as cunning. They know I do not like to be kept waiting overlong.

They did not leave the training yard straightaway. They all had some small business to see to first. Willas went to get his betrothed and her guardian. Rickard went over to the Starks sisters. Only the Crown Prince stayed with King Robert.

Robert summoned Lancel and Tyrek back over to him. He gave his hammer to Jasper so that the two squires could attend to him. They speedily stripped the king of his armor. Soon enough, he was down to his doublet and trousers again.

At the same time, Jasper looked over his father's hammer. He seemed quaintly curious. He stated
"Father, your warhammer looks… different, somehow. Is this a new one?"

"No, it's the same hammer as always," Robert informed his son, "It's just been altered. You see the spikes?"

At that, Jasper took another look at the head of the hammer. He saw that there was one spike on each side of it, excluding the one attached to the handle. Those had not been there the last time he held the hammer.

"You know that Valyrian steel dagger Lord Gregor Clegane gifted to me shortly after Greyjoy's Rebellion?" Robert asked rhetorically.

Jasper nodded, and his father illuminated "Well, I got the idea to melt the dagger down and forge it into spikes for my warhammer. Tobho Mott proved capable of the task. You see, they are sharp and large enough to pierce through the skin of any living thing. Or any dead thing."

"So, whenever the Others come, this hammer will have the same effect on them as obsidian and fire," Jasper proposed.

"Precisely," Robert affirmed. Even the undead will have reason to fear my hammer now.

"This is actually a brilliant idea, Father," Jasper remarked, as though he might have thought otherwise, "Incidentally, if the Watch's reports are accurate, the wights do not even have skin."

All the better.

Right then, Lancel and Tyrek finished removing King Robert's armor. Jasper turned the warhammer over to his cousins, and they rushed to carry it back to the arsenal.

Willas Tyrell returned a few seconds later with Rhaenys Targaryen and Ashara Dayne. Not long after, Rickard rejoined them. Arya Stark and Sansa Stark came over with him, but they did not stop when he did. They and their direwolves continued all the way to the other side of the training yard to where Cersei was standing.

Robert watched as his wife interacted with the Stark sisters. He could not hear what they were saying, but Robert was certain the queen was inviting them to luncheon. Sansa seemed delighted by the prospect. Arya, not so much. Still, Sansa had agreed to spend some time with her in the yard. As such, Arya had to fulfill her part of the bargain to share in each other's interests.

As the girls left with the queen, Robert noticed Arya flashed him a bit of a nasty look. He suspected that was due to what had transpired between himself and Rickard. He had only given the Clegane boy a bruise, but Arya was very protective of her friends. And her family.

Could it be she cares for him? Of course, Arya must have cared for Rickard as a friend. All the same, it was possible that she would come to care for him as more than that. She may behave like a boy, but she is still a girl.

At any rate, everyone Robert wished to speak with was present. However, he would have preferred not to converse with them in the training yard, where they were out in the open and anyone could hear them. A change in setting would be ideal.

"Let us go to my solar," Robert proposed, "We can talk without fear of being overheard there."

"Very well, Your Grace," Ashara Dayne conceded. The others conceded.
Robert had come to the training yard with four of the Kingsguard. He left with four, as well, but not the same four. Ser Arys Oakheart had departed with Queen Cersei and the Stark girls. Ser Preston Greenfield had already been there to protect Jasper, and since the prince was leaving with his father, he would be joining up with Ser Meryn Trant, Ser Mandon Moore, and Ser Barristan Selmy. Of course, Ser Oswell Whent was coming along, too, but he was not of Robert's Kingsguard.

Unlike Cersei, Jon Arryn had lingered for Robert. The Hand joined up with the king when he and everyone else in his company exited the training yard. I never even have to ask him; he always knows when he is needed. It was then that King Robert turned to the most senior of his Kingsguard and said "Ser Barristan, would you be so kind as to locate the Grand Maester and escort him to my solar?"

"It will be done, Your Grace," the Lord Commander asserted. He bowed his head and separated from the king's group.

Robert could have sent Ser Mandon, Ser Meryn, or Ser Preston to retrieve Grand Maester Marwyn, but he trusted Ser Barristan the most. Plus, he thought it best not to have Ser Barristan and Ser Oswell in the same place for too long. Ser Oswell may have forgiven his old brother for bending the knee at the Trident, but it was likely Ser Barristan had yet to forgive himself. I can only imagine how ashamed he must feel to see his old brother doing what he swore to do. Some inexplicable feeling of compassion impelled Robert to spare Barristan Selmy that guilt.

About ten minutes later, Robert Baratheon and his party arrived at his solar. The Kingsguard were ordered to remain outside. Everyone else was permitted entrance to the chamber.

Robert sat down at his desk. Lord Jon settled down in his usual place to the king's right. Rhaenys, Jasper, and Rickard sat down in chairs on the other side of the desk. Willas and Lady Ashara were content to remain standing.

After passing a few seconds in quietness, Jasper queried "Are we waiting for something, Father?"

"Yes, the Grand Maester," King Robert responded, "There is a certain issue that I mean to address to all of you. However, I'll need him present when I do. That is the primary purpose of this meeting, in fact."

"Is there anything else we can discuss before Ser Barristan brings him?" WillasTyrell suggested.

Robert thought on that, and he stated "Perhaps there is. I have a certain subject in mind. While not wholly a matter of precedence, I have always found it to be a fairly interesting one, just the same."

"What might that be?" Rhaenys said inquisitively.

Robert leaned back in his chair, put on a devious grin, and casually asked "How is everyone's romantic life?"

Lord Jon was appalled. He was the only one, though. Rickard and Jasper were stunned, and Willas, Rhaenys, and Lady Ashara looked as though they would laugh.

"Well?" Robert said, as though beckoning someone to speak. When all he got was silence, he remarked "If no one wants to go first, I would not mind being the one to open up the discussion."

"No, thank you, Father," Jasper muttered drily, "I would rather you not go into detail about how you and Mother spend your nights together."
"I wasn't planning to," Robert stated candidly, "I never said any of you had to describe what you've been doing. I am more curious as to know who you're doing it with."

"If it is all the same to you, Your Grace, I would rather not supply any input on this topic," Lord Jon pronounced.

"Very well, Jon," Robert murmured in acknowledgment. Besides, I know you've only had one woman in the last two decades. While you have three children by her, I would wager my hammer that you have not slept with her many more times than that. "Anyone else wish to withdraw?"

No one said anything. At that, Robert smiled again and remarked "Alright then. Who would like to go first?"

"Since I have the most experience, I suppose I will," Lady Ashara declared. Count on the Dornishwoman to speak up before anyone else. "As it happens, I have spent an evening with a man lately. Several evenings, actually. I've had some at Greywater Watch, Moat Cailin, Harrenhal, and even here in King's Landing. It's a different man every time. I even remember the names of some of them."

The good ones, probably.

Willas said inquisitively "Any women?"

Robert paid close attention then. He really wanted to know the answer to that question. By their expressions, so did Rickard and Jasper.

"It has been a long time since I shared a woman's bed," Ashara Dayne admitted, "But it is not something I am opposed to. But regardless of gender, I do not see myself getting into a serious relationship with any one person. The last individual I genuinely cared for was the late Brandon Stark."

"What about Ser Barristan?" Rhaenys countered, "Mother claimed you and he bonded during the tourney at Harrenhal.

"We did," Ashara confirmed.

The same way you and Brandon bonded?

"But not the same way Brandon and I bonded," Lady Ashara revealed. The king's eyes widened. It was as though she had honestly read his mind. "Even so, Ser Barristan was as chivalrous as can be. I became quite fond of him. In fact, had he won the final tilt against Rhaegar, he would have crowned me his Queen of Love and Beauty."

"Alas, he lost," Jasper commented.

"Yes, he did," Ashara conceded, "However, it would not surprise me if he threw the match just so his prince could win."

If he hadn't done that, I might not have ended up killing his prince on the Trident.

"I'll go next," Rhaenys offered. At that, Willas smirked, stepped up behind her, and placed his hands on her shoulders. I would have thought he'd be opposed to hearing of his intended's exploits in the bedchamber. Another thought occurred to him. Unless...

As it happened, "unless" was indeed the case. Rhaenys disclosed "The day we came to King's
Landing, Willas had me in his quarters for dinner. I ended up staying for breakfast, as well. If you know what I mean."

Lady Ashara looked astounded. "Are you saying…?"

Rhaenys just grinned and nodded her head. Willas then proudly proclaimed "When Rhaenys and I are finally wed, you do not have to worry about our union being consummated. We've already accomplished that part."

"Fairly well, I might add," Rhaenys slyly amended.

For a moment, Ashara appeared to be aghast. Then she eased down and rolled her eyes, as if she suddenly decided the situation was more humorous than outrageous. Still, Robert could imagine she was not looking forward to telling Rhaenys' mother. Especially since Princess Elia is said to be her best friend.

Robert turned to his son and inquired "How about you, Jasper?"

The Crown Prince did not reply right away. He seemed hesitant to say anything at all. Eventually, though, he bluntly said "I don't really have anything to contribute, Father. I mean, I haven't."

"I know you haven't," King Robert interjected, "But if our line is to continue, you'll have to someday. I am more curious to know if you have managed to single out any one girl for that honor."

"Not just yet," Jasper confessed, "However, I have come to develop feelings for one of the Stark sisters."

Rickard tensed up a little. Remembering what had transpired in the training yard earlier, Robert did, as well. This might turn ugly. Even so, he had to know. This issue concerned his son's future, after all. He enquired "Which one?"

"Sansa," Jasper replied. At that, Rickard and Robert were relieved. He more than I, most definitely. "You'd be interested to know that Mother speaks fondly of her. When was the last time Mother spoke fondly of any girl who wanted me to court her?"

"There was no last time," Robert recounted. No first time, either. "I am pleased your mother approves of her. Nevertheless, what matters to me is what you think of Sansa."

"Oh, she is a wonderful girl," Jasper professed, "She is beautiful, courteous, sweet, and every bit a proper lady. While it may be too soon to say for certain, I feel she would make an excellent queen. I doubt she would be averse to the prospect, given how often she makes time for me. Only…"

There he paused for a moment. Robert bade him to continue with "Only what?"

"Well, perhaps it is only Prince Jasper Baratheon she likes," the Crown Prince contended, "Suppose I was Ser Jasper, Lord Jasper, or just Jasper instead. Maybe she would not be so keen to associate with me then."

"You believe she only cares about being queen?" Rhaenys presumed.

"I'd like to think not," Jasper disclosed, "She does not seem that shallow. But it is a possibility."

"As it happens, that was all your mother was interested in," Robert recalled, "Up until our wedding night, that is. After that, she and I came to love each other. That did not take long. I can assure you
that **you** were not conceived solely out of duty."

"Lovely," Jasper muttered sarcastically.

To Robert's astonishment, Jon Arryn chose to add his voice to the conversation. He told Jasper "Love does not always come before marriage, dear prince. Often it comes after. That was how it was in the case of your father, in the case of Lord Eddard Stark, and in the case of myself. Sometimes, love does not come at all. In your case, I am confident it will."

"I wish I shared your confidence, Lord Hand," Jasper mumbled bitterly.

"You mustn't question your ability, Your Grace," Lord Jon advised him, "I know the Starks. Many people see them as cold and grim. They may very well be, but that does not mean they are shallow or devoid of empathy. They are not; none of them. They are as capable of love as the rest of us."

That seemed to set Jasper's mind at ease. He smiled and observed "Then I guess there's hope for me."

"And for Rickard," Robert wryly added in.

That statement succeeded in bewildering every person in the solar, especially the youngest one among them. The heir to Moat Cailin stated inquiringly "How do you mean, Your Grace?"

"I have seen the way you and Lady Arya interact," King Robert expounded, "You've taken a fancy to her, haven't you?"

"What led you to believe that?" Rickard enquired, as though he was flabbergasted. He did not try to deny the accusation. That alone was enough to confirm Robert's suspicions.

"Trust me, my boy; I know," Robert pronounced, "You would not be the first to have taken a fancy to a daughter of House Stark. The very same thing happened to me in my youth."

"I don't **fancy** her," Rickard insisted, unconvincingly, "I enjoy spending time with her plenty. She is a great friend and a superb sparring partner. But that does not mean I am smitten with her."

"I never said you were," Robert pointed out. Rickard flushed at that.

"For now," Robert contended, "But soon enough, she'll be a woman, and you'll be a man. There is no escaping the future and its responsibilities."

"Arya won't like that," Rickard glumly thought aloud, "She has no desire to be a lady. On several occasions, she told me that herself. Marriage and children do not appeal to her in the slightest. She would much sooner become a lieutenant in the Legion without Banners than someone's wife or someone else's mother."

"If so, you could make that work to your advantage," Robert debated.

"How so?" said Rickard, intrigued.
"Your lady mother became a Legionnaire at a very early age," the king pronounced, "I suppose that was what ultimately led to her marriage to your father."

"That's correct," Rickard affirmed.

"After Dacey Mormont married Gregor Clegane and bore him you and your younger siblings, she continued serving as one of the Legion's top officers," Robert Baratheon professed, "I know how your father treats her as an equal in everything. Even now, she is leading an expedition across the Narrow Sea. I could have given command of that assignment to any man from the Legion or the Royal Army. But I chose Lady Dacey because I believe she is as competent as any man."

"I am very grateful that you think so highly of my mother, Your Grace," the heir to Moat Cailin stated appreciatively.

"Tell me; what does Arya Stark think of her?" Robert inquired.

"Oh, she idolizes her," Rickard proclaimed, chuckling a bit.

"I'm not surprised," the king muttered, "Suppose you told Arya she could be like Lady Dacey. Would she be so opposed to having a family then?"

"At the very least, she would be less opposed," Rickard conjectured, "I certainly wouldn't object to having her fight alongside me. In fact, that is what attracted me to her in the first place."

"You should tell her that," Robert advised the Clegane boy, "Not now, though. As you said, you and she are too young to be talking about commitment. Be that as it may, you mustn't wait too long. Your parents and hers may try to arrange some other marriages contracts in the next few years."

"May I ask when you think it would be a good time to speak to her?" Rickard Clegane asked hopefully.

"No, that is for you to decide," King Robert Baratheon stated, "However, I would recommend you approach her sometime before the Long Night. At least then, she would have something more to fight for and something to look forward to once the Others are vanquished."

"That is true," Rickard contended. He sat thinking on this subject for a minute, and then he pronounced "I thank you for your counsel, Your Grace. I intend to make good use of it."

Robert did not say anything. He just grinned and nodded. I wish you luck, lad. If Arya is anything like her late aunt, you may need it. Then again, Rickard's chances were already looking a lot more promising than the king's. After all, the heir to Moat Cailin would be able to offer Arya something Robert had denied his former betrothed. Two things, really: fair and equal treatment, and the right to march into battle with him.

Furthermore, this coupling would bring several political advantages, as well. A marriage between House Stark and the northern branch of House Clegane would be beneficial for both houses. In a way, it would be beneficial for the rest of the Seven Kingdoms, too. One of those houses controls the North and holds the Wall; the other house ensures the stability of the realm. Together, they could achieve even more than ever before. Surely Ned and Cat – as well as Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey – had thought of that, too.

Robert felt strangely pleased with himself at this time. What had started out as idle gossip about intimacy had resulted in him giving sage advice and reassurance to the heir of one of the most
influential houses in all of Westeros. *Good counsel really does come from the most unexpected of places.*

Robert only wished he could always be so sagacious. This was one of the few times in his reign where he had not relied on Cersei or Jon to guide or assist him. While it was true that a good king needed good advisors around him, Robert felt he should not have to *rely* on those advisors. *Ned would deny it, but he would have been much better at this than I. Oh, well. No use lamenting on what's in the past.*

Not long after this conversation reached its conclusion, there was a heavy knock on the entrance of the solar. Everyone turned towards it, and Robert called out "Enter!"

Ser Barristan Selmy opened the door, and then he stepped aside to admit Grand Maester Marwyn. Once the Grand Maester was inside, Ser Barristan closed the door behind him.

"My sincerest apologies if I have kept you waiting, Your Grace," Marwyn told the king.

"No worries, maester," Robert Baratheon asserted. He gestured to an empty chair to the left of his desk and bade him "Have a seat."

Grand Maester Marwyn calmly walked over to the chair, his lengthy maester's chain clinking softly with every step. He sat down in the chair and folded his arms in a rather solemn manner. *Everything he does, everything about him is solemn.*

Marwyn the Mage was one of the most respected and accomplished members of the Citadel. After the untimely death of his successor, Pycelle, the Conclave had elected him to serve on the small council. The first vote had been nearly unanimous in his favor; the second, entirely unanimous. In the time since then, he had performed the job commendably and superbly.

Marwyn was considerably younger than Pycelle had been, and based on what Robert heard from those who had known the latter, the former was much more agreeable, trustworthy, and far better-organized. He had been all throughout the realm, and even across the Narrow Sea at least once. *In these troubled times, men like him are invaluable to us.*

As Marwyn got settled in his chair, Robert turned to face the other people in the solar. He gazed around at them and perceived "Some or all of you must be wondering just why I asked you here."

"Well, I assume it was not just to talk about our sex lives," Lady Ashara muttered wittily.

"If it was, you wouldn't have invited the maester," Jasper japed.

Rickard, Willas, and Rhaenys snickered at that. Lord Jon sighed, and Robert rolled his eyes. He *does have a point, though. Even though maesters are required to forfeit the right to fuck, no one can actually prevent them from having that kind of fun. All the same, I know Marwyn to be a man who takes all his oaths, including the one of celibacy, seriously.*

"Anyway…” Robert blankly went on when the laughter subsided, "I have some news to share with the lot of you."

"What news, Your Grace?" Willas enquired.

King Robert did not answer. Instead, he turned to Marwyn and ordered him "Show them."

The Grand Maester nodded, reached into his robes, and pulled out two letters. Both of them had already been opened. One of them had been sealed with orange wax bearing the sun and spear of
House Nymeros Martell. The other had been sealed with purple wax bearing the lone mountain of House Clegane of Moat Cailin.

The Grand Maester gave the former to Rhaenys and the latter to Rickard. As they took the missives and began to read them, Marwyn disclosed "The first one was sent from Volantis by your mother, Princess Rhaenys. The second one was sent from Pentos by yours, Lord Rickard. Both arrived just this morning, likely when you were breaking your fast."

"What are they?" Jasper said inquiringly.

"Essentially, progress reports," Robert Baratheon enlightened his son, "Princess Elia has acquired a lead on the whereabouts of the Golden Company. She has also confirmed that the false Aegon Lord Gregor spoke of is real, and he and Lord Jon Connington are travelling with the Company. Elia Martell has enlisted a trio of Volantene nobles to assist her and her party with finding the Golden Company.

"Meanwhile, Lady Dacey has established contact with Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen," the king continued, "The dragon eggs are now in our possession. Well, Daenerys' possession, to be precise, but she and her brother are now in our custody, so it makes little matter. Furthermore, for reasons unknown, Daenerys decided to go ahead with her marriage to Khal Drogo."

"That is great news!" Ashara Dayne exclaimed giddily, "Now we have forged alliances with the Triarchs of Volantis and the Dothraki."

"That may seem advantageous," Jon Arryn disputed, "Alas, both scenarios come with a downside."

"Quite so," Robert Baratheon concurred, "The Golden Company is very determined to evade public notice, and Khal Drogo must take his new bride to Vaes Dothrak to formally present her as his khaleesi."

"As such, it could be several weeks – maybe months – before Princess Elia and Lady Dacey come any closer to accomplishing their objectives," Grand Maester Marwyn professed, "And, because they and their companies will roaming all throughout the wildlands of Essos, we may not receive another progress report from either of them until they have succeeded."

Princess Rhaenys gave a deep frown, and Rickard gazed at his letter sadly. The others tried to comfort them. Willas caressed his intended's shoulders, and Jasper patted his best friend on the back gently. Lady Ashara tried to say something to reassure them both, but she could not think of anything to say.

Robert Baratheon did not have the same problem. He declared "I know how you must feel. When I was young, my father and my mother sailed across the Narrow Sea. The Mad King sent them there on an errand. Just before they left, they promised me and my brothers that they would return soon. They failed Aerys and us. They were unable to find a suitable bride for Rhaegar, and their ship went down within sight of Storm's End."

Rhaenys, Jasper, and Rickard appeared shocked to hear this story. Robert expected them to be; they had been born after it took place. Willas and Ashara had been alive at the time, but they seemed no less astounded. For some, I suppose hearing this story over and over doesn't make it any easier to hear. It certainly doesn't become any easier for me to tell.

Robert Baratheon let out a strained sigh and mumbled "In spite of that tragedy, I must urge you not to despair. Dacey Mormont and Elia Martell are strong and resilient. Not just by the standards of women; by the standards of men, too. Of course, I cannot claim to know either of them very well,
"I can relate," Rickard Clegane conceded, "I have been likewise worried for my mother and my brothers Alyver and Torrhen ever since they sailed for Pentos. And my uncle, aunt, and youngest cousin, for that matter. Hells, I'm worried for my entire family. After the attempt to destroy the printing press at Moat Cailin, I cannot stop imagining what misfortunes could befall my father, my sister Vallory, and my brother Larys. Despite that, my cousin and grandmother are now travelling to the moat, even after the attack on my uncle at Clegane's Keep. It seems that no matter where my family goes, there is no way to guarantee their safety."

Robert Baratheon was not one to get sentimental, even when sharing tender moments with his wife. Nevertheless, at that moment, he felt for Rhaenys Targaryen and Rickard Clegane. Both of them feel lost. They are stuck in a hostile city, separated from their entire families with no way of seeing or protecting their loved ones. And I did that.

Still, he would not get emotional. When it came to his kingly duties, he kept emotion strictly out of the equation. That was one tactic that served him equally well in both the rebellion and the years of ruling that came after. *Never shed a tear in front of your subjects. Only behind closed doors.* Of course, even when in private, Robert Baratheon rarely shed tears. His last tear had been for Lyanna Stark, when he first learned of her death. Even so, like every other hardship in his life, he had overcome the loss of his former betrothed and found comfort in the arms of his wife.

At any rate, Robert folded his arms and announced "If you wish for some peace of mind, there is something you can do to help your mothers. In fact, it could help everyone in both your families."

That got Rhaenys and Rickard's full attention. Incidentally, it also got that of Jasper, Willas, and Ashara.

Once he verified that everyone there was listening to him, Robert stated "It's time I told you the real reason you are here."

"We have been wondering that since we got here, Your Grace," Willas stated frankly.

"I meant 'here' as in King's Landing," Robert elaborated.

"'Real reason?'" Jasper repeated in perplexity "That should be obvious. They're here to serve as wards of the crown."

"That is only partly why they're here," King Robert pronounced, "Rhaenys and Rickard are mainly here to ensure that their families continue to show fealty to the crown. However, they can accomplish this by more than simply being hostages of the throne."

"How else might we do so, Your Grace?" Rickard inquired.

"By demonstrating your ability to cooperate with the crown, as well," Robert disclosed. He leaned forward and declared "I have a task for you. If you think yourselves up to it, that is."

"First tell us what it is, if you please," Rhaenys requested as politely as possible.
King Robert turned to Marwyn and beckoned him to take over from here. The Grand Maester moved his chair a little closer, and then he professed "This morning, shortly after the ravens carrying those letters arrived, a third raven was spotted by one of my acolytes. However, this raven did not come to the rookery above my apartments. Instead, it flew to one of the lower levels of the Red Keep, where it disappeared into an opening in the wall facing the sea."

"Could the raven have been injured?" Jasper supposed.

"Or disoriented?" Willas theorized.

"If this had been a one-time occurrence, either might have been possible," Grand Maester Marwyn contended, "However, that raven was not the first to inexplicably vanish. For the last several months, as far back as when the Night's Watch confirmed the return of the Others, a number of ravens have been seen mysteriously flying in or out of the lower levels of the Red Keep. They always come in from or head off to the east, meaning their origin or destination is somewhere across the Narrow Sea."

"And you have no clear indication of where these ravens are?" Rhaenys presumed.

"Correct," Lord Jon Arryn affirmed, "All we have determined is that someone must be using them to correspond with someone else in the Free Cities. But that much should be evident."

"How could those ravens travel back and forth without going to the rookery?" Lady Ashara wondered.

"Could there be a second rookery hidden somewhere in the bowels of the Red Keep?" Rickard hypothesized.

"That is our belief," Marwyn the Mage disclosed, "Alas, despite our best efforts, we have been unable to locate this hidden rookery. Even Lord Varys has been unsuccessful in that pursuit."

"Varys claims his little birds cannot discover the hidden rookery," Robert Baratheon countered, "We should question everything the Spider tells us, including this. For all we know, they have found the rookery, but he is choosing to withhold that information from us."

"Knowing Varys, that is a possibility," Lady Ashara conceded, "But suppose he actually hasn't found the hidden rookery. How could Rhaenys and Rickard succeed where the Master of Whisperers has failed?"

"They could do so because of their particular dispositions," Robert Baratheon elucidated, "The Targaryens called this building home for centuries, and this strikes me as the typical dilemma the Legion without Banners would resolve."

"That is logical, Your Grace," Rickard mumbled candidly, "However, I am still a little confused. How would uncovering this hidden rookery prove our usefulness or our fealty?"

"For that matter, how would it help us protect our loved ones?" Rhaenys said inquiringly.

"Both those questions have the same answer," Jon Arryn replied, "We are almost entirely certain that the person who is sending and receiving those ravens is collaborating with an enemy of the crown. Maybe the other person is part of a rival khalaasar, or a member of the Golden Company. It could even be a spy in Lady Dacey's company or Princess Elia's. Whoever it is, it cannot be an ally. If it was an ally, their accomplice here would have gone to the trouble of building a hidden rookery."
King Robert then stated "At present, there is nothing to suggest that the person using this hidden rookery is an immediate threat to any of us. So, we are in no great hurry to find it. Even so, I do not intend to let it go unnoticed for much longer. However, I do not know who among my own people I could entrust with the crucial assignment of uncovering it. That is another reason why you should be the ones to do it. By finding this hidden rookery and catching whoever is using it, you two would effectively eliminate a threat to your family across the Narrow Sea, earn some prestige for your family still in the Seven Kingdoms, uphold order in part or all of the Seven Kingdoms, prove your loyalty to me, and gain favor with the crown."

*Five separate yet equally meaningful motivations.* One or two may have been sufficient to convince Rhaenys Targaryen and Rickard Clegane that it would be in their best interests to comply with the king's request. But he was determined to win them over, so he provided five.

In any case, they achieved their purpose. After a minute of quiet contemplation, Rickard and Rhaenys rose from their chairs, and they held out their right hands.

"You have my full cooperation, Your Grace," Rhaenys declared.

"You have mine, as well," Rickard conceded.

Robert Baratheon grinned in satisfaction and shook hands with both of them. "Excellent."

After the handshakes, Jasper stood up and asked "Just a minute, Father. Will you expect them to conduct an investigation on their own?"

"Of course not," Robert Baratheon assured his son, "They are smart, but I do not expect them to work miracles. Lord Jon, the Grand Maester, and I will supply them with whatever resources they may require. Additionally, they can bring anyone they'd trust into the investigation. Which includes the people in this room."

Unsurprisingly, Jasper smiled. *If I know my son, he's already decided to render his assistance. So have Lady Ashara and Lord Willas.* That was the overall impression the king had of Rickard, Rhaenys, and their companions. They had such faith in one another, it was almost ridiculous. Yet at the same time… it was admirable.

*Would that I could have such faith in my own people… alas, I cannot. For all I know, one of those closest to me is also the one using those ravens.*
Twenty years ago, Moat Cailin had looked a total ruin. Twelve years ago, it had been largely restored, but the signs of its collapse were still quite evident.

To gaze upon the moat now, anyone would think it had never fallen into decay. Even those of us who were here when it had.

For the first time since her firstborn's wedding, Lady Daliah Clegane entered the grounds of Moat Cailin through the southern gates. This was her second visit to the North. Twice more than I ever expected to be here. During her first visit, she had been impressed by the size of the moat. Now she was impressed by the appearance as well as the size. I only wish my reason for coming was as pleasant as the first visit.

While Daliah was past her fiftieth nameday, she was still a fair rider. She rode at the front of her party atop her cream palfrey. After passing under the portcullis, they were received by a pair of attendants, who offered to lead them to the main courtyard. It doesn't seem as cold as last time, she realized. It was still colder than she would have liked, but not unbearably so.

As Daliah and her retainers were led further into the moat, Tyta's small yet sturdy courser trotted alongside her. The young girl exclaimed "We're finally here, Grandmother. Are you excited?"

"Oh, most definitely, I am excited, sweetling," Daliah claimed kindly. Perhaps not as much as you, but I haven't seen my oldest boy in years.

Her granddaughter did not seem effected by the cold at all. Perhaps she is too ecstatic to notice the sudden drop in temperature. Tyta looked around at their surroundings and said giddily "I can't believe we're actually in the very heart of the Legion without Banners. I've always wanted to see this place."

Daliah smiled, though her smile was not wholly a joyful one. Her happiness had been somewhat marred by anxiety ever since the attempt on Sandor's life. It had been months since that dismal event took place, and Daliah Clegane still found it difficult to believe someone as adorable and enthusiastic as her granddaughter had killed a man. She's even younger than her father was when he killed his first.

Sandor's first was only a poacher. His daughter had taken down an assassin. That was nearly as impressive as it was horrifying.

In any case, that was also why they were here. When Gregor learned of the Golden Company's presence at Clegane's Keep, he had investigated into the matter. Although his search had been fruitless at first, last month he had uncovered what may have been a promising lead. He had yet to disclose this lead, but he claimed it had something to do with Tyta. As such, he wanted Sandor to send his niece to the moat. He had also requested Sandor to come, if possible.

Despite his efforts to make himself available, Sandor was unable to come to the moat. Obara would have liked to go along with Tyta, as well, but her duty dictated that she must remain with her husband and their sons. Be that as it may, Sandor and Obara did not want their daughter travelling to Moat Cailin without some member of her family in her company.
Fortunately, Daliah had been willing to make that trek. When her lord husband was alive, she had
hardly ever left Clegane's Keep. Unless it was with him, or when I came north for Gregor and
Dacey's nuptials. Alas, Tarrence Clegane had been dead these last five years. As such, Daliah was
no longer the Lady of Clegane's Keep, and thus, she was not obligated to stay there with her
family.

So, at Gregor's behest, Tyta had left for Moat Cailin a moon's turn ago. Her grandmother had gone
with her, as had a few dozen of House Clegane's soldiers and servants. One of those men was Ser
Bronn, the keep's master-at-arms. In spite of his background as a sellsword, Ser Bronn was the
most accomplished swordsman in Sandor's service. For that reason, the Hound saw it fit to entrust
the man with the safety of his mother and daughter.

_He may love gold more than anything, but at least he is skilled and reliable. Anyway, while he may
not love us, we've got more than enough gold to make him love our well-being._

As they neared the stables, Daliah turned to Tyta and told her "You know, my dear, this is where
your parents met."

"Really?" Tyta said in interest.

"Yes, indeed," her grandmother confirmed, "Your Grandfather Oberyn is one of the Legion's
longest-serving members. His two eldest daughters used to live here with him. When I came to the
moat for your aunt and uncle's wedding with my other two children, your father interacted with
them. Of the two, Obara was the one he bonded with more closely, especially in the training yard."

"I'm not surprised," Tyta commented. _Given her parents' love for melee combat, I suspected she
wouldn't be. "Was this back when Mother was a Sand?"

"Yes, your mother was still a bastard at the time," Daliah recalled, "Because of that, I admit I did
not wholly approve of her association with your father back then. Not long after, though, the King
legitimized her and your Aunt Nymeria. That was when your grandfathers thought to consider
drawing up a marriage contract. After Greyjoy's Rebellion, the contract was finalized and carried
out."

"And a few years later, I came along," Tyta muttered slyly.

"Yes, and Mors and Dermot soon after," Daliah remarked, grinning.

Tyta sighed at the mention of her brothers. _She misses them. And her parents._ It had been over a
month since they departed from Clegane's Keep. In spite of how happy Tyta was to see Moat
Cailin, it could not have been easy to be so far from home.

Daliah could imagine how she felt. Before she was betrothed to Tarrence, she had never been away
from Deep Den for more than a day. Ever since her wedding, she had not gone back to her own
ancestral home even once. _At least Tyta will go back to Clegane's Keep once this predicament is
resolved._

On the other hand, when Daliah left for the keep, she had been six and ten. That was twice her
granddaughter's current age. That age gap on its own made all the difference. Girls of six and ten
had seen their first flowering, and they knew what was expected of them. Girls of eight, however,
were still immersed in the blissful innocence of childhood. Although Tyta's hands were stained
with the blood of Connin, her innocence had not been completely shattered just yet. She was still a
child.
Ser Bronn was the first person in Daliah's party to dismount. After climbing off his fierce destrier and turning the reins over to the stableboys, he went over to Daliah and her granddaughter, intent on offering his assistance.

Daliah watched as Bronn helped Tyta down from her courser. The girl could mount and dismount on her own easily enough, but she was fond of Ser Bronn, and she trusted him as much as her father did. Aside from that, Tyta was in an unfamiliar place, and she remembered the advice her mother gave her. 'When setting foot in a new land, it helps to hold hands with someone close to you when your foot actually hits the ground.' That was a sentiment Daliah agreed with.

Before Bronn could extend a hand to Daliah, another hand was offered to her. This hand did not belong to someone she was close to. As it happened, she could not think of anyone who was particularly close to the owner of this hand. Even so, Gregor had deemed this person's presence to be every bit as essential as Tyta's.

Daliah tentatively accepted the Essosi's hand, and she allowed him to help her from the saddle of her palfrey. He had a firm yet delicate grip. Once she was standing beside him on the ground, she turned to him and said appreciatively "Thank you, Jaqen."

"A man requires no thanks," Jaqen H'ghar assured her, "A man is pleased just to render aid to a lady, as it was a lady's son who saved a man."

*He seems to enjoy reminding us of that.* Daliah did not know what interest Gregor might have had in Jaqen H'ghar, but it must have been of great importance. He had adamantly insisted that Jaqen and Tyta come to Moat Cailin as soon as possible. Daliah and everyone else in her party were only there to accompany and protect the two of them.

It had been months since Jaqen H'ghar was introduced to the Cleganes, and still Daliah knew as little of him as she did back then. His most distinctive characteristics were his exotic accent and his speech. He tended to speak of himself and others as though he was speaking of people not present. Not once had he called himself "I" or someone he was addressing "you."

She wondered why that was. *Maybe it is traditional that way in the Free Cities. Or maybe he has a perpetual identity crisis.* Daliah could no more than speculate on this subject. She had never been across the Narrow Sea. She had never been anywhere other than the Westerlands, the Riverlands, and the North, for that matter. *That alone is more of the world than I cared to see.* As far back as her girlhood, Lady Daliah had not been one for travelling. Only for her family would she even be willing to leave the Westerlands.

Daliah Clegane stood in relative silence as her vassals got off their horses. As the stableboys tended to their mounts, Jaqen H'ghar placed a soft hand on Daliah's shoulder. When she turned to him, he informed her "A man believes a lady's other son approaches."

She followed the foreigner's eyes, and she discovered he was correct. A tall man – the tallest one Daliah had ever seen – was coming towards her. He was dressed in a doublet of boiled leather, woolen trousers, and a hooded cloak. All his attire was black with a tint of purple. The image of a lone mountain was emblazoned on his doublet.

When he was close enough, Daliah pulled her son into a hug. At least, she tried to pull him into one. It was more he who pulled her. Gregor Clegane was too large and too strong to be pulled by anyone. Or pushed. *No one could ever push the Mountain That Rides around.*

Regardless of who initiated the hug, Daliah was delighted by it. She had only seen Gregor twice in the last ten years. She had come to cherish any and all encounters with him.
"It is so good to see you again, Greg," Daliah whispered tenderly.

"You, as well, Mother," Gregor said in response, holding her gently. The top of her head only came up to his throat, so he had to squat a bit to make them a little more even in height. Otherwise, Daliah could only have embraced her son at his midsection. *As long as I can hold him, I don't care which part of him I embrace.*

When they pulled apart, Daliah realized Gregor had not entered the courtyard alone. Three other people were with him. One was a familiar black-bearded man armed with a spear.

"Good day to you, Polliver," Daliah bade him.

"And to you, milady," the captain of Gregor's household guard politely rejoined.

The other two were a girl who was about Tyta's age and a boy who was about half it. While Rickard was the only one of her grandchildren by Gregor she had ever seen, she was certain she was currently looking at two of his siblings. Daliah found it reasonable to assume that Gregor's other children would be of a similar build to their elder brother, and the girl and the boy were both quite big for their age.

A moment later, Gregor stated "Mother, this is Vallory and Larys. Vall, Lar, welcome your grandmother to the moat."

Daliah Clegane knelt down and spread her arms to envelop Vallory and Larys in a hug. They were strong for their age, too, but like their father, they knew their own strength. They did not squeeze her too tightly.

Daliah then introduced Tyta to her uncle and cousins. *More reintroducing, in Gregor's case.* Gregor had only been to Clegane's Keep once since Tyta was born. He had seen Tyta her at the time, but she had been too young to remember him. *She'll certainly remember him this time, though.*

Larys was thrilled to meet her, but Vallory was downright ecstatic. Tyta's responses were much the same. While she was pleased to see Larys, she seemed much more pleased to be acquainted with Vallory. *They do not have any sisters of their own.* Daliah predicted that Tyta and Vallory would get along just fine.

Daliah Clegane had nine grandchildren. Five by Gregor, three by Sandor, and one by Ellyn. Seven boys and two girls. All of them born within the last three and ten years. As of today, the only ones she had yet to see were Alyver and Torrhen, Gregor's second and fourth sons. *With luck, they and their mother will be back soon, and I can see them then.*

She had no way of knowing how long that would be. For Gregor and Dacey's sake as well as her own, she hoped it would not be *too* long.

"How was the journey?" Gregor asked.

"Long and tiresome," Daliah replied straightforwardly.

"Well, I had fun," Tyta proclaimed, "The Riverlands are beautiful. There are so many wonderful sights. Also, you'd never want for food down there. While we brought more than enough supplies, there was plenty of game to hunt and fish to catch. Shelter wasn't a problem, either. We camped in the wilderness most nights. It's still warm enough in the south that you can sleep outside without catching a chill. We didn't stay outside every night, though. On a couple occasions, we stopped at an inn, and when we reached the Crossing, we were hosted by Lord Frey."
Daliah scoffed. *Count on her to give a thorough answer.*

Normally, Tyta was not so talkative. These last thirty days, however, she had been. Since there had not been much to do on the road, that was somewhat understandable. Anyway, Daliah did not mind. Her granddaughter found a plethora of interesting things for them to talk about. Furthermore, Tyta did not talk solely with her grandmother. Often, she had spoken with Ser Bronn and Jaqen H'ghar, too. *She never spoke with any of us at the same time,* Daliah noticed. *At least she never said a word about what happened with Connin, either.*

While not very plausible, Daliah almost felt as though Tyta had forgotten that experience altogether. *As much as I and her parents would want her to forget it, let us hope she has not. If so, this trip was entirely unnecessary, and Gregor's investigation will be back at a standstill.*

"How did you like your stay at the Twins?" Gregor said inquisitively.

"Much better than the last one," Daliah replied, "Lord Stevron was kind enough to house our entire retinue indoors for the night. He even gave Tyta and I our own private bedchambers in the hightborn guest apartments."

"I think he liked you, Grandmother," Tyta wryly interjected.

Gregor was perplexed. "What?"

"Grandmother's room was right next to Lord Stevron's," Tyta disclosed, "And when we had dinner that night, he insisted that she sit beside him on the dais."

"Well, Lord Stevron is a widower these last thirty or so years," Ser Bronn pointed out, "Men can get mighty lonely."

"I suppose that's true." *Ever since Tarrance died, I've felt somewhat lonesome myself.* Lady Daliah was a widow, and Lord Stevron was a widower. Despite having the surname of Frey, he was a decent man. Alas, he and Daliah were well past the practical age for marriage. Additionally, she had no plans to remarry. *After three decades of widowerhood, I doubt he does, either.*

"There is one thing I will say about Stevron Frey," Daliah thought aloud, "He has the charm Lord Walder so markedly lacked. So much so that it is hard to believe he is his father's son."

"Well, he is," Gregor affirmed.

"You could say he's one of far too many," Bronn japed. Daliah and some of the others snickered. *He may have a point. It was a little crowded at the Twins.*

Daliah decided the other two men there were overdue for an introduction. She gestured for them to come forward. When they were at her sides, she turned to her oldest son and told him "Gregor, I would like you to meet the master-at-arms of Clegane's Keep, Ser Bronn."

Gregor smiled at the former sellsword and shook his hand. He remarked "I am so glad to finally make your acquaintance, Ser Bronn. My sister and my brother-by-law have told me so much about you."

"I will take that as praise," Bronn muttered brazenly, "After all, when last I saw the Imp and the Imp's Bitch, I was on good terms with them. Unless their opinion of me has turned sour, I believe I still am."

Gregor chuckled at that. Daliah frowned and candidly murmured "I would rather you did not refer
to my daughter that way, ser."

"I meant no offense, milday," Bronn hastily apologized.

"You might be interested to know that Ellyn actually likes that moniker, Mother," Gregor apprised her, "She told me so herself. Every time someone calls her that, she does not grimace. She grins."

Daliah was equal parts stunned and appalled. "Who all has been calling her that?"

"The spearwives stationed at the Wall were the first ones," Gregor recounted, "You see, they were cross with Ellyn for continually besting them in combat. That moniker was their attempt to get even with her. A very poor and ineffectual attempt, all things considered. Anyway, before too long, the other wildlings and the black brothers were using it, too. Soon enough, so was the whole of the North. If Ser Bronn is any indication, it appears the rest of the Seven Kingdoms has heard of it, as well."

"You mean the whole of Westeros is slandering my daughter's name?" Daliah Clegane spat in disgust. *Moreover, they are slandering the name of Tywin Lannister's daughter-by-law.*

"You may see it that way, Mother," Gregor debated, "But Ellyn doesn't. That moniker does not bother her. Especially since she is Tyrion's. Besides, what's the sigil of the southern branch of our house?"

"Three hounds," Daliah replied. That was when clarity sank in. "Oh… in that context, I suppose the moniker would be appropriate."

*Doesn't make me like it any more than before. But if Ellyn can deal with it, I guess I should, too.*

At any rate, there was still one person Daliah had yet to present. She turned to the only individual there who was not a native of Westeros, and she announced to her son "This is the man you wished to see, Jaqen H'ghar."

Gregor did not smile this time, but he still held out his hand. As the Essosi took it and shook it, Gregor bluntly declared "A lord is grateful to receive a man."

Daliah was intrigued. *He sounds as though he's practiced that line.*

Jaqen H'ghar raised an eyebrow in fascination. Then he gave a nod and commented "A man is equally humbled by a lord's summons."

Gregor nodded back and stated "A man, a lord, and a lord's niece have much to discuss."

Jaqen H'ghar folded his arms and proclaimed "A man will be ready to do so at a lord's earliest convenience."

"So will a lord's niece," Tyta mentioned wryly.

"All in good time," the Mountain asserted. Here he stopped emulating Jaqen's pattern of speech. He looked around at his mother and her party, and he proposed "First, let's get you all settled. Mother, we have set up lodgings for your vassals in the Boarder Tower. I would like you, Tyta, Ser Bronn, and Jaqen H'ghar to reside in the Lord's Tower for the duration of your stay."

"As you command, Gregor," Daliah acknowledged.

"It is not a command," said Gregor, "It is my wish. I would sleep much better at night if I knew you
were sleeping nearby."

"You do not have to explain yourself," Daliah assured him. *After all, I know what he went through just as much as the other way around.* Mere days before she and her granddaughter began the journey north, Clegane's Keep had received a raven from Moat Cailin. Gregor had sent a missive informing them of an attack on the moat.

The attack was small and isolated, but it had resulted in at least one casualty. Much like their cousin, Vallory and Larys had had a brush with danger of their own. It was only by the sacrifice of a valiant Northman that they survived. Also like Tyta, Gregor's daughter and son seemed to have recovered from the shock of that tragedy.

Nevertheless, Gregor was not about to lower his guard. Especially since the one responsible for that fiasco was still at large. *In all likelihood, the perpetrator is still somewhere in the moat. If that is the case, we're no safer here than we were at the keep.* At least Gregor would make them feel safe. Even if they really weren't, Daliah was not afraid for herself. She had already lived a long and fulfilling life. She was far more concerned with the welfare of her children and their children.

Once Daliah's retainers were organized in an orderly fashion, Polliver went to escort them to the Boader Tower. At the same time, the Mountain and his children led his mother, his niece, the former sellsword, and the Essosi to the Lord's Tower.

The Lord's Tower was still the tallest of the buildings at Moat Cailin, and Daliah was a much older woman than when she last saw it. All the same, she was by no means frail or weak. She managed to make the ascent to the tower's upper levels without leaning against the rail or holding anyone else's hand.

Gregor's bedchamber was at the very top of the tower. The nursery and the older children's bedrooms were on the next floor, and the guest apartments were immediately below that. That was where Daliah and Tyta were put up. Everything lower than the guest apartments was space allotted for the Clegane household. That included both branches of the house. As such, Bronn and Jaqen H'ghar had their rooms in that section.

When Daliah and her party arrived at the moat, it was already the late afternoon. By the time Daliah got settled into her quarters, it was the early evening. Supper would be in an hour or two. Daliah decided to lie down until then. She had been riding for a full turn of the moon. The whole last week of that interval had been spent traversing the Neck. Daliah finally realized just how fatigued she felt. *So much time on the road truly does take a toll on one's endurance and spirit.*

Nothing particularly remarkable happened that day. After a brief nap, Lady Daliah had dinner with her son, her grandson, her granddaughters, the household of House Clegane of Moat Cailin, and the officers of the Legion without Banners. The few of them who were still at the moat, at any rate. In fact, other than Gregor, Ser Gerion Lannister and Tormund Giantsbane were the only members of the secret council who were accounted for. Smalljon Umber was dead, Willas Tyrell was in King's Landing, and everyone else was on the other side of the Narrow Sea.

Daliah did not linger after dinner. Instead, she returned to her quarters. She thought about turning in for the night, but she found she was not as tired as before. Even after lying on her back for nigh on a full hour, she could not drift into a slumber. *Even here, sleep does not come easy.* These days, this was not an unusual problem for her. In fact, lately, she had lost a lot of sleep.

*Mother once said that as one gets over, sleep is required less and less. As a girl, I never had trouble sleeping. Now I am a mother and a grandmother both, and I have these frequent bouts with*
Of course, age was not the only known cause of restlessness. Stress was often a factor, too. Daliah Clegane had certainly been under a great deal of stress. The looming threat of the Others and the loss of her husband had been a weight on her mind for years. Now there was the knowledge that her family was scattered throughout the Known World, and that no matter where they went, danger always seemed to be lurking just around the corner. *It is enough to drive one mad.*

Most of all, there was that feeling of loneliness. When she shared her bed with Tarrence, Daliah never had trouble falling asleep. Almost every night since he died, she had lain awake for an hour or longer before she finally managed to nod off.

*Do other widows have such difficulty sleeping? There must be some who do. Some widowers, too.* She soon found herself wondering if Tywin Lannister ever wrestled with this problem after the death of Lady Joanna.

Lady Daliah thought about calling for a sleeping draught. Those usually helped. *But the master could be asleep, and I would hate to disturb him, even for my benefit.*

Ultimately, Daliah Clegane decided she was not ready to go to sleep after all. So, she got out of bed, pulled on a robe over her nightgown, exited her room, and climbed the stairwell up to the top floor of the tower.

There was only one room on the top floor of the Lord's Tower. Daliah encountered a pair of soldiers standing guard outside the entrance of that room. Luckily, they both knew who she was, so they let her pass.

Hoping her son had not turned in just yet, she softly knocked on the door to his bedchamber. A few seconds later, she heard heavy footfalls, which gradually got louder and closer. The door opened to reveal Lord Gregor Clegane. He was clad in a robe of his own. *That thing looks as though it could fit a bear. Then again, since a Mormont normally sleeps here, perhaps it does.*

There were no circles under Gregor's eyes, so it was likely he had not been asleep or trying to sleep. The fact that he did not appear disgruntled or irate was further proof of that. He smiled down at Daliah and told her "Good evening, Mother."

"Evening, Greg," she said in response, "May I come in?"

"Of course," he replied, standing aside and holding the door open for her.

Daliah swiftly entered the bedchamber. Almost straightaway, she noted its size. It was nearly twice the size of her own bedroom, and even that room was slightly larger than the lord's bedchamber at Clegane's Keep. *I doubt even the tallest man and the tallest woman in the realm would really need this much space.* Of course, as the widely-acknowledged holders of those titles, Gregor and Dacey could decide that on their own.

After closing the door, Gregor Clegane walked over to his mother and asked courteously "What can I do for you?"

Daliah wrapped herself more tightly in her night robe. *It's so cold up here. How can he stand it? "I was just hoping to talk to you."

"About what?" asked Gregor.
"Alright then," Gregor conceded. He sat down at the foot of his bed and patted the spot next to him.

Trying not to think too much of what her son and his wife had done there, Daliah sat down beside Gregor. He must have noticed how cold she was. So, he picked up a thick woolen blanket and draped it over her shoulders. She softly murmured her thanks.

As Daliah pulled the blanket closer to her, Gregor assumed "Couldn't sleep?"

"Is it that obvious?" Daliah asked rhetorically.

"Somewhat," her son contended, "This late at night, the only people who are still awake are the on-duty guards and myself."

"The guards I understand," Daliah remarked. Without them, anyone could walk in or out of the moat. "But why are you up this late?"

"Working," he apprised her. It was then that Daliah realized Gregor was holding something in his left hand. He held it up for her to see. It was a small stack of parchments.

"Do you always work at night?" Daliah said inquiringly.

"No, not always," Gregor disclosed. "There are other things I do. However, I can't do most of them right now."

"Why is that?" Lady Daliah asked.

"Because Dacey's not here," he cockily replied, "The rest of them I can't do right now because you are here."

Daliah felt the urge to roll her eyes. That was more than I needed to know. "You do sleep, though, right?"

"Of course, I sleep," Gregor reassured her. "Even mountains need to lie down from time to time."

"A responsible lord doesn't just rest 'from time to time,'" Daliah advised him.

"Oh, I sleep when I can," Gregor murmured, "Don't worry; that's almost every day."

"How many hours?" she questioned him.

Although Gregor was under no obligation to answer Daliah, he decided to indulge her. He thought on that for a moment, and then he explicated "I would say five or six on average. Seven if it's been a quiet day. Four if it's been a long one. Unfortunately, the days tend to be quite long up here."

Yet the North tends to get fewer hours of sunlight than the rest of the realm. Oh, well; that's still better than I would have thought.

"Anything else you want to know?" Gregor muttered sardonically. "My eating habits, perhaps?"

"No, and I'm sorry if I seem to be prying," Daliah asserted. She knew full well Gregor was a grown man. By the Seven, he's the most grown man in the realm. "I'm aware that I lost the right to order you to bed long ago. It's just that-"
"You needn't explain yourself," Gregor calmly interjected, grinning down at her, "I know; even at this stage of my life, you can't help being my mother."

Daliah nodded. *That's it exactly.* "All parents go through that."

"All good ones, at least," Gregor argued.

"Fair enough," Daliah conceded, "Someday you and your siblings will, as well. I can promise you that you'll *never* stop being your children's father. Even when Rickard is taller than his mother and has children of his own, there will be times when you'll still think of him as a little boy."

"That's debatable," Gregor slyly countered, "Not because I won't remember his youth, but because he never really was a *little* boy."

Daliah chuckled and remarked "You may be right. After all, he *did* set the record for the largest live babe born in Westeros history."

"Yes, he did…" Gregor mumbled softly. Ever since Daliah entered the room, her son had retained his smile. Right then, his grin gradually faded. Once it changed into a frown, he let out a deep sigh. It was as though he suddenly became dreary for no apparent reason.

But there *was* a reason. Almost instinctively, Daliah knew what it was. "Thinking about him?"

"All the time," Gregor glumly affirmed, "He arrived safely in King's Landing, and he's written me at least twice a week since he got there. His letters suggest he is doing just fine. Be that as it may… I cannot help but worry. I know he's among friends, but he is also among some of the worst filth in the whole of the Seven Kingdoms."

Daliah cocked her head in interest. "After fifteen years, I would have thought you and your colleagues purged most of the realm's 'filth.'"

"Most of it, yes," Gregor stated, "But not all. King's Landing is the one place the Legion has no official jurisdiction. My fellow Legionnaires and I can only conduct business there if King Robert authorizes it."

"Even so, Rickard still has his own guards and allies," Daliah pointed out, "Additionally, he is under the king's protection. So long as he does not stir up any mischief and his father remains loyal to the crown, he should be out of harm's way."

Gregor reflected on that for a bit. Then he lightly nodded his head to show he agreed. He mumbled quietly "I pray you're right, Mother. If anything was to happen to Rickard… I do not know what I might do."

"I felt much the same when you first went north," Daliah disclosed, "It'll be a while before you get accustomed to that feeling, Greg. But sooner or later, you *will* get used to it. Otherwise, the only alternative is to drive yourself insane with worry."

"Oh, I have no intention of letting *that* happen, Mother," Gregor proclaimed, "After all, in spite of everything, Rickard is a Clegane. Cleganes are tougher and stronger than most other people."

"Yes, they are," Daliah concurred. *And that is precisely why Rickard will endure.* Although she had not seen her oldest grandchild since he was small enough to hold in her arms, she was confident he would live to a ripe old age. *I wouldn't be surprised if he outlasts his whole generation.*

"Of course, Rickard isn't the only one of your children who is currently away," Daliah mentioned.
"That is true," Gregor admitted, "I think about Alyver and Torrhen plenty, too. However, I do not worry about them as much. At least they're with their mother. And their aunt, uncle, and cousin."

"Do you mean to say you do not worry for Dacey, Ellyn, Tyrion, and Duncan?" Daliah supposed.

"Oh, absolutely not," Gregor firmly refuted, "I worry about them, as well. Duncan especially; he's only a little older than Torrhen. Nevertheless, I can derive some relief from the knowledge that my wife, my sister, and my sister's husband can take care of themselves."

"Indeed, they can," Daliah remarked. *Between Dacey's strength, Tyrion's wits, and Ellyn's combination of both qualities, the three of them can overcome any challenge the Free Cities can throw their way.*

Another thought abruptly occurred to Lady Daliah. She predicted it would be a sensitive issue, so she approached it discreetly and carefully. "What about Vallory and Larys? Are you at least able to reassure yourself of their safety?"

Gregor gazed down at his mother in silent contemplation for about a minute. Then he declared "Up until a month ago, I was. At that time, my greatest concern was that they might get sick or injured. Then the incident with the printing press happened."

He rubbed the fingers of his free hand against his forehead, as though it ached. Daliah gently placed her own hands on her son's arm. She wanted to say something to comfort him, but she could not think of anything that might work.

"Now I know how you felt when Sandor got burned," Gregor commented.

"No, this is worse," Daliah disputed, "I wasn't there when Euron Greyjoy pushed your brother's face into that fire. You, on the other hand, were right in the next room when a ceiling threatened to collapse onto your son and daughter."

Had that happened to me, I would have most definitely fainted or gone into shock.

Gregor gazed at the wall for about ten seconds. Then he inquired "Can I confide in you, Mother?"

"Always," Daliah answered.

Gregor looked her in the eye and disclosed "When that explosion took place, all I could think about was the possibility that Larys and Vallory were within the blast radius. When that thought occurred to me… I was so scared. I never felt so terrified of anything in my entire life. I honestly thought I was going to lose my children."

"That is every parent's worst fear," Daliah professed, "Even parents who resent their children would never wish to see them harmed."


"Alright, parents who are capable of human emotion would never wish to see their children harmed," Daliah corrected herself.

This time, Gregor nodded in agreement. He then commented "Although I was beyond relieved that Larys and Vallory survived that episode, their survival came at a price. Smalljon Umber gave his life to save my children. One of my closest friends, most reliable allies, and finest officers is dead now."
"He was a good man," Daliah pronounced. She was not merely saying that; she had met Smalljon Umber during Greyjoy's Rebellion. He and the rest of the members of the secret council had gotten along very well with the Cleganes of Clegane's Keep. When the Legion helped prepare Sandor and Obara's wedding, Smalljon had been tasked with organizing all the food and drink for the feast. Daliah and most of the other guests felt he did a rather outstanding job. "Do not blame yourself for his death, Greg. Blame the one who caused that explosion."

"Oh, I do," Gregor muttered severely, "I have every intention of finding that piece of scum."

"Once you do find him, what then?" Lady Daliah stated enquiringly, "Will you execute him?"

"No, I have promised that honor to Lord Greatjon Umber," Gregor revealed, a wicked grin crossing his countenance. As opposed to his earlier smile, Daliah did not like that grin. It struck her as eerily unpleasant. As long as Gregor remembers this is still about justice, I will not voice any protest. Lord Umber does have a right to vengeance, after all.

"Are you any closer to identifying the guilty party?" Daliah enquired.

"No closer than we were last month, I'm afraid," Gregor disclosed. "Whoever he is, he's very good at covering his tracks."

"Well, it had to have been someone who holds the knowledge of how to make black powder," Daliah contended. "How many people know that?"

"Only me," Gregor informed her, "I've gone to great lengths to ensure that no one apart from myself knows the proper formula and technique required to mix black powder. However, I am not the only person in the world who can acquire the substance."

"How do you mean?" Daliah inquired.

"As you may recall, I supplied the royal army with black powder during Greyjoy's Rebellion," Gregor professed, "The distribution and handling of the powder was closely monitored by trusted soldiers of the Legion. Although most of the powder was used, there was some left over when the fighting was done. Enough to fill twenty kegs."

"What did you do with those kegs?" his mother said inquisitively.

"I brought them back to the moat," Gregor recounted, "They've been stored under guard in the Smelting Tower since then."

"Have you made any more black powder since Greyjoy's Rebellion?" Daliah presumed.

"No, and I do not intend to," Gregor pronounced, "In fact, I am somewhat tempted to toss the remainder of my current supply into the swamps of the Neck."

"Why don't you?" said Daliah. She honestly thought that was a worthwhile idea. At least then, the black powder would cause no more grief and destruction, and I doubt the crannogmen would try to salvage the kegs.

"Because disposing of it might not be the most practical thing to do," Gregor debated, "The safest, yes, but not the most practical. It is still a viable resource, and I hate to waste resources. Another option I'm considering is having some Legionnaires transport the remaining black powder up to the Wall. When the Others come south, the Night's Watch could use it to repel them."

"That would definitely benefit a great many people, and not just the Watch," Daliah said
Gregor nodded. Then he remarked "In any case, I plan to get the powder out of Moat Cailin as soon as possible. After what transpired in the Knowledge Tower, I have deemed it an unacceptable hazard."

"A wise choice. Daliah certainly would never have allowed something so volatile onto the grounds of Clegane's Keep."

"If all the black powder in the world is kept in a guarded storeroom, how could that disaster have even happened?" she wondered aloud.

"I managed to determine that much, at least," Gregor notified her, "When I confirmed that black powder was the cause of the explosion, I went straight to the Smelting Tower. All twenty black powder kegs were accounted for. Even so, I decided to examine their contents. After sifting through the powder for a couple hours, I discovered that the mixture was impure."

"Impure how?"

"Apparently, someone had taken a handful or two of black powder from each keg and replaced it with dirt," Gregor revealed, "Altogether, that's enough to fill another whole keg."

"Then the black powder that caused that explosion came from your own stash?" Daliah realized in horror.

"It would seem so," Gregor grimly confirmed, "It gets even worse than that. Before I emptied the kegs, I weighed them. I found that each one weighed exactly the same as it did when I last inspected them, down to the last gram. That means whoever stole the missing black powder was in the storeroom long enough to determine exactly how much of it he took, and exactly how much dirt he needed to switch it with."

"That must've taken hours," Daliah conjectured.

"Quite so," Gregor concurred, "Therefore, the thief must have been someone with unrestricted access to the storeroom. Alas, I cannot even speculate as to who that might be. In addition to being guarded at all times, the door to that storeroom is always locked. Only two people have a key: myself and Maester Kennick, and the maester has an alibi. He was in the Recruit Tower tending to some injuries when the attack took place."

"What about the guards?" Daliah hypothesized, "Perhaps they know something."

"I had the very same thought," Gregor revealed, "That is my next step. I plan to interrogate every man who guarded the storeroom in the last year. Unfortunately, that will be something of a chore. At least fifty men have taken on that duty. Most of those were voluntary, and I did not keep a record of who stood guard on which nights. In addition to that, some of those men went with Dacey or the Martells."

"Then this inquiry might last until they get back," Daliah thought aloud.

"Oh, I intend to complete it a lot sooner than that," Gregor asserted, "I will not have my wife coming home to discover there's a murderer hiding amongst us."

"I wish you luck then," Daliah commented. There came a short interval of quietness, and then she said "Tell me, Gregor. What happened at Clegane's Keep and what happened at Moat Cailin… do you suppose these attacks are connected?"
"Honestly, I don't," Gregor admitted, "There is no denying that Connin was trying to murder Sandor. However, I was not the target of the explosion in the Knowledge Tower. Samwell Tarly and I have both concluded that the printing press was the target."

"Yes, I believe you mentioned that," Daliah recounted, "I am a little bewildered, though. Why would someone want to destroy your creation?"

"Oh, I can think of several reasons why," Gregor disclosed, "Mainly, someone in the world may wish to control the spread of knowledge. The printing press could be used to educate everyone in the realm, highborn and lowborn alike. But I'd wager that half the lords in the Seven Kingdoms would prefer to keep the smallfolk uninformed and ignorant. Some of them I know would resort to extreme means to do so."

"Like who?" Daliah questioned.

"I am compiling a list of prospective suspects," Gregor told her, "But I will not make any accusations until I have proof. If I did, I could sully the name of an innocent man or damage my own reputation. So, for the sake of security and stability, I will not show this list to anyone. Including you, Mother."

"I understand," she assured him. That would be for the best. I doubt I could be very helpful in this regard, anyway.

Lady Daliah and her son sat in silence for about a minute. Finally, Daliah removed the blanket from her shoulders and stood up. She pronounced "Well, I believe I have kept you from your work long enough. I think I will call it a night."

"You sure, Mother?" asked Gregor.

"Quite," Daliah affirmed, "I wish you luck with your investigations. I have every confidence that you'll succeed."

Gregor smiled again and rose to his feet. He led his mother to the door and gently kissed her on the forehead. He told her "Good night, Mother. I will see you in the morn."

Lady Daliah Clegane swiftly left her son's bedchamber and retired to her own.

This time when she laid down in her bed, she fell asleep straightaway. She remained on her back until daybreak. She slept more serenely that night than she had in a long while. If only that sensation could apply to my waking hours, as well.

Naturally, it did not. When Daliah Clegane rose from her bed the following morning, the burden of her family's tribulations was thrust upon her mind once more. There was no avoiding it; its addressing was inevitable. Thankfully, Daliah was no stranger to hardship. I know we'll overcome all this turmoil. We will because we must.

Gregor wasted no time in delving into business matters. After breakfast, he assembled Daliah and a number of other people in his solar. The others were Tyta, Jaqen H'ghar, Ser Bronn, Gerion Lannister, Tormund Giantsbane, Polliver, and a plump young Reachman named Samwell Tarly.

Once they were all present, Gregor locked the door to his solar and shut the windows. Polliver then went around to look for cracks or holes in the walls, and he found none. After ensuring that the area was secured, Gregor had them all gather around his desk. Daliah, Tyta, Jaqen H'ghar, and Samwell sat down in chairs. Bronn, Gerion Lannister, Polliver, and Tormund Giantsbane remained on their feet.
Daliah noticed Samwell inched his chair away from Jaqen H'ghar's, and he kept glimpsing at the Essosi out of the corner of his eye. It was as though he was wary of him for some reason. That struck her as curious.

After Gregor was seated in his own chair, he looked to Daliah and Tyta, and he told them "Firstly, Mother, Tyta, I want you to know that I am comforted by your presence. With so many of my family, friends, and allies currently away from Moat Cailin, having you here provides some much-needed solace."

Daliah was touched. Tyta must have been, as well, given how she placed a hand over her heart. In public, Gregor Clegane was a rigid, stern, and authoritative leader of men and women. Even so, he had no issue with displaying affection towards his loved ones behind closed doors. This was a side of him that only those close to him ever saw.

Nonetheless, even when he showed his sentimental side, he was still the Mountain That Rides. That became evident a moment later, when Gregor folded his arms and firmly pronounced "Alas, as much as I wish you were only here for a family visit, we all know that is not why I asked you to come here. No, it is a much more ominous chain of events that brought the people in this room together."

"Yes, it took a mercenary trying to kill your brother and niece to get us here. "Do you have any idea what the Golden Company was hoping to accomplish at the keep?"

"Still nothing but conjecture at this point, Mother," Gregor admitted, "We've come up with several plausible theories, but we've no hard evidence to substantiate any of them."

"Our strongest theory is that the Golden Company was simply endeavoring to gain Lord Gregor's notice," Samwell Tarly revealed.

"'Simply?'" Daliah snapped, a little more sharply than she intended "They 'simply' tried to assassinate my other son?"

"That is not what I meant to imply, my lady," Samwell Tarly stated nervously, "What I meant was they were trying to achieve a simple directive by committing a grave act. These days, gaining the notice of Gregor Clegane is something any criminal or misanthrope can do. Since he is a very busy man, he usually sends the Legion's soldiers to resolve most minor conflicts for him, and he only involves himself in the most serious disputes. Thus, someone who hopes to keep the Mountain's notice – particularly someone who is not even in the Seven Kingdoms – would have to do something that personally affects Lord Gregor."

"And while I make an honest effort to avoid letting any of my affairs get personal, I find I cannot make an exception for my kin," Gregor remarked, "The Golden Company must have realized this, and that is why they targeted Sandor."

"They tried to murder Father just to get your attention?" Tyta mumbled heatedly.

"While we cannot confirm that, it is our most reasonable explanation," said Gerion Lannister.

"Why would the Golden Company even want to get your attention?" Daliah enquired.

"To show that they are not afraid to make an enemy of the Mountain," Gregor hypothesized, "The Golden Company was in one of my recurring visions. Unlike all the others, this vision had two different endings. One was of them roaming haplessly throughout the Nine Free Cities. The other
was of them invading the eastern shores of the Seven Kingdoms. Up until a fortnight ago, I had no way of knowing which ending was the true one."

"What happened a fortnight ago?" Ser Bronn queried. That's his first question? Granted, it is a legitimate query, but there are other, more pressing questions that should be addressed, too.

All the same, Gregor supplied a response. He illuminated "As you may know, at the start of the year, three separate companies jointly composed of royal army soldiers and Legionnaires were dispatched to the lands beyond the Narrow Sea. One, led by Prince Oberyn Martell, was sent to recruit anyone who would be willing to join us in the fight against the Others. Another, led by my lady wife Dacey, was sent to bring Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen back here. The third, led by Princess Elia Martell, was sent to seek out the Golden Company."

"Why didn't you lead any of those parties, Uncle?" Tyta said inquiringly. Now that is a good question.

"I am under strict orders from the King not to leave Westeros," Gregor claimed, "According to him, with the Long Night only a couple years away, I am too valuable for the realm to lose at this time."

Considering all you have done for the Seven Kingdoms since you rose to the rank of lord, I am not surprised. Of course, to me, you are too valuable to lose at all.

"Have you heard back from them?" asked Daliah Clegane.

"Yes, and each of them has had a different amount of success," Tormund Giantsbane gruffly remarked.

"Thus far, Prince Oberyn is the one who has had the most," Ser Gerion contended, "His last missive came in two days ago. He has already managed to acquire the services of two sellsword companies, and he is in the process of negotiating for a third."

"I guess my grandfather really does know how to get on the good side of people," Tyta wittily observed.

"It would appear so," Daliah stated bluntly. So do you, my dear. You definitely get that from your mother, who must've gotten it from the Red Viper. She then said to no one in particular "Go on."

"Dacey managed to make contact with the Targaryens and win them over," Gregor professed, "She even managed to secure an alliance with a Dothraki horselord. Alas, for that very reason, her party's return has been indeterminately delayed. It could be months before we hear from her again."

Unfortunate. I was hoping to see my daughter-by-law soon. If I remember rightly, my own daughter went with her. That meant that whenever Dacey and her sons came back to Westeros, Ellyn and her son Duncan would, too.

"What of Princess Elia?" Tyta queried. She sounded concerned. Then again, the woman was her great aunt. So, it was only natural that she would be.

"Lately, the Golden Company has been inexplicably elusive," Samwell Tarly explained, "Luckily for us, one of the Triarchs of Volantis managed to point Princess Elia in the right direction. In fact, three of the Triarch's grandchildren joined up with her party."

"Is this what happened a fortnight ago?" Bronn presumed. Gregor still has not answered his original question. He seems determined to get an answer.
"That is part of it," Gregor responded, "Let us go back to the two versions of my vision of the Golden Company for a moment. Apart from the ending, there is one notable detail that distinguishes them from each other. In the one that ended in invasion, the Company rallies behind a young man. This young man called himself Aegon Targaryen."

Daliah was dumbfounded. How is that even possible?

"He is an imposter," Gregor firmly asserted, "You can take my word for that. I saved the real Aegon Targaryen during the Sack of King's Landing, and I helped him and his siblings disappear."

"Then you really did keep Rhaegar's children hidden from danger all these years?" Daliah assumed. She could still vividly recall what happened on the first day of the year. Every house in the Seven Kingdoms, including Clegane's Keep, had received a decree from King's Landing. Upon reading it, Daliah Clegane – and almost every other person in the realm, she was certain – had been flabbergasted by the news it contained. For the longest time, I doubted the truth of that decree. Now that I hear it from Gregor's mouth...

"The idea was the King's," Gregor claimed, "But it was I who made it possible. I shamelessly admit that Rhaenys, Aegon, and Jaehaerys Targaryen are all alive because of my ingenuity."

Daliah scoffed. Not the humblest of declarations, but humility did not get him where he is now. Aside from that, Gregor said nothing that was not true.

"I'm still amazed you managed to shelter them for so long," Ser Bronn commented.

"Oh, I am quite resourceful," said Gregor, "I also made sure that only a select few even knew of their existence. I kept the circle restricted to people who absolutely needed to know. That number gradually increased overtime, but excluding myself, Polliver is the only person in the entire moat who knew the truth from the beginning."

Daliah turned to the tall man with the black beard and asked "Is that so?"

"It is, milady," Polliver affirmed, "I was there at the Tower of Joy, when Lyanna Stark gave birth to her husband's third child. I was also there when she died and entrusted her son's safety to her brother Lord Eddard and to Lord Gregor."

That was a rather blunt and direct answer, but then again, Polliver had never been one for subtlety. Still, his second statement did not sound as earnest as the first one. She could not say why, though. Maybe I am just being needlessly suspicious.

"Incidentally, that same boy served as my squire for the last five years," Gregor added in.

"Yes, you mentioned him once," Daliah commented, "You referred to him as Jon Snow. I assume that is not his real name?"

Gregor nodded and stated "He was passed off as a bastard for his protection. So was Aegon. Rhaenys took shelter in the swamps of the Neck with Lord Howland Reed's family. She always knew the truth of her identity, but her brothers did not know until recently."

"Other than myself, neither did anyone else in this room," Polliver murmured.

"We are straying from our original topic once again," Bronn irately interjected, "For the third time, I ask you, m'lord; what happened a fortnight ago?"

Why does he care so much? Or maybe he doesn't, and he just wants to appease his curiosity.
Fortunately for Ser Bronn, the Mountain answered his question this time. He expounded "A fortnight ago, I learned which ending of the Golden Company vision was the authentic ending. Princess Elia Martell informed me that Triarch Maegyr's grandchildren had told her of man and a boy who were travelling with the Golden Company. Other than the hair, the man's description matches that of the exiled Jon Connington, and the boy's description matches that of the false Aegon Targaryen in my vision."

He paused for a moment to allow that revelation to sink in. Then he muttered "That is enough to confirm the Company's intentions. They plan to invade the Seven Kingdoms. That brings us back to our top theory on the attempt on Sandor's life. We believe that would have been the Company's way of telling me they are not afraid of what they face once they land on our shores."

"Principally, they may have been saying 'Prepare for Legionnaires all you'd like, Mountain. We'll be ready for them,'" Tormund Giantsbane refuted. That is a bold message. And an unsettling one.

"While I can see how you'd be led to think so, the Legion is not the only fighting force in the realm," Bronn contended.

"No, but it is the most diverse and resourceful," Gerion Lannister countered, "It has also upheld law and order throughout all of Westeros, and it enforces the peace between the Free Folk and the natives of the Seven Kingdoms."

"The Golden Company would be fools to invade, anyway," Polliver argued, "Altogether, there are enough soldiers in the realm to outnumber them at least twenty times over."

"Yes, but a large number of those soldiers are in Essos right now," Gregor pointed out, "That includes half of the Legion. While those units are away, the realm is not as secure. Therefore, this would be the most ideal time for the Golden Company to move against us."

"Do you think they'll invade us soon, Uncle?" Tyta asked anxiously.

"No, my dear," Gregor promptly replied, "We would definitely have heard from your aunt, your great aunt, or your grandfather if the Golden Company had already set sail. If our intelligence on them is accurate, the Company hasn't been anywhere with a harbor in almost four months. So, for now, we're safe."

Tyta breathed a sigh of relief. Lady Daliah breathed one, as well. On top of all our other problems, we do not need an incursion.

"At least, I see no reason to assume otherwise," Gregor uttered after a bit of silence. He looked to Jaqen H'ghar and said enquiringly "What do you think? Are we safe?"

Jaqen H'ghar seemed a trifle bewildered. "A man is not certain what a lord is asking,"

Gregor smirked and remarked "There is no more need for us to continue this charade, Jaqen. I know who you are. What you are."

Daliah was starting to feel a little nervous. What does he mean 'what' Jaqen H'ghar is?

Jaqen H'ghar asked rhetorically "Would a lord care to say what a man is?"

"Yes, perhaps a lord – I mean, you, could enlighten us, Gregor?" Ser Gerion suggested.

Tyta giggled at that. Jaqen's dialect really catches on, doesn't it?
At any rate, Gregor leaned forward and revealed "Jaqen H'ghar is a Faceless Man."

Ser Bronn and Ser Gerion bristled slightly, and Samwell flashed another cautious glance at Jaqen H'ghar. Polliver, Tormund, and Tyta looked confused. Daliah shared their confusion; she had never heard of a man with no face.

"A what, milord?" Polliver enquired.

"Quite simply, he is an assassin," Gregor professed. Suddenly, Samwell Tarly's wariness made total sense to Daliah. She was likewise overcome with uneasiness. She even felt the urge to scream. Before she could, Gregor continued with "He is no ordinary one, though. He and those like him possess the ability to change their appearance at will."

"Not entirely at will," Jaqen corrected him, "Only the appearances a man has collected."

"Oh, I'm aware of that," Gregor asserted, grinning wickedly, "Thank you for voluntarily confirming that fact about yourself."

For a split-second, Jaqen H'ghar seemed displeased and impressed. Then his normally stoic expression returned and he confessed "It is true. A man is what a lord claims a man to be."

Daliah did not bother to note how the others reacted to this news. She herself was practically in shock to hear it. We have been harboring a killer at Clegane's Keep for the last several months.

"It's always the quiet ones," Bronn commented drily.

Polliver gripped his spear in both hands and stepped closer to the Essosi. He proposed "Shall we arrest him, milord?"

"If not, we should at least clap him in irons," Gerion Lannister suggested, resting his hand on the pommel of his sword.

"Neither action will be necessary," Gregor assured the others, "This man is our guest. He had done no wrong that I know of. In fact, it is quite possible that he has done us a fine service."

"What service would that be?" Tormund enquired.

Instead of answering right away, Gregor turned to the youngest person in the room. He stated patiently "Tyta, do you remember when you caught Connin in your father's office?"

"I could never forget it, Uncle," she murmured uneasily.

"I am deeply sorry you had to go through that," Gregor muttered sincerely "Being in that kind of peril must have been terrifying. Moreover, it could not have been easy for you to kill a man, especially at such a young age."

"I am glad Connin's dead," Tyta proclaimed, "But I didn't want to kill him."

"You had no choice," Gregor debated, "You were just defending yourself."

Daliah noticed that Tyta looked down and gazed off to the side when she heard that statement. Gregor seemed intrigued by her reaction. He almost looked as though he had expected it. He said "You were just defending yourself, right?"

Tyta continued staring at the wall for a few seconds. Finally, she turned back to Gregor and admitted "Well... no. He was on the ground when I finished him."
"So, you wounded him first?" Gregor supposed. Again, all Tyta gave him was silence at first. After ten seconds of this, Gregor asked her "Tyta, did you really defeat Connin all on your own, or did you have some assistance?"

In response, Tyta looked over at Jaqen H'ghar, as though she was looking to him for advice. As it happened, the next words he spoke were "A girl may tell the actual tale."

Tyta let out a small sigh, and she lowered the sleeve of her dress a bit to expose her scar. She announced "Connin gave me this during our spar. It could have been much worse. He almost killed me, but Jaqen H'ghar stopped him."

Everyone but Gregor was visibly astonished. Gregor just smiled and remarked "I thought as much."

"Why are you only telling us this now, Tyta?" Daliah asked her granddaughter, trying not to sound too cross with her.

"Jaqen asked me not to say anything," the young girl answered.

"A girl speaks true," the Essosi declared, "A man did not wish to draw attention. If a girl's father and mother had learned what a man had done for a girl, a girl's father and mother would not have let a man be."

_That is true. Sandor and Obara would have Jaqen H'ghar commended if they learned of this._

"So, you were the one who killed Connin?" Daliah supposed hopefully. _If so, Tyta's hands are clean._

"No, a man only wounded a late man," Jaqen H'ghar revealed, "A girl was still the one who made the kill."

"Jaqen insisted that I do it," Tyta claimed.

Daliah was appalled. She glared at the foreigner and spat "You forced her to kill him?"

"A man did not use force," Jaqen H'ghar proclaimed, "A man gave a girl a choice."

"What choice?" Ser Gerion inquired.

"Connin was going to die soon, anyway," Tyta reminisced, "There was no way to avoid that. Jaqen told me I could either end his misery myself, or wait for Father to come and leave Connin to suffer his wrath."

Ser Bronn and Lady Daliah winced. They both knew how "wrathful" Sandor could be. _Sandro would not have even bothered to question Connin. Once he saw Tyta's injury, he would have torn into him. Almost like a real hound._

"So, you killed him out of mercy?" Bronn assumed.

"Yes," Tyta responded, "He was a bad man, but I could not stand to see him suffer."

"It is alright, sweetling," Daliah told her granddaughter softly. _It is not alright, but at least now we know Tyta did not kill Connin out of hatred._ She turned to Jaqen H'ghar and proclaimed "I believe I owe you an apology, Jaqen. As well as a vote of thanks."

"A man requires neither," the Essosi reassured her, "A man only did what a man had to."
"'Had to?'" Tyta noted, "What do you mean? You didn't have to save me. You could have left me to Connin."

"Perhaps a man could have," Jaqen H'ghar debated, "Nonetheless, a man owed a favor to a lord."

"You owed Lord Sandor Clegane a favor?" Samwell Tarly remarked.

Jaqen H'ghar nodded his head and murmured "A man's life was forfeit when a man was taken by raiders. When a lord slew the raiders and rescued a man, a lord restored a man's life. The debt of a life was owed back to a lord. A man repaid a lord by saving the life of a lord's daughter."

*A life for a life. That actually makes perfect sense.* All the same, Daliah was grateful.

"Regardless of your motives, I'm certain we're all appreciative of your intervention," Ser Gerion Lannister observed. Daliah, Gregor, and a couple of the other men nodded their heads in agreement. "However, there is something else I'd like you to explain. What were you doing in the Westerlands?"

"Better yet, why are you in Westeros, in general?" Samwell Tarly muttered. He sounded more inquisitive than demanding.

"A man cannot reveal a man's mission," Jaqen H'ghar stated simply, "Even though a man's mission has already been completed."

Polliver stepped forward and angrily mumbled "*Who* did you kill?"

"No one a lord would not have sent a lord's soldiers after," Jaqen H'ghar claimed, looking to Gregor when he said that.

*Maybe it was the leader of that group of bandits Sandor hunted down.* Then again, the Hound and his soldiers had been the ones to end those outlaws. *In any case, the victim was a criminal. For all we know, the Legion would have had to bring that party to justice eventually.*

"Against my better judgement, I will take your word for it," Gregor Clegane decided. Jaqen seemed pleased.

Tormund then asked "If your mission was a success, why are you still here?"

"Once a man's mission was accomplished, a man intended to leave this land," Jaqen H'ghar expounded, "A man was captured before a man could book passage back across the sea."

"But you're a Faceless Man," Bronn pointed out, "I thought Faceless Men had ways of killing people through unnatural means. Couldn't you have used those means to escape your captors?"

"Only if a man could have done so without taking life," the Essosi elucidated, "That option was not available to a man, and a man cannot take life a man has not been told or ordered to take."

"Even when your own life is at risk?" Samwell Tarly disputed.

Jaqen H'ghar nodded and commented "A man does not fear death."

"That's why you refused to kill Connin," Daliah realized.

"A lady is correct," Jaqen verified. *Who would have thought an assassin could be so principled?*

Gregor then sat up in his chair, leaned forward, and stated "Alright, we have established that you
came to the Seven Kingdoms on assignment. We have also established that you completed this
assignment, and that when my brother rescued you, you were indebted to him. But now that you
have repaid your debt to Sandor, there is nothing keeping you in Westeros here any longer. So,
why haven't you gone back to Essos?"

Jaqen did not answer him straightaway. First, he slowly looked over at Tyta. She noticed him
looking at her, and she gave a small, friendly smile. After that, Jaqen H'ghar turned back to Gregor
and confessed "Because a man saw potential in a girl."

Gregor smirked and mumbled "I knew it."

"Knew what, Gregor?" Daliah asked her son.

Instead of answering that question, the Mountain looked around at the people before him and
announced "I would like everyone but Tyta, Jaqen H'ghar, and my mother to step out for a
moment."

Ser Bronn, Polliver, Samwell Tarly, Ser Gerion Lannister, and Tormund Giantsbane complied with
this order, and they hastily vacated the solar.

Lady Daliah Clegane was then left alone with her son, her granddaughter, and a mysterious killer. *I
do not know why, but I feel I will dread what is coming.*

"Gregor… what is going on?" Daliah whispered anxiously, "*What* did you know?"

"There is no easy way to tell you this, Mother," Gregor Clegane pronounced, "So I will be very
forward: Jaqen H'ghar wishes to mentor Tyta."

"Mentor her in what?" Lady Daliah queried.

Gregor hesitated a moment before replying with "In the ways of the Faceless Men."

Daliah's heart skipped a beat. She breathed very quietly "What?"

"A man has seen a girl give the gift," Jaqen H'ghar disclosed, "With proper guidance, a girl can
continue giving the gift to others."

"What gift?" Tyta queried.

"Death," Gregor Clegane answered for the Essosi. "*Valar morghulis.*"

"Indeed," Jaqen H'ghar affirmed, "*Valar dohaeris.*"

Daliah Clegane did not know what was most disturbing: the fact that a man who had been a guest
of her younger son for months turned out to be an assassin, how he was offering to teach her
granddaughter to be like him, or how her other son seemed to approve of that concept.

In the end, the most disturbing aspect was none of those three things. It was what Tyta did next.
She got up from her chair, knelt in front of Jaqen's, and declared "If you would have me, I would be
honored to be your apprentice."

The last thing Lady Daliah Clegane saw before she fainted was Jaqen H'ghar and her son Gregor
Clegane rushing to catch her.
Note: Originally, I was going to include a detailed scene where Gregor and Jaqen H'ghar convince Daliah to go along with the idea of Tyta learning how to be a Faceless Man. But this chapter turned out to be longer than I expected it to be, and there was no way I could have kept that conversation short. Realistically, that conversation might have had to have been a whole chapter on its own. I'm not going to cop out on that debate, though; I'll still reference it plenty in later chapters. At some point, I will address every possible argument Daliah could have made and every possible counterargument Gregor and Jaqen gave.

In any case, Tyta's going to Braavos soon. I know what some of you are going to tell me. Things like "Sandor and Obara are going to kick Gregor's ass when they find out he let their little girl become a stone-cold murderer." Maybe. But who's to say they'll find out? Aside from that, Sandor and Obara are not the typical highborn lord and lady pairing. They are more… open to certain ideas. Oh, and Tyta's plotline is NOT going to be a simple mirror of Arya's, I assure you. In fact, it will be critical to the resolution of at least two major story arcs.
Civility And Decency

Chapter Notes

Note: After 54 chapters and more than one year, I have finally admitted to myself that "Master of Harmony" is an amazingly absurd and stupid title. As such, I have methodically gone back and replaced every single use of that phrase with something more appropriate and less cringeworthy: "Master of Order." So, those of you who like to reread stories, I just want you to be aware of that. Those of you who only started reading on September 22nd or after, pay no mind to this notice.

Grass. Nothing but grass as far as the eye can see.

There was plenty of grassland throughout the Seven Kingdoms. All that grass, however, was generally found on fertile land where crops could be sewn and grown. No crops could ever be produced by this land. The Dothraki Sea was as barren as it was massive. It's amazing how an entire civilization could actually thrive in these parts.

Then again, to belong to a civilization, one had to be civil. As such, it was debatable as to whether the Dothraki really were a civilization. I suppose we won't know for a certainty until we reach Vaes Dothrak.

They could not get there soon enough. Ellyn enjoyed riding on horseback as much as anyone, but every person could tire of it eventually. In her case, "eventually" was around two months. So far, the khalasar had been on the move for a little more than one month, but it already felt like two. Perhaps that was because the Dothraki typically rode from dawn to dusk, only pausing in-between for meals. The heat may have had something to do with it, too.

"Gods, it is hot out here," said Dacey Mormont, whose horse was trotting beside hers.

"No kidding," Ellyn muttered sarcastically. She turned towards her sister-by-law. Almost immediately, Ellyn could tell Dacey was doing much worse than she herself was. Although she had her reins in both hands, she was leaning in her saddle. She looked either dizzy or disoriented.

At a glance, one might have thought Dacey was sick or dying. Ellyn was wiser than that; she knew the Bear Islander was healthy as could be. It was the climate that was the true problem. Evidently, the heat was taking a toll on the Northwoman.

"Are you alright, Dacey?" Ellyn asked worriedly.

"I'm fine," the older woman insisted, though her tone suggested otherwise.

For that alone, Ellyn was not convinced. She was a very hard person to mislead or fool. She had noticed that ever since they set out from Pentos, Dacey had been sweating more and more each day. She obviously was not drinking enough water to compensate. That implied dehydration, which, in turn, indicated the early stages of heat exhaustion. If she doesn't get some relief from this heat, she could pass out and fall off her horse.

Ellyn wondered what she might do to help Dacey. The only practical solution would have been for
them to stop and let her rest for a bit.

Alas, that was not an option. If they stayed still for too long, they would risk getting left behind. Aside from that, there was no telling who all would see them and what those people who think. Therefore, they could only stop if everyone else stopped, too.

Ellyn would not dare ask the khal to halt. It was unlikely he would fulfill that kind of request, regardless of who made it. And even if he was willing to do so, he would want to know why they were stopping, and Ellyn was not about to tell him that.

Khal Drogo had begun to respect Lady Dacey Clegane at his wedding. In the time since they all left Pentos, his bloodriders and many of his horde had come to respect her, as well. That was no simple achievement, particularly for a member of her sex. Incidentally, she was also the only person in the entire company who stood taller than Khal Drogo. Ellyn could almost claim the same. Another inch, and the khal and I would be of a height.

To the Dothraki, how much respect a person was afforded was proportional to that person's strength. That was one thing Ellyn had learned of them fairly quickly. As such, she was not about to suggest to Drogo that the leader of the Westerosi units was in a weakened state due to the dry weather. That would probably be enough to destroy the Dothraki's admiration for Dacey.

So, asking the khal to break was out of the question. Ellyn would have to find a way to help Dacey cope with the extreme heat through some other means.

As she contemplated what else she might do, the horses in front of her suddenly came to a stop. Ellyn, Dacey, and the others in their row hastily brought their mounts to a halt, too. She looked around the vicinity and saw that everyone was resting.

Lady Ellyn Lannister was perplexed. It was only midday. It was unusual for the khalasar to stop this early. The only exception was when the khal meant to pillage someplace, and the nearest settlement was dozens of miles away. She could hear some of Dothraki shouting something down the column, but she did not understand what they were saying.

Ellyn looked to the man in front of her. She knew him as Pono, one of Drogo's kos. He was also one of the few Dothraki in the horde who knew a bit of the Common Tongue. Not enough to carry a conversation, but more than enough to answer a simple question.

"Why are we stopping?" she asked him.

He rigidly declared "The khalessi commanded it."

"Why?" said Ellyn.

"Go and ask her, Imp's Bitch," he sharply retorted.

Ellyn chuckled at that. I'll never get tired of being called that. Most others would hate to go by that moniker. Many would expect Ellyn to feel the same way about that as her brother-by-law felt to be known as the Kingslayer. Not so. To her, "Imp's Bitch" was a compliment. It signified her relationship with her lord husband and how strong it was.

Tyrion and Ellyn Lannister never allowed anyone's speech to bother them. Both of them had long ago built up a resistance to harmful words. Of course, there were some types of words that could hurt people. However, in the long run, only gossip and rumor could do so, and only if other people were gullible and imprudent enough to believe in them. Slander and insult could only hurt a person if that person allowed them to. Tyrion and Ellyn never allowed themselves to be
offended by rude remarks.

Each other, on the other hand…

Ellyn knew for a fact that Tyrion would never have tolerated all this "Imp's Bitch" business if his wife decided it upset her. Likewise, Ellyn would not put up with anyone saying cruel things about her husband. Any person who dared to do so was dealt a harsh lesson in pain.

The day after Khal Drogo and Princess Daenerys' wedding, one of the Dothraki had brazenly offered to take Ellyn riding. Straightaway, she realized he was not referring to horses, and she promptly declined. Unfortunately, the man did not give up that easily. Even when he became a little more forceful, she attempted to dismiss him calmly, as she did not want to resort to bloodshed so soon.

When she made it clear that Tyrion was the only man for her, the Dothraki had laughed and said "You and that… thing? No wonder you refuse. You do not even know how to lay with real man."

That was when Ellyn's patience reached its end. Determined to defend Tyrion's honor, she challenged the Dothraki to a duel. He was quick to accept, and he claimed "You will land on your back, and then you will submit."

The duel did not quite go the way he expected it to. As a matter of fact, it was rather short; Ellyn was taller, stronger, and faster than her opponent. She did not even have to draw her sword to defeat him. All she needed was the dagger Tyrion had gifted to her at their first meeting. His arakh was no match for it.

In less than two minutes, the Dothraki was on his knees, and Ellyn had a firm grip on his head with her left hand. She held her dagger to his face with her right hand. She was tempted to slit his throat or cut out his tongue, but she felt that would have been too merciful. She wanted to humiliate him the way he humiliated Tyrion. So instead, she cut off his braid and dangled it in front of his face. That certainly left an impact.

Before that day, that man had been one of the most esteemed riders in Drogo's horde. Now he rode near the back with the servants, the elderly, the children, the ill, and the lame. Furthermore, he made sure to keep a fair amount of space between himself and the Lannisters. Ellyn was pleased for that. He will not be disturbing us again for a very long time. Or ever, if he has the sense of a goat.

At any rate, Ellyn was curious as to why Princess Daenerys had ordered the khalasar to halt. She decided to investigate. She pulled on the reins of her destrier, and it carried her out into the open.

"Where are you going, Ellyn?" Dacey stated enquiringly.

"To find Daenerys," the younger woman responded, "She must have a reason for wanting to stop."

"I'll go with you," Dacey proclaimed. Ellyn would have questioned that proposal, but she chose not to.

Although Dacey was Ellyn's sister-by-law, she was also her superior officer. Ellyn was now a member of the Legion without Banners, and even the non-Legionnaire Westerosi in their party were following the Northwoman's orders. Aside from that, Dacey did not seem as bothered by the heat as she had been a few minutes ago. At least she does not look likely to faint anymore. For now.

Ellyn Lannister and Dacey Mormont separated from the rest of the riders in their row, and they
trotted to the head of the company. They kept an eye out for Daenerys Targaryen. At first, they
could not spot her or her silver mare. Then Dacey pointed to the southeast. Ellyn looked in that
direction, and she saw a flash of silver.

"Where is she going?" Ellyn thought aloud.

"I do not know," Dacey remarked, "But she's won't be alone for long."

It was then that Ellyn realized another horse had parted from the horde. The rider of this horse was
blonde, much like Daenerys. That could only be her brother, Viserys. He seemed to be following
his sister, and he was armed with either an arakh or a spear. It was too hard to tell which at this
distance.

"This could mean trouble," Ellyn perceived.

"Indeed," said Ser Bonifer Hasty, who abruptly appeared at her other side.

He had been riding near the front of the company. Ellyn had noticed that wherever he went,
Daenerys tended to be close by. It was though he was determined to stay near her. Maybe he was
obligated to protect her. I can tell he doesn't just want to fuck her. They wouldn't call him Bonifer
the Good for that.

"We should go after them," Ser Bonifer proposed.

"I agree," Dacey conceded, "There is no telling what might be out there, and their safety is our
priority."

"Oh, it is not his safety I'm concerned about," the Stormlander knight spat. As you've repeatedly
demonstrated. Still, he made a good point. Viserys had proven to be a hazard to his sister's
security.

Eddison Tollett then emerged from the column and muttered "Ser, my ladies, not to sound
impertinent, but Daenerys specifically told us to wait here until she returned."

"So?" Ellyn bluntly countered, "We're under no obligation to follow her demands."

"She's right," Ser Bonifer stated, "We are only travelling with the khal; by no means have we
actually complemented our forces to his."

"Besides, when orders compromise the well-being of the person who issued them, it is not wrong
to discard them," Dacey contended, "Oftentimes, it would be wrong not to."

"Unless it was to look after the well-being of those who received the orders," Dolorous Edd
disputed.

"We could debate this all day," Ellyn mumbled sardonically, "Or we could shut up and try to catch
up with Viserys before he can damage his sister again."

"Right, right, of course," Dacey acknowledged. She turned back to the southeast and stated "Let's
move out."

She, Ellyn, and Ser Bonifer proceeded to head after the Targaryens. They were accompanied by
two of the Dothraki. Ellyn recognized them as Jhogo, one of Daenerys' khas, and Irri, one of her
handmaids. They must share our concern. Of course, it would be in their interests to as much as it
would be in ours.
At first, Ellyn and the other four only went at a brisk trot. Before long, they spotted Daenerys stopping her silver and climbing off of her. By then, Viserys was rapidly nearing his sister. That was when the others broke into a gallop.

Viserys managed to reach Daenerys almost thirty full seconds before they did. That was almost too late of them. When they were upon her, Viserys had forced his sister onto the ground, and his hands were clasped around her neck.

Jhogo was swift to respond. With a crack of his whip, he caught Viserys by the throat and roughly pulled him off Daenerys. The blond man cried out in anguish as the whip dug into his skin. Even when he was flat on his back, Jhogo kept tugging it hard to ensure that Viserys did not recover from his attack.

Ser Bonifer speedily climbed off his horse and went to Daenerys' side. As he gently pulled her to her feet, he queried "Did he hurt you, Your Grace?"

"No," the blond woman replied, "I am well, but thank you, all the same."

"Think nothing of it," Ser Bonifer asserted as he brushed the dirt off her attire.

"What were you doing out here, Your Grace?" Dacey enquired, "Why did you ask the company to halt?"

"I was trying to see how far I could ride out on my own," Daenerys illuminated, "I was not attempting to escape or anything of the sort. Doing so would have been pointless, anyway. All I wanted was a moment of solitude."

"I can understand that," Ellyn mentioned. In her youth, she had treasured her time alone greatly. Back then, she had actually preferred to be all by herself. It was not until she first met Tyrion that she became more outgoing. She still liked to have a little time to herself, albeit only occasionally. "Is it not ironic that we are surrounded by empty wilderness, yet there is not a bit of privacy to be found in our present company?"

"That is ironic," Bonifer Hasty conceded. He then turned back to Daenerys and inquired "Do you know why your brother attacked you, Your Grace?"

"He did not appreciate being ordered to halt," Daenerys answered him plainly.

Viserys was still squirming on the ground with Jhogo's whip coiled around his neck. The kha looked to Daenerys and said something in his native language. Irri translated it into the Common Tongue: "Jhogo asks what you would have done with this one, Khaleesi. Would death or disfigurement be a more suitable punishment for him?"

"He is my brother," Daenerys pronounced, "I would not see him harmed."

I am so happy my brothers did not turn out so rotten.

Irri repeated Daenerys' statements to Jhogo in guttural Dothraki. He seemed somewhat displeased, and he made another declaration. Irri translated this one, as well. She stated "Jhogo advises you to at least take an eye or a foot to teach him his place."

"Jhogo presents a fine proposal," said Bonifer Hasty, reaching for his sword, "Should you wish it, I will do the deed myself, Your Grace."

Viserys was starting to look really scared by this point. Ser Bonifer seemed pleased by that. In a
way, Ellyn found it quaintly satisfying, too. She always took delight in seeing brutes learning a rough yet much-needed lesson in humility.

Nevertheless, she also believed in the sacredness of family bonds. As such, she professed "Daenerys can decide her own brother's fate. That is her prerogative."

Daenerys gazed up at the Westerlander and smiled at her. Obviously, she appreciated Ellyn backing her up. The young woman from the west smiled back at the girl.

Princess Daenerys then announced "My brother must be chastised, but so long as he is my family, I will allow no harm to befall him. However, he must realize where he belongs in the khalasar. So… take away his horse."

As much as Jhogo and Ser Bonifer advocated maiming Viserys, both of them seemed to approve of that idea even more. Ellyn was well-aware why. To the Dothraki, those who travelled on foot were viewed as the lowest of the low. Such men were regarded as eunuchs. Making Viserys an actual eunuch has some appeal of its own. But I'll not say that; Daenerys has already selected his punishment.

Jhogo released Viserys from the tight hold of his whip. As he went to take charge of Viserys' horse, the blond man struggled to catch his breath and regain his bearings. Once he was a little more composed, he shouted in a hoarse voice "Clegane, Hasty, kill these Dothraki dogs and discipline my slut of a sister!"

*Didn't his mother ever teach him anything of courtesy? Oh, wait… she wasn't in his life for that long. I guess no one taught him manners then.* That was hardly surprising. In fact, it explained everything about Viserys' unstable persona. If madness was not to blame, it was poor upbringing.

"Give us a reason why we should," Ser Bonifer spat mockingly, "It couldn't be because you are the rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms. The Targaryens lost the Iron Throne long ago."

"And even if they hadn't, your brother Rhaegar had two sons," Lady Dacey pointed out, "One of which rides with us."

"I was born in Westeros just as you were!" Viserys shrieked, "You would side with foreign scum over your own countrymen?!"

"Since this 'foreign scum' is our ally at present, yes," Ellyn wittily commented, "Far as I can tell, you hardly even qualify as a tentative ally. In fact, you are closer to a fiend than a friend."

"I wasn't talking to you, Lannister whore," Viserys snapped angrily.

"I'm the whore?" Ellyn drily uttered, "I am not the one who bartered with his own flesh and blood."

Viserys gave a wicked sneer and mumbled "Yet your own parents gave you away to the monstrous spawn of a backstabbing traitor."

In response to that, Ellyn grimaced, but she did not lose her composure. Instead, she brought her destrier a little closer to Viserys, glared down at him, and proclaimed "Firstly, I was not forced into that match; I consented to it. Secondly, Tyrion Lannister is seven times the man you will ever be. Thirdly… do you know what happened to the last man who slighted my lord husband?"

At that, she displayed her dagger. Viserys quivered at the sight of it, even though Ellyn did not remove it from its sheath. She just smirked, tucked it away, and remarked "Well, you'll see him soon enough. At the very back of the horde, where you belong."
Viserys was effectively rendered shocked as well as speechless, just as Ellyn intended.

After Ser Bonifer Hasty and Princess Daenerys Targaryen climbed back onto their horses, they – along with Lady Ellyn Lannister, Lady Dacey Clegane, Irri, and Jhogo – made their way back to the khalasar. Jhogo led Viserys Targaryen's horse away by the reins, leaving the prince without a mount.

As they went to rejoin the horde, Ellyn looked back at Viserys. He simply sat planted on the ground, pouting and sulking. He made for a truly pitiful specimen of a man. *Even more pitiful than usual, that is.*

"You think he'll just stay there?" Ellyn conjectured. A part of him hoped he would. But the other part remembered that they still needed him, alive and well. *Unless the King changes his mind again.*

"No," Dacey stated, "Sooner or later, he'll return to the company. Between his pride and his life, he would most definitely pick his life."

"Yes, even he must have that much sense," Bonifer Hasty contended.

"He does," Daenerys softly affirmed, "But I fear I may have woken the dragon again."

Ellyn and the others knew that was the expression Daenerys used whenever her brother was pissed off. Which, in truth, was quite often. Be that as it may, she only applied it in circumstances when she provoked him into threatening to physically injure her.

"Do not let that worry you, Your Grace," Ser Bonifer advised the girl, "His days of taking his rage out on you are in the past."

"Aside from that, Viserys is hardly a dragon," Dacey perceived, "My cousin Jorah would probably call him 'less than the shadow of a snake.'"

*A fitting label for a deposed prince.*

"What would he say of me?" Daenerys said inquisitively.

"I wouldn't know," Dacey admitted, "I suppose he would argue that you, your niece, and your nephews are the closest things to dragons left."

"Other than…?" Daenerys began.

"Yes, apart from those eggs." Lady Dacey interjected, "But we have no way of knowing when or how they will hatch. Until they do, you and your brother Rhaegar's children are the only true dragons in the whole of the world."

"What about the maester of Castle Black?" Ellyn pointed out. She and Tyrion had learned of Aemon Targaryen's true heritage when they visited the Wall. *He was easily one of the kindest and most likeable of the black brothers.*

"I did not forget Maester Aemon," Dacey claimed, "I once met the man, too, Ellyn. Alas, he is very old and frail, and a sworn brother of the Night's Watch besides. There is not very much of the dragon in him anymore."

"I still hope to meet him before his time ends," Daenerys remarked.
"With luck, you will, Your Grace," Ser Bonifer supposed. *With more luck, that will be before the Others advance on the Seven Kingdoms.*

After trotting in quietness for a little bit, Princess Daenerys brought her horse alongside Lady Ellyn's, and she politely stated "Excuse me, my lady."

"Yes, Your Grace?" said Ellyn, turning to the blond girl.

"I just wished to compliment you," Daenerys told her sweetly, "Your handling of that situation with my brother was superb."

Ellyn was flattered. She smiled and commented "You did quite beautifully yourself."

"Thank you," Daenerys murmured appreciatively, "I feel I owe that to you. Your support was a great boost to my confidence."

"You seem plenty confident already," Ellyn observed, "After all, an unconfident woman could not have endured what you have endured thus far."

"That may be," Daenerys debated, shrugging lightly, "Still… I have come to admire you and Lady Dacey. I would imagine that many of the women of the Seven Kingdoms look up to the two of you."

"They all do," Dacey cheekily stated, "Literally."

Daenerys giggled at that jape. Ellyn giggled, too. *Because it is irrefutably true.* After they had their laugh, the blond girl pronounced "I would be most grateful if both of you would feast with me tonight."

Ellyn was taken aback by the suddenness of that invitation. The invitation itself, on the other hand, delighted her. "Certainly."

"I would be honored," Dacey claimed.

"Wonderful," Princess Daenerys muttered giddily, "And, if you could, please bring my nephew's lover and maid along."

"What about your nephew himself?" Ellyn noted.

"As much as I would like Jon to attend, it would be for the best if no man other than my brother entered my tent whilst my husband was elsewhere," Daenerys contended, "Aside from that, my sun-and-stars plans to take him and his direwolf hunting this evening."

Ellyn and Dacey snickered. They both knew "sun-and-stars" was a term of endearment Daenerys reserved for Khal Drogo. By the way she used it, it sounded like a very affectionate term. *That would suggest her marriage has at least a little happiness in it.*

"We will be there, Your Grace," Dacey asserted.

"All four of us," Ellyn added in. Of course, she could not really speak for all of them just yet. *Let us hope Ygritte is in one of her more agreeable moods today.*

Soon, they got back to the khalasar. After that, the Dothraki and the Westerosi resumed their march to the east. Eventually, Viserys got up off his ass and ran after them, just as Dacey predicted he would. Ellyn and many of the Dothraki were amused by his efforts to catch up with the column.
The horde kept riding for several hours more. When they finally stopped for the day, the Sun was still overhead. Ellyn thought that quaint. Usually they did not cease until the Sun was starting to disappear over the western horizon. *Drogo must have his reasons for stopping sooner.* Whatever those reasons were, they meant a few more hours' respite for her and everyone else, so she could hardly complain.

As her fellow Westerosi and their Dothraki associates made camp all around her, Ellyn Lannister dismounted her brown destrier. *It feels damn good to be on my feet again. Viserys might disagree, though.* The thought of that made her grin wickedly.

Dacey was still with her. *She looks exhausted.* The Bear Islander climbed off her own mount. When she landed on her feet, she doubled over, as though she was going to collapse. Ellyn quickly stepped up to her sister-by-law and took ahold of her arms.

"Dacey?" she murmured anxiously.

At first, the Northwoman said nothing. Then she mumbled softly "I'm sorry. It's... it's just so fucking hot."

As Ellyn held onto Dacey's arms, she realized the sleeves of her tunic were drenched in sweat. However, Dacey's forehead was free of perspiration. That meant she had either run out of water, or she just was not sweating, despite the Sun's rays constantly bearing down on her.

That was not all that was amiss. Dacey could hardly stand straight, she appeared to have difficulty focusing, her skin was red and dry, her breathing was rapid and shallow, her heartbeat was unnaturally fast, and she looked as though she was going to expel her last meal.

The problem soon dawned on Ellyn. It was as she suspected earlier. *She has heat exhaustion.* Ellyn was no maester, but she knew the signs and symptoms of heat exhaustion when she saw them. At this moment, Dacey was exhibiting many of them.

"Come on," Ellyn urged her sister-by-law, "Let's find you some shade."

Dacey was hardly in a position to protest or argue. Thus, she allowed the younger woman to give her a helping hand and lead her away from the scene. *Hopefully, our tents have already been erected.* She was reasonably certain they had. House Clegane and House Lannister had very reliable retainers.

They were still in the center of the Dothraki horde. Ellyn moved in such a way that it seemed she was the one who needed assistance, not Dacey. She did that so that the Bear Islander's weakened state was concealed, and thus, she would not lose the hard-earned respect of the Dothraki. There was a chance their opinion of the Westerlander woman might go down, but Ellyn did not mind. Personally, she could not have cared less what the Dothraki thought of her.

At any rate, this charade seemed to successfully mislead the majority of the people in the area. Alas, it did not fool everyone.

Before Ellyn and Dacey were anywhere near their tents, they encountered Princess Daenerys and her handmaids. The blond girl saw right through their act almost straightaway.

"Is something wrong with Lady Dacey?" Daenerys asked in concern. *She is more observant than I gave her credit for.*

"Heat exhaustion," Ellyn apprised her, "She needs to get out of the Sun. I'm taking her to her tent."
"That will take too long," Daenerys perceived, "Bring her to mine instead."

"Is that wise, Your Grace?" Dacey inquired.

"Standing out here discussing it isn't," Ellyn candidly remarked.

"Please, don't argue, my lady," Daenerys beseeched the Northwoman, "Just come with me."

Ellyn looked up at Dacey, as though she was awaiting instructions on how to proceed. Ultimately, the older woman sighed and mumbled "Very well."

Thank the gods she decided not to be difficult this time.

They only had to walk another twenty feet before they reached Daenerys' tent. Once they got there, the blonde girl discreetly let them inside. Ellyn noted the khalessi's accommodations were rather spacious and elegant. They practically made the highborn pavilion she shared with Tyrion and Duncan look like a cheap hovel by comparison.

Princess Daenerys and her handmaids followed the taller women into the tent. Once they were out of sight of the Dothraki, Ellyn was able to drop their act. Daenerys was kind enough to give her a hand with Dacey. She gestured to a pile of cushions in the center of the tent and proposed "Let's put her down there."

Ellyn nodded and brought her sister-by-law over to the cushions. She carefully lowered Dacey onto her back. As the Northwoman got settled, Daenerys dispatched orders to her handmaids. She instructed them "Doreah, fetch some water. The colder, the better. Irri, Jhiqui, help me get her clothes off."

The Lysene girl dipped her head and exited the tent. The two Dothraki girls obediently knelt beside their mistress, and they began to undress Dacey.

As they unfastened her cloak and removed it, Dacey murmured "Is this necessary, Your Grace?"

"You could continue to overheat if you keep all this attire on, my lady," Daenerys contended.

"She's right," Ellyn conceded, "You should not have been wearing so much to begin with, Dacey."

"Excess garments do cause excess heating," Irri debated, "It is known."

"It is known," said Jhiqui. Once the cloak was off, the two of them proceeded to take Dacey's hauberk off next.

"If you'd like, we could provide you something else to wear," Daenerys offered.

"While I am grateful, I doubt you'd have anything that would fit me," Dacey stated drily. I don't think any woman would.

"I believe you are correct," Daenerys muttered, "However, Khal Drogo has amassed plenty of riches from his many campaigns. Among those riches is a vast collection of fine apparel. Perhaps we might find something in your size, my lady."

"That'll work," Dacey remarked as Irri and Jhiqui started to remove the jerkin she wore beneath her hauberk. As they unlaced the front of it, she added in "As long as you do not have to go out of your way."

"You needn't worry about that," Daenerys asserted. A minute later, Doreah returned with two
pitchers of water. She placed them next to her mistress. Daenerys picked one of them up and held it out to Dacey, urging her "Drink. Slowly."

The Northwoman took the pitcher, raised it to her lips, and took a deep swig. After swallowing, she gave the pitcher back to Daenerys, who then turned to Ellyn and held it out to her. "Would you care for some, my lady?"

"As it happens, my waterskin ran dry a couple hours ago," Ellyn muttered frankly, "So, I would be delighted."

She accepted the pitcher from the blonde girl and took a long sip from it. To her amazement, the water was rather cool. *This is quaint. The water's been tepid since we left Pentos. Yet today it isn't. Maybe we are near a pond or a river. I wonder... when's the last time I checked our position on a map?*

After getting a drink, Ellyn lowered the pitcher and set it down on the ground, close to the cushions. At the same time, Daenerys took the other pitcher, dipped a small piece of cloth in it, wrung the cloth out, and placed it against Dacey's forehead. As she held the damp cloth there, she disclosed "Your sister Alysane did not react favorably to the heat when she first arrived in Essos, either. Of course, she had plenty of time to grow accustomed to it at Magister Illyrio's manse. You were not afforded the same opportunity."

"Indeed, I wasn't," Dacey muttered. *To her credit, most of us were expecting to leave Essos on the same day we arrived in it. Had Daenerys not chosen to go through with her marriage to Drogo, we would have. "If I had known we would end up riding across the continent, I would have packed lighter clothes. A grave error in judgement on my part that I did not."

"Even you can't be totally ready for everything," Ellyn reassured her sister-by-law. *Mostly, but not totally."

"I suppose so," Dacey admitted. Before Irri and Jhiqui could remove her tunic and leave her bare from the waist up, she stopped the handmaids and told Daenerys "I am immensely grateful for your investment in my well-being, Your Grace, but I do not wish to be a burden to you."

"You are no burden to me," Daenerys proclaimed sternly, "Lady Dacey, I owe my life to your lord husband, and your people took care of me and my brother for the last year and a-half. Please, let me take care of you for the rest of the day. It is the very least I could do in return."

For a moment, Dacey seemed as though she would protest again. Instead, she smiled lightly and said "If you insist."

*I think she does. Very adamantly.* In any case, it looked as though Dacey would be in good hands. Ellyn did not think her presence was required any longer. She rose to her full height, clapped her hands together, and pronounced "I would stay, but I haven't seen my husband and son since this morning. So, I'm going to spend the rest of the afternoon with them. I'll be back for supper in the early evening. If for any reason you need me before then, you can find me in my usual spot near the western edge of the encampment."

"As you say, my lady," Daenerys avowed, nodding her head.

"Could you tell Alyver that I'll see him and Torrhen later tonight?" Dacey requested.

"Of course," Ellyn responded, "And don't worry; I won't say anything about what transpired here. I'll just tell him you had business with the khaleesi."
"Thank you," Dacey said appreciatively.

Ellyn Lannister then exited the khaleesi’s tent, leaving her sister-by-law in the tender care of Princess Daenerys Targaryen and her handmaids. From there, she headed to the west.

Before long, Ellyn spotted a crimson red pavilion marked with the golden lion of House Lannister. That was where she, Tyrion, and Duncan slept.

When she stepped inside, she saw that Tyrion was not there, but Duncan was. Greta was looking after him.

"Good afternoon, milady," Greta greeted her mistress.

"And to you, Greta," the tall woman rejoined. As her handmaiden carefully handed her son over to her, Ellyn inquired "Have you seen my husband?"

"Lord Tyrion went to speak with the khal," Greta revealed. "He should be back soon."

"'Soon' being 'now',' a familiar masculine voice uttered wittily from the entrance of the pavilion. Ellyn turned, and sure enough, the owner of the voice was none other than her lord husband. She smiled at him, and Tyrion smiled back. She did not care that his smile was crooked; it always brought her warmth and joy.

"Is Duncan doing well?" Tyrion inquired.

"I wouldn't know; I just got here," Ellyn cheekily replied.

"He's just fine, milord and milady," Greta notified them, just before she left the pavilion to see to her other duties.

"Excellent," Tyrion commented. He waddled over to his wife, and she knelt to his level so they could both see their son. He was smiling, too. Tyrion tickled him under his chin, causing Duncan to giggle. Tyrion smiled again and said "I noticed he seems to prefer this weather to that of the North."

"So have I," Ellyn disclosed. *That is one thing he and his aunt do not agree on; hot over cold.* She solemnly added in "That is good. He should enjoy it while he can."

"We all should," Tyrion contended, "But no need to lament on imminent disasters."

"Quite so," Ellyn muttered in agreement. She sat down at the table where she and her family broke their fast, lunched, and supped together. As Tyrion sat in the chair opposite hers, she asked him "Why did you go to see Khal Drogo?"

"You may have noticed we made camp much earlier than usual," Tyrion pointed out. As Ellyn nodded her head to confirm, he expounded "I was curious as to why, and I decided to ask the khal. It turned out to be good news. Vaes Dothrak is less than another day's ride away, and Drogo aims for us to get there shortly after daybreak."

"Why daybreak?" Ellyn wondered. She did not see what possible difference the time of their arrival might make.

"I do not know," Tyrion confessed, "Maybe it is simply the khal's preference."

"It could be," Ellyn supposed. She then shrugged and observed "In any case, when we get there is
Drogo's decision. We would be prudent not to question it."

"My thoughts exactly, my love," Tyrion concurred, "Aside from that, we should dwell on the most important part. We are nearly at our journey's end."

"The first half of our journey's end, you mean," Ellyn corrected him.

"Yes, yes, we still have to go back the way we came," Tyrion dismissively commented. "Still, there is no telling how long we will remain at Vaes Dothrak."

"However long that is, hopefully we can take a break from riding once we get there," Ellyn conjectured.

"That would be a welcome relief," Tyrion wryly pronounced. He spent the next few seconds stretching his body. Then he said "Spending so much time in the saddle is making my legs cramp even worse than usual, and my buttocks are almost numb."

"I know what you mean," Ellyn declared, rubbing a sore on her lower right thigh, "My loins have not ached this much since Duncan came into the world."

He scoffed. "Yes, and would I be right to assume this experience is nowhere near as rewarding?"

"No, not nearly," Ellyn affirmed, gazing down at their son and holding him close, "However, the pain is not the most insufferable part. For me, the most insufferable part is wandering through this vast landscape with nothing but tall, inedible grass all around us."

"Yes, it has become quite tedious," Tyrion mumbled. "Saddle sores I can tolerate, but not boredom. Boredom is the bane of my existence."

"Mine, too," Ellyn agreed. That's one of the best aspects of our marriage; we never bore each other.

Tyrion then turned to his wife with a devious look across his countenance. She referred to that as his "Impish" expression. "I know something we could do to combat our common enemy of boredom."

"What?" Ellyn asked in interest.

"The Dothraki believe all things of importance should be done under the stars," Tyrion informed her, "Perhaps tonight, after we put Duncan to bed, we could mate in the style of the horselords."

Ellyn did not know whether to guffaw or sneer. "You want us to have sex outside?"

"Only if you do, too," Tyrion assured his wife, "As long as we're among these people, we should show some regard for their customs. Furthermore… it would be a new experience."

Most women would be appalled if their husbands presented a suggestion such as that. Then again, most women were unwilling to marry a dwarf. In that capacity and others, Ellyn Lannister had been different from most women. Despite her initial shock, the idea did have an odd appeal.

Apart from that, Ellyn was never embarrassed to be seen with Tyrion. She even openly kissed him on the lips in public. Granted, this is much more than kissing or even snogging, but still… who knows? Ultimately, she told her husband "I'll think on this. You'll have my answer when I get back tonight."
"Back from what?" Tyrion queried.

"Oh, I forgot to mention," Ellyn realized, "Princess Daenerys invited me and a few other women to dine with her this evening."

"I see," Tyrion muttered, almost indifferently, "Well, we've still a few hours of sunlight left until then. What say the three of us pass the remainder of the afternoon together?"

"There is nothing I'd rather do," Ellyn stated sincerely. Unless, of course, we had the option to bond back home instead of here.

Ellyn Lannister spent the rest of the afternoon mingling with her husband and son. About half that interval they spent by themselves in their pavilion. For the other half, they went outside and interacted with their friends and associates. Those individuals included Ser Lothor Brune, Ser Brynden Tully, Prince Jon Targaryen, his paramour Ygritte, Dolorous Edd Tollett, and, of course, Ellyn and Tyrion's nephews Alyver and Torrhen.

To Ellyn's relief, the boys did not seem too bothered by their mother's absence. Torrhen had been fed shortly before they stopped, and Alyver could find plenty to keep himself occupied. Luckily, if they needed anything, they were not unattended. Their Aunt Alysane was voluntarily supervising them until her sister returned that night.

When the Sun began to set in the west, Ellyn kissed her husband and son good-bye, and she left them with the promise to come back to them whilst the night was young. She fully intended to fulfill that promise. To her, time with family was precious. Additionally, she had not forgotten the suggestion Tyrion had made earlier. True to her word, she would give it some serious thought. I just may indulge him, just to see how he would indulge me.

At this time, Khal Drogo was preparing to go on the last hunt of the day. As always, his bloodriders and the usual members of the hunting party were going with him. This time, Prince Jon Targaryen, Ghost, Ser Gerold Hightower, and some of the other Westerosi were coming along, too.

Over the course of the last several weeks, Ellyn had noticed how Khal Drogo and Prince Jon had progressively gotten better-acquainted with each other. Being the former's wife and the latter's aunt, Princess Daenerys Targaryen had been the catalyst who brought them together.

Ellyn could not tell which of them was more interested in getting to know the other. For all she knew, they really were not so interested in one another, and they were only mingling for Daenerys' sake. Since both men are still alive and unscathed after a full month, I can assume they do not despise each other. That should count for something.

Shortly after the khal and his hunting party set out, Ellyn went to meet an appointment of her own. She easily convinced Ygritte and "Myrna" to come with her. What she did not anticipate was that Lyarra, the mother of Ghost and his packmates, would accompany them, too. Ellyn was somewhat hesitant to bring the grown direwolf along, but her mistress assured her that Lyarra would not cause any trouble.

It takes one wolf to know another, so I'll hold her to her word.

When they got to the khaleesi's tent, they found Aggo with his bow, Jhogo with his whip, and Rakharo with his arakh standing guard. When the women were upon them, the three Dothraki stepped aside to allow them entrance. They eyed Lyarra warily as she approached, but they did not try to stop her from going into the tent.
Did Daenerys know that we'd bring Lyarra? Her khas would not have let a direwolf into her tent unless she permitted it. She knew Ghost was fond of Daenerys, seeing as his master had bonded with her frequently ever since she wed Khal Drogo. Perhaps Jon's "maid" and Ghost's mother had been present at some of their encounters with Daenerys. Or...

When Ellyn entered the tent, she found it in much the same condition as before. There were some notable differences, though. A small table had been placed in the center of the room. The table was very short; almost level with the ground. Its surface held a platter of roasted goat, an assortment of fruits, a block of cheese, two loaves of bread, a bottle of wine, and a bottle of fermented mare's milk.

Daenerys sat at the head of the table. She had changed out of her normal bare-sleeved riding gown into a flowing dress of red silk and black lace. It complemented her petite figure nicely. Irri and Jhiqui stood at the wall of the tent behind their mistress. Doreah was nowhere to be seen at present.

Furthermore, Dacey was no longer lying on her back on the pile of cushions. She was sitting up straight at the table next to Daenerys, and she seemed to have recovered from her heat exhaustion. She looked totally revitalized. Interestingly, her apparel had changed, too.

She was now wearing a sleeveless gown of green silk and purple lace. Although the dress went all the way down to her ankles, it must have been made for a shorter woman originally. It was more than a little tight on her, particularly across the upper chest. At a glance, Ellyn could tell the bodice was too small for her bust. If she moves too quickly, something might pop out. She snickered at the thought of that.

In spite of that, she thought her sister-by-law looked beautiful. Ellyn had only seen her wear a dress twice before, and both those occasions had been her brothers' weddings. As it happened, other than her own wedding, those were the only times Ellyn had willingly worn a dress in her life, too.

"Well, don't you look nice," Ellyn wryly remarked, folding her arms and walking over to the table, "Had I known this would be a formal event, I would have dressed for the occasion."

Dacey smirked and commented "Well, luckily for you, we went ahead and thought of that."

Daenerys made a gesture, and Irri and Jhiqui stepped forward. Each of them took one of Ellyn's arms and guided her over to a huge covering. Doreah stood on the other side of the covering with another sleeveless dress in her hands. This one was about the same size as Dacey's, but the color scheme was different. It was made of yellow silk and red lace.

"What do you think, my lady?" said the Lyseni girl.

"It's… lovely." Ellyn Lannister was widely considered to be one of the wisest and most observant women in Westeros. However, she did not need her wits to figure out what was about to happen.

Her supposition was confirmed a couple seconds later, when Irri and Jhiqui began to undress her.

At first, Ellyn felt a strong desire to protest. Then it occurred to her than Daenerys and her handmaids may have gone to a lot of effort to procure this dress. To refuse it would have been impolite and ungracious. Besides, it is a lovely gown.

Of course, Ellyn was still fully capable of dressing herself. She had been since her sixth nameday. Nonetheless, this was Irri and Jhiqui's livelihood; to obey their khalessi's every command. As such, Ellyn felt it would not have been right of her to prevent them from doing their jobs. At least I know they can be discreet.
Ellyn said nothing and allowed the two Dothraki girls to strip her down to her smallclothes. She blushed when her breasts were exposed to them, but she did not cover them up. Never let your embarrassment show to anyone, she reminded herself.

Thankfully, her discomfort only lasted about another minute. That was how long it took Irri and Jhiqui to dress her in the gown. Ellyn discovered it was an almost perfect fit. Like Dacey's, the bodice was a little small. Other than that, it felt as though it had been specifically tailored to her physique.

Once the Dothraki girls were finished, Ellyn tentatively stepped out from behind the covering. Dacey looked as though she would laugh. She did not; she just grinned and nodded.

"It suits you, my lady," Daenerys perceived.

"Thank you, Your Grace," Ellyn said gratefully. For both the compliment and the gown.

Daenerys Targaryen gestured for Ellyn to sit down. The Westerlander woman compliantly walked over to the table and took a place beside the blond girl.

Once Ellyn was seated, Irri and Jhiqui went over to Myrna, and they led her over to behind the covering. A couple minutes later, Lyanna Stark emerged in a sleeveless gown of grey silk and white lace. It has been years since she last wore such fine clothing, and she likes it even less than Dacey or myself. Yet even so and even now, she wears it well. Ellyn watched as Lyanna sauntered across the room and planted herself next to Dacey. Lyarra padded over to her mistress and sat on her haunches.

After that, Daenerys Targaryen announced to her handmaids "You may go now."

Irri, Jhiqui, and Doreah collectively bowed to her and filed out of the tent. As they exited, they passed by Ygritte, who took the liberty of taking the last seat at the table, between Ellyn and Lyanna.

"Thanks for not forcing me to wear a dress," she mumbled gruffly.

"Well, Jon did say you do not care for such attire," Daenerys recounted.

"Yeah," Ygritte confirmed, "Never worn a dress in my life. Nor do I plan to."

Ellyn Lannister, Dacey Clegane, and Lyanna Stark were of a similar mindset. Normally, they would pick chainmail and boiled leather over silk and lace any day of the week. Be that as it may, they were not completely averse to flowing gowns. In fact, Ellyn was quite pleased with the one she currently wore, and apparently, so were the Northwomen. I wonder if the princess will let us keep these. She never expected to think that about a dress.

Right then, she noticed something peculiar. Her dress was yellow and red. The colors of House Clegane of Clegane's Keep and House Lannister. Dacey's dress was green and purple. The colors of House Mormont and House Clegane of Moat Cailin. Daenerys' dress was red and black. The colors of House Targaryen. Lastly… Lyanna's dress was grey and white. The colors of House Stark... how could that be?

That could have been a coincidence and nothing more, but given the circumstances, the possibility of coincidence was extremely unlikely. The only other explanation was that… Daenerys knew.

"May I ask you a question, Your Grace?" Ellyn stated quietly.
"Certainly," the blond girl said in response. Ellyn chose her words carefully: "For my curiosity's sake, how much do you know of your nephew's maid?"

"The truth," Daenerys answered straightforwardly, "Jon confided in me a couple days ago."

Ellyn was somewhat relieved that Daenerys had not seen through that farce, as well. All the same, she could not relax just yet.

"Does Viserys know?" she said anxiously.

"Jon may know nothing, but his halfwit of an uncle knows even less," Ygritte japed.

Dacey and Lyanna laughed, and Daenerys gave a polite chuckle. It would be for the best if Viserys remains in the dark. Unlike his sister, he cannot be trusted with sensitive information. Of that, Ellyn was certain.

"My khas and my handmaids are unaware of her identity, too," Daenerys disclosed. I was just about to ask that. Outside of your lord brother's inner circle, I am the only other person who knows that both of my brother's wives still live."

"We should keep it that way," Ellyn advised, "Every time someone more learns the truth of Lady Lyanna, we increase the chances of her exposure."

"There we wholeheartedly agree," Dacey assured her sister-by-law.

"That is why I have elected to keep my facial mask on until we sail back to Westeros," Lyanna claimed.

"That would be wise," Ellyn stated approvingly.

"Yes, it would be," Daenerys concurred. She then looked to her own sister-by-law, smiled at her, and remarked "Even so, I hope to see your true face soon, sister."

"I hope for that, as well," Lyanna pronounced. She smiled back and added in "Sister."

There came a short period of silence. It was broken when Ygritte murmured "Now that that's over with, I say we eat."

So, they did. Daenerys served the other women herself. She gave each of them a relatively equal helping of goat, fruit, cheese, and bread. Lyanna's serving of meat was bigger than the others'. That was only because she was sharing it with Lyarra. The mother direwolf had a hearty appetite. Thankfully, it was a very large goat.

Where drink was concerned, they all poured their own cups. At first, no one other than Ygritte touched the fermented mare's milk. Then Ellyn built up the courage to give it a try. It was a little strong, but it was something she could get used to.

All in all, everything tasted delicious. This was easily the best meal Ellyn had eaten since she left Moat Cailin. It was also the most pleasant, the most filling, the most comfortable, and even the most sophisticated. Who would have thought Daenerys Targaryen would be such a gracious hostess? Especially to four older women she has only known for a single turn of the moon?

At the end of supper, Daenerys wiped her fingers and mouth on her napkin, and she cleared her
throat. Once Ellyn and the others gave her their attention, she looked around the table and stated "There are two reasons why I invited you all to sup with me tonight. The first is the simple pleasure of your company. The second is because I wanted to celebrate today with… well, people such as you."

"We're celebrating?" Dacey presumed, a little baffled.

"Just what **are** we celebrating?" Ygritte inquired.

Daenerys enlightened them with "Today happens to be my sixteenth nameday."

Ellyn was stunned. Apparently, so were the others. Whether that was because they were astonished by this revelation or they were mortified not to have realized it before now, she could not say. It was a little of both in her case.

"Do not pity me," Daenerys told them in a reassuring tone, "I did not expect anyone else to remember that. I would have been far more surprised if someone actually **did** remember. Viserys might have, but I do not think he cares. In fact, when I was younger, I even forgot it myself at times."

"Somehow, that makes sense," Ellyn perceived, "The anniversary of one's birth must seem very insignificant when one is desperately striving to avoid one's death."

"Just so, my lady," Daenerys affirmed.

"Well, I'll be the first to wish you happiness on your nameday, Your Grace," Dacey proclaimed, raising her wine goblet.

"I'll drink to that," Lyanna declared, raising hers, too. Soon enough, Ellyn did the same, and Ygritte ultimately followed. Finally, Daenerys lifted her own.

After the toast, Ellyn turned to the princess and stated inquiringly "May I be so bold, Your Grace, as to ask what you meant by 'people such as us?'"

"Please, no more of this 'Your Grace' nonsense," Daenerys bade the others, "I would like you all to call me 'Dany.'"

"Very well, Dany," Ellyn conceded, grinning a bit.

"And in answer to your question, I meant that as praise," Dany specified, "By 'people such as you', I speak of people I admire, people I can identify with, and – most importantly – people who remind me of myself."

"How do we remind you of yourself, Dany?" Dacey inquired. That is something I'd like to know, too.

"There are a number of facets I share with the four of you," Daenerys debated, "Some of you may have noticed a few of them."

"Well, we're all women, we're all natives of Westeros, and we're all a long way from home," Lyanna pointed out.

"While that is all true, there is much more that connects us than **that,**" Daenerys Targaryen revealed. She folded her hands together and stated "I would like to play a game."
"What sort of game?" Lyanna enquired.

"A guessing game, really," Daenerys responded, gazing around the table once more, "There are three special things all five of us have in common. These things may not seem obvious at first, but if you think carefully, they will quickly come to light."

"What exactly is the point of this game?" Ygritte asked, somewhat demandingly.

"I just wish to see if any of you have noticed what I have noticed," Dany claimed.

"Perhaps we have," Dacey conjectured, "Would it be unreasonable to ask for a clue?"

Daenerys shook her head and remarked "Since I believe in fair play, I will give you one hint: all three of them involve family. Beyond that, I will say no more."

Ellyn Lannister, Dacey Clegane, Lyanna Stark, and Ygritte spent the next ten minutes in silent meditation. Each of them sought to determine all the possible characteristics she might have shared with the other three and Princess Daenerys Targaryen.

This was one scenario where Ellyn's sharp wits proved to be a tremendous asset. She was the first to produce a response. She looked to the blond girl and proclaimed "I believe I may have figured two of them out."

"Go ahead, my lady," Dany bade her.

When all eyes were on her, Ellyn professed "First, each of us has been involved in a rather unlikely yet extremely meaningful relationship."

"How so?" Lyanna queried.

"Well, for instance, twenty years ago, no one would have suspected that you and Prince Rhaegar would fall in love," Ellyn elucidated, "Likewise, the relationship between Jon and Ygritte would never have happened if my brother Gregor had not pushed to bring the Free Folk south of the Wall. On that note, the odds of the world's tallest man and tallest woman getting together were practically negligible, yet Gregor and Dacey overcame those odds. As for Tyrion and myself... our difference in height alone is enough to turn heads. Lastly, there is Dany and the khal."

"That speaks for itself," Dacey interjected. Just what I was about to say.

Ellyn leaned back a bit and stated "All of us were matched with someone we may have seemed incompatible with. Despite that, at some point, love blossomed from each of our unions. That happened quite early in my case. I loved Tyrion from the moment he and I were introduced to each other at Lannisport. I would wager none of you felt the same when you first met your own husbands. Or husband-to-be, in Ygritte's case. Nevertheless, I've no doubt that you love them right now."

"You are absolutely right, Ellyn," Dacey proclaimed, "Your brother and I were only colleagues at first, but I've loved him longer than you've known your husband."

"Rhaegar was the only man I've ever loved," Lyanna recounted sadly.

"Your son is the first person I've ever truly loved," Ygritte apprised the wolf woman.

"I did not love Drogo when I married him," Dany confessed, "Our wedding night was far from pleasant. Every night of the following week was almost as bad. At one point, I doubted my own
ability to even survive my marriage. No more, though. I know I will survive it. I still do not know if I really love Khal Drogo, but I feel I will come to in time."

"I applaud your resolve," Dacey commented.

Daenerys smiled, turned back to Ellyn, and told her "You are correct, Lady Ellyn. Our unusual romantic relationships comprise the first of the three special things we all share. Now, would you tell me what you think the second one is?"

"The second thing is the various political and social benefits that come with those relationships," Ellyn pronounced.

"What the fuck does that mean?" Ygritte muttered bluntly.

"I believe she means that by getting involved with the men in our lives, our houses and our people have gotten stronger as a result," Dacey perceived. She glimpsed over at her sister-by-law and asked "Is that right?"

"Yes, that is precisely what I mean," Ellyn confirmed. *It's nice that at least someone knows what I'm talking about.* "Although the Targaryens molded the Seven Kingdoms into one, the North has always stood apart from the rest of the realm. It was Lyanna and Rhaegar who brought ice and fire together. Furthermore, their affair may have been the precursor to Robert's Rebellion, but it was also the precursor to the realm's unification."

"It was?" Lyanna murmured in perplexity. Ellyn Lannister nodded her head solemnly.

"Had you and Rhaegar not eloped, Robert Baratheon would never have seized the Iron Throne," she debated, "Had he never been crowned, the position of Master of Order would not have been created, and my brother would never have occupied it. As such, the Legion without Banners would never have existed, either. Think of all the other things that would never have been if that was the case."

"I suppose Gregor would still be in the Westerlands," Dacey hypothesized, "He and I would never have known each other."

"I concluded as much," Ellyn affirmed, "We are quite fortunate that you do know one another, though. You were and still are the best possible match for the Mountain That Rides."

"I appreciate that, Ellyn," Dacey Clegane muttered thankfully.

"I mean what I say," Ellyn asserted, "Gregor's marriage to you was what officially established him as a Northman and a vassal of House Stark. The Legion has only gained greater status and influence since you and he were wed. One could even argue that your union led to a string of other, equally advantageous unions."

"Such as yours?" Lyanna Stark supposed.

"Yes, such as mine," Ellyn contended, snickering a little, "Now, that is an interesting tale. The whole reason Tyrion and I were acquainted with each other in the first place was because of his father's paranoia."

"How do you mean, my lady?" Dany inquired.

"Ever since my brother founded the Legion and renounced his right to Clegane's Keep, Lord Tywin Lannister has viewed him as a threat," Ellyn elaborated.
"The Old Lion tends to perceive everyone as a threat," Lyanna disputed.

"Fair point," Ellyn admitted, "However, every person outside of the royal family is subject to the Master of Order's judgment. That includes Lord Tywin, even though he is the King's father-by-law. So, Gregor is one of the few men he would ever be subject to."

"Then you can hardly fault him his suspicions," Ygritte argued.

"Another fair point," Ellyn muttered, scratching her temple, "When he realized how powerful Gregor truly was, Lord Tywin thought to keep another member of our house close-by. So, he took my brother Sandor on as his squire. Alas, that was only a temporary solution; it ended when Sandor married Obara Martell. Even so, Tywin was quick to replace one Clegane hostage with another."

"Which was what led to the contract between you and Tyrion," Dacey recalled.

"Correct," said Ellyn. "Tywin Lannister knew that by marrying me off to his son, he could keep me at Casterly Rock indefinitely. My brothers and I realized that as soon as the match was proposed."

"Yet you consented to marry the Imp anyway," Ygritte noted.

Ellyn gave a dismissive shrug and commented "I loved him, and he loved me. That's reason enough to marry. Aside from that… Tywin Lannister underestimates the both of us. He has not even realized that I can be just as much a danger to him as Gregor."

She felt a queer type of amusement from seeing the astonishment on the others' faces.

"If you are wondering, I do not intend to kill my father-by-law," Ellyn Lannister reassured them, "I would never do that, even though he despises his son and only sees me as a hostage. But I am no one's hostage. If I was, I would not be on this side of the Narrow Sea with the rest of you."

"I should say not," Dacey concurred.

"Furthermore," Elly went on, "By tying House Clegane to House Lannister, Lord Tywin has effectively increased the wealth and prestige of my family. And of all his grandchildren, Duncan is the only male among them whose family name is Lannister. Although he hates Tyrion, he holds no enmity towards his youngest grandson. It is quite possible my son will be the Lord Paramount of the Westerlands and Warden of the West."

As long as Jaime and that bitch Lynesse remain as cold to each other as they have been lately, that will definitely be the case.

All of a sudden, Lyanna started laughing.

"Something funny, Lya?" Dacey enquired.

"That is just too rich," the older Northwoman comically remarked, "Duncan's great-grandfather – Ellyn's father's father – was the kennelmaster of Casterly Rock. Now one of his descendants may be the Lord of the Rock one day. I wonder what Tywin would think of that. I mean, can you not see the irony?"

"Oh, I see it," Ellyn drily disclosed, chuckling with her. Enough iron there to forge a suit of armor. When she was done giggling, she said "Before we get any further off-track, let us return to our previous topic of discussion."

"Very well," Ygritte murmured. She knows she's next.
Ellyn turned to the wildling and professed "Even when the world believed Jon to be a bastard, his association with you served as a precedent to relations between the Seven Kingdoms and the Free Folk. It went beyond age-old hostilities and diplomacy. Even if your relationship turned out to be nothing more than a fling, it was founded on trust and intimacy. Two qualities that have almost never existed between the people who live north of the Wall and the people south of it."

"None of that can be denied," the young red-headed woman candidly admitted.

"Your affiliation with Jon is even more significant now," Ellyn pointed out, "Since it turns out he's a trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen, he will be instrumental in restoring House Targaryen's presence in Westeros. To do that, he will require a bride. He could have chosen any woman in the Seven Kingdoms, but he chose you. That will strengthen the alliance between your two cultures even more than before. It is also worth mentioning that since Jon is a prince, once you marry him, you'll become-"

"Don't finish that sentence," Ygritte interrupted, speaking through gritted teeth.

Ellyn scoffed and said plainly "Very well."

Daenerys brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes and told Ellyn "You needn't explain the benefits of my marriage to Drogo, my lady. I am very much aware of them. In fact, they are the very reasons I decided to stay with him."

"Really?" Ellyn stated, intrigued.

Dany nodded, gazed around the tent, and proclaimed "Some of you must have been surprised when I willingly agreed to go through with my marriage."

"Well, none of us expected you to," Dacey remarked.

"My husband suggested you might," Ellyn recounted, "But none of us shared his conviction."

"I actually did consider accepting your offer to escape," Dany confessed, "If you had presented the option to me a year ago, I would have taken it without hesitation. All I knew of the world before then was what Viserys told me. Then your countrymen found us at Pentos. While we were in their protection, I had a new, less subjective source of knowledge. As a result, I have a much better understanding of the world than I did in my childhood. One of the things I learned was that some sacrifices have to be made for the greater good. That was why I chose to be Khal Drogo's khalessi."

Ellyn was astounded. "Do you mean to say you relinquished your freedom and your dignity just so the people of Westeros would gain an alliance with the Dothraki?"

"That is correct," Daenerys firmly pronounced, "It was the hardest choice of my life, but I know it was the right one. After all, the alternative was to leave Drogo behind. By doing so, we would have made an enemy of the Dothraki, and we do not need any more enemies."

"Maybe not," Ygritte remarked, "However, since there would have been a sea between us and him, he would not have posed an immediate threat."

"An immediate one, no," Dany conceded, "But we must think beyond the Long Night. Ever after we defeat the Others, the Seven Kingdoms will continue to engage in trade with the Free Cities. If they so desired, the Dothraki could impair those dealings."

"Worst case scenario, they would attack any Westerosi on sight," Lyanna pointed out.
"Now that I think on it, I may have overestimated my people's ability to extract you, your brother, and ourselves from the wedding," Dacey thought aloud, "Over the last month, I have reflected on every possible way that escape could have gone, and all of them ended in bloodshed on both sides. The only way we would have gotten out of there without suffering heavy casualties was if everything went perfectly. Alas, even for the Legion without Banners, plans never go perfectly."

"That occurred to me, as well," Dany revealed, "That is another reason I do not regret my choice to stay with Drogo. We are going to need every ally we can find in the fight against the White Walkers. The Dothraki are a fearless people, and even Viserys recognizes Khal Drogo's reputation as a warrior and a leader."

"He and his horde would be invaluable to us," Ellyn said in agreement.

Daenerys turned back to the Westerlander and stated "I must salute you, Lady Ellyn. You have correctly placed two of the three special things the five of us share. I don't suppose you have managed to uncover the third one, as well?"

At that, Ellyn Lannister merely shrugged. What family-oriented issue could be just as prominent as our romantic relationships and the benefits of them? She did not want to admit it, but she was at a loss.

Daenerys nodded in understanding and said "I will not fault you if you cannot guess the third one. I myself did not realize it until today."

*Is that a clue?* If it was, it was a vague one.

By now, Dacey, Lyanna, and Ygritte were not even bothering to speculate as to what this third similar feature might have been. They were more interested in watching Ellyn and seeing if she would determine what it was.

After a minute of uninterrupted silence, Dany declared "I will give you one more clue. The third thing we have in common is something we also have in common with Lyarra."

*Well, that narrows it down.* Perhaps it narrowed it down too much. What could three highborn women, a deposed princess, and a wildling share with a mother direwolf?

*Wait... a 'mother' direwolf...* Ellyn noticed something. Lyarra had given birth to a litter of six wolf pups. Dacey was a mother of five. Lyanna was a mother of one and stepmother to two. Her son Jon had gotten Ygritte pregnant. Ellyn herself was a mother of one.

All of them had children or were expecting children. That was something they had in common. As far as Ellyn Lannister knew, the same did not apply to Daenerys. Then Ellyn remembered, *something she only learned today...*

Ellyn gradually turned to face Princess Daenerys Targaryen and asked her "Dany... are you with child?"

The blond girl said nothing. She just smiled.

Ellyn smiled, too. "So, that's the third thing. We're all mothers or expectant mothers."

Daenerys lightly nodded her head. "You really are as astute as people say you are, my lady."

*One of the many reasons why Tyrion and I are so well-matched for one another.*
"Congratulations, Dany," Lyanna bade her late husband's sister.

"Does the khal know?" Ygritte enquired. Her tone suggested she was not actually interested in knowing.

"Not yet," Daenerys replied, "I am going to tell him tonight, when he returns from his hunt."

"I can guarantee he'll be pleased," Dacey contended, "Sometimes, men take the news better than we do. When Gregor and I found out I was pregnant with Rickard, he laughed."

"Rhaegar was enraptured when he learned I was carrying Jon," Lyanna recounted, "Not long after, he went off to war."

"Jon got drunk when I told him of this," Ygritte recalled, placing a hand on her protruding abdomen.

_Tyrion wept. Granted, they were tears of joy, but that's the only time I ever saw him shed a tear._ To spare her husband's dignity, Ellyn did not say that aloud. Instead, she asked Daenerys "What do you think the khal will do?"

"Nothing, at first," Daenerys theorized, "But when we arrive at Vaes Dothrak tomorrow, he'll probably want to celebrate the news then."

"That sounds like him," Lyanna observed, "In any case, I look forward to becoming an aunt again."

"And if ever you have any questions or if ever we could be of assistance to you in any way at all, just say so," Dacey advised Daenerys, "We would be happy to counsel and console you."

_She's been through the process five times, so she certainly knows what she is talking about._

Daenerys grinned at the tallest woman there and said "I will remember that, my lady. Thank you. Thank all of you for coming here tonight."

_Oh, the pleasure is all ours. And partially yours._ Clearly, she had enjoyed that little guessing game.

Not long after, Daenerys' dinner guests left her tent. As Ellyn hoped, she, Dacey, and Lyanna were allowed to keep the dresses the princess had lent them.

Of course, before she went outside, Lyanna exchanged her gown for her usual commoner's garb. It would not do for an ordinary maid to be seen prancing about in such refined formal attire in public.

Dacey's clothes from earlier were still drenched in sweat, and they desperately needed washing. For that reason, her dress was still the only article of clothing available to her. So, her only option was to wear that.

In the meantime, Ellyn's everyday clothes were perfectly fine. She thought about changing back into them. However, she quite liked her own dress. Generally, she hated dresses. Yet this one was an exception. She did not know why. Maybe it was the design, or the person who had gifted it to her.

Ultimately, Ellyn chose to keep her dress on. She fastened her belt around her waists and draped her cloak over her shoulders, but she carried the rest of her clothes under her arm.

Fifteen minutes later, she made it back to the Lannister pavilion. She found Tyrion leaning over
Duncan's cradle, singing softly. He'll never admit it, but he has a wonderful singing voice.

When Ellyn entered the tent, the dwarf looked up, and he grinned at his wife.

She grinned back and walked over to him, saying "Is he still up?"

"No, he just went to sleep," Tyrion informed her.

Sure enough, Duncan Lannister's eyes were shut, he was lying very still, and he made nary the softest sound. He was definitely in the midst of a deep, peaceful slumber.

Ellyn knelt on the other side of the cradle, and she placed a delicate kiss on Duncan's soft cheek. The little boy stirred, but he did not wake up.

"Isn't he beautiful when he sleeps?" Tyrion asked rhetorically.

"He's beautiful always," Ellyn countered.

"Yes," Tyrion stated in agreement. He smirked and wittily murmured "Are you certain he's mine?"

"Quite certain, my love," Ellyn cheekily answered, "If he wasn't, there'd be no other way to explain him."

Tyrion chuckled at that jest, and he returned his attention to their son.

Ellyn went over to their bed, placed her earlier clothes beside her, and removed her cloak. As she unfastened her belt and set it aside, Tyrion looked over at her again. Noting her change in apparel, he drily proclaimed "I see you have had an eventful night. But I don't believe I've seen you in that dress before."

"It was a gift from the princess," Ellyn illuminated.

"Daenerys Targaryen has good taste," Tyrion remarked, "You must think the same, seeing as you're still wearing it."

"If it didn't like it, I would never have let her dress me in it in the first place," Ellyn contended.

"She dressed you?" Tyrion uttered in mild astonishment.

"No," Ellyn refuted, "Her handmaids did."

That revelation brought a devious grin onto her husband's face. The same grin he had earlier, when he suggested that they make love outside the pavilion.

"You're thinking about the two of them with me, aren't you?" Ellyn blankly presumed.

"I can't help it if it makes for an enticing image in my head," Tyrion said shamelessly, "You must think so, too. Otherwise, you would have dressed yourself."

"I know I could've dressed myself," Ellyn asserted, "But they… insisted."

"Did they?" Tyrion said enquiringly. He sounded as though he did not believe her.

Ellyn thought back on when Irri and Jhiqui had changed her into her current apparel. They never actually asked to undress her; they had only done so at Dany's orders. Ellyn then realized that she had not resisted them at all. In fact, she had welcomed them. She mumbled anxiously "Well… no. I
guess they didn't. I don't really recall protesting their advances, either."

Tyrion smirked and jokily proposed "If you want, I could invite them here and leave for a while. I
would take Duncan with me, of course. Wouldn't want him to wake up and see his mother
rediscovering herself."

Ellyn rolled her eyes and muttered sardonically "You are terrible, you know that?"

"Yes, I do know that," Tyrion said cockily, "I cannot help it, though. Imps are terrible by nature."

"So are bitches," his wife retorted, "Speaking of which…"

Ellyn donned an evil smirk of her own, and she brought her hands up to her bodice. As she casually
brushed her hand against her cleavage, she murmured sensually "What say you and I step outside?"

Initially, Tyrion was confused. "For what?"

Ellyn giggled and slyly told him "I seem to recall suggesting that we partake in the practices of the
Dothraki. One in particular stood out. I thought about it, and I figured there would be no harm in
trying."

Her husband immediately realized what she was implying. Even so, he seemed taken aback. "Are
you serious, Ellyn?"

Ellyn's smirk grew a bit. She rose from the bed, sauntered over to her husband, knelt to his level,
and seductively murmured "Don't tell me you're having second thoughts."

"Oh, no, definitely not," Tyrion claimed, "I'm just a little surprised, is all."

"Well, then let me set you at ease," Ellyn suggested, bringing her other hand down to the front of
his trousers. He felt him underneath, and already he was a little stiff. "Come on, Tyrion. I am
feeling adventurous tonight. Let's do something that would be frowned upon in the Seven
Kingdoms. Something that other nobles would shudder at. Something that would make your
father's hair stand on end. If he had any."

As she predicted, that won him over. Tyrion smirked once more, leaned his head upwards, placed a
firm kiss against his wife's lips, and muttered "When you put it that way…"

After ascertaining that Duncan was indeed sound asleep, his parents went over to their bed and
swiftly removed the bedsheets. Together, they brought the sheets outside, and they spread them out
on the ground in front of the pavilion. The on-duty Lannister guards looked bewildered, but they
did and said nothing. Before the night is out, they might be wishing they had gotten an earlier shift.

Once they had a makeshift bed on the ground, Ellyn laid down on it and turned to her husband. His
lustful gaze made her drip in anticipation. She beckoned him with "Whenever you're ready."

He was ready right then, as Ellyn soon discovered. She fully expected him to be; she knew him
better than any other woman.

On his feet, Tyrion Lannister was only half as tall as most men. On his back, he was more of a man
than any other man could ever hope to be.
She moaned in arousal as he thrust inside her. She held him close to her chest. Her nails dug into the flesh of his back, but he did not mind the pain. If anything, it incited him to go deeper.

Keeping one hand around her waist, he groped her tits with his other hand. Her breasts were small like the rest of her, but they were enticing all the same. He ran his tongue along her nipples as he resumed his plunge. The faster he went, the louder she became. He pumped into her unsteadily at first. Soon, he found the most agreeable pace, and he kept that pace. At one point, she stopped moaning long enough to call out his name.

"Oh, Maron! Oh, yes!" she shrieked. She sounded delighted. As pleased as he was to confirm that she was enjoying the experience, he wished she would keep the noises she made to incoherent moans.

*Why do women feel the need to talk when they're being fucked?* It annoyed him whenever he was getting intimate with a woman, and she spoke to him out of nowhere. It was very distracting and extremely unnecessary. He was tempted to tell her to shut up, but he did not wish to spoil the moment. Anyway, he was almost done.

He felt his climax approaching fast. Just before it was upon him, he lifted her up off the sheets and thrust hard into her one last time. She arched her back and screamed in ecstasy as he came inside her.

When it was all over, the two of them collapsed onto the bed. They were wrapped in each other's arms, panting heavily. He caught his breath first, and it was appropriate to talk now.

"Talking after sex is fine. *During* sex... definitely not." He smiled. In his mind, there were times when one shouldn't multitask.

Once he was respiring normally, he turned to her and asked "How do you feel?"

He felt the odd need to ask that question every time he made love to a woman. Whether it was because he was genuinely interested in how she felt or because he simply wished to have an assessment of his performance, he could not say. It was mostly a compulsion.

"Even better than last time," Elia Sand responded, grinning at him.

Ser Maron Greyjoy grinned back. He remembered last time quite well. Afterwards, she had described it as the best love she had ever made with a man. He had noticed she did not say "man or woman." Where she came from, that was a bit of an important detail.

"After this time, I'm certain she'll admit it was the best she ever had with a man or a woman." He held her close to his chest.

Elia rested her head on Maron's shoulder, and she ran her hands down his back. She rubbed the spots where her nails had dug into his skin. Although she had not drawn blood, those marks would not fade easily.

"They'll fit right in with my other scars."

As Elia caressed the small of his back, she placed a few light kisses on Maron's face. One on his forehead, one on his nose, one on each of his cheeks, one on each of his temples, and one on his chin.

"You missed a spot," he thought humorously. That spot did not remain overlooked for long. A couple seconds later, Elia gave him a kiss on his lips, which he returned.

Maron noticed she only kissed on the lips at the beginning and end of a round. *Maybe she has a*
At any rate, he found he enjoyed those kisses. Almost as much as he enjoyed everything that happened in-between them. He wondered if that could have meant anything.

_Gods forbid I actually fall in love with her. We've only been doing this for a fortnight, and anyway, she's nearly twelve years my junior._

That was quite true. Ser Maron Greyjoy would soon turn seven and twenty, and not long ago, Elia Sand had seen her fifteenth nameday.

Usually, Maron Greyjoy would not share a bed with anyone so young. Despite his Ironborn heritage, he had standards on who he would lay with. Nevertheless, the fifth daughter of Oberyn Martell had enticed him.

When Maron first embarked on this mission, he had set sail on his warship, the _Leviathan_. Oberyn Martell, Ellaria Sand, and the four youngest Sand Snakes had come aboard with him. While the _Leviathan_ was large even for a flagship, daily encounters with the Dornish passengers were inevitable.

If Elia had been any other man's daughter, Maron would not have dared to touch her. In fact, given her father's reputation, for the longest time, Maron was unwilling to even look Elia's way.

As it happened, she was the one who approached him, not the other way around. For a while, he resisted her advances, due to his fear over what her father might do to him if he gave in. Maron may have been friends and colleagues with the Red Viper, but he knew how protective the Dornish could be of their children.

Fortunately, when Prince Oberyn realized what was going on, he and his consort Ellaria gave Maron their blessing to court their oldest girl. _Far as I know, courting and bedding are not that different from one another in Dorne._ That was when Maron conceded and invited Elia to his cabin on the _Leviathan_. He did not feel so guilty or apprehensive after they made love for the first time. After all, Elia had flowered a couple years prior, so she was a woman by all accounts. Apart from that, Maron was not Elia's first.

He did not know who her first really was, and he decided he would rather not know. _What matters is that I've outdone him, according to Elia._

Maron recalled being about the same age as Elia when he lost his virginity. His first had been one of Lord Gorold Goodbrother's daughters. He could not remember which one, though. That was partly because the Lord of Hammerhorn had sired twelve girls and partly because she had not been particularly memorable on her back. _Unlike this exotic beauty._

Interestingly, that was just before his father's ill-fated Rebellion. So, shortly after Lord Gorold's daughter made a man of him in the bedchamber, Maron was expected to become a man on the battlefield, as well.

Alas, Maron did not have much opportunity to partake in the war directly. His elder brother Rodrik and his uncles Euron and Aeron did most of the fighting for their family. Rodrik had been maimed and captured, Euron had been killed, and Aeron had been imprisoned.

Maron himself did not see any action until King Robert's forces besieged Pyke. That was where he encountered Nuncle Victarion fighting alongside the Royal Army. He had been enraged by his uncle's betrayal, but before he could engage him in combat, Maron was countered and subdued by
Looking back on that episode, Maron realized how fortunate he was that Ser Barristan had intervened. *The man saved more than my life. If not for him, either my nuncle or I might have become a kinslayer.*

Father had surrendered that very same day. Not long after, he was taken to the Wall, and Maron and his brothers were made hostages of the crown. Rodrik was incarcerated in King's Landing, Theon was put in the charge of Winterfell, and Maron was brought to Moat Cailin.

Eleven years had elapsed since then. Lord Balon Greyjoy was still a sworn brother of the Night's Watch, and he would remain one until his last breath. At some point, all three of his sons had been freed from their captivity. Even so, they had voluntarily chosen to stay at their respective locations. Each of them had done quite well for himself.

Theon was a ward to Lord Eddard Stark and a good friend of his family, Rodrik had become the Master of Ships on the small council, and Maron was the Ironborn representative on the secret council. One could argue Maron had the most desirable position. He had been released earlier than his brothers, and he grown the most in terms of influence.

In Maron's mind, being sent to Moat Cailin was the best thing that could have ever happened to him. Although he dreaded the place at first, the experience had opened his eyes to the diversity and greatness of the world. Even before he was given back his freedom, he had discovered how outstanding life outside the Iron Islands could be. That was one of the things that had impelled him to stay at the moat.

All the same, he never allowed himself to forget his roots. Once a year, he and his brothers returned to the Islands to visit their family and friends. They spent most of that time with their mother and her family at Harlaw. However, that furlough only comprised a few weeks of the year. The rest of the year, they spent on the mainland.

Of course, he was not on mainland of the Seven Kingdoms now. At this time, Ser Maron Greyjoy was nowhere near Westeros. It had been nearly two months since he saw it last.

At present, he was out on assignment. King Robert and Lord Gregor Clegane had tasked him with travelling to Essos and recruiting as many swords as he could find. They argued that the Seven Kingdoms would need all the reinforcements it could get in the wars to come, and Maron was in full agreement.

Lord Victarion Greyjoy had lent much of the Iron Fleet's strength to this cause. He had even appointed his nephew to the office of Iron Captain. A duty which Maron had been quite eager to assume. *First I fill in his spot on the secret council, and now I have his old commission as leader of the Iron Fleet. What next? Maybe Nuncle will decide to make him his heir.*

Maron was not foolish enough to believe that would actually be the case. Victarion Greyjoy already had a son, Gregor, named after The Mountain That Rides. Maron was currently fourth in his house's line of succession after his uncle, his cousin, and Rodrik.

Thankfully, Maron was content with that. He did not care for the Seastone Chair. Even before Father rebelled, it would never have been his. It would have been Rodrik's. *Now neither of us shall have it. Oh, well. At least we'll still have the rest of the Seven Kingdoms.*

Although Prince Oberyn Martell was in command of the mission, Maron was in charge of their armada. Even if most of the vessels were not Ironborn in origin, Dorne had not had a proper fleet in
centuries. Thus, Maron was far more qualified to direct them than the Red Viper. Oberyn was the one who decided their destinations, but it was up to Maron to decide how they got there. The ships went where he told them to. Such empowerment in that role. The feeling it gave him was almost as good as the feeling Elia Sand gave him.

"What about you?" the Sand Snake's soft voice interrupted his broodings. "Do you feel as good as I do?"

"If I didn't, you think I would admit it?" he asked rhetorically.

"Yes, I do," she murmured plainly, turning to him.

Maron scoffed and told her sardonically "It was marvelous."

"Good," she remarked, setting her head back down, "But we can do better than 'marvelous.'"

"Oh, we will," he asserted firmly. *If she is any indication, I get progressively better every time.*

The two of them laid in silence for a couple minutes. Maron cherished those minutes, as there was hardly ever any silence at sea. *Except when my late Nuncle Euron was still alive. Silence was everywhere in those days.*

Ultimately, the quiet atmosphere was shattered. Naturally, Elia was the one to do it. She looked Maron in the eye again and queried "So, where will we be heading next?"

"That will be the topic of today's discussion," he apprised her. He knew she preferred a more direct answer, but as of then, that was the most direct he could be. *I don't choose where we go; that's her father's job.*

"Well, our options are not as broad as they were last week," Elia debated, "We've already been all along the west and south coasts of Essos."

"And I'd say we've been quite successful so far," Maron contended, "Three sellsword companies in two months."

"Yes, but the Windblown, the Second Sons, and the Stormcrows only have around three thousand units altogether," Elia pointed out, "That is but a fraction of our own forces."

"No need to have such a glass-half-empty attitude," Maron uttered cheekily.

"Glass-half-empty?" Elia repeated in confusion.

"One of Lord Gregor's proverbs," he enlightened her, "It refers to a scenario where a person has a drinking glass that is only filled halfway. A person with a negative outlook would see it as half-empty. Whereas someone with a positive outlook sees it as half-full."

"How does that work?" she queried in interest.

"I didn't understand at first, either," Maron confessed, "Lord Gregor explained that it's all a matter of whether you choose to appreciate what is there or sulk over what isn’t there."

"Ah, that makes sense," Elia commented. After a short pause, she smirked and said "Would I be right to assume your people tend to have a glass-half-full approach to life?"

"You might…” he stated, a little perplexed. "What led you to think that?"
"Well, meaning no offense to you or any other Ironborn, but I've heard that life in the Iron Islands is not always pleasant," Elia stated.

"You're right; it isn't," Maron promptly affirmed. So promptly that she giggled a bit. "At least it wasn't until King Robert took steps to make the Islands fertile and establish better connections between them and the rest of the Seven Kingdoms. Nowadays, it's more appealing."

"I will take your word for it," Elia muttered, "Still, before all that, the Iron Islands were the smallest, least powerful, and most isolated of the nine regions in the Seven Kingdoms. While I do not agree with many of your people's old practices such as raiding, I do admire how they never allow any of their disadvantages to discourage them. They even view death in a positive light."

"How so?" he asked.

"No other culture is so bold as to declare 'what is dead may never die,'" she argued. Maron chuckled. "That is not meant to be taken literally. It mostly refers to those of us who've been drowned and revived. It is not uncommon for followers of the Drowned God to go through that process. I went through it once myself."

"If you still believe in the Drowned God, how are you a 'ser?'" Elia enquired in interest, "I thought only followers of the Seven could be knighted."

"That's not always the case," Maron elucidated, "Your sister Nymeria's husband, Lord Jorah Mormont, is a firm believer in the Old Gods, and he was knighted at Lannisport for his heroics during my father's rebellion. In a similar fashion, I decided I wanted a title of my own a while back, and I was knighted in the sept at Moat Cailin."

"Ah, alright," Elia Sand acknowledged.

Maron settled back down and stated "Your observation of my people is a fair one. We tend to make the best of any situation, no matter how dreary. That is what gives us our resilience and our tenacity, and what keeps opportunity within our grasp. That is also another reason why we say 'what is dead may never die.' Be that as it may… there are some dead things in this world that should stay dead."

"I know…" Elia mumbled, suddenly a little uneasy. She knows what I'm talking about, he realized.

"Best not to dwell on that," Maron hastily added in.

"Perhaps," Elia remarked, "But I wonder… do you think White Walkers can swim?"

"By all accounts, they cannot," Maron debated, "Nonetheless, we are fairly certain they can walk on any surface. That includes ice."

"So, what?" Elia murmured restlessly, "Do you think they could freeze the surface of the Narrow Sea and march all the way to Essos and beyond?"

"I would like to think that would be impossible," Maron told her, "But with dragons, giants, wargs, and so many other strange creatures cropping up in recent years, I've had to rethink the boundaries of 'impossible' several times."

"Then even all the way out here, we're not safe from the Others?" Elia presumed grimly.

"While it may be too early to assume so, there is nothing to suggest otherwise," Maron perceived. I
would not be surprised if they could freeze the whole of the Narrow Sea.

Elia sighed and said irately "I was afraid of that. Gods, I can't believe I was foolish enough to think that sailing to the far east would be a solution to our problems."

It has been known to remedy many an Ironborn problem. Alas, this is one predicament where even the Ironmen cannot escape by ship.

Maron pulled Elia close and told her softly "Don't reflect on that, Elia. The Others won't head south until winter, and that won't be for at least another two years. By then, we'll have amassed enough strength and resources to counter them. For now, though… you should just relax. Maybe be more optimistic about the matter."

Elia reflected on that for a few moments. Then she smiled at the Ironman and muttered "Very well, Maron. I'll try to believe that the glass is half-full"

"Excellent," he uttered, snickering slightly.

The silence returned to the room for a few minutes more. Maron thought about proposing that they start another round. Before he could present the offer, there was a knock on the door.

"Yes?" he called out.

"Forgive me if I disturb you, Captain," came a voice from the other side. He recognized it as Dagon Codd's voice. "But Prince Oberyn requests your presence on the command deck."

"Tell him I will be there momentarily," Maron proclaimed.


As Dagon's footsteps faded away, Maron emerged from the bed and proceeded to get dressed. After getting into his smallclothes, he pulled his beeches on and swiftly laced them up. He found his white tunic near the base of the bed. It smelt of saltwater, but it was reasonably clean.

As he threw his tunic on, Elia climbed out of bed, too. She went to retrieve her clothing. In his haste to have her, Maron had flung them across the room. Luckily, he had not torn them.

Maron looked around for his doublet and his cloak, but Elia found them first. She held them out to him, and he accepted them graciously. As he put those back on, Elia got into her own smallclothes and her dress.

A couple minutes later, they were both fully clothed once more. They were armed, as well; Maron adorned his belt with his sword, and Elia slid her dagger up her sleeve. Then they each took another minute to touch up their appearances in the looking glass that overlooked the chamber pot. Wouldn't be good protocol for the captain to report to the bridge looking all disheveled.

Once Maron was satisfied with his appearance, he turned to his consort and stated "Well, my dear, as much as I enjoy your company, duty calls."

"You needn't explain, Captain," Elia insisted, "Perhaps again, tonight?"

"Maybe," Maron supposed, "Depends on how long your father requires my presence."

"It won't be all night, I assure you," Elia slyly muttered, "Papa won't keep you for that long. Mama will see to that."
He smirked. *She has a point, though. Ellaria Sand does hold some sway over the Red Viper.*

Ser Maron Greyjoy kissed Elia Sand on the cheek and departed from his cabin. Whether she left soon after or stayed there, he did not know. Either way, he predicted that he might find her there when he got back that evening.

Maron headed down the adjoining corridor until he arrived at a stairwell. From there, he made his way up to the command deck. Once he was up top, he heard someone exclaim "Attention on deck!"

Everyone on the command deck of the *Leviathan* promptly stood at attention. Maron smiled for a moment, and then he declared "At ease!"

He had come to appreciate being afforded that much respect. He could get used to it on his own ship, but he was determined not to let it get to his head. In his experience, too much power did unsettling things to people. His own father was a fine example of that. *I am not about to repeat my father's mistakes.*

As the ship's crew returned to their previous tasks, Maron looked around for Dagon Codd. He spotted him near the center of the command deck. A certain Dornishman with an ever-present mischievous expression was with him.

Maron strode over to them, and he told his fellow Ironborn "Thank you, Dagon. You may go now."

Dagon Codd saluted his captain and said "Yes, ser."

Ser Maron Greyjoy was left alone with Prince Oberyn Martell. *We'll not be alone for long, I'm certain.* At least, he hoped they would not remain alone, considering what he had done with the last Dornish person he had been alone with, as well as who that Dornish person was.

"I did not interrupt anything, did I, Maron?" Oberyn inquired deviously.

"Not at all, Oberyn," Maron disclosed, "I just finished."

"Even so, this must be a bit of a nuisance," Oberyn Martell disputed, "No man likes to go from lying with a beautiful girl to attending to her father."

*One could make that argument.* He noted "You think of Elia as a girl?"

"I'll always think of her as a girl," Oberyn pronounced, "You don't, I assume?"

"If I did, I would have gotten here sooner," Maron mumbled drily. "Women interest me; girls do not. I will not sleep with just anyone, my prince. I'm not you."

"You would have a lot more to boast about if you were," the Red Viper japed.

*Yes, because I just LOVE to flaunt my accomplishments as you do.* Maron rolled his eyes and muttered "Are we here to trade blows, or are we here to converse on matters of import?"

"The latter, though there's always room for the former," Oberyn contended. He placed his hand on the younger man's shoulder and directed him over to the bridge. "Come, captain; our new business associates await our arrival."

*I know better than to keep them waiting.*
When Maron and Oberyn entered the bridge of the *Leviathan*, they found half a-dozen other men already assembled there. These six men represented all the progress Maron and Oberyn had made in their objective over the last eight weeks.

The oldest of them was a mysterious Pentoshi only known as the Tattered Prince. He was the commander of the Windblown. He and his two thousand warriors had been looking for work in the Disputed Lands when Ser Maron and Prince Oberyn commissioned their services. Winning them over was relatively simple.

After him, there was the captain of the Second Sons, the Braavosi Mero, and his second-in-command, Brown Ben Plumm, who claimed to be a descendant of many cultures, including House Plumm of the Seven Kingdoms. A while back, the Fleet had docked at Myr, and by sheer luck, the Second Sons happened to be in the city, too. Interestingly, Maron Greyjoy and Oberyn Martell were both second sons. In addition to that, Prince Oberyn had once served with the Second Sons before he enlisted in the Legion without Banners. He still had enough of a reputation in their ranks that he was able to get their leaders to sign on with all five hundred of their cavalry.

Lastly, there were the three joint commanders of the Stormcrows: a Qartheen with a clean-shaven head aptly referred to as Sallor the Bald, a broad-faced Ghiscari called Prendahl na Ghezn, and a young Tyroshi named Daario Naharis. The fleet had encountered them just before they reached Qarth. Initially, Sallor and Prendahl had been averse to joining up with such a large foreign company. Daario had somehow convinced his fellow captains to see reason. Subsequently, the Westerosi fleet's numbers swelled by another five hundred.

The units of those companies were scattered throughout the ships of the Westerosi fleet. The officers, however, had been given highborn accommodations aboard the *Leviathan*.

Overall, this was a good start to Maron and Oberyn's mission. *Only a start, though. We have a long way to go yet.* As Elia pointed out earlier, these three sellsword companies only had three thousand soldiers collectively. Even though the Windblown, the Second Sons, and the Stormcrows were among the most esteemed sellsword companies in Essos, they were not enough to warrant returning to the Seven Kingdoms. *We need more. Many more.*

That was the subject of this gathering. They were going to decide where to go and who to recruit next.

"Gentlemen, you all know why you are here," Maron Greyjoy proclaimed, "You all know what is at stake. You all know our time and our resources are severely limited. You all know that you will be paid for your services. Above all, you all know that before you are paid, you must return to Westeros with us. But before we can even fathom sailing west, our ranks must grow."

"Indeed, my dear captain," Mero muttered in a deceptively amiable tone, "But what can we do about that? We cannot force people to enter our companies any more than you Westerosi can."

"The idea isn't to force people, good Mero," Maron professed, "Quite the opposite, actually. People who are pressed into joining a cause will run, buckle, or back out when they are faced with danger. On the other hand, people who join a cause by their own volition can be trusted to hold their ground. Therefore, every person who takes up arms with us must be a willing volunteer."

"You need not fret, Ser Maron," Sallor the Bald remarked, "There are plenty in the world who will join a cause without asking any questions."

"Provided you have the coin," the Tattered Prince wryly added in.
"We have more than enough coin, fellow prince," Oberyn Martell said blankly. "We have adequate transportation, as well. There is enough space on the ships of this armada to comfortably carry over two hundred thousand men across the Narrow Sea. And their horses."

"So, if you have the money, the lodgings, and the means to hire more sellswords, why do you need us?" asked Prendahl na Ghezn.

"Because the lot of you are native to this part of the world," Maron expounded, "As such, you know the land better than anyone in my fleet. As I said before, we only have so much time before the Long Night occurs. If we are going to recruit as many fighters as possible in as little time as possible, we'll need you to guide us."

Brown Ben Plumm laughed at that. Everyone turned to him, and the dark-skinned man muttered "Perhaps I did not hear you right, ser. You want US to recommend sellsword companies for you to hire? Do you not see how bizarre that is?"

"Loath as I am to admit it, he has a point," Sallor the Bald conceded, "It is not often that sellswords seek out other sellswords for their services. They tend to… clash."

"We got the six of you into a room peacefully and easily enough," Oberyn candidly pointed out. "Only because our interests did not conflict with each other's," the Tattered Prince countered. "If not you, who else would I consult?" Maron debated, "From what I've seen, sellswords are always high in demand on this side of the Narrow Sea. In order to survive in this market, you must know which jobs are available to you, and which jobs have already been taken. Thus, you must know how other sellswords think."

"Well, we think of other sellswords as competitors," Mero mumbled.

"Not anymore," Maron sternly refuted, "As of now, the only competition you should care about is the one between those who have a right to live and those who refuse to die."

"The Iron Captain is correct," Daario Naharis announced, speaking for the first time since the discussion began. "The inhabitants of the Seven Kingdoms have cast aside all their own disagreements with each other for the good of the world. There is no reason we of the Free Cities cannot do the same. For now, at least."

For all their other differences, all the men there seemed to share and agree with that sentiment.

"Very well," Brown Ben Plumm pronounced, "But know this: all we can do is list potential prospects. We cannot guarantee that any of them will be willing to work with us, or even be willing to meet with us."

"I think that is fair," Oberyn Martell stated.

Maron Greyjoy nodded in agreement. He then clapped his hands together, gazed around the bridge, and proclaimed "In any case, let the listing begin. I am open to any suggestions. Any at all."

Prendahl na Ghezn was the first to offer one. "What about the Gallant Men?"

"Perhaps," Oberyn thought aloud, "My late comrade Ser Osmund Kettleblack was once a member of that company. Or he claimed to be, at any rate."

Maron Greyjoy had never met Ser Osmund Kettleblack. All he knew of the man was that he used
to be the Crownlanders’ representative on the secret council, he had died during Greyjoy's Rebellion, and Ser Lothor Brune had replaced him. *Just as I replaced Uncle Victorion. Except Nuncle is still alive.*

"Getting them to sign on shouldn't be too difficult," said the Tattered Prince, "The Gallant Men have been known to switch loyalties. At some point in the last ten years, they've represented each of the Free Cities in the Disputed Lands."

"We were just in the Disputed Lands," Mero mumbled frankly.

"No, we weren't," Sallor countered.

"This was before you joined up," Brown Ben Plumm revealed.

"Oh, right," Sallor avowed.

"Since no one has any objection, I will label the Gallant Men as a promising candidate," Maron declared, "However, I would prefer if we did not make for the Disputed Lands just yet. We're a long way from that region, and, as Mero said, we were just there. For the present, let's focus more on companies who are local to southern Essos, or companies who were last seen in this part of the world."

"That'll be fine," Daario Naharis commented, "As it happens, the Long Lances are nearby. They generally confine their movements to the lands around Slaver's Bay."

"That's right," Prendahl na Ghezn affirmed, "Furthermore, Gylo Rhegan is an easy man to deal with. You, my captain, might regard him as a reasonable man."

"What about his company?" Maron queried, "Are they competent?"

"Most certainly," Mero asserted, "Naturally, Gylo's Lances could not compare with my Sons, but they do well enough on their own."

"Alright, that's two," Maron thought aloud, "Any more?"

"We could look up the Company of the Cat," Brown Ben proposed.

"Absolutely not," the Tattered Prince snapped, "The Windblown and the have always been at each other's throats. I refuse to have anything to do with them."

"Would you rather treat with the Others?" Oberyn Martell wryly muttered.

"Almost," the Tattered Prince murmured heatedly, "Their commander, Bloodbeard, is a menace who cannot be trusted."

"He says the same of you," Mero wittily remarked.

"Well, all grudges aside, consider how much manpower the Company of the Cat would bring to the table," Daario Naharis debated, "They have as many units as all three of our groups combined."

*I think I've decided which of these men is the most likeable.* "That alone warrants at least meeting with them."

The Tattered Prince was the only one who seemed opposed to that. He stated "I see I am alone on this issue. So, I will not protest. But if you do arrange a meeting with the Company of the Cat, do not expect me to attend."
"I give you my word no one will ask that of you, my prince," Maron reassured the elderly man.

The next hour was spent systematically reviewing all the other sellsword companies of Essos and the plausibility of seeking each one out. Each company came with its own distinct advantages and disadvantages. In some ways, some of them were more appealing than others.

The Tattered Prince personally recommended the Iron Shields and the Maiden's Men, as he used to be a member of both. The Company of the Rose and the Stormbreakers had both been founded by Westerosi, and the commanders of the Stormcrows had it on good faith that the majority of the current members possessed a strong desire to one day return to their ancestors' homelands. Brown Ben Plumm spoke fondly of the Bright Banners, and Mero approved highly of the Ragged Standard.

The only group all six of the sellsword captains fervently opposed approaching was the Brave Companions. Apparently, none of them wanted anything to do with Vargo Hoat and his "twisted band of mutilators," as Daario so richly described them. Even Oberyn was against them. Very much against them. He claimed a more fitting name for them was the "Bloody Mummers." The Tickler would probably get along with them just fine. I and all sane people, however…

All that together was enough to convince Maron Greyjoy that the Brave Companions would be more of a liability than an asset. As such, he assured the Red Viper and the sellsword captains that their ships would keep their distance from the Brave Companions, and they would avoid all forms of contact with them in the future.

At the end of the hour, the eight men had effectively and thoroughly covered every single sellsword company in the Known World, with the sole exception of the Golden Company. For reasons that had been made plentifully clear to all, the Golden Company was off-limits. We'll leave that lot to Oberyn's sister and nephew.

Oberyn was about to close the discussion when the Tattered Prince presented one final suggestion. This suggestion was by far the most astonishing and controversial one of the entire meeting. He advocated that before they even bother looking for more sellswords, they consider sailing for Astapor first.

"What is there in Astapor that would possibly be of interest to us?" Maron asked in bewilderment. He was well-aware that Astapor's only commodity was slaves. There were no sellswords there except for those who were in the personal employ of the masters.

The Tattered Prince answered with a question: "Who is the greatest warrior in all the world?"

He did not even give the others time to think before continuing with "When you think of the model warrior, do not think of any one particular champion. Think not of Strong Belwas, Khrazz, the Brindled Butcher, the Spotted Cat, Barsena Blackhair, or Steelskin. Nor should you think of Khal Drogo, Ser Barristan Selmy, Ser Jaime Lannister, or even Lord Gregor Clegane, the legendary Mountain That Rides."

"Then who is the greatest warrior?" Maron Greyjoy queried. If he truly is better than Lord Gregor, he'd be invaluable to us.

"Not who, precisely, my captain," the Tattered Prince responded cryptically, "More 'what.'"

"Explain," Maron requested, trying to sound patient.

"The ideal warrior is no one specific man," the old Pentoshi professed, "Instead, it is a
specific type of man. One who is bred to feel no pain, ignore all fear, show loyalty only to his commander, and live only to serve."

Oberyn’s eyelids expanded, and he let out a quiet gasp. It was as though he had realized who the other prince was referring to, and he did not like the implication one bit. He uttered anxiously "Tell me you do not mean… the Unsullied."

"I do," the Tattered Prince stiffly confirmed.

Oberyn’s uneasiness rapidly turned to anger. He spat crossly "You cannot be serious. We are not yet so desperate as to stoop that low."

Maron was baffled by the Red Viper's behavior. "What are you talking about, Oberyn? Who are these Unsullied? And why are you so against hiring them?"

"Because, Maron, my friend, you do not hire Unsullied," Prince Oberyn Martell disclosed bitterly, "You buy them."

Maron was astounded. "They're slaves?"

"Slave soldiers, to be precise," Daario apprised him, "It's debatable as to whether they really are the best warriors alive. I will agree, though, that they are a force to be reckoned with."

"Even the Dothraki are reluctant to face them in the field," Brown Ben Plumm proclaimed, "I myself would avoid facing them whenever possible."

"As would I," Sallor the Bald conceded, "All they know is discipline and obedience, which is taught to them from the moment they are old enough to understand words."

"They accept any command given to them, no matter how unscrupulous," Mero declared, "Only commands given to them by their masters, though. They only obey other individuals if their masters tell them to do so. They would never betray their masters for anyone or anything."

"Apart from obligation to do their duty, they have no other interests to speak of," Prendahl na Ghezn proclaimed, "Desire is a concept alien to them. I mean any form of desire. They are made eunuchs at a very early age."

Maron resisted the urge to cover his manhood protectively. He drily observed "These Unsullied sound more like animals than men."

"Some would argue they are neither animal nor man," Daario contended, "It would be more appropriate to classify them as their own breed. They probably would be… if they could breed."

"Slave soldiers are still slaves," Prince Oberyn firmly muttered, "Slavery is outlawed in Westeros. Even the Free Folk who live north of the Wall outside the Seven Kingdoms do not practice it."

"No one is asking you to take up the trade, my prince," the Tattered Prince disputed, "I urge you to rethink your position on this matter. Soldiers who are utterly fearless, completely loyal, and virtually undefeatable."

_We'll definitely need people like that when we face the Others in battle._

"Slave soldiers are still slaves," Oberyn Martell repeated indifferently.

The Tattered Prince lightly shook his head and sighed. A few seconds later, Maron noticed a
devious gleam in his eye. The elderly Pentoshi muttered "If you would just hear me out, I may have a solution you'd approve of. One that involves acquiring the Unsullied without ever actually engaging in slavery."

At first, Oberyn said nothing. Then he shrugged and muttered "Against my better judgment, I will listen to what you have to say."

"Wise of you," the Tattered Prince commented approvingly. He turned to everyone else and stated "I would like to speak with Prince Oberyn alone."

Ser Maron Greyjoy swiftly escorted the other five sellsword captains out of the bridge before he stepped out himself. The two princes were left on their own to converse on this very delicate topic.

Ser Maron Greyjoy, Mero, Ben Plumm, Sallor, Prendahl na Ghezn, and Daario Naharis spent about fifteen minutes waiting outside the bridge.

Maron thought about pressing his ear against the door to the bridge, but out of respect for his colleague's privacy, he elected not to eavesdrop. Still, he wondered what Oberyn and the Tattered Prince could be talking about in there. Moreover, he was intrigued by the Tattered Prince's confidence.

What Oberyn said of slavery was true. Even the Ironmen frowned upon it. They used to have thralls on the Islands, but thralls had been banned since Uncle Victarion was named Lord of Pyke. Maron had no desire to bring slavery to the Seven Kingdoms, regardless of the circumstances.

After fifteen tense minutes, the door to the bridge opened, and the two princes stepped out onto the command deck. The Tattered Prince seemed to be smirking in satisfaction.

Prince Oberyn Martell solemnly turned to Maron and told him "Captain, plot a course."

"Where to, my prince?" Ser Maron Greyjoy enquired.

"Astapor," was all the Red Viper said in response.

...

"Hodor, Hodor?"

"Yes, Hodor, we're there," Benjen Stark stated drily.

Three weeks had passed since they departed from the Wall, and they had finally reached Craster's Keep. It only took Ser Waymar and his party a day or two to get this far. Then again, there were only seven in that group, and one had gone back alive. Hundreds of black brothers had gone out on this ranging. How many of us will return, I wonder?

This company was not composed solely of Night Watchmen. There were also a couple dozen Northmen, one of whom was kin to the First Ranger.

After dismounting from his gelding, Benjen Stark turned his attention to Bran and his companions. They still seemed to be in good health thus far.

Before leaving the Wall, Benjen had ensured that his nephew was bundled up tightly in fur and warm clothes. I'll not have him freezing on my watch. The Reeds were dressed in just as much clothing, and Hodor practically looked like a bear in his huge fur coat.
At a glance, one might mistake Bran and the others for members of the Watch, given how their outer layers were completely black. The Watch had lent them those clothes, and the black brothers wore no other color in any of their own ensembles.

As Benjen helped Meera and Jojen Reed down from their palfreys, Hodor climbed down from his massive destrier. Then he lifted Bran out of the saddle of his garron and placed him on the ground gently.

Once he was on his feet, Bran pulled back the hood of his coat and looked around the vicinity.

"Quite calm," he observed, "Wouldn't you say so, Uncle?"

"Yes, it is unnaturally peaceful today," Benjen Stark noted.

All of a sudden, the horses whinnied in fright, and Summer came bounding out of the trees. He padded up to his master and sat down before him.

Bran scratched his faithful beast behind the ears. Then he looked up at Benjen and suggested "If you so wish, I could have Summer investigate."

"That won't be necessary," Benjen Stark told his nephew, "I have already dispatched scouts to survey the path ahead. Apart from that… it would be for the best if your abilities were kept secret."

"I agree with you," Bran proclaimed, "But Leaf is somewhere out there waiting for us. What if one of your rangers discovers her?"

"I wouldn't worry on that, my lord," said Jojen Reed, "Remember how she evaded everyone's notice at the Wall until she approached us. Hard as the rangers might try, none of them can catch her."

"Jojen is right," Meera Reed commented, "I believe Leaf will only be found if she lets us find her."

"That aside, every ranger I sent out already knows about the children of the forest," Benjen apprised Bran, "They will be accompanying you, me, and everyone your father assigned to your detail to the cave of the Three-Eyed Raven."

"Very well, Uncle," Bran avowed.

"What's the soonest we can continue?" Jojen enquired, "We cannot stay for long."

"Lord Jeor does not plan to linger, my lord," Benjen Stark revealed, "Rayder's reconnaissance party is expected to arrive tomorrow. Once they report in, we will move on. For now, we must wait."

"Then wait we shall," Bran declared.

"Hodor," said Hodor, as though he agreed with the notion.

The Stark men arrived on the scene a few seconds later. Most of them, Benjen knew, such as Lew, Alyn, Hayhead, Donnis, and Quent. All of them were among the score of soldiers Lord Eddard Stark had deemed worthy of the honor of protecting his second son on his journey north of the Wall. Let us hope Ned's confidence in their ability is well-founded. Even if the Others were merely a myth, not everyone can survive in this land.

"The Lord Commander is about to have words with Craster," Benjen thought aloud, "Come with me; I'll show you to his keep."
As the stewards tended to their horses, Bran Stark, his companions, and his guards followed the First Ranger to Craster's Keep. It was no true keep in any sense of the word, but out here, in the middle of the haunted forest surrounded by snow, it was as good a shelter as any fortress.

All around Benjen, his fellow black brothers were setting up camp. Most of them looked quite fatigued, and justifiably so. None of them had had a decent night's sleep since they left the Wall. In fact, of the seven days of the past week, they had not even spent one full day resting. Hopefully, this night will give them the rest they so urgently need. To a black brother, a single good night's rest – even an occasional one – could do wonders for his health and morale. In a situation such as this, it could even make all the difference between life and death.

Benjen hoped that at least Bran would catch up on some sleep. In his mind, his nephew had a greater part to play than anyone else there. If the Great Ranging failed to defeat the Night King, he would likely be Westeros' next greatest line of defense. After the Wall, that is. But we have to be prepared for the possibility that the Army of the Dead will somehow get past the Wall.

Benjen took a small amount of comfort in the knowledge that the Army of the Dead was nowhere near the Wall just yet. After all, he, twenty-five hundred of his brothers, and four times as many wildlings stood between the Night King and the Seven Kingdoms. Even if we do not kill him, we'll take down a sizable number of White Walkers and wights with us. With that in mind, Benjen opted not to brood over this dismal subject anymore. Instead, he would focus on working towards his current, immediate objective.

After trudging through the snow for about three minutes, they reached Craster's Keep. Some of Craster's wives were outside, doing their chores. Or maybe they were his daughters. To the likes of Craster, there was no difference.

When they were at the entrance of the keep (which was really nothing more than a hut), Benjen turned to the people who had walked there with him. He looked down at his nephew and told him "Bran, you, Meera, Jojen, and Hodor may come in with me. Summer and the guards must remain out here."

"As you say, Uncle," Bran conceded. He knelt next to Summer and told him "Wait for me here. I'll be back shortly."

Naturally, the direwolf could not nod his head, but he seemed to understand the command. He sat down on his haunches near the front of the hut and stayed there. Alyn and the other guards stood near him. Although the Watchmen tended to keep their distance from the direwolf, the Stark men did not seem so unsettled by his presence. They may have been wary of Summer and his mother and siblings at first, but they appeared to have become accustomed to their presence in the last year.

The inside of Craster's Keep was crowded. The old, ill-tempered wildling himself was seated at the head of his long trestle table. More of his daughter-wives were at work serving him and his guests. Benjen used the term "guest" loosely in this context. Throughout his service to the Watch, he had sought shelter under Craster's roof many times, and never once had he felt welcome. Craster's functions as a host left much to be desired by the standards of the Seven Kingdoms. Of course, he and his family were not residents of the Seven Kingdoms, so they were not subject to their laws. In Craster's Keep, what Craster said was absolute.

The sad thing is he's probably the most hospitable host on this side of the Wall.

Although Craster's Keep was large enough to accommodate half a hundred men, the trestle table
could only seat about half that number. Lord Commander Jeor Mormont sat to Craster's right, which was meant to be construed as a place of honor. The most honor Craster affords us.

Most of the rest of the benches were occupied by officers and senior members of the Watch. Those included Ser Ottyn Wythers, Mallador Locke, Thoren Smallwood, Ser Jaremy Rykker, and the oft-disagreeable Ser Alliser Thorne.

The man seated to Craster's left used to be a black brother. Now he styled himself a king. Benjen was surprised to see him there; they were not expecting him for another day. Count on Mance to turn up at the most unexpected times unannounced.

There was some empty space next to the Lord Commander. When Lord Jeor noticed Benjen was there, he patted the spot next to him. It appeared as though the Old Bear had saved a spot for the First Ranger. Flattered as Benjen Stark was by that gesture, he could not accept it. Not if it meant the children would have to stand.

Benjen brought Bran, Jojen, and Meera over to the empty place on the bench. As luck would have it, there was just enough room for all three of them to sit without having to squeeze.

By the looks they gave him, Jeor Mormont and Mance Rayder seemed to approve and even commend Benjen's decision to give his seat to Bran and the Reeds. Craster did not seem to care one way or the other. I did not expect him to.

Craster did, however, seem interested in these new, young faces.

"Ah, so is the Watch accepting women now?" he said inquisitively, gazing over at Meera, "I suppose you'll be offering my girls a chance to dress in black."

"My sister and I are here on the Lord Commander's invitation," Jojen Reed claimed. That is partly true. Not wholly, though, seeing as you left the Old Bear no choice but to extend the invitation in the first place.

"That is true," Jeor Mormont affirmed. The raven on his shoulder shrieked "True! True!"

"I see," Craster remarked. His eyes then fell across Bran. He smirked and murmured "I knew you allowed children into your order, but you must be stretched thin as a rake if you're actually bringing them all the way out here."

"This is my nephew, Brandon," Benjen Stark informed the wildling.

"Bran, they call me," Bran Stark pronounced, "While I would like to be, I am not a black brother, my lord."

"I am no lord, boy," Craster gruffly retorted, "Even so, it is good of you to remember your courtesies. That is something your Uncle and his brothers often forget in my house."

You forget yours often enough; why can't we?

"Hodor," said Hodor, stepping next to Benjen. The tall stableboy had to crouch down to enter the hut, and he had to remain crouched to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling.

"What was that?" Craster sharply remarked.

"Hodor," Hodor repeated.
Craster turned to Benjen and demanded "What did he call me?"

"Forgive him," the First Ranger muttered, "His speech is… extremely limited."

"To 'Hodor'?'" Craster presumed.

"Yes," Benjen confirmed, "All he says is 'Hodor.'"

"Hodor," said Hodor.

"Hodor!" quorked the Lord Commander's raven.

Lord Jeor grumbled "Not this damn bird, too."

Benjen had much the same thought. Just when I thought his raven could not become any more annoying…

"What the fuck does 'Hodor' even mean?" Craster mumbled.

"No one knows for certain," Benjen Stark disclosed, "I, however, was there when he first started saying it."

"You were, Uncle?" Bran queried in interest.

"Yes, I was," Benjen admitted, "My memory of the affair is not too great. I was quite young back then. Younger than you, even."

"What all do you remember?" Jojen Reed enquired.

"Well, it was just before Ned left for the Vale," Benjen recounted, "One moment, he and Hodor were sparring in the training yard. The next… Hodor was on the ground, having a shaking fit. When Old Nan ran to him, he repeatedly shouted something about holding a door."

"What door?" Meera inquired.

"I honestly haven't a clue," Benjen replied, "As I said, we were in the training yard, so there were no doors in sight. None that could be held open, at least. The gate was only a stone's throw away, but it had already been opened at the time."

"Maybe it was a symbolic door," Meera conjectured. That's possible. Or maybe there is no door at all, and it was nothing more than a meaningless phrase.

"Did he ever say anything other than 'Hodor' after that?" Bran asked his uncle.

"As far as I know… he has not," Benjen answered him.

"Curious," Jojen Reed murmured, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"As intriguing as this is," Craster interjected scathingly, "Perhaps our time would be better spent discussing matters of greater precedence than the ravings of a simpleminded giant?"

Watch your filthy mouth, old man. No one insults Hodor.

"Quite so," Lord Jeor muttered. He turned to Mance Rayder and asked him "What news of the Night King's forces?"
"I would like to know that myself," the self-proclaimed King-beyond-the-Wall wittily responded. Benjen was taken aback. "I thought you said some of your people were conducting reconnaissance on the Army of the Dead."

"And I told you true," Mance asserted, "Alas, they have yet to return."

"You mean they've been delayed?" Jaremy Rykker supposed.

"No, they are not late," Mance Rayder explicated, "I am merely early."

"If you are not here to give a report their findings, why are you here?" the Old Bear queried.

"Why! Why! Why!" the raven screeched.

"I just wanted to make sure you got here on time," Mance murmured straightforwardly, "Is that so hard to believe?"

Actually, it is not. If we were not here, he would have gone looking for us. He probably would have gone all the way to the Wall, if need be.

"Luckily for you, we were not expecting you until the morrow, anyway," Benjen Stark uttered blankly.

"Did you at least bring the reinforcements you promised?" asked the Lord Commander.

"Of course," Mance assured the Old Bear, "My forces are camped due north of here. They will merge with yours once you clear the haunted forest."

"You will be with them, I trust?" Lord Jeor assumed.

"Well, you are leading your own men," Mance Rayder contended, "So, I intend to do the same with mine. What kind of ruler would I be if I did not?"

A craven one, but at the same time, a cautious one.

"Have you seen any more of the Others recently?" Thoren Smallwood stated inquiringly.

"Some sightings here and there," Mance Rayder revealed, "They seem to be confining their movements to the areas north of here."

"How many of these encounters resulted in fighting?" asked Mallador Locke.

"So far, none, thankfully," Mance claimed, "I have given my people explicit orders not to engage the White Walkers or their wights in combat unless it cannot be prevented."

"That would be wise," Lord Jeor Mormont uttered favorably, "If the Night King truly does control all the reanimated corpses on this side of the Wall, he may take notice if enough of them get put back down."

"If so, we could expose our plot to do away with him," Ser Alliser Thorne commented dismally.

Craster suddenly gave a derisive laugh. "If you ask me, what you are planning is a fabulous waste of time, resources, and lives. You should call off this foolhardy plan and go back south while you still can."
"The thought is tempting," Benjen admitted, "But in the end, we'll be no safer south of the Wall than north of it."

"You won't be safe either," the Lord Commander told Craster, "I ask you again to consider letting us move you and your family to Castle Black. You will be much safer there."

"Not according to your First Ranger," Craster sardonically remarked, "Anyway, I refuse. Why would I want to subject me and mine to the laws of your realm when we have everything we'd ever want or need right here?"

"Twenty thousand of my people have already relocated to the Seven Kingdoms," Mance Rayder pointed out, "The vast majority of them have adapted fairly well to it."

"Furthermore, you do not actually have to follow the laws of the Seven Kingdoms," Jeor Mormont proclaimed, "You just have to ensure you do not break any of them."

"As 'appealing' as this sounds, I remain unfazed," Craster adamantly murmured, "If ever I change my mind, I will let you crows know. Until then, this and nowhere else is my home."

"Home!" the raven quorked "Home! Home!"

Now, that's a pleasant thought. The last time Benjen Stark had gone to Winterfell was for Robb's wedding to Margaery Tyrell. His visits before then had been very rare and spread-out. Still, the memory of his family's ancestral home was often enough to keep him motivated and inspired.

While he reflected on that, he noticed Craster glimpsed over at Bran again. The irascible, old wildling then turned to the First Ranger and remarked "If your nephew isn't in the Watch, why is he even here?"

"That is classified information," Benjen hastily answered, as if by reflex.

"Not here, it isn't," Craster snappily countered, "Every person who sits at my table under my roof tells me of his business. Otherwise, he is not welcome here."

That put Benjen in a difficult situation. Only a handful of people in the world knew what Bran was, where he was going, and why he was going there. Out of all the persons currently assembled in Craster's Keep, only Jeor Mormont, Mance Rayder, the Reeds, Bran, and Benjen himself were among that number. Hodor may know, too, but who really knows what he knows?

For various reasons, the group of those who did know was kept very strong for many good reasons. Not the least of which was security.

"It's alright, Uncle," Bran interjected, getting to his feet, "I'll leave."

"No, be seated, young lord," Lord Jeor bade the boy, who gradually returned to the bench. The raven cried out "Lord! Lord!"

After Bran sat down again, the Old Bear turned back to Craster, leaned closer to him, and whispered into his ear. He spent the better part of five minutes whispering to the old wildling.

For most of that interval, Craster looked indifferent and grumpy as ever. His countenance did change at certain points, though. At some points, he seemed stunned. At others, he seemed fascinated. At others still, he seemed amused.

When the Old Bear was finished whispering to him, Craster looked to Bran again, donned his most
pleasant smile (which was still very uninviting), and stated "Well then… best of luck to you, lad. You are going to need it and more to accomplish your goal."

"I cannot fail, my lord," Bran sternly declared, "If I do, it could mean the doom of us all."

*He's not far wrong. Winter is coming.*

"Doom!" shrieked the raven, "Doom! Doom! Doom!"

Night soon fell over the land. Once it did, Mance left to rendezvous with his people. After the King-beyond-the-Wall deprived them of his company, everyone else went to bed. Benjen, Lord Jeor, and the other officers were afforded the "right" to sleep on the floor of Craster's Keep. The rest of the black brothers had to camp out on the snow-covered ground, as usual.

Craster permitted Bran, Jojen, Meera, and Hodor to sleep by themselves in the toolshed out back. This was very uncharacteristic of the wildling, but no one questioned this sudden act of kindness.

Benjen had noticed that after learning the truth of Bran's purpose in the land, Craster seemed to have developed a bit of what could almost have been respect for the boy. He even had one of his daughters, a heavily pregnant girl named Gilly, tend to Bran and his companions.

The following morning, Gilly brought Bran, Jojen, Meera, and Hodor to Craster's Keep for breakfast. She seemed to have gotten close to Bran's company. From what Benjen observed, even Summer appeared to accept her.

After breakfast, Mance Rayder showed his face once more. This time, he was not alone. Four other wildlings were with him. One of them looked as though he had seen a ghost. *Maybe he has…* Actually, in Benjen's mind, a ghost would have been preferable to what was really out there.

Craster sent his wives and daughters outside so that he, Mance, the other four wildlings, Lord Jeor, and Benjen could converse in private.

Once everyone was settled, one of the new arrivals – a man named Devyn Sealskinner, the apparent leader of the small group – began the explanation. He recounted "We spent the whole of the last turn of the moon hiking through the Frostfangs. We managed to make it through the mountains without coming across any wights. But as we neared the edge of the Frangs…"

After a moment's pause, he turned to the man with the unsettled expression and beckoned him "Go ahead, Orell. Tell them what you saw."

At first, Orell was quiet. Then he let out a deep sigh and haltingly revealed "I was our eyes in the sky. For the longest time, the sky was as empty as the lands below it. Not so when we reached the northern Frostfangs. Oh, no; a host unlike anything you could ever imagine is amassed there."

"Then you have seen the Army of the Dead?" Lord Commander Jeor Mormont presumed.

"Yes," Orell softly confirmed, "It is massive. Larger than even we dared to think."

"How many did you see?" Benjen Stark queried.

"I cannot begin to guess," Orell replied, "There had to be millions. Perhaps as many as ten million. Or twenty."

Benjen felt his heart skip a beat. *That's more than twice the population of the Seven Kingdoms.*
"Are you sure?" Mance Rayder questioned, skepticism and worry in his tone.

"I would not exaggerate on something like this, Mance," Orell assured his king.

"What were they doing?" Mance queried "Were they on the march?"

"I do not believe so," Orell hypothesized, "They were simply standing around, moving amongst themselves like a disorganized crowd of drunkards."

"We do not believe they had any destination in mind," a third wildling, a woman named Holly, perceived.

"Has anyone else seen this host?" Lord Jeor asked.

"Alas, we have not," the last wildling, a woman named Karsi, disclosed, "As soon as Orell spotted them, we got out of there as quickly as we could."

"Did you manage to see the Night King?" Lord Jeor enquired.

"I may have seen him," Orell supposed, "But I was too high up in the air to know for a certainty. At that height, I cannot tell one person on the ground from another."

"Do you think the Night King knows we're coming for him?" Mance inquired.

"We couldn't say," Devyn confessed, "We pray not."

*If he does know, we may see him and his forces a fair deal sooner than we planned.*

"Then you were not discovered?" Benjen asked. *Gods save us if they were.*

"No," Karsi proclaimed, "Orell warged out of his bird before any of the wights could look up."

"Are you certain?" Benjen said dubiously.

"I do not think we would have gotten out of the Frostfangs alive if we were discovered," Holly debated.

"You mean most of us would not have gotten out alive," Devyn corrected her. He then frowned, looked around the table, and stated "That brings us to the most unsettling aspect of our reconnaissance."

"Go on," Lord Jeor insisted. He tried to sound stoic, but Benjen could detect a hint of apprehension in his voice.

"Mance brought the four of us here to deliver a report," Devyn professed, "We were six when he sent us out. Bodger and Rowan did not make it out of the Frostfangs alive."

"Tell us what became of them," Mance requested. The way he gave that order was perplexing. *I wonder if even he doesn't know yet. Likely he does know, as I can't see why the wildlings would wait to tell him until they told us, too. Still... it's possible.*

Holly recalled "In our haste to leave the Frostfangs, we descended the northernmost slopes a little too quickly. One of our company, Bodger, slipped and tumbled all the way to ground below. We found him when we ourselves got to the bottom. He had broken his neck."

"Did you burn the body?" Benjen presumed.
"We were going to," Karsi declared, "Keep in mind, no more than one minute passed from the time Bodger fell and the time we reached him. When he was confirmed dead, Devyn ordered the body burned. Rowan volunteered to do the deed. But just as she approached Bodger… he came back."

Benjen Stark felt his eyes widen and his breath slow down. Around the keep, most everyone else had much the same reaction.

"After one minute?" Lord Jeor uttered softly.

"Yes," Devyn insisted, "It could not have been any longer than that. That was how long it took for Bodger to get up. He attacked Rowan before she could even produce her flint. We tried to help her, but before we could do anything, he had already torn out a sizable chunk of her neck."

"Luckily, before she could come back, we managed to burn them both," Holly recalled.

"We haven't had another brush with death since then," Devyn remarked, "All the same… it has been a week since that episode, and we still cannot believe we saw Bodger become a wight after being dead for one lone minute."

"I cannot blame you for not wanting to believe it," Mance Rayder muttered, "We've never seen a body reanimate that quickly before. At least not without a White Walker nearby."

"We thought of that, too," said Orell, "So after we burned the bodies, I warged into my bird and did a sweep of the area. I assure you that other than those in the host gathered in the Land of Always Winter, there were no White Walkers to be seen anywhere in the Frostfangs."

"So, Bodger came back all on his own," Holly contended.

"This is grim news indeed," Lord Commander Mormont thought aloud, "The Others' hold must be getting stronger, now that they can reanimate bodies almost immediately after death. Be that as it may, we are fortunate to have learned this sooner rather than later. We can use this knowledge to our advantage."

"Use it how, my lord?" Benjen Stark queried. I don't see what advantage this might give us.

"From now on, if anyone dies, the body must be burned immediately," Jeor Mormont declared, "No questions, excuses, or exceptions whatsoever. The manner of death does not matter, either. Whether they are stabbed by a sword, mauled by a shadowcat, freeze to death, or simply expire peacefully in their sleep, they are to be burned straightaway. I want every black brother to understand the importance of this directive."

"I will pass that same directive along to my own people," Mance claimed.

"Looks like we all finally agree on something."

"Have you anything further to report?" Mance Rayder questioned the other wildlings.

"No, Mance," Devyn responded, "Only that the Land of Always Winter is completely overrun with the undead, and that fire is our most valuable tool now more than ever."

"Then that concludes preliminary reconnaissance," the King-beyond-the-Wall pronounced.

"Indeed, it does," Lord Commander Jeor conceded, "Now we take the offensive."

"Hear, hear," Benjen murmured in agreement. Although I am not going on the offensive just yet.
Craster was the only one there who had not opened his mouth since the conversation began. In fact, he had looked rather uninterested in the whole affair. Benjen was inclined to think he had not even been paying very much attention to the conversation, if any at all.

Even so, Craster spoke the very last words of the conversation. He mockingly stated "I'll keep an eye out for you lot when you return. There will probably be so few of you left that you'll all fit in my hall."

_Sooner or later, the Others will come to your hut, daughter-raper. When they do, I don't think I'll be bothered to stop them._

Within the hour, the Night's Watchmen broke camp. All twenty-five hundred of them were mounted on horseback once more. This was also when Bran's group separated from them.

Nearly all the black brothers would turn west and make for the First of the First Men. Benjen Stark and a select few, however, would turn east and make for a different location, instead.

Benjen's orders were quite clear. Once he delivered his nephew, his nephew's guards and his nephew's companions to this location, he and the rest of the black brothers in their party would head straight for the Fist of the First Men and reinforce the rest of the rangers and Mance Rayder's wildling army. There they would prepare the hard advance into enemy territory, and ultimately execute that advance.

Benjen Stark said as much when they met up with Leaf. He told them firmly "I will ride with you as far as the cave of the Three-Eyed Raven. After that, I must leave you."

"I understand, Uncle," young Bran Stark asserted, speaking with the seriousness and wisdom of their wizened Old Nan, "You must do what is required of you, just as I must."
It had been four months since the start of the three-hundredth year of Aegon's Conquest. Four months since they had last seen Westeros. Four months since they first set out to complete the errand given to them by King Robert Baratheon.

*Just a little longer, and we'll have something to show for these last four months.*

In the first week of the year's fifth month, Prince Aegon Targaryen, his mother Princess Elia Martell, and their party had finally succeeded in tracking down the largest sellsword company in Essos.

Alas, they had not yet secured the allegiance of Golden Company. At present, the Company was still a potential threat to the security of the Seven Kingdoms. *But not for much longer, regardless of how this day turns out.*

Aegon and his associates had tracked the Golden Company all across Essos over the course of the last several weeks. Somehow, the Company always seemed to be just out of reach. After a while, the pursuit felt more like a game of cat-and-mouse, and either the cat was too slow or the mouse was too quick. *Nevertheless, at some point or other, the cat will catch the mouse.*

Although the search had begun in Volantis, the chase had not begun until after Aegon's group left the city. After speaking with Triarch Malaquo Maegyr's grandchildren and welcoming them into their ranks, the Westerosi fleet had sailed up the Rhoyne.

Their intended destination was supposed to be Ghoyan Drohe, but Mother did not wish for them to sail all the way there only to find another dead end. As such, whenever the fleet happened upon a town or a city built on or near the Rhoyne, Princess Elia Martell ordered their ship to dock there. Each time, she took a few hours to speak with the locals, determined to see if any of them knew anything more of the Golden Company.

In most cases, all Mother managed to get was either information they were already aware of or no information at all. This occurred so often that one might have been inclined to think of this constant stopping as nothing more than a fabulous waste of their precious time.

All the same, there were some places along the Rhoyne where the inhabitants yielded some knowledge of the Golden Company that was both new and useful. By themselves, those few helpful sources made the fleet's frequent anchoring totally worthwhile.

At Volon Therys, Aegon, Mother, and their companions learned that after the Golden Company's visit to Volantis, they had indeed been seen travelling north. However, they had gone west towards the Disputed Lands first. They had been there for nigh on a full turn of the moon before they headed back east and ventured up the Rhoyne.

Although no one in Volon Therys could claim to know the Golden Company's purpose for going to the Disputed Lands, there were some who revealed that the Company had been to Lys, Myr, and Tyrosh in a single month. The reports of their activities in that region tended to conflict, but these reports all seemed to agree that the Company had refused at least one hopeful contract from each city. That indicated they had no intention of siding with anyone in the continual struggles over the Disputed Lands. *So, they aren't offering their arms to anyone else after all. It appears they are still just looking to swell their ranks.*
When the fleet was about halfway up the Rhoyne, they encountered the ruins of Chroyane. Hollistor Maegyr bade the Westerosi not to enter the city, as it was known to be overrun with victims of greyscale. Called "stone men" by many, most of them had been driven insane by the illness, and simply touching one was said to be enough to cause it to spread.

Aegon and his mother chose to heed the Volantene nobleman's warning; they were not going to investigate the ancient ruined city.

Be that as it may, Mother decided that they would still go under the city, as the Rhoyne went straight through it. If they were to continue their quest by way of river, this was their only choice. Their only other option was to go around the city by way of land, and Mother was not ready to part with their vessels just yet. Ser Lyn and Lord Renly both conceded on that point; they wished to wait as long as possible before having to depend on their horses for transportation.

Just before they reached Chroyane, Princess Elia issued an order that everyone was to be silent and arm themselves, and no one was to go ashore or disembark until after they were out of the quarantine zone. This order was passed all throughout the fleet, and only when everyone had heard it did Mother allow them to press on.

Initially, the going was quiet, smooth, and peaceful. Once they were upon the Sorrows, Aegon caught glimpses of figures lurking in the mists. For a while, all he saw was an occasional ominous silhouette. Then the fleet came to a bridge that connected the east and west banks of Chroyane together. It was there that those silhouettes became much more vivid. They gained features, physiques... and weapons.

When the ships at the front of the Westerosi fleet were directly beneath the bridge, the stone men made their true intentions known. There they quite suddenly turned aggressive and attacked the ships from above.

Aegon's vessel was one of the first to be boarded. Thankfully, none of the boarders lasted very long. They were no match when up against the likes of Ser Arthur Dayne, Ser Lyn Corbray, Ser Loras Tyrell, Lord Renly Baratheon, and Vereld Maegyr.

At his mother's behest, Aegon did not partake in the fighting. Much as he wanted to, there was no need for him to do so, as the other men had the situation well under-control. Still, he did draw Blackfyre and stand in front of Princess Elia Martell. He was prepared to defend his mother from anyone and anything. *I am not about to let some stony bastard lay even one infectious finger on my flesh and blood. Not even my flesh and blood.*

The fighting lasted less than fifteen minutes. Once it was all over, Mother called for an assessment of the damages incurred. Thirteen of their ships were boarded by sixty stone men. Thankfully, all sixty had been killed, and they had only taken seven Westerosi with them. Thrice that number had been wounded, but none of those injuries had been fatal. Better yet, most had not been exposed to the stone men.

Anyone who may have contracted greyscale was swiftly treated by Talisa Maegyr. Working quickly and efficiently, she managed to prevent an outbreak. Miraculously, not one person in the whole fleet would be doomed to become a stone man. *Fortune smiled on us then. Let us hope it will do so again, once we find the Golden Company.*

This was one situation where Aegon realized how useful the Maegyrs truly were. Between Hollistor's intellect, Vereld's combat prowess, and Talisa's medical training, the three of them comprised an invaluable team of three. The fact that they were siblings just made their bond all the more impressive.
When Aegon and his mother came to Volantis, there were over fifty ships in their fleet. When the Maegyrs joined up, they had brought along another nine vessels, each complete with a full crew, a platoon of their family's soldiers, and enough supplies to sustain them all. However, at Mother's insistence, Vereld, Hollistor, and Talisa were given lodgings aboard their flagship, the *Sea Serpent*.

Aegon was very glad she had extended them that courtesy. Not only had that gesture demonstrated how the Westerosi officers viewed the Volantene nobles as equals, but it had also provided plenty of opportunities for the two parties to interact.

By the time they emerged from the ruins of Chroyane, Aegon had come to regard all three of the Maegyrs as more than an ally. Thus far, they appeared to have developed a similar view of him. That proved to be a blessing; Aegon liked making and having friends, and apart from the Maegyrs, there was no one else aboard the *Sea Serpent* who was close to him in age. Other than Renly and Loras, who usually just preferred each other's company.

Aegon Targaryen and the Maegyrs never ran out of subjects to converse on. As it happened, they were as eager to learn about the Seven Kingdoms as they had been to enlist in the Legion without Banners. Aegon indulged them with many detailed chronicles of the history – both ancient and recent – of Westeros. Each of the Volantenes repaid him in turn. Vereld showed him several of the more advanced fighting styles of the east, and Hollistor taught him of all the different cultures of the Free Cities and how to speak High Valyrian. As practical and useful as the brothers' lessons were, Aegon found he appreciated the things their sister shared with him even more. His expertise with medicine was trivial at best, but he knew it was just as important to one's survival as swordsmanship and knowledge. *Oftentimes, more so.*

Aegon learned a fair amount of healing from the youngest of the Maegyrs. He also thought of her as the best mentor of the three. Whereas Vereld could be a little quick-tempered and Hollistor could sometimes be a haughty one, Talisa was always patient and gentle. She was never afraid to speak her mind. In fact, she *always* spoke it. Even so, her eloquence did not bother Aegon. If anything, it just made her seem even more endearing.

Although Aegon had come to enjoy spending time with all three of the Maegyrs, Talisa was the one he was most interested in getting to know on a personal level. Alas, he could not simply ask her brothers to leave her alone with him. While Vereld and Hollistor respected their sister's space, they could be fairly protective of her, too. Not that Aegon could hold that against them. *I would do the same for my sisters, even though most of them are actually my cousins, and the only one who isn't is older than I, and betrothed besides.*

In any case, Aegon had decided it would be wise if he did not give in to personal feelings. They still had a mission to complete first. *But after that, maybe*…

It ultimately took about three weeks for the fleet to make it to Ghoyan Drohe. Shortly after the *Sea Serpent* and the other ships crossed over from the Rhoyne to the Little Rhoyne, they arrived at their destination.

Like Chroyane, Ghoyan Drohe was a ruin. Fortunately, this one was not crawling with stone men. That meant there was a greater chance that people capable of articulate speech were in the area.

Mother dispatched a search party to scout ahead. After less than an hour, the party returned with some scavengers they had met near the city's blocked-up canals.

The scavengers had been along the Rhoyne for almost half a year. Most of that time, they had spent in Ghoyan Drohe. As such, they turned out to be an excellent source of information, albeit not a free one. A bit of coin got them to loosen their lips. After that, they had revealed that not one,
but two large companies had passed through Ghoyan Drohe in the last couple months.

One of them was a Dothraki khalasar. However, two of the scavengers swore that they had seen more than Dothraki in that party. Even from a distance, they could tell there were some foreigners amongst the horselords. When asked what these foreigners had looked like, both scavengers had claimed "much like you." That was all Mother needed to confirm that Lady Dacey Clegane and her party were with Khal Drogo and Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen.

The other great host that had recently passed by Ghoyan Drohe had been a band of sellswords. They had been smaller in number, but better armed and armored. And, the scavengers claimed, much finer to look upon. They recalled how the Sun's glare had reflected off the infantry's golden armor. It had shone so brightly that it had threatened to blind the scavengers when they first gazed at it.

Even if the color of the soldiers' armor had been omitted, it was no challenge for Aegon and his companions to determine which band of sellswords the scavengers had seen. The scavengers had hidden when the Golden Company came to Ghoyan Drohe, so they had no idea what they were doing in the area or why. Nonetheless, they had managed to see where the Company had gone when they departed the ruined city. According to their report, Homeless Harry Strickland and his soldiers had headed directly northeast, towards Norvos.

After compensating the scavengers for this information and sending them on their way, Mother gave the order for the fleet to turn around. By the end of the day, their ships were out of the Little Rhoyne and back in the Rhoyne. A couple days later, they arrived at Ny Sar, yet another ruin. *So many ruins on this river, it's a wonder no one's ever tried to restore them.*

Ny Sar was located at the confluence of the Rhoyne and the Noyne. The fleet had passed it when they first went up the Rhoyne to get to Ghoyan Drohe. Mother had insisted that they stop there, but not to investigate. This minor delay was more for sentimental reasons, as Ny Sar had been the palace of their ancestor, Princess Nymeria, before it was destroyed by the Valyrian Freehold.

They had made good progress thus far, so they could afford this minor delay. Apart from that, Aegon Targaryen shared his mother's awe and fascination when he first saw Ny Sar. *It must've been a wondrous city in the days of its prime.*

When they returned to Ny Sar after their trip to Ghoyan Drohe, they did not linger this time. Also, instead of continuing down the Rhoyne back whence they came, the *Sea Serpent* and all the other vessels turned onto the Noyne.

Before long, they reached Norvos. Aegon was concerned that they would encounter another setback. One could not blame him, given the reputation of this Free City. Although Norvos was ruled by a council of magisters, the members of the council were selected by their religious leaders, the bearded priests.

The bearded priests were notoriously xenophobic, especially towards those who practiced other faiths. As it happened, everyone in the Westerosi party – including their Volantene allies – was a believer in the Old Gods, the New Gods, the Drowned God, or the Lord of Light. So, they could expect no help from the city's ruling powers. They would have to locate another source instead.

Aegon recalled that his uncle Doran's wife, Lady Mellario, was from Norvos. After more than two decades of marriage, she had gone back to the city of her ancestors. Oddly enough, that was around the time Lord Gregor Clegane and the Lords Paramount of the Seven Kingdoms announced the second coming of the Long Night, but that had had nothing to do with Mellario's decision to abandon Dorne.
As far as Aegon knew, his aunt had not seen or even corresponded with her husband since she returned to Norvos. She may have written to Arianne, Quentyn, and Trystane. She certainly tried her hardest to take them with her, but as the Prince of Dorne, Uncle Doran neither could nor would have his children taken away from them. As such, Aunt Mellario was forced to leave them behind, too.

Needless to say, Lady Mellario and Prince Doran Martell had not parted on good terms at all. Be that as it may, there had been no animosity between her and Aegon’s mother when they last saw each other. In fact, Princess Elia Martell was one of the reasons Mellario had not left Westeros sooner than she had.

After the fleet docked in Norvos, Mother hastily sought out Lady Mellario. Aegon had accompanied her, and not just because he was accustomed to following her to negotiations. He was genuinely interested in seeing his aunt again, even though it occurred to him that she may have been unlikely to reciprocate the feeling.

As it turned out, she was not. When Aegon got to Mellario’s estate, she warmly greeted him and her sister-by-law. Her receptive nature had come as a bit of a surprise. It was almost as though she had been expecting them. Then again, they had already been in Essos for around three months, and they definitely had not been travelling incognito. Word may not get around as quickly here as it does back home, but sooner or later, it does get around.

When last Aegon saw his aunt, she believed him to be Uncle Oberyn’s issue. Nevertheless, she did not seem too shocked when she learnt the truth of his heritage. Of course, why would she have been? Her only tie to House Targaryen is through Mother, and the conflicts of the Seven Kingdoms had never been of any great interest to her. That was one thing his aunt had in common with most of Dorne.

At any rate, Aegon got more out of this visit than a bittersweet family reunion. Although she was no longer invested in the affairs of the Seven Kingdoms, Lady Mellario was up to date on what transpired in the lands of the Nine Free Cities. She managed to provide him and Mother some useful information on the Golden Company.

She informed them that the officers of the Company had been to Norvos less than a fortnight beforehand. During their stay, they had tried – and spectacularly failed – to broker an alliance with the bearded priests. Mellario had picked up tidbits of gossip pertaining to the Company’s past and future whereabouts. Immediately before coming to Norvos, they had tried to forge an alliance with the Sealord of Braavos and the magisters of Pentos. Both attempts had ended just as badly as the one with the bearded priests.

By now, Aegon had noticed an interesting pattern in the Golden Company’s movements. Apparently, the Company was systematically travelling to all the Free Cities and reaching out to the main governing powers of each. Mother arrived at that very same conclusion, as did Hollistor Maegyr and Aunt Mellario.

If that was indeed the case, the only Free Cities the Golden Company had left to go to were Qohor and Lorath. Of course, there was a possibility that they had already gone to one or both of those cities. Maybe even before they went to Volantis. Once more, his mother, his aunt, and Hollistor all had the same thought.

All the same, this was the best lead they had had at this time. So, they decided to be optimistic and assume that the Company had not yet been to the northermmost or easternmost of the Free Cities. From there, it was all a matter of predicting where they would head next.
Given the Golden Company's unpleasant history with Qohor, it was quite probable that they would go there last, if at all. Furthermore, Lorath was quite out of the way, and closer to Norvos, besides. In the end, everyone came to agree that that was where the Golden Company would next be. As such, Mother decreed that they would head north as soon as possible.

After bidding his aunt a very fond farewell, Aegon and his party left Norvos. This time, they did not depart by the Noyne. None of the major rivers in Essos were connected to the continent's northern coast. Sailing to Lorath would have necessitated going back down the Noyne and the Rhoyane and all the way around the Narrow Sea. In the time it took to undertake that journey, the Golden Company could have visited all of the Free Cities a second time.

With all that in mind, this was one setting where the route by land was definitely the more sensible and desirable one to take. This was where they finally brought out all the horses they had been transporting in the lower decks of their ships.

When Mother announced that they would continue the journey on horseback, her decision had been met with much praise. After having spent most of the past ninety or so days with a deck beneath their feet, most of the Westerosi soldiers were eager for a change of setting. In fact, only the Ironborn members of their group did not seem bothered to have been on the water for so long.

Mother had chosen to keep the fleet docked at Norvos and to leave the Ironborn units behind to tend to their ships. Likewise, the Maegyr vessels were being monitored by the Volantene crews who ran them, but Vereld, Hollistor, Talisa, and every one of their soldiers had set out with all the non-Ironborn Westerosi. That arrangement seemed to work out fine for all parties involved.

Prince Aegon Targaryen exited Norvos astride a hardy brown destrier. He rode at the front of a grand column alongside Princess Elia Martell, Ser Arthur Dayne, Ser Lyn Corbray, Lord Renly Baratheon, Ser Loras Tyrell, Vereld Maegyr, Hollistor Maegyr, and Talisa Maegyr. The nine of them led a procession of five hundred Volantene soldiers and ten thousand Westerosi warriors northward to Lorath.

A week's ride had brought them to where they were at present, within sight of Lorath Bay. They could see the city of the same name on the largest of the Bay's three islands. On the mainland south of the island of Lorath, there was an encampment. At a glance, Aegon identified the people in the encampment as the Golden Company. Once again, their armor gave them away.

The encampment was huge and expansive, but all the tents had been erected rather close to the coast. That effectively limited the number of places the Company could escape to if they came under attack. So, another company – even one much smaller in size – could easily surround them and cut off their retreat. Finally, the cat has ensnared the mouse in a trap.

Mother called for the column to halt when they first caught sight of the Golden Company. By now, most of their own forces had already climbed over the hills overlooking Lorath Bay. They were in plain sight of every person in the encampment below. The sky was directly overhead, so it must have been around midday. They see us as clearly as we see them.

"How shall we proceed, Your Grace?" Vereld Maegyr asked Mother.

"For now, let us do nothing," Princess Elia Martell declared, "We have spent four months looking for the Golden Company. Now, it is their turn to come to us."

"Well, suppose they have no intention of coming to us," Loras Tyrell contended.

"Eventually, they'll have to," Mother debated, "Look at where they are, and then at where we are.
We have them strategically pinned down. If they try to break camp and flee, we can easily close in around them. I do not see any ships anchored on their side of the Bay, either. Unless they can swim in their armor, they have no way of getting away from us."

"Indeed not," Renly Baratheon conceded, "But if they think they see an opening in our ranks, they may be bold or dense enough to move towards it. To prevent such futile endeavors, I propose that we disperse our own units across these hills. That'll convince the Golden Company that no matter what happens here today, they'll not leave this area without encountering us first."

That might also prompt them to send an envoy sooner.

"Excellent idea, my lord," Mother pronounced. She looked around at the officers under her command and told them "Give the order for the company to spread out."

The officers went to distribute Princess Elia Martell's demand, and the soldiers speedily followed it. Within the next five minutes, hundreds of Volantenes and thousands of Westerosi were arrayed side-by-side in four orderly lines. The lines were so long that they entirely cut off the inlet where the Golden Company was assembled from the rest of the mainland.

"Now… we wait," Mother proclaimed. Sounds fine to me.

Although Aegon was prepared to remain there atop his horse all day, he actually only had to wait about ten minutes. That was how long it took for the Golden Company to acknowledge the Westerosi party's presence and dispatch a messenger.

The man sent to speak for the Company was a brute. He had a round belly, a graceless gait, a face heavily adorned with scars, and two damaged ears. He was accompanied by half a dozen more men, all of whom were closer to average height and much less menacing in appearance.

The sight of the man was enough to make Aegon want to draw Blackfyre. However, the large man's hands went nowhere near his own blade, so Aegon willed himself not to wield his. He just held his ground and waited for the brute to approach.

Soon enough, the brute and his colleagues were within spitting distance of the Westerosi officers and the Maegyrs. That was when they brought their mounts to a stop. No words were spoken just yet. Before he even opened his mouth, the brute spent a good minute seizing up Mother and everyone else. His eyes lingered on Aegon a little bit longer. He raised an eyebrow, as though something about the Targaryen prince intrigued him. I may know what. He probably thinks he knows me.

The brute ultimately sat up in his saddle and called out "Identify yourselves. Then state what business you have in these parts."

It was Mother who answered. "I am Princess Elia of House Nymeros Martell. I have come to treat with you on behalf of Robert of House Baratheon, the King of the Seven Kingdoms. Might I know your name, good knight?"

"Aye, Your Grace," the brute muttered, speaking a little more respectfully, "I am called Ser Franklyn Flowers, though I am also known as the bastard of Cider Hall."

"I thought he looked a bit like a Reachman," Loras whispered to Lyn and Renly. Aegon irately gestured for them to quiet down.

"If your intentions are not hostile, why do your forces surround ours?" Ser Franklyn inquired.
"For the simple reason that we desired to gain your notice," Mother revealed.

"You could have gotten our attention just as easily by riding down to our camp, Your Grace," Franklyn Flowers pointed out.

"That is true," Mother admitted, "But had we done that, would you have been as impressed?"

"I never said I was impressed," Ser Franklyn uttered plainly, "Still, I will commend you on your display of force. It is rather audacious of you to block our access to the land, but you cannot mean to keep us here. Our numbers are thrice your own."

"We are aware that you possess superior numbers," Princess Elia Martell murmured drily, "But what you see here is only a small fraction of the total strength we have amassed in Westeros. Furthermore, not one of the people you see before you has been paid to be here. Each and every one of them has something far greater to fight for than coin."

"Just what might this 'oh, so noble' cause be?" the baseborn Reachman mumbled sardonically.

"The preservation of all life," Mother proclaimed, "I mean all life. Mine, yours, my people's, your people's and that of every other breathing person in the Known World. Whatever else you and your fellow sellswords believe in, we all must have common ground on that much."

Ser Franklyn Flowers seemed taken aback. For a moment, Aegon was nervous that his mother may have said something to startle or aggravate the bastard knight. Then, a few seconds later, Ser Franklyn solemnly remarked "Very well. If you would just come with me, Your Grace. I will bring you to the Captain-General."

"Thank you, good ser," Elia stated appreciatively. So far, the negotiations are already going better than I thought they would.

Aegon, his mother, Ser Lyn, Ser Loras, Lord Renly, Ser Arthur, and the Maegyrs allowed Ser Franklyn Flowers to take them back to the Golden Company's encampment. They took about a hundred of the Volantene soldiers and twenty-five hundred of the Westerosi with them. The rest of their forces stayed behind to guard the inlet and prevent anyone from departing the area prematurely.

As they rode through the encampment, Aegon Targaryen gazed around at the men of the Golden Company. Some of them were sharpening their swords. Some were polishing their armor. Some were sparring with friends. Some were eating. Some were drinking. Some were laughing. All-in-all, they looked, talked, and behaved very much like the average group of Westerosi soldiers.

They're no different than we are, Aegon realized. They just have their priorities in the wrong order.

Ser Franklyn brought them to a big cloth-of-gold tent surrounded by a ring of pikes topped with gilded skulls. Aegon had heard somewhere that the Golden Company dipped the skulls of previous captain-generals in gold and kept them on display. Based on what he saw, that report was more than a mere rumor.

As he neared the pikes, he gazed down at Blackfyre, and then he turned back to the skulls. This sword once belonged to at least one of those skulls. He found himself wondering which skull was Bittersteel's.

At the mouth of the captain-general's tent, Ser Franklyn climbed off his mount. Likewise, Aegon, his mother, Ser Arthur, Renly, Loras, Lyn, Vereld, Hollistor, and Talisa dismounted their own
horses. The units who had accompanied them to the encampment remained ahorse.

There were two men standing guard at the captain-general's tent. At first, they looked as though they would not let anyone inside. Then Ser Franklyn spoke with the guards, and after that, the guards stepped aside to grant Aegon and his companions entrance.

Mother was the first to follow Ser Franklyn inside the tent, but Aegon stayed close to her. Regardless of how this meeting went, he was not going to stray too far from his mother's side. That was more for her sake than his. Aegon was well past the age where boys turn to their mothers when they are scared or in need. He was at the age where he felt obligated to protect her and not the other way around. Anyway, I've already got Ser Arthur to watch my back. Mother can rely on me to watch hers.

Inside the captain-general's tent, nine more men of varying backgrounds were gathered around a table.

One was a Summer Islander with dark skin and white hair. Another was a pale-faced Lyseni with lilac eyes, white hair with a mismatched gold goatee, and many pearl and amethyst earrings. A third was a ghastly Volantene with a pointed black bear and blood-red hair.

At the head of the table was a portly man with thinning grey hair and the guise of a Westerosi or a descendant of one. Standing beside him was a short, slouched man with an obscenely large nose, stubble all over his cheeks and chin, and bags under his eyes.

The other four men were standing off to the side. One of them was clean-shaven, carried an astute expression, wore his hair in a ponytail, and dressed in a long, loose grey robe. Aegon thought he looked somewhat like a maester, but without the chain.

The next one was a brawny man with a shaggy beard and a shock of orange hair. He wore the emblem of a duck on his tunic. Like Ser Franklyn, he appeared to be a native of the Reach. Bitterbridge, I'm guessing.

The last two were a middle-aged man and a boy on the cusp of manhood, both with blue hair. One could be forgiven for assuming they were father and son. However, when Aegon took a closer look, he realized that the blue hair was the only feature they had in common. Other than that, they did not look alike at all. Of course, Aegon already knew who they were.

For the present, Aegon elected to avoid making eye contact with the blue-haired man or the blue-haired boy. Sooner or later, he would confront them. But that would have to wait. For now, Mother had to appeal to the officers of the Golden Company.

The portly man – whom Aegon surmised must have been Homeless Harry Strickland – turned to the half-dozen citizens of the Seven Kingdoms and looked them over. He enquired "Who are these new faces you have brought us, Franklyn?"

"I'm afraid not, Captain-General," Vereld disclosed.

"Our grandfather did not send us," Hollistor affirmed, "It is our own interests that brought us here."

"As well as the interests of those we came with," Talisa added in, gesturing to the Westerosi in their party.

The portly man – whom Aegon surmised must have been Homeless Harry Strickland – turned to the half-dozen citizens of the Seven Kingdoms and looked them over. He enquired "Who are these new faces you have brought us, Franklyn?"
It was Mother who answered for the bastard knight. She stepped forward and stated "We have spent the better part of the year looking for you, Captain-General. Many resources and several lives have been expended in this endeavor, and should you refuse to treat with us, I fear there will be even greater loss. So, I plead with you not to turn us away, and to hear us out instead."

After thinking for a moment, Homeless Harry Strickland shrugged casually and said "As you say, my lady. However, I would prefer to hear your name first."

"Princess Elia of House Martell," Mother responded straightforwardly.

Homeless Harry nodded his head and disclosed "I am Harry Strickland, captain-general of the Golden Company."

He then proceeded to introduce the other men in the room. The Summer Islander was Black Balaq, the commander of the company archers. The Lyseni was Lysono Maar, the company spymaster. The Volantene was Gorys Edoryen, the company paymaster. The short, slouched man was Watkyn, Harry Strickland's squire and cupbearer.

The clean-shaved man was called Haldon Halfmaester. The large man with the duck on his tunic was Ser Rolly Duckfield. The blue-haired man and boy were presented as Griff and Young Griff respectively, but no one there actually believed that. Again, Aegon tried to stay out of sight from those two.

His efforts to remain unnoticed were wasted, though. A moment later, Mother introduced everyone in her own party. She announced to Homeless Harry "You are already familiar with the Maegyrs. These others are Ser Lyn Corbray, Lord Renly Baratheon, Ser Loras Tyrell, Ser Arthur Dayne, and my son, Prince Aegon Targaryen."

Right away, Aegon found himself the center of attention. Every person on the other side of the table fixed his eyes on the young blond man. He wanted to ignore them, but doing so would have been pointless. Just because I don't acknowledge them, they won't lose interest in me.

At one point, Aegon's eyes connected with Young Griff's. When that happened… he was gravely astounded. He was unsettled by just how alike the two of them really looked. Apart from their hair, they were practically identical. It's almost like peering into a looking glass… if the upper-half of the looking glass was tinted blue.

"What is the meaning of this?" Gorys Edoryen snapped at Harry Strickland.

"I… I haven't a clue," Homeless Harry murmured in confusion. It appears even the Company's top spy and commander are oblivious to this mummer's farce. That is just pitiful.

"I am aware of the lies you have been fed," Mother proclaimed, gazing around the tent, "You were told that my husband Rhaegar's children were murdered during the Sack of King's Landing. Most likely, you were also told that it was not Prince Aegon who died, but a lookalike instead. I will admit that that is partly true. My son was replaced with a decoy. But only after the Sack. My daughter was, too. The decoys were already dead, but both of my children actually survived the Sack."

"Then where have they been these last sixteen years?" Black Balaq demanded.

"In hiding, of course," Lyn Corbray retorted wryly, "No longer, though. Now that the King has seen fit to welcome them back into society, there's no need for them to hide."

"Exactly how long has this been the case?" asked Lysono Maar.
"Since the start of this year," Renly Baratheon expounded, smirking, "You really need to keep up on current events. By now, all of Westeros knows the truth of Rhaegar Targaryen's children. How is it you lot are still in the dark?"

"We have been frequently on the move this past year," Homeless Harry Strickland disclosed, "We do not receive much news out in the badlands. Unless it involves a contract or a means to strengthen our company, we do not make it our concern."

"So, what would we care for what goes on half a world away?" Lysono Maar contended.

"Oh, I believe you care for what happens in the Seven Kingdoms far more than you let on," Mother debated, crossing her arms and glaring at the officers of the Golden Company, "Why else would you have sent that assassin?"

Homeless Harry and his subordinates were both flabbergasted and outraged by that accusation. "Excuse me?"

"Six or seven months ago, a man of common birth turned up at a certain holdfast in the Westerlands," Mother recounted, "There was nothing remarkable about him. He claimed to be interested in becoming a guard for the lord of that holdfast. Not long after, he tried to murder and steal from that same lord. He might've succeeded, had the lord's daughter not interrupted and killed him."

"What does that have to do with us?" Black Balaq queried.

"The emblem of the Golden Company was found in his pocket," Mother firmly proclaimed, "You may be interested to know that the holdfast he infiltrated was Clegane's Keep, the seat of Lord Sandor Clegane. Also known as the Hound, he is the brother of Lord Gregor Clegane, the Mountain That Rides, as well as the husband of my brother Oberyn's oldest daughter, Obara. The girl who stopped the assassin was their daughter Tyta, my great-niece. She had not even seen her eighth nameday when she stained her hands with the blood of her father's would-be killer."

Gorys Edoryen raised an eyebrow and asked "What was the assassin's name?"

"Connin," Mother professed, "Of course, for all we know, that was just an alias. Even if it wasn't, I suppose you will deny any knowledge of this incident."

"The incident itself, we do deny," Harry Strickland proclaimed. He turned to Gorys Edoryen and said inquiringly "Doesn't one of our spies go by the name of Connin?"

"Not anymore, captain-general," the spymaster replied, "There was such a man in our company once. He disappeared about nine months' past."

"Why didn't you mention this sooner?" Homeless Harry snapped.

"I did not see the need to," Gorys Edoryen contended, "Connin did not steal anything from our coffers or our arsenal. All he took was his fair share of gold and enough provisions to last him for a fortnight. Then he vanished without a trace. Since he only took what was rightfully his or what could easily be replaced, I did not send our spies after him. If I have caused you unrest because of this, I beseech your pardon."

"You needn't my pardon, Gorys," Harry Strickland asserted, "Considering the circumstances of Connin's disappearance, you were not wrong to assume he had simply resigned his commission. Aside from that, every man here knows he is free to leave this organization whenever he pleases."
"Aye, captain-general," Gorys Edoryen remarked. He then rubbed his temple and muttered "Still, it was a shame to lose the man. He was one of my best infiltrators."

"My niece's family can attest to that," Mother spat crossly, "So if you did not send Connin to kill the Hound, who did?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea, Your Grace," Homeless Harry Strickland insisted, "As things stand, we do not have the means to keep track of every person in our company, let alone the ones who are no longer serving with us. Once they leave, their affairs are no longer our concern."

"Perhaps someone else hired him," Lysono Maar conjectured.

"Like who?" Loras Tyrell questioned.

"How would we know?" the paymaster uttered blankly, "Every man has enemies. Sandor Clegane is no exception. Even those of us here in Essos are aware that it was he who killed the hated Euron Greyjoy. A man with an accomplishment such as that must have some enemies. Nevertheless, we do not know every person who might want him dead."

"Yet just now, you quite strongly implied that a third party hired Connin to do the deed," Mother noted.

"I said 'perhaps,' Your Grace," Lysono Maar pointed out, "That was pure speculation and nothing more."

Princess Elia Martell let out a frustrated sigh. Then she stepped forward and remarked "Regardless of whether or not you had a hand in what transpired at Clegane's Keep, that fiasco is only a small part of the bigger issue at hand."

"How so, Your Grace?" asked Black Balaq, perplexed.

"Despite your claim of being disinterested in the Seven Kingdoms, I know that you are anything but," Mother sternly pronounced. After a very brief pause, she abruptly added in "Everything you have done lately indicates that you are preparing to invade Westeros."

Once more, Homeless Harry Strickland, Black Balaq, Lysono Maar, Gorys Edoryen, Franklyn Flowers, Watkyn, Haldon Halfmaester, and Rolly Duckfield were alarmed. The only two who did not appear taken aback were Griff and Young Griff. The former seemed indifferent to that declaration; whereas the latter… smirked.

As shocking as that accusation may have been, Aegon noticed none of the Golden Company officers made any effort to counter it. Then he wondered… Maybe they are going to invade Westeros; they just don't know it yet. It was not uncommon for sellsword companies to only be told enough information to get their most immediate goals finished, and sometimes their employers had one final major objective which was not revealed to them until after all other tasks had been accomplished.

It could very well be that the Golden Company has only been instructed to go around Essos and recruit as many into their ranks as possible. Maybe once they have been all throughout Slaver's Bay and the Nine Free Cities, "Griff" will have them sail across the Narrow Sea.

"Well?" Mother murmured after a long, tense silence.

"I am afraid I can neither confirm nor deny that accusation, Your Grace," Homeless Harry
Strickland explicated, "Our employer \textbf{does} have an ultimate objective, but he refuses to reveal it until we have toured all of Essos for new members."

"Why would you agree to such a deal?" Loras Tyrell muttered dubiously.

"He promises us good coin," said Lysono Maar, "And he \textit{knows} what will happen if he does not hold his end of the bargain."

"Well, suppose his final assignment turns out to be an impossible errand," Renly Baratheon theorized.

"The word 'impossible' is alien to the Golden Company," Gorys Edoryen refuted.

"So, if your employer commissioned you to invade the Seven Kingdoms, you would do so?" Lyn Corbray presumed. He sounded unconvinced.

"As long as he followed through on everything he promised us, there is no reason we wouldn't," Homeless Harry Strickland boldly declared, "Meaning no offense to those of you who call Westeros your home, but the Company has mobilized campaigns against the Seven Kingdoms before."

\textit{Yes, and at a success rate of exactly zero percent.}

"We are aware of that," Mother claimed, "However, that was back when the people of Westeros barely even got along with one another. But currently, the realm is unified like never before. Even the Free Folk reside peaceably in the Seven Kingdoms. These days, a successful invasion of Westeros would be a feat beyond even your capability."

"Doesn't mean we shouldn't try invading, anyway," Young Griff cockily proclaimed. That was the first time he had spoken since Aegon entered the tent. His sudden declaration was almost as alarming as the implication behind its context.

"Do you mean to say that invasion \textbf{is} your goal?" Lyn Corbray asked rhetorically.

"Of course, it's our goal," Young Griff snapped heatedly, "Long as the Usurper sits the Iron Throne, the Seven Kingdoms will always be in disarray. It is our duty to remove that filthy drunkard from power."

"I would caution you to curb your tongue, if you value it," Renly Baratheon muttered angrily, "That 'filthy drunkard' is my elder brother, and you have no right to slander him so."

"I have no right to speak my mind of the man who killed my father?" Young Griff crossly retorted.

Aegon felt the urge to guffaw. \textit{How easily he blows his cover. How did this halfwit remain in hiding for this long?} After the urge passed, Aegon stepped forward and declared "King Robert did not kill your father. He killed mine."

Again, all eyes were on him. This time, he felt considerably more confident to be the center of attention. Aegon looked around at the men of the Golden Company and told them "You may as well drop this charade right now. Even before we entered this tent, we knew that that boy's name isn't Young Griff. Likewise, the man standing beside him is not named Griff, either. Isn't that right, Lord Jon?"

At that, everyone turned towards the blue-haired man. He seemed to have gotten quite anxious all of a sudden. Now it was Aegon's turn to smirk. \textit{His silence by itself is enough to answer my}
"Griff" ultimately released a heavy sigh and mumbled "There is no point in denial. So, I admit I was once Lord Jon Connington. Then one day I was stripped of my ancestral home and banished from the Seven Kingdoms. Now I am Jon Connington the exile and nothing more."

"You are still Jon Connington the traitor," Renly Baratheon sharply countered.

"Am I a traitor for serving the rightful rulers of Westeros?" Jon Connington snapped.

"We are not the rightful rulers any longer," Aegon Targaryen disputed, "My siblings and I have made a compromise with Robert Baratheon."

"What compromise?" said Jon Connington. He sounded genuinely interested.

"We bent the knee to him," Prince Aegon explicated, "In exchange, he has promised to restore House Targaryen to nobility status in the Seven Kingdoms."

"And you actually expect him to keep his word?" uttered Young Griff scathingly, "What kind of fool are you?"

"You've the gall to declare me a fool?" Aegon wittily rejoined, "I am not the one who is so arrogant that he honestly thinks he could pay a pack of exiles to annex an entire continent."

He hastily turned to Harry Strickland and said sincerely "No offense meant to you or yours, Captain-General."

"You gave none, Your Grace," Homeless Harry asserted.

"You call HIM 'Your Grace'?' Young Griff yelled heatedly. "That boy is an imposter!"

"It takes one imposter to recognize another," Lyn Corbray cockily declared.

"We seem to be at an impasse," Haldon Halfmaester observed, "Both these boys claim to be Aegon Targaryen, but there cannot be two Aegon Targaryens."

Actually, there have been six, including myself. But I'm the only one to be found amongst the present company.

"How do we know which is the imposter and which is the real one?" Ser Rolly Duckfield thought aloud. Aegon grinned at the shocked expression on Young Griff's face. Evidently, he did not appreciate being doubted by his own allies.

"Duck raises a good point," Watkyn remarked. He had a raspy voice to match his small figure.

"Maybe he does," Harry Strickland conceded. He looked over at Aegon and asked him "Is there any way you can prove the truth of your identity?"

"Yes, several, in fact," Aegon Targaryen proclaimed. "Has anyone a torch or a brazier? Any sort of flame would do. If not that, some flint rocks, or the capacity to make fire?"

"What would that accomplish?" Gorys Edoryen murmured enquiringly.

"True Targaryens have the blood of the dragon," Aegon elucidated, "Fire cannot harm a dragon. It just so happens that no level of heat could ever adversely affect me."
"Yet you're sweating right now," Lysono Maar pointed out.

"Because we've been riding all day," Aegon contended, "Like all the rest of you, I can still sweat when I exert myself. But I never sweat due to heat. Whereas Young Griff over there… he seems to be perspiring. Yes, I believe he is."

Sure enough, Young Griff's forehead was practically glistening at this time. And we're not even outside. He really cannot handle this climate.

As the blue-haired boy wiped his brow, Aegon stated "If you'd rather not see me hold a flame to my skin, I have other means of showing my resistance to fire. I could take off my doublet and stand outside for a while. Even after several hours, my skin will not be the lightest shade of pink."

"Neither would mine," said Black Balaq. Yes, but your skin is only ever one color.

"My siblings and I can vouch for him," Hollistor Maegyr pronounced, "When we first met Aegon, he placed an open flame to his whole left arm for two minutes without damaging it at all."

"It certainly convinced us," Talisa Maegyr remarked.

"It might have been sufficient to convince you," Haldon Halfmaester contended, "But not all of us are swayed so easily. This ruse can be dismissed as some type of sorcery or a conjuring trick."

"You are not the first maester to have that thought," Aegon murmured. He is the first half-maester to do so, though. I will not hold your doubts against you. Fortunately, that is not the only evidence I can supply to prove my identity."

He turned to Ser Arthur and gestured for him to approach. Once the Dornishman was at his side, Aegon proclaimed "You'll recall that this man was introduced as Ser Arthur Dayne. Would I be right to assume some of you are familiar with that name?"

"Of course, we are," Gorys Edoryen affirmed, "Plenty of people on this side of the Narrow Sea know of the legendary Sword of the Morning."

"It is a little strange seeing him here, though," Rolly Duckfield perceived, "Last we heard of him, he was long dead."

"As you can see, he most definitely is not dead," Aegon professed, "The world simply believed he was. After Robert's Rebellion, we went into hiding with me. He has faithfully served as my sworn shield for the last sixteen years. Now, I ask you: would a Kingsguard knight bother protecting a fraud?"

"Normally, I would think not," Jon Connington contended, "But ever since Jaime Lannister earned his moniker 'the Kingslayer,' I would say there is plenty of room to question the honor of those who wear the white cloak. I could make an exception for Ser Arthur, but there is still the possibility that he did not know his charge was a fraud."

"Do you truly think me so daft, Lord Jon?" Ser Arthur murmured bitterly. He's not daft at all. There is no way he could be so deadly or precise with a blade if he could not plainly see what was right in front of him.

"No, I do not, Ser Arthur," the former lord of Griffin's Roost claimed, "When last I met you, you valued honor to a fault. But men can change in sixteen years. I certainly did."
"Lord Jon has a point," Lysono Maar pronounced.

Loath as I am to admit it, he does. Looks like we still require more proof. Aegon then placed his hand on the hilt of Blackfyre and announced "I am about to take out my sword, but you needn't be alarmed. I have no intention of using it; I only want all of you to see it."

"Very well," Harry Strickland acknowledged, "Proceed."

Aegon then pulled Blackfyre from its sheath in one smooth motion. He held it high in the air and muttered "On the subject of swords, would anyone care to identify this weapon?"

The officers of the Golden Company studied the Valyrian steel blade closely for a few minutes. It was Black Balaq who spoke first: "That wouldn't be… Blackfyre, would it?"

"Correct," Aegon confirmed, lowering his blade, "This is the very sword your organization's founder, Aegor Rivers, carried into battle."

"How did you come to possess it?" Ser Franklyn Flowers muttered inquisitively.

"When Bittersteel was captured at the end of the Second Blackfyre Rebellion, his sword was taken from him," Aegon recounted, "Sometime later, his half-brother, Brynden Rivers joined the Night's Watch. Unbeknownst to all but his cousins, Bloodraven took both Blackfyre and Dark Sister with him to the Wall. Shortly before he disappeared, he hid the swords at Castle Black. Now, almost fifty years later, the swords have been recovered. I laid claim to Blackfyre."

To his relief, no one seemed to care enough to ask who was given Dark Sister. Aegon was quite glad for that. They don't need to know about Jon just yet. The whole of Westeros may know now that I have a brother, but as long as the Golden Company continues to believe I am Father's only son, I still have an edge over this pretender.

"You think a sword makes you a prince?" Franklyn Flowers gruffly murmured, "In legends, it might. But the real world is more complicated than that."

"No need to be so condescending, ser," Aegon commented stoically, returning Blackfyre to its scabbard, "I know full well that nothing in the world is ever simple."

Not even introductions, if this conversation is any indication. Thankfully, he still had one argument that was all but guaranteed to succeed in establishing him as the true Aegon Targaryen.

He glimpsed over his shoulder and beckoned Princess Elia Martell to come closer. She promptly stepped up next to him, and he softly said "Mother?"

Elia Martell delicately placed her hands on Aegon's shoulders, and she announced "I have known this young man since he was sired by my late husband, Prince Rhaegar. From the moment he was born to the Sack of King's Landing, I almost never let him out of my sight. The only times I did were when I was asleep, and when that was the case, he was almost always in the care of my best friend Ashara Dayne, whom I trust with my life. Ever since the Sack, he has been with me almost every day of his life. As such, I am going to say this one time only: there is no chance that he was switched with another child."

She paused for a moment to give that statement time to sink in. Then she gazed over at Young Griff and stated not unkindly "That young man with the blue hair may honestly believe himself to be Rhaegar's son. If so, he should not be condemned. He should be pitied, as he is a victim of deception. He has been gravely misled by the very man my husband regarded as his best friend. He
also has my sincerest condolences for never getting to know his true mother. Alas, whoever she is, I am not she. The only son ever born from my womb is the man currently beside me."

Aegon looked around the tent during his mother's speech. It looked as though most of the officers of the Golden Company were at least beginning to believe. Upon that realization, he smiled at his mother. *Just when I thought I could not love her any more than I already did...*

Jon Connington and Young Griff were the only two who did not seem the least bit swayed. *I expected that.*

There was only one possible counterargument one could have provided here. Aegon had grown up believing his mother was actually his aunt, and he had not learned the truth until she told him. Anyone who was aware of that might have questioned him for not figuring out the truth on his own somewhere down the line, whether through observation or basic intuition.

Thankfully, none of the Golden Company officers had any way of knowing that this time last year, Aegon Targaryen had thought his name was Edgar Sand. Thus, none of them could call him out on that.

There came a rather long interval of quietness. It was broken by Jon Connington, who stepped forward and pronounced "I believe there is only one surefire way to determine which is the real Aegon Targaryen."

"Tell us, Jon," Homeless Harry Strickland bade the exiled lord.

"Yes, do tell," Mother remarked. By her tone, she was amused. *She probably thinks he is bluffing.*

"A name is a sacred thing," Jon Connington contended, "So sacred that its owner should go to great length to uphold its goodness. All matters of goodness are judged by the Gods. Therefore, in a disagreement such as this, where two different people both claim the same name, the Gods would tend to favor whichever one of them was the name's rightful owner."

"Favor them?" Loras Tyrell commented, "You make it sound like a trial by combat."

"In a sense, that is what I am suggesting we do," Jon Connington muttered. That statement caught everyone's interest.

"What exactly are you proposing, Lord Jon?" Ser Rolly Duckfield enquired.

"Single combat," the exiled Stormlander announced, "We pit claimant against claimant and see how they fare. Whoever emerges victorious from the bout is the real Aegon Targaryen."

"Or, one could argue, whoever emerges victorious is the better swordsman," Lyn Corbray wittily commented.

"Or simply the one with the stronger will to live," Franklyn Flowers supposed.

"I would expect as much," Jon Connington muttered blankly, "Naturally, the Gods would give the true Aegon the quicker hand and the greater endurance."

"Since when have you been such a godly man, Connington?" Lord Renly inquired.

"I am not a godly man, Renly," Jon Connington insisted, "I do not build my life around the Gods like a septon, but I pray to them when it is appropriate to do so, and I turn to them in times of judgement, just as we all do."
"Lord Jon's proposal does have some merit," Homeless Harry Strickland thought aloud.

"Perhaps it does," Mother contended, "But that does not mean anyone should be forced into this skirmish. The decision to brawl should be the claimants' alone."

Everyone then looked around at Aegon and Young Griff, as though awaiting some input from them.

"I'm more than willing to fight for my name," Young Griff promptly claimed.

"I am, as well," Aegon said candidly. *Since I was planning to do away with this feigners anyway, this works out perfectly. At least in this case, no one can say I killed him without provocation.*

Most of the other people there seemed to have accepted their choice. Aegon noted that his mother did not offer a word of protest. *She must be confident in my ability.* That realization made Aegon even more confident in his own ability.

"Just a moment," Ser Arthur interjected, "What would become of the loser?"

Jon Connington shrugged and supposed "That is for the winner to decide."

One look at Young Griff's face was enough to tell Aegon what he was thinking. *It appears we've both already decided.*

"It would be best if we resolved this dispute as soon as possible," Jon Connington recommended, "Therefore, I propose that we hold the duel today."

"Fine by me," Aegon conceded.

"And me," said Young Griff.

"I suppose you've already decided where to have this duel, too, Connington?" Ser Lyn drily commented.

"Yes," the former lord of Griffin's Roost affirmed, "It should be somewhere south of the Golden Company's encampment, but north of Princess Elia's company. Ideally, halfway between the two forces. With that arrangement, we can ensure that no one intervenes or flees, and we can avoid making a grand show of this affair."

"That's an excellent idea, my lord," Young Griff stated approvingly.

Aegon said nothing this time; he just nodded in agreement. *Let's go on with this already; we've already wasted enough words.*

"Now, if no one's any objections, I propose that we go ahead with the duel now," Jon Connington pronounced.

"Very well," said Aegon.

"Alright with me," Young Griff muttered. No more words were needed after that.

A half-hour later, Aegon found himself, his mother, and the rest of their party in the center of the inlet of Lorath Bay. Aegon was now clad in a suit of leather armor. Having grown up in Dorne, he had come to favor light armor over heavy armor. It may have been less protective, but it weighed less and it did not impair the wearer's range of motion.
As they waited for Young Griff and the officers of the Golden Company to arrive, Ser Arthur Dayne came to speak with him. He told him "While I have every confidence in your ability to win this duel, Your Grace, I would like you to know that if the fighting turns sour for you, I am ready to intervene at a moment's notice."

"You will do no such thing, Ser Arthur," Aegon ordered his sworn shield. His tone was patient but firm, "This is supposed to be a one-on-one match. It may not be a trial by combat, but it is the next closest thing. I will not fight for my name by acting dishonorably."

"Is it all that necessary for you to fight at all?" the Sword of the Morning contended.

"Yes," Aegon asserted, "As much as I wish we could settle this dispute without killing anyone, you and I both know the only way this is going to end is with either my blood or Young Griff's staining the ground."

"Given Young Griff's irrational disregard for diplomacy, I find I must agree with you," Arthur Dayne mumbled grimly, "Be that as it may, I must caution you, Your Grace. In a bout such as this, anything can and will happen."

"I know what I'm doing, Ser Arthur," Aegon proclaimed, "I neither want nor need any assistance. However, if one of Young Griff's companions tries to enter the fight on his side, you have my leave to cut him down."

"As you wish, Your Grace," Ser Arthur avowed, smiling a bit. At least he's partly content.

Another half-hour later, the officers of the Golden Company showed up. Most of them looked much the same as they did back in the captain-general's tent. The only differences were that Jon Connington and Young Griff had washed the blue dye out of their hair, and Young Griff was now clad in a standard suit of the company's golden armor.

Young Griff's true hair color turned out to be light blond. Very light blond, at that. That struck Aegon as curious. It was quite rare to see such bright yellow locks on anyone other than a Targaryen.

At one point, Aegon found himself looking between his mother and Young Griff, and he wondered Could it actually be possible…

Almost straightaway, he shook his head in adamant refusal and cast that thought out of his head No, no, of course not. There is no way in the Seven Hells. Concentrate, Aegon. You are Aegon. You're about to fight for your life to prove that. You cannot doubt yourself now of all times.

Princess Elia Martell, Talisa Maegyr, Vereld Maegyr, Hollistor Maegyr, Arthur Dayne, Lyn Corbray, Renly Baratheon, and Loras Tyrell stood around Aegon Targaryen in a large half-circle. Similarly, Jon Connington, Homeless Harry Strickland, Lysono Maar, Gorys Edoryen, Black Balaq, Watkyn, Franklyn Flowers, Rolly Duckfield, and Haldon Halfmaester stood around Young Griff in an equally large half-circle. The two groups moved closer together until they converged, forming one full circle with Aegon and Young Griff in the center of it.

Young Griff was armed with a large gilded shield and a bastard sword with a gilded hilt. Aegon wondered how much his opponent's arms and armor were worth. They might be enough to hire a smaller sellsword company.

In his left hand, Aegon carried a leather shield to match his armor. It was not exceptionally sturdy, but it would be sufficient to block his rival's blows. Apart from that, his sword more than
compensated for his lesser shield. After decades of being buried in the ground, *Blackfyre* was finally seeing action once more. *Today, I shall appease its thirst for blood.*

Jon Connington stepped into the dueling ring and stepped between the two younger men. He asked them rhetorically "The rules of this combat are simple. Each side only has one fighter, no one else may intervene, no weapons apart from the ones in your hands are to be used, and the fighting shall last until one of you shouts 'yield,' or until only of you is left standing. Do you both understand these terms?"

"Perfectly," Aegon commented.

"Aye, my lord," Young Griff remarked.

Jon Connington nodded in acknowledgment. After that, he returned to the edge of the dueling ring and announced "Then begin, and may the Gods smile on the true Aegon!"

*Oh, they shall. At the end of this duel, I'll be smiling, too. I'll be smiling like a lackwit.*

Aegon Targaryen expected to spend a minute or so facing off his adversary. Alas, his adversary proved to be too eager to wait that long. Almost immediately after Connington's declaration, Young Griff charged forward with his sword high.

In response, Aegon speedily lifted his shield and stopped the blow in midair. At the same time, he swung *Blackfyre* at Young Griff's side, which the other boy blocked with his own shield.

When they pulled their swords apart from their shields, Aegon thrusted his blade forward, and Young Griff parried it. They spent a while parrying each other's blows. Every few seconds, one of them made a daring attempt to cut through the other's defenses, but no matter how hard they pushed each other, neither of them succeeded in drawing blood.

*He's better than I thought he'd be,* Aegon noticed. He wondered if Young Griff was thinking the same of him. Based on the frustrated expression across the other boy's face, he probably was. *Looks like we're an even match. For now…*

It was no longer midday, but the Sun was still high in the sky, and sunset would not be for several hours. That gave Aegon a unique advantage. He was immune to the negative effects of heat, whereas Young Griff was not. *It may not be hot enough to contract heatstroke, but no one likes battling in this climate for prolonged periods of time.*

The first ten minutes of sparring went absolutely nowhere. However, shortly after that, Aegon observed that Young Griff's advances were starting to become a little less fierce and a little more labored. *He's beginning to tire. It would seem heat is my ally.*

Another five minutes elapsed before Aegon finally broke through Young Griff's defenses. As he simultaneously blocked a blow with his shield and delivered another blow with his sword, he raised his leg and kicked Young Griff in the lower chest. The other boy stumbled backwards, struggling to remain afoot.

Just before Young Griff regained his balance, Aegon lunged forward and swung *Blackfyre* at his head. Somehow, Young Griff managed to dodge all but the tip of the sword. He shouted in pain as *Blackfyre* left a wide cut in his right cheek.

Aegon smiled in satisfaction. *First blood. Soon, first kill, too.*

Unfortunately, he did have the upper hand for much longer. After he recovered from his flesh
wound, Young Griff came at him with a renewed tenacity. He waved his sword at Aegon's lower body. The Targaryen prince managed to jump out of harm's way from that blow, but he was too slow for the one that followed.

This time, Young Griff's sword nicked his upper leg, just above his knee. Aegon had to bite his tongue to keep from yelling. Ignoring the pain, he knocked away Young Griff's sword, and he threw another cut at his rival's chest. He struck him with the blunt side of his blade. That was intentional; Young Griff's armor was too thick to slice through. This nonlethal blow managed to stun him.

"Had enough?" Aegon muttered cockily. Inwardly, he was partially hoping Young Griff would say 'yes,' but he knew the likelihood of that was extremely low. In any case, he was not about to give up. *I could do this all damn day, if I must.*

"Not on your life," Young Griff spat, glaring hatred at the Targaryen prince, "You think you are so impressive, what with your sword, your bodyguard, your resistance to fire, and your 'mother.' You really think that makes you the real Aegon? It doesn't! Even without all that, I will defeat you. Then the world will know that *I* am the son of Rhaegar Targaryen!"

"You must be delusional," Aegon uttered derisively, "Rhaegar wasn't your father. Your own father sold you for a jug of Arbor gold. You're unfit to be a prince of anything other than Pisswater Bend!"

That enraged Young Griff. "Shut your goddamn mouth, you son of a thrice-fucked bitch!"

At that, Aegon looked over at Princess Elia Martell and told her "I will personally cut this bastard's tongue out for that slight he just dealt you, Mother."

For a moment, Mother smirked at his jape. A split-second later, her smirk dropped and her eyes widened in shock. It was as though she was startled. Even before she opened her mouth, Aegon realized what was amiss.

This momentary distraction almost cost Aegon the duel. He turned back to Young Griff just in time to see his opponent's sword sailing towards his neck. He hurried to parry this blow with *Blackfyre*. Young Griff's blade managed to avoid touching his throat, but it did not avoid hitting his body altogether. It ended up cutting into his shoulder blade.

Aegon shouted in agony as blood began to seep from this fresh wound. Worse yet, Young Griff's blade was still wedged in his shoulder. The other boy grinned wickedly as he twisted it around, widening the wound and amplifying the pain exponentially. Eventually, he extracted the blade, but by the time he did, Aegon's felt as though his arm would fall off.

Aegon wanted to scream. He did not, but his mother did. As concerned as Aegon was for his own well-being, he found room to worry for his mother's, too. *She needs to know I'm alright.* Aegon rose to his full height, raised his weapons again, and mumbled through gritted teeth "Is that the best you can do?"

"Not even close," Young Griff taunted him, "You should just yield now, while you still have both your hands."

Aegon still had no intention of giving up. For one thing, he doubted Young Griff would spare him if he yielded, and even if Young Griff actually would accept his surrender, Aegon was not about to give him the satisfaction of winning this duel.
Once he composed himself, Aegon Targaryen reentered the fray. He was still as perceptive and adroit as ever, but due to the ache in his shoulder, he could not lift his shield high enough to totally cover his entire torso.

To his dismay, Young Griff noticed this weakness, and he was quick to take advantage of it. He proceeded to deliver a number of fierce blows from above. Aegon was able to block the first dozen or so, but after that, Young Griff's sword slashed his thigh. He yelped and gripped his side. As unpleasant as this feeling was, Aegon kept his mind on the duel. He managed to evade his opponent long enough to recover and adapt to this new damage.

Over the next several minutes, this combat pattern repeated itself another five times. Each time, Young Griff launched a vicious assault, Aegon managed to parry or avoid most of his attacks, one still got him somewhere, he was given another wound, and he had to adapt to this newest injury whilst trying to avoid getting hit again.

Soon, Aegon was bleeding from his shoulder, his right arm, his left thigh, his upper left leg, his lower right leg, and the middle of his chest. By now, Young Griff was really starting to wear him down. The Pisswater boy smirked when he realized this.

"Admit it; I've already won," Young Griff murmured cheekily.

"Fuck you," Aegon whispered solemnly.

In response, Young Griff thrust his shield, not his sword, forward. The heavy metal square rammed into Aegon's leather one, causing it to snap and crack. It also left a throbbing sensation in Aegon's shield arm.

Before Aegon had time to recover from that, Young Griff thrust his shield forward again. This time, his shield all but obliterated Aegon's, and the force was so great that it knocked him onto his back.

Aegon found himself lying flat on the ground. His shield was a splintered mess, parts of his armor were soaked in his blood, and his body ached from his head to his heels. All because I let myself get distracted. I am such a damn fool.

Regardless of his low opinion of himself, he was not beat just yet. Blackfyre was still in his hand. So long as he could hold his sword, he would not quit.

While he was on his back, Young Griff stood over him. He had barely been wounded at all during their duel. That could have been due to luck. Most likely, it was due to how his armor was thicker and less revealing. Be that as it may, it was weak along his gorget. Even from down on the ground, Aegon could clearly see Young Griff's neck.

That gave him an idea. With careful timing and execution, he could exploit that weakness and use it to end the duel very quickly.

Aegon closed his eyes and became listless, as though the will to fight had left him. Young Griff seemed to buy the bait, as he wryly proclaimed "I told you the real Aegon would win."

It's not over yet, but you are correct.

Young Griff cast aside his shield and held his bastard sword in both hands. All the while, Aegon remained perfectly still. Even when Young Griff raised his sword high into the air and prepared to strike, Aegon did not move a muscle. Not until the very last moment.
Finally, when Young Griff brought his sword down, Aegon made his move. He rolled away from his spot on the ground and pounced to his feet. Just as Young Griff's sword struck the blood-soaked sand Aegon had been lying on not two seconds earlier, Aegon grabbed him by his shoulder and pulled him closer. He speedily raised his sword, lined it up with Young Griff's gorget, and plunged it forward.

The tip of *Blackfyre* disappeared for a second. Then there was the sound of bones splitting, and the tip of *Blackfyre* came out the back of Young Griff’s throat, as did the first two feet of the blade.

There was a collective gasp around the dueling ring. Aegon could not tell which of the spectators had gasped. At certain points, he had practically forgotten they were even there. Nonetheless, at this time, he was just glad there was no longer anything for them to spectate.

Young Griff let go of his sword, and it fell harmlessly to the ground. Then he dropped to his knees. A very quiet, shrill gagging sound passed through his lips. It was as though he was struggling to talk. *He probably knows he's going to die, but he's trying to get out one last insult toward me.*

Aegon knelt down to the level of Young Griff's eyes, and he slyly uttered "If you think I'm going to let you have the last word, you can drop dead even sooner."

He drove *Blackfyre* even further into Young Griff's neck, causing him to groan in agony. Aegon was strangely content by that sound. That trouble him; he never thought he would find the death rattle of another man so gratifying. *Could this be bloodlust?*

In any case, Aegon decided Young Griff had suffered enough. He swiftly extracted *Blackfyre* from his neck and put him out of his misery. Young Griff landed face down in the sand and laid still. His feet twitched a bit, but no other part of him showed any indication that he was holding on to life.

Aegon stared down at his vanquished foe. The feeling of satisfaction was back, but it was overshadowed by the even greater feeling of relief. Relief that the duel was over. *And that I'm still alive at the end of it.*

All of a sudden, he was grabbed from behind. Initially, he was startled, but he hastily realized that the person behind him was embracing him. When he saw the person's hands, he recognized them as his mother's.

"You did it," she whispered into his ear. Her voice was a mixture of pride, relief, and joy. She sounded as though she was sobbing.

Aegon gently placed his free hand on his mother's hands and looked over his shoulder. Her eyes were swollen and wet, so she had been crying. He tried to think of something to say to comfort her, but he could find no words. He barely even had the strength to talk, move, or breathe.

This was the precise moment when the full extent of Aegon's wounds finally caught up with him. The collective hurt was so all-consuming and so overwhelming that he passed out on that very spot. He could faintly hear his mother scream as he collapsed.

When he regained consciousness, he was laying on his bed in his tent. His armor had been removed, and it had been replaced with a clean white tunic and breeches.

He was not alone. Talisa Maegyr and Haldon Halfmaester were tending to his injuries, his mother was at his side, Ser Arthur was standing guard next to the bed, and Jon Connington and Homeless Harry Strickland were standing a few feet away, near the foot of the bed.

When she saw that he was awake, Princess Elia Martell leaned forward and threw her arms around
her son's upper body. Aegon felt a small stinging in his torso when she did that, but he cast it out of his mind and hugged her back. He held her close to him, the way he did when he first learned she was not really his aunt. Eventually, she released him. That was when he thought about getting up.

"Take it easy, Your Grace," Haldon urged Aegon as he tilted his head upwards. The halfmaester and Talisa helped the Targaryen prince sit up. His body still ached all over, but the pain was nowhere near as intense as it had been earlier.

"How long…?" he began.

"Several hours," Talisa enlightened him straightaway, "It's already the late evening. We were starting to think you'd sleep until morning."

_The thought is tempting. After all, falling into unconsciousness isn't what I would call restful. A good night's sleep still sounds nice about now._

"Well, I should thank you for treating me," Aegon commented, looking between Talisa Maegyr and Haldon Halfmaester.

"It's no trouble at all," Talisa asserted. Haldon nodded.

Aegon then gazed over at Jon Connington and Harry Strickland. He found himself quite speechless again. He did not know what to say to either man. After all, he had killed the boy both of them may have believed to be Aegon Targaryen. Even though he had proven himself as the real Aegon, the loss of Young Griff could not have been easy for them.

Ultimately, he broke the uncomfortable silence with a question: "What did you do with Young Griff's remains?"

"My officers buried him near the coast," Harry Strickland responded.

"We buried him deep in an unmarked grave," Jon Connington disclosed, "So, no one will ever desecrate his final resting place."

_I suppose even Young Griff should be afforded that much respect._

After a pause, Aegon said inquisitively "What happens now?"

"What do you mean?" asked Harry Strickland.

"Where do we go from here?" Aegon specified.

"That is up to Princess Elia," Arthur Dayne stated.

"Yes, it is," Aegon avowed. _Regardless of what I accomplished today, Mother is still in command of this mission._

He slowly turned to her, hoping she might answer his question. She merely grinned and told him "I have not yet decided. But I have good news. Wherever we go, it will be together."

Aegon grinned back at her when he heard that. "You mean the Golden Company has agreed to fight with us?"

"A more accurate expression would be 'fight for us,'" Mother notified him, "An even more accurate one would be 'fight for you.'"
Aegon was confused. "I don't understand."

"Allow me to clarify, Your Grace," Harry Strickland offered. Aegon turned to the captain-general, and he explained "Lord Jon Connington did sign a contract with the Golden Company. However, although he was the one who first presented the contract, the contract's mandate quite clearly dictates that the man my soldiers and I are to rally behind is not Connington, but Aegon Targaryen."

"Then the contract has been nullified," Aegon perceived, "Seeing as I killed your 'Aegon Targaryen.'"

"Not quite," Jon Connington countered, "The contract never explicitly referred to Young Griff by that name or any other name. For all intents and purposes, the contract requires the Golden Company to follow the real Aegon Targaryen. Back when they thought Young Griff was Aegon Targaryen, they were obligated to follow him. Now that we have verified that you are Aegon Targaryen, they are now obligated to follow you, instead."

"That's a very peculiar arrangement," Aegon commented, "All the same, I should also point out to you that this contract wasn't drawn up with my awareness or my consent. Wouldn't that render it invalid, anyway?"

"Do you want it to be?" Harry Strickland muttered sarcastically.

"No, I am simply ensuring that it isn't," Aegon Targaryen assured him, "I am sorry if my behavior seems quaint, captain-general, but this all seems a little fantastical."

"How is it fantastical, Your Grace?" Jon Connington inquired.

"Well, put yourself in my position," the young blond man contended, "My mother and I have spent the last four months pursuing the most renowned sellsword company in Essos. Now, after killing that same company was taking orders from, I suddenly find myself controlling them in his place. Is there any part of that that does not sound absurd?"

"'Absurd' is not how I would describe it," Jon Connington pronounced, "'Incredible' would be more appropriate. In any case, I understand your bewilderment. In your position, I would probably be just as stunned by such a sudden twist of fate. However, at the end of the day, I would overcome my astonishment, and reflect on the advantages of that twist of fate."

"Oh, I shall," Aegon proclaimed, brightening up a little. Thirty thousand swords with one thrust of a Valyrian steel blade. That is quite an achievement. "So, you really do intend to honor the contract?"

"Yes," Homeless Harry responded, "We can discuss the particulars of the contract later. For now, I believe you should rest."

"I would appreciate that," Aegon Targaryen stated bluntly. Gods know, I am in no mood to discuss transportation, payment, duties, and so many other details for the entire Golden Company right now. That headache can wait for the morrow.

Soon after, Jon Connington, Homeless Harry Strickland, and Haldon Halfmaester exited Aegon's tent. Mother stayed at his side for a while longer. Then she kissed him on the forehead and whispered sweetly into his ear 'I'm proud of you, Egg."

Once Princess Elia Martell went outside, the only other people who were still in the tent were
Arthur Dayne and Talisa Maegyr. Obviously, Ser Arthur was there to protect Aegon, just like always.

However, all of Aegon’s wounds had been thoroughly cleaned and bandaged by now. With that in mind, there was no real need for Talisa to be there anymore. Why hasn’t she gone yet?


_Isn't she eager to please?_ Aegon scoffed and muttered "Now that you mention it, my throat's a little dry. I could use something to drink. If you don't mind, that is."

"I don't," Talisa assured him. She got up from her chair and walked over to a small table across the room. On that table was a bottle of Dornish red, a pitcher of water, and a tray of goblets. Talisa opened the bottle, took one of the goblets, and filled it.

"Pour one for yourself, too," Aegon advised her. Talisa nodded and did so. After that, she returned to the bed, sat back down next to Aegon, and held one of the goblets out to him.

When Aegon lifted his arm to receive the goblet, there was a bit of a tightness in his arm and his chest. Thankfully, this tightness was not so pronounced when he took the goblet from Talisa. As sore as he felt, at least he could pick up objects without flinching. She must have noticed that, too, given the way she smiled and lightly nodded in approval.

Aegon and Talisa sat sipping their wine in silence for a few seconds. Then another thought occurred to Aegon.

"Who changed my attire?" he asked, gesturing to his tunic and breeches.

"Your mother," she answered him, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. That was good enough for Aegon, and he certainly had no issue with it. After all, his mother used to dress him when he was just a small boy, and he had thought her to be his aunt back then.

All of a sudden, Talisa smirked and added in "I may have lent a hand, though."

Aegon nearly sprayed wine all over his bed. At first, he was alarmed by how brazen she sounded. A moment later, the actual meaning of that statement sank in, and he was much more impressed by that than the statement itself.

"I'm a healer, Aegon," Talisa reminded him, "My profession requires me to see the nether regions of others."

"I see…" Aegon commented awkwardly, "And just how many 'nether regions' have you seen?"

"Well, if you must know, I've seen plenty of women," Talisa admitted. She looked as though she was going to say more, but she hesitated first. After that, she blushed and added in "But to be honest… you've the first man I've seen."

"Good for you," he mumbled drily. He took another swallow of wine, and then he smirked and wryly muttered "Tell me, Talisa. Did you like what you saw?"

He expected her to blush a deeper shade of red, cringe in shock, or even threaten to slap him. Instead, she grinned mischievously and replied with "As it happens… I did."

Now it was Aegon's turn to blush. In his experience, anyone other than a Dornishwoman would
almost certainly have been appalled by that question. *Maybe Volantenes have the same type of open-mindedness as those from Dorne.*

Aegon emboldened himself a bit and cheekily proposed "If you liked it that much, would you like to see it again?"

"Alright," Talisa said straightforwardly.

Again, Aegon was stunned. "Did I hear you right?"

Talisa chuckled and asked rhetorically "Why do you think I'm still here?"

*Well, that answers my earlier question.* Looking back on this scenario and viewing it in perspective, Aegon could not believe he had not realized this earlier.

Fortunately, when he made that lewd suggestion, he had not been entirely jesting. In fact, on a number of occasions before this day, he had been tempted to make this offer before. He had had reasons for not going through with it until now. Two of those reasons tended to be with her quite often.

"What would Vereld and Hollistor say?" Aegon debated.

"That would say 'congratulations,'" Talisa claimed, "Don't worry about my brothers. They may be protective of me, but normally, they do not get in the way of my personal life. Unless they felt the man who caught my fancy was unworthy of me."

*Luckily, there's already been an Aegon the Unworthy.* "Then they have no objections to… you and I?"

"Definitely not," Talisa confirmed.

"That's a little hard to believe," Aegon murmured, "Ever since you joined up, they hardly ever gave us a chance to be alone."

"Only because they wanted us to be focused on the mission," Talisa disclosed.

"Well, I'm glad for that," Aegon commented.

"So am I," said Talisa. She then leaned closer and suggestively proposed "However, now that the mission is more or less over… do you suppose…?"

At that, Aegon turned to his sworn shield and asked him "Ser Arthur, would you mind standing guard outside the tent tonight?"

To his delight, the Sword of the Morning did not protest. Instead, he gave a light nod and walked over to the entrance of the tent. Just before he stepped outside, he turned to Aegon and bade him "Have a pleasant night, Your Grace."

*Oh, I shall.*
Note: Two things. One, the biggest criticism I have gotten lately is that there are "too many subplots." I admit that I might. That's certainly saying a lot, given how it's THIS franchise. Anyway, for those of you who feel as though too much is going on in this story, worry not. I've gotten to the point where all the many subplots begin to converge or tie in with one another. That officially started in the last chapter; this one continues to do so. From here onward, most chapters will involve two or more story arcs coming together.

Secondly, there will not be an update next week. I have a lot going on in the coming fortnight, such as my mother's birthday, a visit with some family members, and moving to a new office for my job. Oh, and the Nightmare Nights Convention will be next weekend. This will be the last time that convention occurs in Dallas, so I'll definitely be attending that. In the meantime, do not despair. I assure you there will be another update sometime around Halloween.

From the moment of birth, every citizen of the Seven Kingdoms was expected to swear fealty to his king. While most people were only required to bend the knee to show their obedience, there were some who demonstrated their loyalty through greater, more direct methods.

Rickard Clegane's father had been serving the crown since before he was born, and he had arguably accomplished more than any other Westerosi had in the last seventeen years. However, Gregor Clegane had not met Robert Baratheon until the former was eight and ten. When Rickard was first afforded the honor of shaking the stag king's hand, he was not even three and ten at the time. Even though I am already as tall as a man grown, most would refuse to acknowledge me as one.

In spite of that, Robert Baratheon treated Rickard Clegane the same way he treated his older subjects. Rickard believed the king must have had great confidence in his abilities. Otherwise he would not have entrusted me with so important an assignment.

Ever since the King told Rickard and his friends of the possibility of a hidden rookery in the lower levels of the Red Keep, they had been working diligently to locate this rookery and identify the person or person using it.

A month had passed since King Robert first gave them this crucial task, and they had made considerable progress thus far.

At present, they were in the royal solar, reporting their latest progress to the King and his Hand, just as they had been doing once a week for the last turn of the moon. Their first three reports had been so laughably short that they were almost not even worth presenting. To their good fortune, the king had been both understanding and patient. Regardless of how many resources he allows us, he knows we are still only five people.

Their fourth report, by contrast, was quite hopeful. At least it was in Rickard's mind. I pray the King thinks so, as well. This is the result of our combined efforts over the last month, and if it does not satisfy King Robert, he and Lord Jon may start to question our competence.
When Rickard Clegane and his friends had the full attention of Robert Baratheon and Jon Arryn, they began their report. Willas Tyrell opened with: "While we have been unable to determine where the rookery is, who is using it, or why, we have observed several interesting factors that have brought us closer to answering those questions."

"What sort of observations have you made?" asked Lord Jon.

"Firstly, there is no definitive interval as to when the ravens arrive or depart," Willas declared, "With respect to time, that is. The amount of time that elapses between the ravens' appearances always varies. Sometimes, their flights occur within days of each other."

"That margin is not exclusive to how much time passes between an arrival and a departure," Rhaenys Targaryen disclosed, "Oftentimes, that is how much time passes between a departure and an arrival, too."

King Robert seemed perplexed. He rubbed his chin "That is curious. There is nothing but water to the east for hundreds of leagues."

"So we noticed, Father," Jasper Baratheon drily muttered. "Two days is not nearly long enough for even the strongest raven to traverse that distance unburdened, let alone with a missive tied to its talon."

"That led us to develop two separate theories," Rickard proclaimed, "Firstly, perhaps the ravens of the hidden rookery do not fly to just one specific destination. The ravens of normal rookeries certainly don't. As such, the party who is using the hidden rookery could be keeping in contact with multiple parties across the Narrow Sea."

"That is definitely plausible," King Robert remarked, "And your other theory?"

"Whoever is receiving the ravens and sending them back may be a great deal closer than we think," Ashara Dayne debated, "They could be on a ship somewhere between here and Essos. Or maybe the ravens have been specially trained."

"Specially trained?" the king repeated in bewilderment.

Lady Ashara shrugged and supposed "Once they are sent out from King's Landing, they might fly to the east until they are out of sight. After that, they might change their course and head somewhere northwest or southwest, back to the Seven Kingdoms. Likewise, when the ravens come here, they may start from the mainland of Westeros, fly northeast or southeast, and then when they are out far enough, they turn due west toward King's Landing."

"The ship, I could believe," Lord Jon Arryn murmured, "But the concept of training ravens just for the sake of deception is difficult to swallow, my lady. No raven has wits enough to learn and remember such complex flying patterns."

"Unless it was controlled by a warg," Jasper suggested. Rickard glared at him. Is that a jest?

"There are no wargs this far south of the Neck," the heir to Moat Cailin bluntly reminded his best friend.

"That we know of," Jasper countered, "Varamyr Sixskins and some of the other wargs amongst the Free Folk may not hide their gifts from the world, but I would wager that not all wargs are so open about such matters."

"Jasper, I know you've been away a long while," King Robert told his son, "Many things have
changed since you went north. One thing that hasn't changed is that there are no wildlings anywhere in the Crownlands."

*That's a little reassuring to know. Knowing that and the fact that the best wargs have a limited range, we can safely rule all of them out as the perpetrator behind this rookery conspiracy.*

"Aside from that, most of the Free Folk do not know how to read or write," Willas pointed out, "When they lived north of the Wall, they always kept in contact with each other well enough without the use of ravens. Although they are now more scattered than they've ever been, they still manage to communicate normally with traditional techniques."

*Not conventional techniques, but effective ones, just as well. "Furthermore, the Free Folk would have nothing to gain by fooling us into thinking they had an ally across the Narrow Sea. I doubt they care for what goes on in Essos, anyway. Ten years ago, they hardly even cared for what happened in most of Westeros."

"That is true," Jon Arryn concurred. He looked around at Rickard and his friends and presumed "Then we are in agreement that these ravens are being handled by a citizen of the Seven Kingdoms, and they are all bound for somewhere in the far east?"

"It would appear so, my Lord Hand," Rhaenys affirmed.

"Alas, that by itself does not help us much," Ashara Dayne muttered, somewhat glumly, "Since the ravens appear at random intervals, we have no way to predict when they come and go. As such, it is difficult to establish their heading. Or headings. Worse yet, it is also possible that some of the ravens manage to avert our notice when they arrive or depart."

Jasper nodded his head and commented "The only surefire way we can account for all the ravens and the paths of their flights is if we had someone looking out for them all day and all night. Alas, the five of us have neither the will nor the capacity, and there is no one we can trust to stand sentry for the ravens."

"What about Ser Oswell?" King Robert proposed, "Or Ned's old friends? Or the Mountain's men-at-arms? You trust them, don't you?"

"Of course, we do," Rickard asserted, "That is why we keep them close to us. Hence, that is why we cannot expend them on such a petty task; they already have other duties to fulfill."

"Fair enough," the king remarked, though his tone indicated he was not pleased. *Hopefully, this is the only time we'll have to disappoint him today.* Robert Baratheon then folded his arms and stated "Where the ravens are coming from and going to isn't what most concerns me. I am more invested in discovering who is managing them. What progress have you made in that regard?"

"Much, Your Grace," Willas replied. He leaned forward and held out a small piece of parchment. As the native of the Stormlands took the parchment, the Reachman illuminated "We have compiled a list of individuals who could be responsible, based on a number of deciding factors."

"Factors such as motive, opportunity, capability, and likelihood," Lady Ashara explicated.

"Who is your primary suspect?" Jon Arryn inquired, peering at the list over the king's shoulder.

"At the moment, Varys," said Jasper. "Any particular reason why?" King Robert enquired, looking up from the list. *Besides the obvious, you mean?*
"Well, no one should ever underestimate the Spider's resourcefulness," Lady Ashara contended, "His little birds on the ground have already made him the second best-informed man in the Seven Kingdoms."

"The first being my father," Rickard proudly added in. As invaluable as Varys' web of spies must be, even that cannot top the information supplied by visions of the future.

"Varys may have realized that," Willas conjectured, "He hardly strikes me as the type to get envious, but as the Master of Whisperers, he may feel compelled – or even obligated – to surpass Lord Gregor in intelligence gathering. The best way to do that would be to monitor the Mountain's closest allies."

"Thus, he may have opted to monitor the activities of the Westerosi companies currently across the Narrow Sea," Jasper stated, "Those companies may have four times as many Royal Army soldiers as Legionnaires, but they are still being led by three of Lord Gregor's closest allies."

"His wife, my mother, and my uncle," Rhaenys clarified. As if we didn't already know that.

"Likely, Varys can't remain in constant contact his little birds whilst they're all the way out there," Rickard remarked, "So, he could have resorted to using birds in a more literal sense."

"This is a bit of an outlandish theory," Robert Baratheon refuted, "Not the idea that Varys would do such a thing; he isn't above that. But your reasoning as to why he would keep a hidden rookery is not wholly sound. Varys wouldn't expand his intelligence network just for the sake of having more knowledge."

"Wouldn't he, Father?" Jasper wryly countered, "To people like the Spider, there is no such thing as too much knowledge. Besides… eunuchs need to find some way to pass the time."

The king laughed at that. He appeared to agree with the sentiment. If that happened to him, I'd wager he would suddenly have a lot of free time. For that matter, so would the Queen.

"As things stand, we have no concrete evidence that Varys is the guilty party," Willas admitted, "But until we can prove otherwise, he'll remain at the top of our list of suspects."

"Very well," King Robert avowed. He then gazed back down at the list and muttered "In the meantime, let us go over the rest of these suspects."

"As you wish, Your Grace," Rickard proclaimed.

They spent the following hour discussing the names on that piece of parchment. Each of those names belonged to a person whom Rickard and the others had ample grounds to suspect of running the hidden rookery. Those included Rodrik Greyjoy, Janos Slynt, Jalabahar Xho, and several of Grand Maester Marwyn's acolytes. The Grand Maester himself was free from suspicion, as he was the one who brought this matter to the King's attention in the first place.

Lord Stannis Baratheon was on that list, too. Strangely, the King did not seem especially shocked when he saw his brother there. He merely quipped "Stannis always did insist on doing things his own way."

What did shock him was the very last name on the list. Just as we expected it to. At that point, King Robert grimaced at Rickard and his friends, held the list so that only the final name was visible, and snapped in outrage "What manner of piss-poor joke is THIS?"
"I'm afraid it's no joke, Your Grace," Lady Ashara claimed uneasily. That only seemed to make the king angrier.

"If it makes any difference, Father, I was the one to first suggest her," Jasper hastily pronounced.

"That just makes it worse, Jasper," Robert Baratheon spat heatedly, slamming the list down on his desk, "You mean to tell me you believe your own mother could be a traitor?"

"No, I certainly do not," Jasper sternly insisted.

Lord Jon placed a hand on King Robert's shoulder and told him "You mustn't let this aggravate you, Your Grace. We have yet to establish if the individual using the hidden rookery actually is a traitor. It could simply be someone with an agenda of their own who treasures privacy."

"That is what we are inclined to believe, my lord," Willas claimed.

"Is that so?" King Robert uttered dubiously. When the heir to Highgarden nodded his head, the king smirked and murmured sharply "Then tell me; what sort of agenda do you imagine the Queen has?"

"We do not yet know if she truly does have one, Your Grace," said Rhaenys "We only think she might."

"Again, I ask you why," King Robert muttered bitterly.

"You know as well as I do that she comes from an ambitious family, Father," Jasper argued, "Lannisters are known for their insatiable desire for money and power. Mother is by no means an exception. I love her dearly, but I could never turn a blind eye to how politically ruthless she can be. Do you know what the last thing she told me before I went to Moat Cailin was?"

"'Take care of yourself, sweetling?'" Robert Baratheon asked rhetorically, smirking. Jasper blushed, causing Rhaenys and Lady Ashara to giggle. Rickard spared his best friend that indignity. The Crown Prince rolled his eyes and recounted "Yes, that was the last thing she said when you were present. But after you went back to your horse, she stayed with me a minute longer, and she told me: 'Where you are going, everyone will claim to be your friend, but nearly all of them are actually your enemies. Always remember that, my prince.'

Clearly, he did.

"That does sound like something Queen Cersei would say," Jon Arryn perceived.

"Yes, it does," King Robert conceded, "But that is hardly sufficient reason to suspect her."

"That is not all, Your Grace," Willas professed, "After everything that has happened in the last year – namely the conference at Harrenhal – the Queen must be furious that so many secrets were kept from the crown and from her for so long. Before then, she was already reluctant to place her trust in anyone or anything. After that episode… she is probably convinced that the only sources she can rely on are her own."

"Therefore, she has cause to create the hidden rookery," Lady Ashara debated.

"Perhaps so," stated Robert Baratheon, "But who would she be writing to?"

"My mother and the Martells each left with several thousand people from all over Westeros,"
Rickard pointed out, "There were plenty of Westerlanders in all three of those companies. Most of the Legionnaires amongst that number are loyal to my father first, but the majority of the others would still be obligated to obey House Lannister. Thus, they would do whatever the Queen asked of them, simply out of duty."

"Rather quaint you should mention that, Rickard," King Robert wryly muttered, "Cersei’s own brother is in one of those companies. The one your lady mother is leading, no less. Does the thought of that unsettle you?"

"Not at all," Rickard responded. Uncle Tyrion is the last person I would suspect; other than his fondness for money and power, he is nothing like the Queen. "Even if he wasn’t my uncle, I would never suspect Tyrion Lannister. Other than Ser Gerion Lannister, he is the only member of the Queen’s family whom I can count as a true ally to my own family."

"Aside from that, I need not remind you how the Queen despises her younger brother, Your Grace," said Lord Jon.

"Indeed," King Robert commented. By the expression on his face, Rickard could tell he was still displeased and dismayed by the concept that his wife had an entire network of spies behind his back.

"This is still just conjecture, Your Grace," the heir to Moat Cailin proclaimed, "The Queen is last on our list for a reason. As of now, she is the one we least suspect. We are simply doing as you asked us and being absolutely thorough."

That appeared to reassure the king a little. He grinned slightly and remarked "I am… very relieved to hear you say that, my boy."

"I'm glad to know so," Rickard stated sincerely. Some men would rather be told their wives had taken lovers than be told they were involved in illicit activities. Father was one such man. The king seemed to be another. "Our intent is not to cause you unrest, Your Grace. We could have kept this theory to ourselves. But we could not do so in good conscience. We simply wish to prepare you for every possible outcome whenever we uncover the truth about the hidden rookery."

"I understand entirely," Robert Baratheon claimed, "But be careful not to share these theories with anyone else. Rumors circulate like filth in King’s Landing, and an accusation directed at the Queen would anger a great many people. Particularly the Queen herself."

"I promise you that no one outside this room will ever know any of this, Your Grace," Rickard assured the king. His friends murmured their agreement. The tall boy then smirked and cockily added in "Least of all from me. I am very good at keeping secrets."

"Like your father?" Willas stated enquiringly.

Rickard shrugged and supposed "Yes, that is one thing I have in common with my father."

"Another being your similar preference for women," the king mumbled slyly. In response to that wily observation, Jasper, Willas, Rhaenys, and Lady Ashara chuckled. King Robert laughed at his own joke, and Lord Jon gave no reaction.

Rickard just sat and waited for the others to quiet down. He neither said nor did anything to refute that statement. After all, it was more or less true. Arya honestly isn’t all that different from Mother. The only real difference is that she is of higher birth.

When the laughter died, Robert Baratheon enquired "Do you have anything further to add?"
"No, everything of note we have amassed to date has already been discussed, Your Grace," Willas pronounced, "Our next step is to follow up on our list of suspects and examine each one of them more closely. By this time next week, we plan to have eliminated as many as half of them."

"Excellent," King Robert stated in approval. After a short pause, he announced "If there is nothing else, you have my leave to go. We will reconvene at this same hour next week. However, should you acquire anything that might warrant the crown's attention sooner, you may present it to myself or Lord Jon at any time."


Rickard Clegane and his friends dipped their heads to the king and proceeded to file out of the solar. Ser Theo Frey, Ser Preston Greenfield, and Ser Mandon Moore were standing guard outside the entrance. Ser Oswell Whent stood apart from them ten feet away. When Rickard and his companions stepped outside, Ser Oswell and Ser Preston joined their company, intent on guarding Rhaenys and Jasper respectively.

The group walked together in silence for a few seconds, and then Jasper said inquiringly "Does anyone have the time?"

"I believe it is still the early afternoon," Lady Ashara thought aloud. *It should be. Luncheon was served early today, and we were in the solar for no more than an hour and a-half.*

Jasper Baratheon turned to his best friend and asked rhetorically "Say, Rickard, isn't it around the time the Stark sisters finish their dance lessons?"

"Approximately," Rickard Clegane thought aloud. *They may be 'dancing' for another ten or twenty minutes, though.* "Why do you ask?"

Jasper gave a wide grin and proposed "What say we go and meet up with them?"

"I'm all for that," Rickard merrily proclaimed. "But first, while we're all together, there is something I must do."

"What?" Willas inquired curiously.

Rickard did not answer right away. Instead, he took a moment to prepare himself for what he was about to do. He breathed in and out repeatedly, steeled his nerves, and built up his focus. *Come on, you can do this.*

Finally, he turned to Ashara Dayne, looked her in the eye, and told her "You look very lovely today, Lady Ashara."

At first, the Dornishwoman was stunned by the suddenness of that statement, but she smiled and said "Why, thank you, Rickard."

"Of course, you look lovely every day," Rickard pronounced, "But today you look lovelier than usual. Have you done anything to touch up your façade?"

"No, but perhaps it's the change in climate," Ashara drily hypothesized. *Yes, it has gotten cooler since yesterday. Hold on; I can work with this.*

"It could be," Rickard stated, "If so, the autumn weather does wonders for your complexion. I'd go so far to say it gives you a more youthful appearance."
"I appreciate that, though I am not so young anymore," Lady Ashara debated.

"That makes no matter," Rickard asserted, "Some may say that beauty fades with age, but that is certainly not the case with you. I personally believe you look more handsome than you did when I first met you last year."

That succeeded in getting Ashara Dayne to blush and cover her mouth with her hand. "Well, I don't know what to say… thank you, again."

"It's my pleasure," Rickard told her. Very much my pleasure. But I have not attained victory yet; I am only halfway there. He then turned to Rhaenys and boldly "Since we are on the subject of loveliness, it would hardly be appropriate to leave you out of the conversation, Rhae."

The dragon princess giggled in amusement and muttered "Really? What brought that on, Rick?"

"The simple truth that your beauty is quite remarkable," Rickard claimed, "So remarkable that it would be a crime to let it continue to go unremarked."

"By all means, continue," Rhaenys beckoned him spiritedly.

I really hope Willas does not get the wrong idea. Rickard went on with: "Looking at you, one would never think you grew up in a marshland. Not that there is anything wrong with life in the Neck. After all, despite the unforgiving landscape, you still blossomed into a fine, young woman. In fact… if I did not know better, I would say the bogs may have somehow enhanced your image."

"To be honest, I've always thought so, too," Rhaenys disclosed, running her hands along her bare neck, "You'd be amazed what swamp water can do for your skin. It softens it and toughens it at the same time."

"Yes, and I would say your skin nicely complements your physique," Rickard perceived, "It brings out both the exoticness of your mother's heritage and the resilience of your father's. The resulting combination is enough to leave one breathless."

That was what finally got Rhaenys to blush. She seemed touched by that praise. "That's… perhaps the highest compliment anyone has ever given me."

"Not for long," Rickard hastily claimed, gazing over at Willas, "I am certain someone will outdo me soon. Someone far worthier of you than I."

If Willas had been annoyed or cross with how Rickard was talking with his intended, he did not appear so at this time. After that last comment, the heir to the Reach stated wryly "I'm relieved to know you've faith in my ability."

"Of course, I do," Rickard affirmed, "You and Rhaenys are made for each other. Anyone with eyes could see that."

Willas and Rhaenys said nothing in response to that. Instead, they just smiled, nodded their heads, stepped closer to each other, and exchanged a quick peck on the lips.

"I think you've got it," Jasper informed his best friend, smirking.

"It would seem so," said Rickard, also smirking. When he saw the confusion on Willas, Rhaenys, and Lady Ashara's countenances, he mumbled "Alright, I suppose that deserves some explanation."

"I should say so," Willas conceded.
Rickard enlightened them with "Ever since we got to King's Landing, I've been trying to find out Arya's true feelings for me. Straight-out asking her is not an option. She is rarely ever that forward with her emotions. For that same reason, I couldn't ask Sansa or anyone else who is close to her. They wouldn't know any more than I would. The other day, I finally admitted that I needed some counsel on this matter, and – knowing how popular he was with the fair sex in this youth – I elected to ask the king for advice."

"Rickard, you do realize just how King Robert was popular with the fair sex, don't you?" Lady Ashara assumed.

"Of course, I realize that, my lady," Rickard uttered sardonically, "I am not so ignorant that I do not know what transpires between men and women when they become intimate with one another."

"I never accused you of ignorance," Lady Ashara assured him, "My point was that if you ask the king for advice on courting women, you might end up trying to become a man of the ladies."

"Only if I grow reckless and selfish," Rickard countered, "Believe me; I have no plans to become a man of the ladies. I've no desire to become that sort of shameless cad. At this moment, there is only one girl I have my sight set on. As it happens, she is practically identical to her aunt, whom the king once had his own sight set on. Although Robert Baratheon did not end up with Lyanna Stark, he at least knew what she was like. As such, I asked him if he could help me with my situation with Arya."

"And what exactly did he tell you?" Rhaenys inquired.

"He proposed that I take up flirting," Rickard revealed, "Not with Arya, though. Flirting never worked on Lady Lyanna; no doubt it wouldn't succeed with Arya, either. Instead, the king recommended that I flirt with other women while she is around."

"What would that accomplish?" Willas muttered in bewilderment.

"According to my father, nothing brings out a woman's true feelings like the threat of competition," Jasper professed, "That's why he still makes occasional passes at the maids and serving wenches. He only does so to test my mother; he never actually beds any of them. Once he confirms that she is not content with his flirting, he casts aside the other women, returns to her, and showers her with far more affection."

"That is actually an ingenious ploy," Lady Ashara thought aloud. Rhaenys seemed to be of a like mind.

"I thought so, too," said Rickard, "I decided it was worth trying out. If Arya gets jealous of my flirting with other women, then I'll know that she truly thinks of me as more than a friend."

"If she does not?" Willas conjectured.

"We're still young," Rickard uttered plainly, "Arya and I have plenty of time to change our feelings for one another. I'd just like to know where she stands now."

"I can understand that wish," Lady Ashara proclaimed, "However, if the idea is to make Lady Arya jealous, then shouldn't you have waited until she was in the area to flirt with Rhaenys and myself?"

"Well, first, I had to make certain that I actually can flirt," Rickard debated, "If I did not try flirting until I was near her and it turned out I was terrible at it, Arya might have caught on to what I was doing. Worse yet, I could have ended up saying some to embarrass her or myself."
"I doubt that will be the case," Rhaenys declared, giving a small smile, "After all, it seems you're a natural charmer."

"I agree," Lady Ashara remarked, "And if we are telling you that, you must be good. Dornishwomen are not easily flattered. Easily bedded, perhaps, but very hard to flatter. It would require a real master of words to get us to blush."

"So, you think me a master of words?" Rickard noted.

Lady Ashara nodded to confirm, saying "Like father, like son."

Yes, Father does have a way with words.

"Aren't you worried that Arya might get very jealous?" Willas supposed.

"Why would she?" Rickard disputed, "It is not as though she and I are betrothed. Thus, neither of us has a right to interfere in the other's personal life. Besides, even if she does get extremely jealous, that could work to my advantage."

"My father would concur," Jasper commented, "If Arya calls you out on the flirting, you'll know for a certainty that she wants you. Of course, at this point, she likely does not know if she does want you. If she becomes jealous, she still may not know even then. But once confronted with the situation, she may sort out and decide her true feelings fairly quickly."

"Just one problem," Lady Ashara contended, "What if your flirting actually entices some other women? What would you do then?"

"I asked the king that very same question," Rickard recalled "He told me it was my choice. He personally recommended that I take advantage of the scenario and have some fun. As 'tempting' as that sounds, I think I will stick to distributing compliments and nothing more."

"As long as the compliments are genuine, there is no harm in that," Rhaenys supposed.

"Oh, I promise you; they'll always be genuine," Rickard asserted, "I would not invent false praise just to get on the good side of people. I would only comment on what attributes they actually possess."

"Then everything you said to me and Rhaenys a few minutes ago..." Lady Ashara stated haltingly.

Rickard merely smiled and pronounced "I meant all of it. Every word."

Rhaenys Targaren and Ashara Dayne were rendered speechless. After a bit of quietness, the latter commented "You are a wonderful boy, Rickard."

"Yes, I am almost envious of my mother for giving you your first kiss," Rhaenys said cheekily.

Rickard snorted in amusement. They're not going to let it go, are they? Oh, well; at least I can still choose whom to have my second kiss with.

"In any case, good luck with the flirting," Willas bade the heir to Moat Cailin, "Hopefully, Lady Arya gets jealous. But not so jealous that she tries to poke you with her Needle."

"I'll try not to let it get that far," Rickard mumbled bluntly. Although Arya was known for her quick temper, Rickard did not view her as a danger to his person. Even if she does try to stab me, I am still the superior swordsman. Her water dance is no match for my brute strength.
Just then, Jasper placed a hand on Rickard's shoulder and told him "We'd better get moving if we're going to see Sansa and Arya. They could be gone by the time we get to Syrio Forel's studio."

"Oh, right," the younger yet taller boy agreed. He looked around at the others and said "See you all at supper."

"See you then," Willas Tyrell, Rhaenys Targaryen, and Ashara Dayne replied in near-perfect unison.

Rickard Clegane and his best friend Crown Prince Jasper Baratheon separated from the three older members of their party. Ser Preston Greenfield accompanied them. Ser Oswell Whent stayed with the others.

Rickard, Jasper, and Ser Preston made their way to the nearest winding staircase. On their way there, they came across another familiar face.

"Good day, Your Grace, Lord Rickard," Lord Jon Arryn greeted the two boys.

"Uh, hello, Lord Jon," Rickard politely returned, despite his bafflement.

"How long were we talking back there?" Jasper asked him. Glad I'm not the only one who is startled.

"It has been less than half an hour since your appointment with the King," the Hand disclosed. Time enough for him to get here from a path other than the one Jasper and I used. Even so…

"Lord Jon, you are either very quick or very quiet," Rickard perceived.

"Likely, I am both," the Lord Paramount of the Vale contended, "Do not let my age deceive you, lads. I may be older than your fathers put together, but I am as spry and graceful as either of you or either of them."

Rickard scoffed. "I would not have thought of you as one to boast."

"I am not boasting," Jon Arryn insisted, "I am stating a flat fact."

"Yes, that is one thing you do excel at, my lord," Jasper muttered sardonically. Indeed; an ideal Hand of the King is an eloquent one.

Lord Jon gave a nod of his head and queried "Where are you off to?"

"Syrio Forel's studio," Rickard notified him, "Arya and Sansa should be finishing up their daily lessons with him any minute now."

"We're hoping to catch them before they leave," Jasper added in.

"Well, then do not let me keep you," the Lord of the Eyrie bade them, standing aside to let them pass.

"Actually, would you mind accompanying us there, my lord?" Rickard requested, "There is something I've been meaning to ask you. For a while now, in fact."

The elderly lord promptly nodded and declared "I would be happy to answer any questions you have."
"We wouldn't be keeping you from anything?" Jasper assumed hopefully.

"No," Jon Arryn responded, "My lady wife is out in the city, my children are at their lessons, and the king is occupied with other affairs."

Then now's the best time to talk to him. Who knows when next he'll have such availability?

Rickard Clegane, Jasper Baratheon, and Lord Jon Arryn walked to the nearby stairwell and proceeded to ascend it. Ser Preston Greenfield followed them close behind. Thankfully, he gave them enough space to converse in private.

As they climbed the stairs, Jon turned to Rickard and said enquiringly "What did you wish to ask me?"

The heir to Moat Cailin looked to the Hand and stated "It has been a month since the king tasked us with locating the hidden rookery in the Red Keep. Although we've put together a list of people who could be using the rookery, we've found no clues whatsoever as to where the rookery may be. Then again, we haven't found any real proof that the rookery exists, either."

"What about all those ravens that disappear and reappear in the lower levels of the Red Keep?" Jasper disputed.

"Those ravens could simply be taking shelter in the Keep," Rickard hypothesized.

Jasper shrugged and thought aloud "Ravens have been known to stop and rest for a short time before continuing their journeys. Be that as it may, the ravens in the lower levels all carry letters with them. We have confirmed that much, at least. It would be ludicrous to think that those messenger birds would come all the way to King's Landing from across the Narrow Sea just to recover for a few hours. Especially if they were intent on flying back whence they came."

"Well, consider that we're never seen more than one of those ravens at the same time," "Maybe we've just been seeing only one raven all along."

"If so, that has to be the hardiest raven I've ever seen," Jasper muttered drily.

"Alright, maybe there are multiple ravens," Rickard contended, "But maybe they aren't really message birds after all. Maybe someone is simply attaching blank pieces of parchment to their talons and then sending them on their way."

"Why would anyone bother to do that?" Jasper murmured incredulously, "Moreover, who would expend all those resources on a hidden rookery if it would accomplish nothing?"

"That's just it," Rickard proclaimed. Right then, they stepped off the staircase, onto the floor they had been climbing up to. Rickard turned to the other two men and proposed "What if there is no hidden rookery?"

Jasper and Lord Jon looked stunned. A few seconds later, after they resumed walking, the latter proposed "You should share this theory with the king."

"No, what I meant was… maybe the king already knows all about the truth of the hidden rookery," Rickard expounded, "If so, he would know if it actually exists."

"You think the rookery is just an elaborate hoax my father came up with?" Jasper presumed. There was astonishment as well as disbelief in his tone.
"I think that is one possibility," Rickard professed, "I know the very idea of that sounds absurd. I myself do not have much faith in its legitimacy. Nevertheless, we're supposed to consider every single possibility, remember? Thus, I cannot help but wonder if this is all a ruse the king arranged."

"Why do you believe King Robert would orchestrate such a scenario?" Jon Arryn inquired.

"To test us," Rickard argued, "It could be that he wishes to see how far Jasper, Rhaenys, Willas, Lady Ashara, and I will go to demonstrate our fealty to him. So, maybe he invented the story about the hidden rookery to test us."

"Would that that was the case," Lord Jon stated drearily, "You are half right, my lord. The king is indeed testing you, the prince, and the others. Alas, the hidden rookery is very much real. So is the threat it poses."

"With respect, my lord, how do we know that?" Jasper enquired. At least I've got him wondering, too. I can't be the only one with a totally open mind.

"You must take my word for it," Jon Arryn proclaimed, "Perhaps nothing I say will be sufficient to persuade you. All the same, I know for a certainty that the King would not give you a complex and time-consuming assignment just to reassure himself of your loyalty to the crown. He is fully aware of how useful your skills really are, and he would not waste them on petty exercises. Not with less than two years until the Long Night returns."

Rickard was effectively taken aback. How had that not occurred to him? Gods, I can be such an idiot at times. He released a heavy sigh and remarked "You've an excellent point, my lord. The king wouldn't do a thing like that."

"Still, the idea did merit some consideration," Jasper uttered, "Like you said afore, Rick, nothing should be overlooked."

"Just so, Your Grace," Jon Arryn conceded. He must have noticed the sullen expression on Rickard's face. He patted the tall boy on the shoulder and assured him with "You mustn't feel ashamed of that theory, my lord. It takes a shrewd man to think of every possible solution to a predicament, and a bold man to give voice to those thoughts. Evidently, you possess both qualities. That is yet another way in which you take after your lord father."

Rickard chuckled. "Interesting how so many people have pointed out the characteristics I share with my lord father today. Not that I'm ungrateful, mind you."

"Yes, I can tell you are proud," Lord Jon Arryn perceived. "As you should be. Every time someone compares you to Lord Gregor, it's another sign that you will ultimately succeed him."

Rickard was perplexed. "Succeed him how?"

For a moment, Jon Arryn said nothing. He just looked Rickard over, as though he was debating whether to answer him. Eventually, he gazed straight into Rickard's eye and asked him "Do you know the true reason you are here, my lord?"

Rickard thought on that, and then he said "Whatever it is, I assume it's not to be a hostage of the realm or to flush out the party behind the hidden rookery?"

"Correct," Lord Jon confirmed. "The true reason you are here... is to be judged."

"Who's judging him?" Jasper enquired. Just what I was going to ask.
"Your father, Your Grace," Jon Arryn apprised the Crown Prince. *The king is judging me? Why? He got his answer a few seconds later, when Lord Jon told him "When your lord father passes on, you will inherit Moat Cailin from him. That much is obvious. Should Lord Gregor will it, you will also inherit the title of commander of the Legion without Banners. However, you will not inherit the office of Master of Order. The next holder of that title is for the king to decide."

"I always assumed as much," Rickard admitted, "I never doubted the moat would one day be mine. However… the Legion without Banners was founded by my lord father under his authority as the Master of Order. With that in mind, wouldn't the next Master of Order control the Legion, as well?"

"Yes, but the next Master of Order would not necessarily be a Legionnaire," Lord Jon contended, "The king has ruled that if the Master of Order and the commander of the Legion without Banners are not the same person, the latter will answer to the former. In other words, the entire Legion without Banners will submit to the Master of Order, just as it does now."

"So, what you're saying, my lord, is that while the Legion itself belongs to House Clegane, the authority to control it does not?" Jasper perceived.

"Precisely, Your Grace," Jon Arryn verified, "That is why Rickard is here. The king is evaluating him, in effort to determine if he is suitable enough to one day replace his father as the next Master of Order."

Once more, Rickard was astounded. All this time, he had believed he was only in King's Landing to serve as a hostage and to do the crown's bidding. Now, he just heard that the king was practically grooming him for a tremendous responsibility. *King Robert is honestly considering me as a candidate for the newest office on the small council? The same office my father has held longer than I've been alive? I... I literally cannot find the words.*

If anyone other than Lord Jon Arryn had told him that, Rickard would have doubted it or at least questioned the plausibility of it. But the Hand of the King would not mislead him. Or so he hoped. In the short time he had known Jon Arryn, the Lord of the Vale had given Rickard no reason to mistrust him. *If there is only one honest man in this city, it would have to be he.*

"Would... would it be imprudent to ask how I've done thus far, my lord?" Rickard uttered tentatively.

"So far, the king is impressed with the work you've done," Lord Jon disclosed, "Nonetheless, you've a long way to go before he deems you worthy of succeeding your father as the chief peacemaker in the realm, my boy."

"I never thought otherwise," Rickard remarked candidly.

"Has his friendship with me impacted Father's judgment any?" Jasper inquired.

"It has tilted the scales slightly in his favor," the Lord of the Eyrie claimed, "Your father and I believe it would be a great advantage if the future King of Westeros and the future Master of Order were friends beforehand."

*Yes, they'd be more likely to cooperate and less likely to piss each other off. I find that I share the sentiment, my lord. Colleagues are more apt to get along if they know each other personally.*

"Indeed, my lord," Jon Arryn conceded, "After Lord Steffon Baratheon and his wife died, I was the closest thing Robert Baratheon had to a father. For that very reason, after he was crowned, he appointed me to be his Hand. I did not covet the office, but I accepted it for his sake. To this day, I
do not regret doing so."

"I am glad for you, Lord Hand," Rickard commented plainly. Some friendships really do transcend all else.

Less than two minutes later, they reached Syrio Forel's studio. There Rickard and Jasper bade Lord Jon Arryn a pleasant rest of the afternoon, and then he parted from them and Ser Preston.

After the Hand left the vicinity, Rickard and Jasper turned their attention to his nieces. Jasper lightly knocked on the entrance to the studio. Almost immediately, the door swung open. In turn, Jasper jumped back a pace in alarm.

The person on the other side of the door was Syrio Forel, Arya and Sansa's "dance teacher." In actuality, he was a bravo from the Nine Free Cities. According to Arya, he used to be the First Sword of Braavos, meaning he had served directly under the Sealord. That implied that he was one of the most renowned swordsmen living. I don't think he could best Father or Mother, but he could probably beat most men his own size.

For as long as Rickard had known her, Arya Stark had enjoyed swordplay. Over a year ago, her cousin Jon had had the blacksmith of Winterfell forge Needle for her. Ever since then, she had been learning how to fight with it. Even after she learned she was going to King's Landing, she wanted to continue her training. Lord Eddard Stark respected his daughter's wish to learn to wield a blade, and he had written to Lord Jon Arryn, asking him to find Arya a proper instructor.

Given Arya's petite stature and the slender shape of Needle, Lord Jon had deemed a fencer to be the most ideal teacher for her. Subsequently, he had commissioned Syrio Forel to train Arya in the water dancer fighting style of Braavos.

When he saw who was on the other end, Syrio Forel grinned and remarked "You arrive just in time."

He stepped aside to allow the heirs to Moat Cailin and the Iron Throne access to the room, and they swiftly entered it. Ser Preston Greenfield remained out in the corridor, standing vigil by the entrance.

Syrio's studio was almost completely empty. There were no chairs, no tables, no tapestries, and no portraits.

All the same, the room was not entirely empty. While there was nothing there that could have served as furniture or embellishment, it was not devoid of people. Or animals, for that matter.

Off to the side, Arya Stark was sitting on a stone step. She was petting her direwolf Nymeria behind her ears. Likewise, her sister Sansa was seated next to her, stroking her own direwolf Lady's back. Arya was holding a wooden sword in her free hand, and another wooden sword was on the ground beside Sansa's feet. Furthermore, each girl was clad in a tunic and breeches. Even now, it seems queer to see Sansa in that simple ensemble. Yet it looks so natural on Arya.

A little more than a turn of the moon ago, Arya had suggested that Sansa join her lessons. Normally, the elder Stark sister was averse to doing anything that involved physical exertion (other than actual dancing), but she and Arya had agreed to partake in one another's interests. Thus, when her younger sister suggested she give swordplay a chance, Sansa had elected to do so.

Sansa's first week under Syrio's direction had been disastrous. Back then, one would have thought she had never held a sword before. In truth, she hadn't. Fortunately, the bravo was a patient and
encouraging man. Under his guidance, Sansa had gotten better.

Although she had been a slow learner when they began, her form, her stance, and her technique had gradually improved overtime. She was still nowhere near Arya's level, and Rickard did not think she would last even two minutes in a melee or single combat, but at least she was capable of defending herself by now.

As Jasper and Rickard approached the stone steps, the Stark girls gazed up at them. Arya smiled happily, but Sansa recoiled and looked away, shakily covering her face with one of her hands. Rickard chuckled at that. Even now, she cannot stand to have the Crown Prince see her in this condition. Had Rickard come on his own, Sansa would not have been so self-conscious of her appearance.

Rickard looked back and forth between Arya and Sansa, and he recalled what his interaction with Lady Ashara and Princess Rhaenys before he and Jasper came to Syrio's studio. Now's my chance.

Rickard knelt next to Sansa and said assuredly "Don't feel so mortified, Sansa. You may think you look a fright, but you don't. In fact… I think you look gorgeous."

The older Stark sister sharply turned her head towards the heir to Moat Cailin. She seemed somewhat comforted by that remark. She stated dubiously "Do you mean that, Rickard? Because I think I look a mess."

"Nonsense," Rickard insisted, patting her shoulder gently, "Believe me; it would take much more than some dirt, sweat, and bruises to impair beauty such as yours."

Sansa giggled a bit and muttered "I appreciate you saying that, Rickard. It is surprisingly difficult to maintain one's façade in the capital city. Not to mention one's figure. Just look at me. Despite these drills with Master Forel, I believe I may have put on a little weight since we arrived."

There are a great many ways in which one can fall into temptation in King's Landing. Nevertheless, Rickard continued with "Oh, you think too little of yourself. From what I can see, there is hardly any fat on you. Hells, were you any thinner, you wouldn't even need to wear a corset under your dress."

Sansa was blushing already. Rickard was not the least bit surprised. Most Northwomen may have been even harder to flatter than Dornishwomen, but Sansa Stark was an exception. She's hardly even a challenge. But, of course, that's not the point of my flirting.

As Rickard spoke to Sansa, he casually glimpsed over at Arya and took careful note of her reactions.

Initially, she appeared baffled. Likely, she cannot comprehend why I'm sweet-talking her sister. That would have made sense. After all, Rickard did not interact with Sansa nearly as often as he did with Arya.

Soon after, Arya's confusion seemed to change to disgust. Whether she's appalled by who I'm flirting with or my flirting in general, I could not say. Of course, it doesn't have to be just one or the other.

In the end, Arya was exhibiting signs of irritation more than anything else. That speaks for itself. Whatever the case, she clearly does not like my being so forward. With Sansa, at any rate.

Even before he sought advice on talking to the fair sex from the king, Rickard had been aware that the average woman dreaded having competition. That was especially true when her own sister was
the competition. *In a scenario such as that, she is liable to feel as though both parties have betrayed her.*

Apparently, Rickard's flirting with Sansa was starting to have that type of effect on Arya. It could not have been the praise itself that annoyed her. Arya had never cared for comments on her own beauty. In her mind, she was far from beautiful. *Compared to Sansa, maybe. But she is hardly what I would call ugly. She possesses the same type of beauty as her aunt.*

At any rate, it seemed as though Arya was not pleased at all with how Rickard was interacting with her sister. If she thought of him as nothing more than a friend, she would have been indifferent or ignored them. Yet she looked almost jealous.

This indicated there was indeed a possibility that she really did regard him as more than a friend. However, he had to tread softly, lest he chance ruining the relationship the two of them already had. It was still just a friendship between them, and Rickard did not ever want to risk losing that. As such, he chose to quit while he was ahead.

Not long after Rickard ceased flirting with Sansa, Jasper reminded them of his presence. He folded his arms and proclaimed "Rickard makes a fine point. There is something oddly appealing about a woman who exercises regularly."

Predictably, that captured Sansa's fancy. She gave a beaming smile and murmured hopefully "Is that so, Your Grace?"

The Crown Prince nodded his head. Then he humorously commented "Sansa, for the last time, the name is 'Jasper.'"

"Yes, of course, Yo- Jasper," Sansa hastily corrected herself, flushing again. In response, Rickard and Arya snickered. Fortunately for Sansa, Jasper was kind enough to shake her blunder off.

"So, how went today's lesson?" Rickard enquired.

"Outstanding," Arya promptly replied.

"It went well, I suppose," Sansa murmured hesitantly.

"The girl and the boy are still sloppy," Syrio Forel called out from across the studio, "But they will learn. In time."

*Hopefully, 'in time' will be within the next two years.*

"The girl and the boy?" Jasper repeated in bewilderment.

"Ever since our first meeting, he's called me a boy," Arya elucidated. *Better than 'Arya Horseface.'*

"I can see how he'd mistake you for one," Rickard japed.

"He didn't make a mistake," Arya mumbled, "I almost wish he had, though. If others did the same, maybe then people would take my desire to learn to swordfight more seriously."

"Perhaps," said Rickard in agreement.

"I'm just glad he didn't refer to me as a boy," Sansa commented.

"Well, it would be impossible to mistake you for one," Jasper contended, "Even as a joke, calling
you masculine would be utterly foolish."

That seemed to please Sansa Stark. She gazed up at the Crown Prince, grinned, and said gratefully "Thank you, Jasper."

The black-haired boy grinned back, saying "Anytime."

It looks as though I'm not the only one who is naturally charming. Nor am I the only one who takes after his father.

At that moment, Syrio Forel approached the girls and declared "Remember what all we covered today. I expect you to be able to recite it from memory by tomorrow."

"Aye, Syrio," Arya firmly acknowledged.

"Yes, Master Forel," Sansa remarked. She sounded less enthusiastic, but just as committed.

The Braavosi seemed convinced. He picked up their wooden swords, balanced them on his shoulders, and exited the studio.

"So, what all does he expect you to memorize?" Jasper enquired.

"Just some proverbs about swordplay," Sansa disclosed.

Arya gave a more thorough response: "All halls lead somewhere; where there is a way in, there is a way out; quiet as a shadow, light as a feather, calm as still water, quick as a snake, smooth as summer silk, swift as a deer, slippery as an eel, strong as a bear, fierce as a wolverine, still as stone, and – most importantly – fear cuts deeper than swords."

"Well, someone's been paying attention," Rickard slyly muttered, "Any of that actually make sense to you?"

"Of course," Arya asserted. After a bit of silence, she sighed and added in "Most of it, anyway."

"That's more than I can claim," Sansa glumly remarked, "But we've still much to learn."

"Indeed," said Rickard. There is always more to learn.

"Interesting how most of bravos' techniques are centered around grace and agility than force and might," Jasper observed.

"Well, grace and agility are typical traits of most fencers," Rickard contended.

"I can see how those could serve as advantages," Jasper thought aloud, "All the same, on the field of battle, I would still prefer combat styles based on force and might."

"As would I," Rickard conceded. "But to my knowledge, we won't be in a battle any time soon. So, let's talk about something else."

"I've no objections," Sansa muttered.

"Neither do I," Arya stated, "Come on; sit down."

The boys settled themselves beside the girls on the stone steps. Rickard sat to Arya's right, and Jasper sat to Sansa's left. A moment later, Nymeria padded over to Rickard. He rubbed her underneath her chin, and she licked his hand playfully. At the same time, Jasper joined Sansa in
grooming Lady's coat.

Back at Moat Cailin, Rickard and Jasper had been good friends with Robb Stark and Jon Snow (who was now Jon Targaryen). As such, the two of them had gotten along rather well with the direwolves Grey Wind and Ghost, as well as their mother Lyarra.

In the time since they arrived in King's Landing, Rickard and Jasper had bonded closely with Arya and Sansa, too. As a result, they had become quite friendly with Nymeria and Lady, as well. Rickard had been intrigued by how well he and the Crown Prince interacted with most of the Stark direwolves. Five out of seven. I don't think anyone else who isn't a Stark could make that claim.

"What should we talk about?" Sansa enquired.

Jasper shrugged and proposed "Anyone been up to anything exciting lately?"

"Well, I spent most of the past week in the Queen's entourage," Sansa recalled, "I had a wonderful time with her. The rest of you may find that dull, though."

A little. "Jasper and I aren't really at liberty to talk about what we've been up to."

"Why's that?" Sansa queried.

"King's business," Jasper said plainly. He turned to Arya and stated enquiringly "What about you? Anything of note to divulge?"

Arya did not speak right away. For a while, she seemed to be contemplating whether she should even supply an answer. Ultimately, she folded her arms and proudly revealed "As it happens, I had an adventure the day before yesterday."

"An adventure where?" Rickard asked in interest.

"The lower levels of the Red Keep," Arya elaborated, "It started in the early morning. I was chasing cats. Syrio ordered me to catch them, you see."

"He never told me to do anything of the sort," Sansa interjected.

"You're not that far in the lessons yet," her younger sister expounded, "Anyway, before noon, I managed to capture all but one of the cats in the Red Keep. The only one I couldn't grab was this old, scrawny tom who kept getting away from me. I ended up following him all over Maegor's Holdfast. By the time I finally caught up with him... I realized I was in an unfamiliar part of the Keep."

"What happened then?" Sansa enquired.

"I quickly found out I was under the ground," Arya recounted, "Seeing as there were no windows or sunlight. I thought about going back up to the surface right away, but I ended up staying down there and exploring the catacombs of the Red Keep. Found some rather interesting things."

"Do tell," Jasper bade her eagerly.

"Well, I came across this vast chamber filled with what I thought were monsters," Arya admitted, trying not to sound like a fool, "Then I realized the 'monsters' were neither breathing nor moving. However, they were not imaginary. They were just long dead."

"Oh, I know where you were," Jasper wryly pronounced, "You just stumbled upon the final resting
place of House Targaryens' real dragons."

"How can you be sure?" Arya questioned.

"Because I know they're down there," Jasper illuminated, "I haven't actually seen them myself, but my mother has. She told me that the Mad King and his ancestors used to display their dragons' skulls in the throne room during their reigns. After my father seized the throne, he deemed the skulls unsuitable for public display, and he had them moved below."

"I'm quite relieved he did that," Sansa commented frankly, "The knowledge that my grandfather and uncle died in the throne room already makes me feel nervous enough when I go there. If the remnants of beasts long dead were present, as well, the visits would only be all the more unsettling."

"Well, we certainly wouldn't want that," Jasper uttered, placing a hand on Sansa's shoulder. That seemed to make her feel less queasy.

As the Crown Prince comforted the elder Stark sister, Rickard asked the younger "So, Arya, what did you think of the dragon skulls?"

"They were a wonder to behold," Arya reminisced, "I was a little intimidated when I first saw them, but then I remembered 'fear cuts deeper than swords,' and I cast my fear aside. Then I took a closer look at some of them. There were incredible. Three in particular really stood out. They took up an entire wall all on their own. The biggest one of all... it was larger than any two of the others put together. I couldn't even reach the top of its muzzle."

"Must have been Balerion the Black Dread," Rickard supposed, "From what I remember of House Targaryen's history, whenever Balerion fully extended his jaws, a grown man mounted on a grown horse could ride into his mouth without ducking."

"How could anyone back then have been certain of that?" Sansa said curiously.

"Maybe they found some witless volunteers to test the validity of that claim," Jasper wittily remarked.

Rickard, Sansa, and Arya chortled at that. Actually, who's to say those 'volunteers' must've been witless? Sane men have died more ludicrous deaths by their own volition.

"So, what else did you see, Arya?" Rickard asked the girl he secretly hoped would be the future lady of Moat Cailin. Keep fantasizing, Rick, he chided himself. You've got a long way to go before you get there.

"Oh, I saw plenty more that day," Arya Stark disclosed, "How much would you like to hear?"


Arya decided to indulge the three of them. The next hour was spent recounting her experiences in the lower levels of the Red Keep from the other day.

At one point, she had wandered near the Black Cells. Luckily, the gaolers had not noticed her. Nor had any of the prisoners. That is fortunate; no one needs to know she was there.

At another point, she found a small underground river that flowed out into the Blackwater. She had marked it as a possible escape in case she could not find her way back to the upper levels of the Red Keep.
Nonetheless, she did find her way up top eventually, and she did not have to resort to using the river. That was lucky on her part, as that river was actually part of the city's sewer system. Maybe that's the same route Father's men used to escort Princess Elia and her children out of the Keep during the Sack. I could ask Rhaenys, Raff, Eggon, or Shitmouth about this later.

Overall, Arya had been completely alone during her visit to the underground parts of the Red Keep. But not for the entirety of her visit.

Near the end of her day in the Keep's catacombs, Arya recalled, she had reached what must have been the very base of the structure's foundation. Once she got down there, she had heard what sounded like whispers. To sate her curiosity, she had sought out the source of those whispers. As she got closer to them, they had become louder and shriller. Soon, they sounded more like shrieks than whispers.

Soon, she discovered what was making those noises, as well as what they were. It turned out they were actually bird calls. Calls produced by ravens, to be precise.

Upon that revelation, Rickard and Jasper became fully engaged in Arya's recollection.

"Tell us everything you remember of that," Jasper beseeched her, "And leave nothing out."

"Nothing at all," Rickard emphasized, "We want you to share every detail. Please."

Sansa was astonished by how strangely engrossed the two of them suddenly were. "Why do you care?"

"Because…" Jasper apprehensively began. After a tense pause, he claimed "If someone's keeping ravens in the bowels of the Red Keep, we should know of it."

"Yes, exactly," Rickard bluntly conceded. Way to think fast, Jasper. "A rookery being covertly used in the same building the royal family and the small council work and sleep in? That is a disaster waiting to happen."

"I see what you mean," Arya muttered, "However, you should know my memory of that episode is hazy at best. It was near the end of the day. I was quite tired and a little hungry. Not to mention very ready to find my way back to the surface."

"Just tell us what you remember," Jasper requested, as politely as his eagerness would allow, "That's all we're asking."

"As you wish," the dark-haired girl flatly agreed, "There really is not that much to tell. I was only down there for about ten minutes. I thought about turning the ravens loose, but decided against it. After all, they had nowhere to go, as there were no openings to the outside. That I could see, that is. It was extremely dark down there, believe me."

"You made the right choice," Rickard assured her. Indeed, she had. Not only did Arya keep the ravens from flying amok, but she also upheld the integrity of our investigation. If whoever was using the ravens found them missing, they would have known that others in the Keep were aware of their activities, and they would have taken steps to disappear or relocate. All our work would have been for nothing then.

"You're right about that much," Arya murmured drolly, "Mere minutes after I got there, I starting hearing whispers again. This time, they turned out to be actual whispers. Also, I did not go to them. They came to me."
"Did they see you?" Jasper asked anxiously.

"No," Arya responded, "When I realized someone was coming, I rushed to find cover. I managed to hide in the corner just when they arrived."

"How many were there?" Rickard inquired.

"Two," Arya claimed, "I think. One was carrying a torch, but it was so dim that I could barely make out his companion."

"Did you see who they were?" Rickard stated wistfully. Dare I hope we are that fortunate?

"I tried to," Arya pronounced, "But I could not bring myself to gaze directly at them. I was afraid the light from their torch would reflect off my eyes. If it did, they could have spotted me easily."

"It's alright, Arya," Rickard spoke to reassure her, "In your position, I would have done the same."

"No, you would have emerged from the shadows and confronted them," Arya debated.

_Only if I wanted to expose our investigation. Then again... given how I've got greater height and muscle over most in King's Landing, maybe I could have subdued both of them._ "Why do you think that?"

"Even though I did not see them, I still heard them," Arya revealed, "They did not sound tough. In fact, they sounded weak and scared."

"I don't suppose you recognized either of their voices?" Jasper presumed confidently.

"I'm afraid I didn't," Arya confessed, "But I did notice that their voices were soft and high."


"I honestly can't remember," Arya avowed, "I'd like to say they were both men, but again, their voices were soft and high. They could just as well have been women."

"What about what they talked about?" Jasper suggested, "Did their speech give any clue as to who they were or who they're involved with?"

"Well, one of them mentioned a 'master,'" Arya expounded, "Whether it was their master or someone else's, I do not know."

At that, Rickard looked to Jasper, and his best friend stared back. By the expression on the prince's face, it was as though he was having the same thought as the heir to Moat Cailin. _It couldn't be a member of the small council... could it?_

"Anything else?" Sansa said inquiringly. She was not as captivated with this conversation as the others, but she seemed fascinated by it all the same.

"While they were there, one of them dictated a message, which the other wrote down," Arya recalled, "I heard what they said, but I could not understand anything about it. It sounded more like they were reciting poetry or speaking in riddles than drafting a letter."

_They're communicating in code, _Rickard realized. _Clever bastards._ Once again, Jasper appeared to have the same thought.
"After they finished the letter, they sealed it and left the room with one of the ravens," Arya went on, "I did bother to linger. As soon as they were gone, I got out of there and returned to the upper levels of the Keep as fast as I could."

By the end of that account, Rickard Clegane was downright flabbergasted. The search for the hidden rookery had been conducted in a very methodical fashion, yet he and his companions had been unable to even confirm the rookery's existence. In a single day, Arya accomplished more than I have accomplished with Jasper in the others over the last four weeks. Although Arya Stark was not one to be underestimated, Rickard never would have fathomed that she would come up with the investigation's first major lead.

"Why didn't you mention any of this until now?" Sansa inquired.

"I didn't know who to tell," Arya claimed, "And I did not think anyone would believe me."

"Yet you told us," Jasper pointed out.

"Well, if there is anyone who would believe me, I am hoping it's the three of you," Arya commented.

"I believe you," Rickard assured her.

"As do I," Jasper agreed.

They all looked to Sansa, who needed a minute to think. Eventually, she sighed and mumbled
"Arya may have an active imagination, but she would not invent a tale such as this."

Arya Stark seemed almost touched that her sister did not label her a liar. She looked around at the others and enquired "What should we do about this? Should we keep it to ourselves?"

"No, we must share it with the King and the Hand," Rickard declared.

"What about Willas, Rhaenys, or Lady Ashara?" Jasper questioned.

"They can wait," Rickard contended, "King Robert and Lord Jon must know first."

"Hold on; what if Arya gets in trouble?" Sansa professed.

"Why would she?" Rickard stated inquisitively.

Sansa shrugged and hypothesized "Maybe she trespassed in a restricted area whilst she was down in the lower levels."

"I'll see that she isn't punished," Jasper assured the auburn-haired girl. Both the Stark sisters were noticeably grateful for that. In a way, Rickard was relieved, too. No matter what happens next, at least the four of us will be there for one another.

"We should find the King and the Hand as soon as possible," Rickard suggested.

"Right," Arya acknowledged, "Who should we seek out first?"

"Normally, I would recommend going straight to my father," Jasper thought aloud, "But the Tower of the Hand is much closer than the throne room."

"Apart from that, I believe the king is usually indisposed at this hour," Rickard added in. Conveniently, the Queen is often 'indisposed' at this time of day, as well.
"Usually, yes," Jasper confirmed, "So, let's go to Lord Jon first. I would hate to… interrupt my father when he's… 'doing his duty.'"

*Oh, it's not his duty that he's doing.* All japes aside, Rickard was not opposed to finding Lord Jon Arryn first. In fact, he had been hoping that they would see the Hand before the King.

Rickard Clegane, Jasper Baratheon, Arya Stark, and Sansa Stark swiftly left Syrio Forel's studio and headed down the adjoining hallway. Lady, Nymeria, and Ser Preston Greenfield speedily followed after them. The Kingsguard knight was wary of the direwolves, but he made certain not to place too much space between himself and the Crown Prince.

It took them about five minutes to reach the Tower of the Hand. They needed almost as long to make the long ascent to the top. When they got there, they encountered a heavily built man with a square, plain face, silver hair, and an utterly humorless expression.

"Hello, Ser Vardis," Jasper Baratheon greeted the man.

The captain of Lord Jon Arryn's household guard dipped his head and stated "Afternoon, Your Grace. What brings up here today?"

"I must speak with the Hand at once," Jasper proclaimed.

"I'm afraid Lord Jon gave explicit orders not to be disturbed," Vardis Egen murmured solemnly.

*Did he forget who he is talking to?* Although Rickard was stunned by the Valeman's dismissive remark, Jasper seemed more intrigued by it. "Might I ask why?"

"He spoke of a headache," Ser Vardis expounded, "It's been troubling him all day."

"We just saw him a few hours ago," Rickard recalled, "He looked perfectly fine."

"Yes, but the pain was at least tolerable then," Ser Vardis Egen stated, "It has gotten much worse since this morning. Not half an hour ago, the pain became so great that Lord Jon elected to retire to his quarters until he has recovered from it."

"He has my sincerest condolences if he is hurting," Jasper muttered, a little irately, "Be that as it may, you must let us inside. It is urgent that we see Lord Jon straightaway."

"We do not intend to waste his time, Ser Vardis," Sansa pronounced in a cordial tone, "Please, allow us entrance to Lord Jon's chambers. What we have to tell him involves a matter of great import."

Ser Vardis Egen had already been starting to waver on his position of letting no one into the Hand's bedchamber. Sansa's plea was what won him over. He sighed and mumbled "Very well. But I must ask that you be brief."

*He changed his mind just in time. Arya was probably three words away from drawing Needle on him.*

Ser Vardis turned to the door and knocked on it twice. He announced, "The Crown Prince and his companions wish for an audience with you, my lord."

They waited for a response. When none came, Ser Vardis knocked twice more and called out "My lord? The Crown Prince asks if you would receive him."
Again, all that came back was silence. *Maybe he's asleep. If so, perhaps we should come back later.*

Jasper did not have the same idea. He sternly ordered Ser Vardis "Open the door."

The knight from the Vale hastened to obey that command. He reached into his doublet, pulled out the key to the Hand's bedchamber, and used it to unlock the entranced. Once the bolt was unfastened, Ser Vardis pushed the door open.

When the door was fully ajar, Ser Vardis peered into the room. Two seconds later, his eyelids expanded. He dropped the key, rushed into the room, and yelled "My lord!"

Rickard and the others stepped inside the bedchamber after Ser Vardis. Almost immediately, they discovered the cause of his alarm.

Lord Jon Arryn was at his desk near the window. He was slouched over in his chair. He seemed to be awake, but he was barely moving.

Out of concern, Jasper hurried to the Hand's side. Rickard did the same. When he was looking at the Lord of the Eyrie up close, that was when he realized something was dreadfully wrong.

Lord Jon's body seemed to have gone listless. His hands were twitching, his breathing was labored, and a bit of spittle was dripping from the corner of his mouth.

"My lord?" Jasper said worriedly, "What happened? Are you alright?"

Lord Jon Arryn did not answer him. So far, there was no indication that he had acknowledged the other people in the room or even noticed their presence.

Rickard was baffled. What could have caused this? Then he saw it.

On the surface of the desk was an overturned wine goblet. Its contents were pooled on the ground below the desk… and staining the front of Lord Jon's doublet. That was when he recalled what had almost happened to Uncle Sandor last year.

*Oh, Gods, no…*

Rickard spotted a jug of wine on the small table beside the desk. Lord Jon must have poured from that jug. Rickard went over to the jug and sniffed it once. He could not smell anything irregular. So, he dipped his finger in the liquid and lightly pressed it against the tip of his tongue. The taste confirmed his theory. *It's not all wine.*

Upon arriving at that conclusion, Rickard spat on the floor and shouted "Get help! Hurry!"

Ser Vardis Egen rushed to find the Grand Maester. *Gods, please let them get back here in time.*

Until the Grand Maester turned up, there was nothing more anyone could do for Jon Arryn. Except whisper soothing words in effort to comfort him, but in the long run, that was virtually useless.

Be that as it may, Rickard and his friends did it, anyway. *It's the least my father would do for a dying ally.*

Rickard Clegane, Jasper Baratheon, Sansa Stark, and Arya Stark all crowded around the elderly Lord Paramount of the Vale and Warden of the East. They each spoke softly to him in hopes that their words might somehow console him.
Rickard tried to think of something reassuring to say, but the only words he could find were "Stay with us, my lord. Please… stay with us."
Stable Incomes

Chapter Notes

Note: I'm back! It turns out a week-long break from writing as just what I needed. I really enjoyed the Nightmare Nights Convention over the weekend. Hope the rest of you had an exciting Halloween, as well.

By the way, before you read this chapter, you should be aware of a certain fact: I REALLY hate Telltale's Game of Thrones. It's one of the worst video games I have ever played. I mean, it literally has the entertainment value of getting mugged in an alley. And by that, I mean it is tantamount to being beaten, robbed, and possibly raped in a darkened hovel without even the remotest means of protecting one's self or fighting back whilst anyone who could or might help you cannot or will not.

Sadly, it actually could have been a good game. Its main problem is that it follows the franchise's policy of "things must get worse before they get better," yet those morons at Telltale seem to have forgotten that eventually, things are supposed to actually GET better. Anyone who's played that game knows what I'm talking about. Anyone who hasn't played it... don't. Save yourself some rage.

I just want to mention this because the antagonists of that game, the Whitehills, are the most poorly-written and one-dimensional villains I have ever seen. Nevertheless, they are also amongst the most despicable characters of all time. That is why there is so much antagonism towards House Whitehill in this chapter. This chapter contains some very gratifying moments for anyone who wants to see the Whitehills suffer as strongly as I do. If that game pisses you off as much as it pisses me off, this update is for you!

Truthfully, I doubt there is anyone who genuinely hates Telltale's Game of Thrones as much as I do. The only way I'll ever change my opinion is if Season 2 of the game involves the total destruction of House Whitehill. Alas, that game won't come until after the final season of the show airs in 2019. Somehow, that just makes this whole thing even MORE infuriating. Sometimes, I feel as though Telltale is well on the way to replacing Valve as the laziest video game company on the market.

Okay, I'm done with my spiteful rant. Proceed.

When one went hiking into the mountains, the noises made by the wind tended to become greatly amplified. At the right altitude with the right surroundings, they practically sounded like a human being crying out. One would almost be inclined to wonder if those sounds were actually being generated by voices of those who died in the wilderness long ago. Such a thought was eerie as well as disconcerting.

However, as unsettling as the shrieks produced by the winds in the mountains were, a sigh from the Mountain That Rides was a generally far more bothersome sound. In all the years Ser Gerion Lannister had known Lord Gregor Clegane, the former had only seen the latter sigh when confronted with an exceptionally difficult or frustrating predicament. When he is perturbed, none of us can rest easy.
The sigh Gregor gave at this moment was an especially loud and prolonged one. By itself, that was enough to make his unease obvious. He was staring down intently at the letter in his hands, rereading it for the fifth or sixth time that morning. *Does he think the words will somehow change if he stares at them long enough?*

Ser Gerion knew Gregor Clegane was not so naïve as to actually have such foolishly hopeful thoughts. All the same, he *did* seem rather engrossed in the contents of that letter. Then again, considering the subject of those contents, Gerion could not fault Gregor his restlessness. *Still… we have problems enough already.*

"You mustn't let this matter trouble you so, Gregor," the blond knight advised his commander and friend.

The Mountain gazed up from the parchment and turned towards the other native of the Westerlands, and he remarked "It does not trouble me, Gerion, so much as it irritates me."

Tormund Giantsbane raised an eyebrow and queried "Why does it irritate you?"

"Because I went to great length to keep Jon Arryn alive," Gregor disclosed, "Were it not for my intervention, he would have been murdered by the later Petyr Baelish, who would have pinned the death on the Lannisters in effort to start a civil war in the Seven Kingdoms."

"Well, at least the *war* has been averted," Samwell Tarly pointed out. *Meaning the mission to eliminate the Mockingbird was not a *total* waste of resources.*

"You are correct, Sam," Gregor Clegane affirmed, "As of now, there will be no war in the near future, other than the one between the living and the dead. Even so… I had hoped Lord Jon would remain the Hand of the King at least until the Long Night arrived."

"The Hand is not yet dead, though," Tormund stated plainly.

"No, but he may as well be," Gregor mumbled, "It has been three weeks since he suffered that stroke, and he has shown absolutely no signs of recovery. The Grand Maester believes his unresponsive condition is permanent."

"You cannot blame yourself for acts of nature, my lord," Samwell Tarly debated. *True. Even greenseers have no control over that.*

"Well, it happens that the stroke was *not* a natural one," Gregor revealed, "In actuality, it was deliberately induced as a result of poisoning."

The heir to Horn Hill was stunned. "But the word around the moat is that the Hand's stroke was entirely incidental."

"Yes, that is what most people have been told," said Gregor Clegane, "As much as I would prefer it to be the truth, it is merely a cover story. The crown manufactured that tale so as not to incite a panic."

*That may be for the best. If word was to get around that an attempt had been made on the Hand of the King's life, unrest would run rampant throughout the realm.* Gerion looked to the Mountain and asked him "Other than the four of us, who all knows the truth of this matter?"

"Only a select few individuals, whom the King was kind enough to list," Gregor Clegane illuminated, gazing back down at the letter, "Those would be the King, the Queen, the Crown Prince, my son Rickard, Lord and Lady Stark, their daughters, Willas, Rhaenys, Lady Ashara, the
Kingsguard, Grand Maester Marwyn, Ser Vardis Egan, Maester Colemon, Lady Lysa Arryn, and Lord Varys."

"I assume that until told otherwise, we are forbidden from sharing the truth with anyone else?" Samwell conjectured.

"Correct again, Sam," Lord Gregor confirmed, "For that very reason, the inquiry into the attempt on Lord Jon's life is being kept very low-profile. No parties other than the previously stated twenty-seven individuals are being included or even apprised of it. Rickard and his companions are assisting with it directly, but for the present, the king does not wish for the Legion to get involved."

"Then we are not expected to partake in the inquiry?" Ser Gerion presumed. Let us hope not. As much as I would like to find out who did this to Lord Jon, we cannot afford to expend any manpower or resources on yet another investigation.

"Precisely," Gregor Clegane pronounced, much to Gerion Lannister's relief. He gazed back down at the missive and muttered "Maester Colemon is actively working to treat Lord Jon, and Lady Lysa is attending to her husband's every need. She and her children are in no imminent danger, thankfully. In the meantime, the King has decided to appoint another man to the office of the Hand."

"So soon?" Tormund muttered in astonishment, "Arryn's condition is that hopeless?"

"King Robert is still holding out hope that Lord Jon will eventually emerge from his coma," Gregor pronounced. He should know better than to cling to false hope. "After all, there is no telling if that will ever happen, and even if it does, there is no way of knowing what sort of state Lord Jon's mind will be in. So, until his condition changes, the King needs a new Hand."

"Maybe he'll ask Lord Eddard," Samwell Tarly proposed.

"One would think," Gregor conceded, "Alas, he will not. The King claims as much in this letter. He argues that with the threat of the Night's King and the Army of the Dead rapidly nearing, the Warden of the North would currently serve the realm better from Winterfell than he would from King's Landing."

"Indeed, he would," Tormund murmured, "Wolves are very good at keeping the pack united against the many dangers of the world."

"If not his best friend, who else would the king approach?" Samwell enquired.

"According to this, he was going to make Lord Stannis his Hand," Lord Gregor wryly uttered, "However, before Robert could approach him, Queen Cersei offered an alternative. Between his wife and his brother, who do you think has greater sway over the king?"

Gerion snorted. At the end of the day, even kings sometimes think with their cocks.

"Whom did the Queen suggest, my lord?" Samwell said curiously.

"Her father," Gerion was the one to answer this time, "I know because I, too, received a raven this morning. Mine was from my nephew Jaime. He informed me that my 'beloved' eldest brother departed from Casterly Rock earlier this week. He is bound straight for the capital city."

"Must be eager to take the job," Tormund bluntly perceived. I've never known Tywin to be eager about anything. Except when it involved strengthening our family's domain."
"Did the king ever actually present the offer to Lord Tywin?" Samwell stated inquiringly.

"Yes, less than a fortnight ago," Lord Gregor expounded, "It is worth noting, however, that Tywin was very quick to accept. Almost as though he was expecting it."

"Perhaps he had Cersei present the offer on his behalf," Gerion theorized, "She did so in the early days of his reign, before he chose Lord Jon."

"And Tywin Lannister was Hand of the King once before," Samwell pointed out.

"To a king he betrayed, if I remember the history of this land rightly," Tormund blankly remarked.

"As well as a king he helped Robert overthrow," Gerion amended. *Not out of the goodness of his heart, of course. If it suited our house's best interests, I bet Tywin would turn against the Baratheons, too. I would not put that above him.*

"Do you believe this is cause for concern, my lord?" Samwell asked Lord Gregor.

"At present, no," the Mountain responded, "It is no secret that I detest Tywin Lannister, but he is still the Warden of the West and the Lord Paramount of the Westerlands. Aside from that, he is a renowned military officer and leader. Reluctant as I am to admit it, he is perhaps the best possible candidate to succeed Jon Arryn as King Robert's Hand."

"You may be right," Gerion thought aloud. *In the absence of Lord Eddard, who else is there that the king or queen can trust?*

"If you weren't so busy fortifying the Seven Kingdoms against the onslaught of the Others, my lord, I believe you would be an even better candidate," Samwell Tarly disputed.

Lord Gregor scoffed. "I suppose I would, Sam. It is not unusual for one man to occupy multiple positions on the small council, and the current stability of Westeros is largely my own doing. Additionally, the position of Hand of the King is far more appealing to me than the position of King itself. Be that as it may, that arrangement might not work so well in practice. The Hand is expected to always be at the king's side, just as his real hands are. As Master of Order and commander of the Legion, I am needed all throughout the realm. I have thousands of soldiers to command, as well as a fortress of my own to run."

"Successful Hands have served under more demanding constraints," Samwell contended, "I can provide some examples, if it please you."

"It would not please me now," the Mountain muttered, "We can discuss this at a later date, if ever Robert has second thoughts about his father-by-law advising him."

"Very well," the Reachman acknowledged. *Still, he does give a fine argument. In spite of his doubts of his ability to multitask, Gregor has potential to make an excellent Hand. We should definitely revisit this topic sometime.*

Tormund leaned back in his chair, rested his feet on top of the table, and muttered nonchalantly "So, if we're done talking on that, what else is on the agenda for today?"

Gregor Clegane set aside the message from the king. Then he reached into his doublet and pulled out a longer sheet of parchment. He smoothed it out on the surface of the table and announced "I'm pleased to say we've gotten somewhere in our investigation of the printing press fiasco. You remember that idea I pitched a while back?"
"The one where you planned to take all the guards' gloves and 'swab' them?" Gerion assumed. *Whatever that means.*

"That's the one," Lord Gregor affirmed, "But not *all* the guards, as you know. Just the ones who stood watch at the black powder storeroom at any time between the conference at Harrenhal and the explosion in the Knowledge Tower, as per Sam's recommendation."

"Any time after that interval would have been unnecessary," Samwell elucidated, "Any time before would have been a stretch."

*Why does he feel the need to remind us?* Like Samwell, Gerion had been there when Gregor first proposed this idea. Tormund had been present, as well. However, the Westerlander and the wildling had not been as involved with the idea's execution as the Reachman. That was not due to a lack of trust on the Mountain's part or a lack of interest or commitment on Gerion and Tormund's part. They had simply been carrying out the investigation through more conventional – yet less fruitful – means. They also had other duties to attend to. Some of which concerned their own people and their own families.

Apart from that, whenever Gregor Clegane ran an investigation, he sometimes preferred to work alone or with as little aid as possible. Like his plans, his investigations were very elaborate and methodical. Only the people of the highest intellect could effectually follow along with him. *Which is probably why he only had Samwell assist him.* Gerion Lannister and Tormund Giantsbane were by no means halfwits, but they made much better fighters than intellectuals. Many of the techniques Gregor Clegane employed were strange and innovative in equal measures.

For instance, he could tell if a particular individual had been somewhere or held a certain object if the markings made by their hands were left behind. He called those markings "prints," and he had a practical way of locating them, which he called "dusting." Often, it took hours to match the prints found with the person who made them, but this approach had never failed thus far.

"Even so, that would have to be at least half a hundred men," Ser Gerion observed, "Maybe as many as two hundred. And who knows how many of that number went with Lady Dacey, Prince Oberyn, or Princess Elia?"

"Nonetheless, the guards were our best lead," Gregor professed, "Even if none of them turned out to be the guilty party, at least one of them must have allowed the guilty party entrance to the storeroom or looked the other way when the guilty party came around."

Unfortunately, every guard at Moat Cailin – House Clegane retainer or otherwise – was required to wear gloves as part of the uniform. *So, no prints to be found.*

That was not enough to stop Lord Gregor, of course. He had another potential approach for singling out which of the guards was the one who stole or helped to steal the black powder. He had explained this method in detail to Gerion, Samwell, and Tormund. *Sam was probably the only one who could follow along, though.*

Apparently, whenever one handled black powder, some residue would be left behind on their clothes and skin. Much more would remain if the powder was ignited, but even if the powder was merely being moved, some of the sulfur, charcoal, and saltpeter would tend to stick to the mover's flesh and clothing.

The residual black powder could easily be washed away with soap and water. If one did not bother to clean their body or their attire, the powder would hypothetically stay on indefinitely. *This is a rare occasion when cleanliness can prove to be a hindrance.*
At Lord Gregor's insistence, every resident of the moat was expected to bathe at least once a week. He had established that rule so that everyone at Moat Cailin could maintain their health and show a courtesy to others. Additionally, all the guards' uniforms were washed at least every second or third day. That included the entire ensemble, except for the helms, the boots, and the gloves.

Obviously, helms and boots could not be washed; they could only be polished. Most gloves could be washed, but they were harder and took longer to clean than any other article of clothing. That aside, this far north, it always very cold. Nearly everyone wore gloves outside; many even wore them indoors. Due to the low temperatures, few people were willing to give up their hands' primary source of warmth, even if only for a few hours.

Each of the guards at Moat Cailin had one pair of gloves. If ever he wore them out, he would be given a fresh pair. As it happened, none of the guards who had stood outside the black powder storeroom in the last nine months had asked for a new pair.

With that in mind, Gregor had devised an intricate yet effective solution to determine which – if any – of the guards had taken the missing black powder from the storeroom.

Over the last fortnight, he had interrogated each of the guards separately. Whenever he spoke with one of them, Samwell had been present, too. At some point during each of the interrogations, Gregor had asked to take the guard's prints, and each guard had complied with the order.

This was merely a ploy to get the guards to remove their gloves. While Gregor made copies of their fingers' prints with ink and parchment, Samwell rubbed a piece of cotton cloth all along their gloves. This cloth had been moistened beforehand with a type of chemical that attracted and held onto metal-rich particles. Lord Gregor called that "swabbing."

After each interrogation was completed and the guard was dismissed, Gregor and Samwell examined the swab for metallic residue. So far, most of these tests had turned up negative results. But maybe they've gotten lucky since our last discussion.

"Anyway," Gregor Clegane continued, "By now, we've swabbed the gloves of every man who's guarded the storeroom since the start of autumn. Except the ones currently in Essos, but as it happens, we will not need to interrogate them."

That captured Gerion's interest. "Do you mean to say you found metallic residue on one of the other guards' gloves?"

"Indeed," Samwell replied, "We tested the residue, and sure enough, it turned out to be pure, unignited black powder."

"Finally, we're getting somewhere," Tormund commented drily, shifting his feet on the table, "So, who was it?"

"A young man named Olyvar," Gregor Clegane revealed, "He's a native of the Crownlands, and he grew up near or in King's Landing. Originally, he was a male prostitute by trade. A few years back, he came north to the moat to seek out more… reputable means of bringing in income."

From fucking for gold to stealing chemical weapons. Quite a 'noble' transition. "Are you going to make an arrest?"

"I already have," Lord Gregor proclaimed, "But it was not Olyvar whom I took into custody. I did a little more digging, and I discovered that while he was the one who swiped the black powder, he was not the one who used it."
Gerion was intrigued. He bade the tallest man there "Go on."

"You should know that whenever Olyvar guarded the storeroom, he was almost always paired with an Ironborn named Todric," Gregor explicated, "Todric, quite simply, is a fat, unreliable drunkard. I do not know whose decision it was to assign him to guard duty, but that party made a dire error in judgment."

"It would seem so," Tormund agreed, "You don't have a drunk stand watch. That's almost as foolish as having a corpse stand watch."

At least corpses don't ramble incoherently. Ser Gerion said inquiringly "So, was Todric involved in the stealing of the black powder?"

"Yes, albeit indirectly," the Mountain disclosed, "When I first interrogated Todric, he claimed to have seen absolutely nothing whenever he guarded the storeroom door. Even before I found the residue on Olyvar's gloves, I doubted the validity of his word. After I made that discovery, I knew Todric was lying. So I questioned him again. More thoroughly this time."

"And what did you uncover?" Tormund enquired.

"Todric confessed that he has been shirking his responsibilities," Gregor Clegane illuminated, "In the last several months, he has guarded the black powder storeroom maybe once or twice. The rest of his shifts, he has spent in the Drunkard's Tower. Apparently, with hardly any coercion, another man convinced Todric to 'switch' shifts with him off the record."

Off the record? This is really getting interesting. Gerion queried "Who might this other man be?"

"One Britt Warrick," Samwell Tarly answered him.

"A Northman," Gregor Clegane mumbled crossly, "Though I'm loath to call him that; he's also a vassal of House Whitehill."

That could mean trouble. Gerion Lannister was well-aware of how Gregor Clegane viewed House Whitehill of Highpoint. In fact, every person in the Mountain's inner circle knew that he hated most of the Whitehills and their retainers. More so than he hated the Freys, the Boltons, or Tywin. Not that he doesn't have ample reason to dislike them.

The house's current lord, Ludd, was an immoral, disgraceful specimen of a nobleman, and his favorite living son, Gryff, was nothing more than a pitiful, overreaching thug. Their soldiers and servants were just as deplorable. Many of them were sadists by nature, and they were often out of control. How appropriate that they are bannermen to House Bolton.

A couple years back, the Legion had been summoned to deal with some Whitehill retainers for disturbing the peace on House Forrester lands. Gerion vividly recalled how much the Mountain had enjoyed chastising those men. I'm not ashamed to admit that I enjoyed it a bit, as well.

Sometime before this event, Gregor had told the secret council of several of the horrendous things he had seen the Whitehills do in his visions. As a result, Ser Gerion and the others had come to share the Mountain's disdain of House Whitehill. Although the Whitehills had not committed most of those atrocities as of yet, they were still fully capable of all of them. Since that had been enough to warrant the death of Petyr Baelish, they were quite fortunate no further ill had befallen them thus far.

If Torrhen Whitehill wasn't a reasonable man and if Gwyn Whitehill hadn't married Asher Forrester, I bet Gregor would have launched a scheme to have their family stripped of its status
and its ancestral home by now. If ever the Mountain elected to go through with such a campaign, Gerion would have supported him. Their colleagues would have, too, he was certain.

"There's a reason Britt wanted the switch in duty shifts to be kept off the record," Samwell professed, "He has never actually been assigned to guard the black powder storeroom. Nor has he ever volunteered for the job. In fact, he's not even on the official guard roster."

"Then wouldn't Todric have been suspicious when he realized he had no shift to cover?" Gerion debated.

"Drunks usually do not ask too many questions," Tormund slyly countered. "Unless you count the nonsensical ones amidst their befuddled ravings.

"That aside, Todric didn't know that Britt is not part of the moat's guard detail," Lord Gregor elucidated, "Britt made that work to his advantage, and he told Todric he was supposed to guard the third-floor tavern in the Drunkard's Tower."

"Well, that would explain why it was so easy for Britt to get Todric to switch," Gerion Lannister observed.

Gregor nodded. Then he folded his arms and stated "Once I learned all this from Todric, I confronted Olyvar soon after. At first, he refused to cooperate, but with a few words and a little intimidation, I got him to loosen his lips."

A wise move on his part. He saved himself a lot of needless pain. Tormund seemed to think the same. He said curiously "What did the former man-whore have to say?"

"He confessed to entering the storeroom, removing the handfuls of black powder from the kegs, and replacing them with dirt," Gregor Clegane announced, "However, he claims he did those things under duress."

"Under duress?" Gerion repeated in perplexity.

"Apparently, Britt forced Olyvar to steal the black powder," Samwell elaborated, "In plainer terms, he blackmailed him. If Olyvar did not go along with his scheme, Britt threatened to expose his secret."

"What secret?" Tormund Giantsbane inquired.

Samwell hesitated a moment before responding with "That he… 'appreciates' the company of men and dreads the company of women."

Tormund looked stunned and a little revolted. Gerion, on the other hand, was slightly bewildered. He shrugged and muttered "What's so wrong with that?"

Gregor, Samwell, and Tormund all gave him odd looks. He quickly realized his last statement may have been poorly worded, and he hastened to correct it. "Allow me to rephrase what I meant: Lyn Corbray, Renly Baratheon, and Loras Tyrell all favor men over women. Their taste is common knowledge in most of Westeros. While the practice may be frowned upon by the gods, no one condemns them for it."

"No one here, maybe," Tormund blankly argued, "But you know as well as I, Gerion, that the rest of the world isn't like the moat. Where I come from, most of the Free Folk find the thought of a man being with another man sickening."
Some of them will eat a man, yet they will not lie with one. They have very odd standards.

"Furthermore, Ser Lyn, Lord Renly, and Ser Loras are all highborn," Samwell pointed out, "They can afford to flaunt their tastes without other nobles or the smallfolk judging them or criticizing them. Olyvar hasn't the same freedom. Once he does something to become a source for gossip, his name is forever tainted."

"Hence, Britt's leverage over him," Lord Gregor added in. *In that case, I guess Olyvar cannot be wholly blamed for complying with Britt's demands. If I was in his position, I would probably go to great length to keep that type of secret from being made known, too.*

"If Olyvar is so determined to keep his orientation hidden, how do you suppose Britt found out about it?" Gerion wondered.

"Now that, we don't know," Samwell Tarly admitted, "Neither did Olyvar. All we have is conjecture."

"Perhaps Olyvar was being indiscreet with Lyn, and Britt happened to be in the area long enough to notice them together," Lord Gregor theorized.

"Why Lyn?" Tormund said enquiringly.

Lord Gregor casually shrugged and muttered "You may think this strange, but I like to think Renly and Loras are faithful to one another."

*Odd as that may seem, it's a fairly sound argument.* Tormund and Samwell said nothing in response, but they appeared to see the logic in that point, as well.

"Did Olyvar have anything more to say?" Gerion asked.

"Yes, but not very much," Samwell disclosed, "He encountered Britt a total of twenty times. Each time, Britt had him take one or two handfuls of black powder from one the kegs, weigh the amount taken with a small scale he provided, fill the respective keg with the exact same amount of dirt, and return it to its original place. Britt kept both the powder and the dirt in two pouches concealed underneath his doublet. He didn't tell Olyvar why he wanted the black powder or what he was going to do with it. Olyvar had a lot of questions for Britt, and all of them went unanswered. Britt was never in a rather talkative mood, as you can imagine."

"That doesn't surprise me," Tormund commented.

After a brief pause, Gregor Clegane continued with "As I said before, Olyvar was the one who gathered the black powder, but I know for a certainty that he was not the one who threw that barrel at the printing press. At the time of the explosion in the Knowledge Tower, he was in the Drunkard's Tower. He has more than thirty witnesses who can verify his alibi."

"Is one of them Todric?" Tormund cheekily murmured.

"Actually, yes," Samwell replied, "Of course, he was drunk as a drowned priest, so his testimony did not amount to much. Luckily, most of the other witnesses were at least sober enough to remember Olyvar clearly."

"Then it was Britt who threw the barrel," Gerion proclaimed, looking to Gregor to confirm or deny that statement.

"Yes, after many, many hours of exhaustive investigation, we have determined that Britt Warrick is
the culprit,” the Mountain asserted.

Gerion smiled at that. So did Samwell.

"Then it seems the matter is settled," Tormund contended merrily.

"Not quite," Gregor grimly refuted, "Although we have established Britt as Smalljon's murderer, there are still a lot of aspects that do not add up. What motive could he have had to do what he did? How could he have accessed the storeroom? What was he hoping to accomplish? Most of all… who was he working with?"

"What makes you think he wasn't working alone?" Tormund disputed.

"Because there is no way he could have pulled this off by himself," Gregor Clegane professed, "Britt Warrick is an utterly unremarkable man. He possesses average intelligence at best, and he is not especially strong, bold, or cunning either. His family is sworn to House Whitehill, so he must be naturally cruel and unreasonable."

"Perhaps you should consider confronting him next," Gerion bluntly suggested.

Lord Gregor smirked and said "Conveniently, that is the very next item on the agenda. Gentlemen, what say we reconvene in the Reproach Tower?"

Gerion had mixed emotions to hearing that proposal. Of all the places to hold a meeting, the Reproach Tower was the least desirable one to go to. The only reasons anyone ever went there were to distribute punishment, receive punishment, or stand witness to punishment. Whereas at the Pleasure Tower, they offer 'punishment' of a different variety.

"Oh, have we done something to displease you?" Tormund sardonically remarked.

"No," Gregor answered candidly, "I simply wish to show you the proper way to handle terrorists."

"'Terrorists?'" Samwell muttered in confusion.

"That's his name for people who spread nothing but terror throughout the land," Gerion enlightened the heir to Horn Hill.

"Basically, yes," Gregor Clegane validated, "We have one such individual in our midst, and I intend to make him suffer for what he has done."

"I would be delighted to accompany you, just to see that," Tormund Giantsbane claimed.

"I'll come along, too, if it means getting some answers to those unanswered questions," Samwell Tarly muttered.

The two of them and the Mountain collectively looked to Gerion Lannister, as if expecting a reply from him. Almost straightaway, the blond knight gave a firm nod and declared "Out of respect for our late comrade, we should all look his killer in the eye and see that justice done."

"My exact thoughts," said Gregor Clegane in agreement.

Up until now, they had been having this discussion in the main chamber of the Meeting Tower. We may as well have had this gathering in Gregor's solar, given how few of us are here. The chamber seemed so vast and empty, likely because only four chairs were occupied.

A turn of the moon ago, five had been occupied instead. Alas, Polliver was no longer with them. At
Lord Gregor's command, the black-bearded captain of the guard and a small group of Legionnaires had boarded a ship with Lady Daliah Clegane, her granddaughter Tyta, and the Clegane's Keep retainers who had accompanied them to Moat Cailin.

The ship had set sail about five and twenty days past. By now, it must have reached Braavos, its intended destination. The captain and crew had not been told why they were bound for the northernmost Free City. In fact, the purpose of the voyage was being kept extremely classified. Only a certain few people knew what the mission's objective was. Samwell, Tormund, and Gerion were not among that few, but Gregor assured them they would told of it eventually.

*As long as our people return to the Seven Kingdoms safely, that's all that really matters.*

At any rate, Gerion Lannister, Samwell Tarly, Tormund Giantsbane, and Gregor Clegane proceeded to file out of the council chamber. They then made their way out of the Meeting Tower by way of the catwalk which connected the building to the adjoining Infantry Tower. From there, they crossed the Infantry Tower until they reached another catwalk, which took them to the Artist's Tower. Finally, they descended the Artist's Tower until they arrived on the floor that was level with the top of Moat Cailin's outer wall, where they went back outside and traversed the segment of wall which connected the Artist's Tower to the Reproach Tower.

After the Lord's Tower and the Armament Tower, the Reproach Tower was the third most heavily guarded of the moat's twenty towers. It was also the most ominous and imposing. Fierce-looking gargoyles adorned the roof, chains were spread along the exterior walls, rows of decaying heads on spikes sat atop the balustrades, and the foundation's brick and stone were blood red. A single glimpse of the structure was enough to drive the faint of heart away and urge even the boldest of men to take caution. *An appearance to match what goes on within.* The Reproach Tower was meant to look so intimidating by design, as that was where the Legion without Banners conducted all its most unpleasant activities.

Gerion Lannister and his three companions entered the Reproach Tower altogether. He noted the expression on Samwell Tarly's face. The Reachman seemed a little queasy about approaching the building, but at least he could bring himself to enter it. When he first arrived at Moat Cailin, he had been unwilling to go anywhere near the Reproach Tower.

Once they were inside the Reproach Tower, the four men made their way down to the ground level, but they did not stop there. They continued to descend until they were in the basement. *Now we are definitely talking serious business.* While the entire Reproach Tower was grim and frightful, the things that occurred underground were by far the most gruesome.

Ultimately, they came to a cell where two Legionnaires stood watch. Gerion did not recognize either of the men, but Tormund seemed familiar with both of them. *It's possible they're from north of the Wall.* Neither man looked friendly in the least, but they both dipped their heads to Lord Gregor when he approached them.

"He's in there, Lord Mountain," one of the wildling Legionnaires reported.

Gregor Clegane nodded and asked "Did he give you any problems?"

"Some," the other wildling Legionnaire responded, "But none our fists couldn't solve."

"You didn't damage him too much, I hope," Lord Gregor commented.

"Not too much," the first wildling wryly mumbled.
"Good," the Mountain said approvingly, flashing a wicked smile, "I don't like having others do my work for me."

Yes, he is rather adamant on handling certain tasks in his own manner. The two wildling guards stepped aside to allow Gregor Clegane access to the cell. The Mountain swiftly entered the small chamber; Gerion Lannister, Samwell Tarly, and Tormund Giantsbane followed him inside.

The cell was completely empty, except for a young man with short blond hair standing in the middle of the room. This man had at least two bruises on his face, his lower lip was swollen, and he was pressing a hand against his hip, as though it ached him. Gerion did not allow himself to feel any sympathy for the man. After what he's done, he is undeserving of anyone's pity.

Britt Warrick immediately snapped to attention when Ser Gerion and the others came into the cell. He tried to smile, showing his teeth. They were a little yellow, but they were all there. A few might go absent before we leave this room.

"Why, Lord Gregor," Britt murmured amiably, "Isn't this a pleasure?"

He may have sounded cordial, but Gerion knew false courtesy when he heard it. Only a guilty man tries to be jovial in a dire situation such as this.

Lord Gregor did not bother to answer Britt's question. Instead, he slowly sauntered over to Britt until he was within two feet of him, and then he abruptly punched the shorter man in the stomach. Britt immediately doubled over and fell to his knees. He held his lower torso and coughed violently into the ground.

"Drop the act, Warrick," Gregor snapped bitterly, walking around the Northman, "Confess now and save yourself a world of hurt."

"What exactly am I meant to confess to?" said Britt Warrick, as though he was confused.

At that, Gregor kicked him in the side. This time, Britt collapsed onto his stomach. He laid there for a few seconds. When he tried to get up, the Mountain placed a foot on his back and pressed down, effectively trapping Britt in place.

As he held his foot there, Gregor knelt down so that his head was closer to Britt's. Then he muttered "Two months ago, there was an explosion in the Knowledge Tower. The explosion was triggered by a small barrel of black powder. Black powder taken from my own stores, no less. We know it was you who committed this foul misdeed."

Britt seemed shocked. "My lord, that is outrageous!"

"We have testimony from two of your 'fellow guards,'" Gregor nonchalantly refuted, "I also have the word of half a-dozen witnesses who saw you both enter the Knowledge Tower shortly before the explosion occurred and exit it shortly after."

"Well, maybe I was just there to get a book," Britt offered anxiously.

"Bullshit," Samwell declared, "I am in the library all the time. I have never once seen you there. I would wager you do not even know how to read."

Whenever he swears, there can be no doubt.

"No one is talking to you, pig boy," Britt Warrick spat derisively.
That earned him another kick from Lord Gregor. As Britt recovered from that blow, the Mountain muttered heatedly "Samwell Tarly is the heir to a noble house of the Reach and my personal notary. You will speak to him with due respect. Besides… you call *him* a pig? You should take another look at that pile of blubber your family serves before you compare men to pigs again."

Britt almost looked genuinely appalled. He shot mockingly "And you criticize *me* for not showing due respect?"

"I would say that *is* the respect Ludd Whitehill deserves," Gregor slyly retorted.

"Indeed," Tormund Giantsbane concurred, "I've seen the man, and I think *Lard* Whitehill should be his proper name."

Ser Gerion and Samwell snickered. *I would love to hear someone say that to Lord Whitehill's face. Just imagine the reactions.*

Gregor then reached down, seized Britt by his tunic, and roughly pulled him off the ground. Once Britt was on his feet again, the Mountain uttered "You may as well come clean right now, Warrick. We have proof it was you who used the black powder. Todric and Olyvar have already told us everything."

Britt Warrick scowled and remarked angrily "That's what I get for confiding in a drunk and a cocksucker. *I knew* I should have killed those two."

Almost immediately, Lord Gregor's countenance changed. In a way, he looked strangely delighted. He said contemptuously "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Right then, Britt realized his blunder, and his face went pale. *He's all but confessed already.*

Gregor folded his arms and stated "Now that you've admitted to your crime, tell us why you did it. I am very keen to know what motive could have driven you to set off an explosion which almost killed an innocent boy and an innocent girl."

"My only target was the printing press," Britt claimed sternly, "My lord, if I had known your son and daughter were in that room, I would never have thrown that barrel."

"That's a fucking lie," Gregor Clegane sharply rejoined, "You are not above harming children. I know what kind of man you are."

Britt scoffed. "You don't know a thing about me."

"I know enough," Gregor severely countered, jabbing an accusing finger in Britt Warrick's direction, "I know you would murder an unarmed farmer and his young daughter without cause. I know you would have the effrontery to use the excuse that you were 'following orders' to justify that atrocity. I know you would run like a craven when an opponent who was actually capable of fighting back showed up. I know you would be audacious enough to claim they attacked first. Above all, I know you would let a private civil war start just because you have no integrity or virtue to speak of."

*Clearly, whatever visions he had of Britt, they were not good ones.* Gregor Clegane was doing something he did not do often; he was venting his rage on a person. In Gerion's mind, he had every right to do so. *If Joy had been in Vallory or Larys' place when the explosion happened, I would be just as furious with Britt.*

Britt looked equal parts baffled and astounded. "I have done none of those things."
"And you never will," Gregor bluntly commented "I will personally see to that."

Britt Warrick gulped and asked "What are you going to do?"

"Well, I am going to do nothing to you," Lord Gregor claimed. Other than roughing him up a little more. "The one you should really be worried about is Lord Greatjon Umber. I told him I would give him his eldest son's murderer."

"You wouldn't," Britt said hopefully.

"Oh, he would," Gerion drily muttered. He gave the Greatjon his word, and the Mountain never breaks his word. Ser Gerion Lannister had been the very first person to enlist in the Legion without Banners. In the sixteen years he had known the Legion's commander, Lord Gregor Clegane had never once gone back on a promise or a pledge.

"In a way, I am actually glad it's you," the Mountain told Britt Warrick, "Now, not only will I have no reservations about fulfilling my promise to Lord Greatjon Umber, but I'll also derive great pleasure from imagining all the things he is going to do to you once you reach Last Hearth."

"What in all the hells did I do to warrant such utter loathing from you?" Britt wondered frantically.

"It's not so much a matter of what you've done as it is what you could've done," Gregor vaguely remarked.

Now Britt was downright bewildered. "The fuck does that even mean?"

"Even if a rat becomes a man in the next life, he was still a rat before," Gregor Clegane perceived. That's a nice proverb. "That is especially true in your case. You've already proven you're just as capable of horrendous acts as you would have been, had the world been different."

Now Britt was laughing. Whether it was maniacal laughter or amused laughter, Gerion could not tell. Either way, it appeared he was not taking Gregor as seriously as he should have been. "This is such horseshit. You expect me to believe those famous 'visions' of yours are enough to condemn me?"

"Why wouldn't they be?" Gregor calmly argued, "They were enough to condemn your associates."

Once again, Britt was confused. "What are you talking about?"

Gregor Clegane folded his arms once more, and he recounted "Remember that territory dispute between the Forresters and the Whitehills?"

"You'll have to be more specific, my lord," Samwell commented from the side.

"Yes, those bloody Forresters frequently need to be put in their place," Britt insolently stated.

Not nearly as often as that wretched excuse of a highborn family called House Whitehill needs to be.

"I speak of the event that transpired shortly before Gwyn wed Asher," Gregor Clegane clarified. That was probably the smartest thing any Whitehill has done in the last few decades. "Some of your fellow soldiers thought to entertain themselves by harassing the peaceful farmers in the lands surrounding Ironrath. They murdered over a dozen villagers for no reason other than sport. They almost murdered the family of Lord Gregor Forrester's squire, Gared Tuttle, but Gared fought back. From what I heard, he shoved a pitchfork through the neck of one of the
invading soldiers and buried a hatchet in the throat of another. His heroics were what incited the other farmers to take up weapons, too. When confronted with an adversary who could fight back, the other Whitehill soldiers naturally ran like cowards back to Highpoint."

"Naturally," Gerion Lannister remarked. "It's pathetic when soldiers flee at the sight of armed civilians, but I wouldn't expect anything more from Whitehills."

"Of course, the affair was by no means over," Gregor Clegane recounted, "Once Lord Whitehill heard of this skirmish, he travelled to Ironrath, demanding Gared's head. When the Forresters refused to grant the request, Ludd threatened to bring the matter to the Boltons. Lord Gregor Forrester was prepared to bring the Glovers into it, as well. Thankfully, I had caught wind of this fiasco by then, and I interceded before Galbart Glover, Roose Bolton, or Eddard Stark had to get involved.

"When I got there, I let both parties tell me their versions of the story," the Mountain went on, "The Forrester farmers told the truth; that much was evident right away. The Whitehill soldiers, on the other hand, told such shameless lies. I doubt Lord Ludd even expected us to believe them. Once both sides had spoken, I had to listen to Whitehill ramble about how soldiers were far more important than pig farmers, as if that meant it was alright to slaughter them without cause. Then Lord Forrester had his turn to talk. He expressed genuine regret that that horrible episode had to happen in the first place, and his only desire was for justice to be served."

He paused here, and then he leaned closer to Britt and told him "Believe me, I saw it served."

Britt took a step back and said anxiously "What did you do?"

"I'll get to that in a minute," Gregor asserted. "Once everyone had a chance to talk, I told Whitehill he could have Gared's head… if and only if he could tell me the names of the two soldiers he lost. You should have seen the expression on that idiot's face when he was unable to do that one simple task."

"Lord Whitehill has over five hundred soldiers," Britt crossly muttered, "You cannot expect him to remember all of them."

"Oh, but I can," Gregor Clegane coolly debated, "There are over five thousand people in the Legion without Banners, and I know the names of every last member, including those who have died or left the organization. The day I forget even one of them is the day the Seven Hells freeze over."

_Hopefully not the day the world freezes over, considering what next winter will bring..._

"Likewise," the Mountain continued, "Lord Forrester knew the names of every villager he lost, as well as the ones who were almost lost. He is a true example of a caring and honorable lord. Nothing at all like that pompous shit, Ludd Whitehill."

"You wouldn't dare say that to Lord Ludd's face," Britt cockily supposed.

"Oh, I already have," Gregor proclaimed shamelessly, "Albeit with more tact. That's another thing the Whitehills do not understand; tact. But that's beside the point. After Ludd failed to recall the names of the men who had died in his service, I took it upon myself to settle the grievances of the injured parties. Meaning the Forresters, as they were the only true victims of this calamity."

_There, we can all agree._ Gerion and the rest of the secret council had helped Gregor look into this matter. They had confirmed that the Forresters had done nothing to provoke this unwarranted
attack on their lands. Furthermore, neither Ludd nor any of his children had ordered the soldiers to torment the farmers. That was all the idea of Highpoint's master-at-arms, Harys, who had led the attack.

Although the Whitehills were accountable for the actions of their vassals, Gregor had chosen to show leniency towards them, as they were still highborn and technically guiltless of this crime. Harys and the other soldiers were not so fortunate. For their misdeeds, the Legion took all of them into custody. They were all brought to Moat Cailin... and none of them had ever gone back to Highpoint.

"Now, a couple minutes ago, you asked what I did to see justice served for this ordeal," Gregor passively recalled, "As far as the rest of the world is concerned, your comrades were simply executed for their crimes committed against the Forresters. But the manner of their executions was hardly simple. I will now tell you what became of them. In graphic detail."

"I've decided I would rather not know," Britt Warrick abruptly remarked. I can't blame him.

"Nevertheless, you're going to hear it, anyway," Gregor announced, "So shut up and listen closely. If you try to ignore me or phase out my words, I'll just start the tale over again."

At that, Britt Warrick gave Gregor Clegane his undivided attention.

The Mountain began with: "We treated your colleagues quite fairly during the ride back here. Although we always kept watch over them, we did not shackle them in irons or force them to sleep on the hard ground. They ate the same food as the rest of us, and we let them sleep in tents, too. We even gave them privacy when they had to make water. That was more courtesy than they deserved, but we could afford to be generous."

*Given what came after, I would call that a fair trade.*

After a short interval of quiet, Gregor stated "Once we reached Moat Cailin, those comforts ended. I brought the Whitehill soldiers straight to this building. Here I subjected them to all manner of horrors and agonies. The things I did to them would make even the Thenns shudder."

"I fucking hate Thenns," Tormund commented bluntly.

*Who doesn't?* The Magnar of Thenns, Styr, was certainly not a delight to be around. It was rumored that even now, after moving south and agreeing to adhere to the standards of the Seven Kingdoms, he still occasionally feasted on human flesh. No one could prove it, but people who angered the Magnar were known to disappear from time to time. Be that as it may, his son, Sigorn, was much more amiable. In fact, he seemed to have gotten close to Ser Gerion's daughter, Joy. *He isn't that much older than her.* Not that Gerion ever expected anything to come of that. Although Joy was no longer a bastard, she was still free to mingle with whomever she pleased. *Then again, whomever she pleases...*

Gerion opted to worry on that later. The issue presently at hand required his attention more. He watched Gregor Clegane as he circled Britt Warrick and informed him "More than twenty of your associates were escorted to Moat Cailin. All of them were 'guests' of the Reproach Tower for an entire week. Their 'rooms' were on this very same floor. I tasked my chief interrogator, the Tickler, with getting them settled."

*That must've been the best week of the Tickler's life.* For the Whitehill soldiers, it was the worst.
"First, I made all of them go three days without food, water, or other luxuries," Gregor Clegane restlessly went on. "After that, the real 'thrills' began. Each man was put through a different type of prolonged torture and anguish, based on his greatest vice. There was this portly one, who deemed himself too good to step aside and let others by. I broke both his legs with a mallet, and I had him thrown into the bogs of the Neck. To this day, I don't know whether drowning or the creatures of the swamps claimed him first. There was another one with these obnoxious black sideburns, who loved to mock people. I had the Tickler shave his sideburns off. And his cheeks with them. It took days for him to succumb to the infection. There was this one with a tan face and a red mustache, who seemed to take joy in taunting people. I punched him in the mouth repeatedly until all that remained was an unrecognizable pulp."

He paused for a few seconds to let Britt absorb all that, and then he resumed with "There was another one, who was a confirmed murderer. He had killed a close friend of Gared Tuttle's father. When I came to him, the man pathetically begged for his life. He said 'I have a family! They'll never survive without me!' In response to that, I said 'Good. That'll mean even fewer retainers for the Whitehills.' Then I unmanned him and disemboweled him. Then I left him to rot in his own intestines. I'm still amazed he managed to hold out for as long as he did."

Despite how callous Lord Gregor had been at the time, he had still firmly believed in protecting and defending the innocent as strongly as he ever did. So, after he gelded and eviscerated that one Whitehill soldier, he had checked to see if the soldier actually did have a family. It turned out he did not have one. Gerion was hardly surprised. Families get invented all the time at swordpoint.

"My personal favorite is what I did to that cunt, Harys," Gregor revealed, "The man hardly ever talked. But as I say, 'actions are louder than words.' And his actions spoke plenty of his persona. He was a monster, plain and simple. Interestingly, someone once remarked that he resembled me. In stature and strength, perhaps. In intelligence and reason, however, he was vastly inferior. Perhaps the gods decided to make a copy of me and grew idle before they finished."

"Tyrion once said a similar thing of himself. He jested about how the gods were trying to produce another Jaime, but they ended up making him instead."

"I spent an entire day pounding Harys into the ground," Gregor Clegane proudly recalled. Literally. "The ground of this room, in fact. Every blow I dealt him gave me more satisfaction than the feeling of victory after a battle. I did not keep him restrained or cripple him beforehand. I gave him a fair opportunity to fight back and defend himself. Even then, he was no match. It turns out he was only powerful when surrounded by his fellow soldiers or when he was up against weak foes. When facing a strong opponent alone, he was hopeless. For every punch he managed to land on me, I delivered over a hundred more onto him. By sunset, I had practically beaten him to death. However, that was not how I killed him. Oh, no; his death was much more poetic than that."

Britt was absolutely horrified by now. Nevertheless, he did not dare turn away or cover his ears. Instead, he watched and listened to Gregor. The Mountain leaned even closer to him than before, donned an evil grin, and whispered ever so softly "I had my squire bring me my greatsword Summit. With that in hand, I reached into Harys' mouth, pulled out his tongue, and cut it out. Then… I forced him to eat it."

Samwell covered his mouth and moaned, at though he was going to retch. I'm surprised he managed to hold out for this long.

Lord Gregor snickered deviously and muttered "That may have been the most grotesquely
humorous thing I ever saw in my life. Whoever knew it was actually possible for a man to choke to death on his own tongue? Alas, it can happen. If Harys was alive and still had his own tongue, he'd attest to that."

Britt looked as though he was on the verge of pissing or shitting himself. *Let's hope he at least has enough dignity left not to do either. It took long enough to clean this room after Harys stayed in it.*

Gregor then folded his hands behind his back, stared Britt Warrick in the eye, and mumbled "I will do even worse than that to you. Unless you tell me everything."

Suddenly, Britt became much more cooperative than before. He backed away from the Mountain and yelled "I was hired to destroy the printing press!"

"By who?" Gerion Lannister inquired.

"I don't know who!" Britt proclaimed, "I never spoke or met with him directly! I just came back to my room one day and found a note on my bed!"

"And what exactly did this note say?" Tormund stated inquiringly.

"You might've call it a contract of sorts," Britt responded, "The person who sent the letter offered to pay me a large sum of gold if I did away with the printing press."

So now Britt had a motive. *Money. It just had to be about money.*

"So, you can read," Samwell remarked cheekily. Britt threw him a hateful look, but Samwell did not cower in fear.

"I need a better description than that," Gregor Clegane remarked, "Tell me; was the idea to use black powder yours or your employer's?"

"It was his," Britt insisted, "He told me everything I needed to know in order to acquire the black powder without anyone noticing. It was he who informed me of Todric's drinking habits, Olyvar's sexual preference, where to find a portable scale and mounds of dirt that resembled black powder, the schedule of the rotating guards at the storeroom in the Smelting Tower, and everything else."

"Where did you keep the black powder after you stole it?" Lord Gregor queried.

"The note instructed me to bring it to a certain secluded spot in the Healing Tower and leave it there," Britt Warrick revealed, "Sometimes, I stayed in the area for a while after making my deposit, but no matter how long I lingered, no one ever turned up. In any case, the powder from the previous drop-off was always gone by the time I showed up with the next load, and it had been replaced with a tiny bag of golden dragons."

"Then your employer was the one who collected the powder," Gerion presumed, "You just obtained it."

"That's right," Britt said tentatively, "The more I took, the richer I became."

"How did you gain entry to the storeroom?" Gregor Clegane queried "I have confirmed that only a master locksmith could turn the bolts of the door to that room, and you are hardly a master locksmith."

"Well, I didn't pick the lock," Britt blankly confessed, "I didn't have to; I had a key."
For the first time since they entered the Reproach Tower, Gregor, Gerion, Tormund, and Samwell were rendered speechless.

"What was that?" Samwell murmured, thinking he had misheard.

"My employer included a key to the storeroom in the note he sent me," Britt elucidated, "I don't have it any longer, though. He told me to leave the key whenever I dropped off the final load of black powder in the Healing Tower, and I did so."

"Where is this note?" Tormund asked in interest.

"I burned it," Britt confessed, "My employer was very insistent that I do that, as well."

Should have guessed. Gerion placed his hands on his hips and noted "Since you received some gold every time you dropped off the black powder, you were obviously paid in advance. We've established that money was your only reason for engaging in this deal. So, what compelled you to destroy the printing press anyway?"

"I didn't want to risk displeasing my employer," Britt claimed, "More importantly, I hadn't been paid in full. The gold I earned from the twenty drop-offs was less than half what my employer promised me. He made it very clear that if I wanted the whole amount, I would have to go through with the destruction of the printing press."

"Go on," Tormund beckoned him.

"A few days after the final drop-off, I received another note on my bed," Britt recounted, "I burned this one after reading it, too, as per its directions. This time, my employer informed me that the printing press was being moved to the fourth floor of the Knowledge Tower that day. He also told me a small barrel of black powder could be found in a particular closet in the Knowledge Tower. He told me I was free to proceed whenever it suited me, but regardless of how long I waited, I would not receive the rest of my gold until the job was done."

"Then you still haven't been paid," Tormund wittily muttered.

"No, I have not," Britt mumbled bitterly, "I haven't heard from my employer since my first unsuccessful attempt to destroy the printing press."

'First?' That'll be your only attempt. Ser Gerion muttered scathingly "Did you really think he was going to contact you again?"

"He must've planned to," Britt argued, "I mean, I opened up the barrel and looked inside when I found it. I don't know how much black powder I took from the Smelting Tower, but it had to be more than the amount in that barrel. Only about half of it was in there."

His employer knew better than to expend all his resources in one try, Gerion realized.

"And you have no clue who your employer might have been?" Gregor Clegane assumed.

"None," Britt Warrick swore, "Believe me, my lord, I'd tell you if I knew."

"Funnily enough, I do believe you," the Mountain pronounced. After a bit of silence, he lightly shook his head and said "Alas, in the long run, that makes no difference. Your fate remains unchanged."

Britt Warrick backed away from him again. This time he backed all the way into the far wall of the
cell. He braced himself and uttered quietly "But… you should you wouldn't torture or kill if I told you all I knew."

"Yes, I did," Gregor Clegane affirmed, "You may recall that at the start of this audience, I established that I had no plans to kill you. I also established that I am giving that privilege to another man. One you have wronged far worse than I."

At that, Lord Gregor walked back to the entrance of the cell and pushed open the door. The two wildling Legionnaires stood at attention, and their commander ordered them "Take Britt Warrick upstairs. I want him prepared for immediate transport to Last Hearth."

"Aye, Lord Mountain," they acknowledged in unison.

It was then that Britt Warrick tried to escape. He did not get very far; he was not even halfway to the door when Samwell Tarly stuck his leg out and tripped him. Not two seconds after Britt landed on the ground, the two wildling Legionnaires were upon him. They roughly seized him by his arms and half-carried, half-dragged him out of the cell. All the while, Britt shouted "No, no, please! Don't do this! I have gold! I'll pay you anything! Anything! Please, no! NO! You-you cannot do this! Lord Whitehill will-"

"Lord Whitehill doesn't know that you exist!" Tormund interjected. Indeed. The affair with Gared Tuttle proved as much.

Eventually, Britt's frantic screams were reduced to echoes, and soon enough, even the echoes faded away. Gerion was glad for that. As much as he enjoyed hearing that piece of scum plead for his life, the silence was far more reassuring.

A couple hours later, a small detachment of Legionnaires left Moat Cailin from the northern gate. There were a score of infantrymen, a dozen cavalry, and a lieutenant who rode in a wagon. There were three wagons in total. The other two carried weapons and provisions. Britt Warrick rode in the back of the lieutenant's wagon. His hands and feet were shackled tightly, and a hood was drawn over his head, rending him blind as well as mute.

For now, this small caravan would travel along the kingsroad, but at some point, they would break off and head due east towards Last Hearth, which was their journey's end. After they reached the holdfast of the Umbers, they would go back south. All but one of them would return to Moat Cailin.

Gerion Lannister, Gregor Clegane, Samwell Tarly, and Tormund Giantsbane stood at the north gate and watched as the caravan made its way up the kingsroad. They kept their gaze fixed on the caravan until it vanished into the distance. Once they could no longer see it without a far-eyes, the four men went reentered the grounds of the moat.

"Once more, justice prevails," Samwell Tarly stated brightly.

"Not just yet, Sam," Gregor Clegane counted, not unkindly, "Britt's employer is still out there."

"And in possession of the other half of the missing black powder, if Britt told us true," Gerion Lannister pointed out.

"Oh, I'm confident he did," the Mountain contended, "I surveyed the damage left by the explosion, and I found it did not… shall we say, coincide with the total amount of black powder that was stolen from the Smelting Tower. If all the powder was used, the explosion would have had a much larger blast radius. It still may not have been enough to obliterate the printing press, but at the very
least, it should have left a lot more debris and rubble."

"Wait, you mean that even the whole amount of stolen powder would not have destroyed the press?" Tormund Giantsbane presumed.

"No, half of it actually would have been enough," Lord Gregor debated, "Under the right conditions, that is. If Britt had thrown that barrel a little closer and higher to the press, he would have succeeded in his goal."

"Then we're damn lucky he did not bother to aim," Tormund drily perceived.

"Quite so," Gerion conceded. *Otherwise we might've had the same fate as Smalljon.* At the time of the explosion, he and Tormund had been standing much closer to the printing press than Smalljon and Lord Gregor's children had.

The four men began the short walk back to the Meeting Tower. On the way there, they resumed their private conversation.

"If Britt's employer has enough powder left to demolish the press, then perhaps he will try to destroy it again," Samwell conjectured.

"He will definitely try again," Lord Gregor asserted, "If he went to all the trouble of having Britt steal that black powder, he is not going to be dissuaded from completing his goal so easily."

"Especially since he only used half the powder Warrick stole," Tormund added in.

"Then I suppose we're fortunate that's the only black powder left in the moat," Gerion perceived.

"I agree," Samwell muttered. He turned to the Mountain and said admiringly "It was a very wise decision on your part to send all the remaining black powder kegs up to the Wall, my lord."

"I did what was best for all," Gregor Clegane debated, "After what happened in the Knowledge Tower, I realized it was no longer safe to store the black powder in Moat Cailin. Besides, the Watch has greater need of it than we do."

That was quite true. *By now, any fire-based weapons will be of paramount importance to the black brothers.*

"There's another advantage," Samwell Tarly stated, "By removing all the rest of the black powder from Moat Cailin, the perpetrator only has one more opportunity to destroy the press."

"Do you think he's noticed that?" Tormund Giantsbane wondered.

"He must've," Lord Gregor contended, "Otherwise he wouldn't have been clever enough to evade detection for this long."

"Then he won't waste his last chance," Ser Gerion thought aloud, "We can expect him to be even more cautious than before."

"He'll have to be," Samwell commented, "After all, we have armed soldiers guarding the press all day long."

"I wouldn't put too much faith in guards," Tormund blankly murmured, "Now that we know they can be bribed or extorted."

"I wouldn't worry on that, Tormund," Lord Gregor assured the wildling, "All the men guarding the
press are not fond of drink, and I am fairly certain they all like women."

"Furthermore, after Britt's letdown, I don't think the perpetrator is willing to trust anyone else to accomplish this objective," Gerion Lannister supposed.

"Yes, if he is as clever as we think, he'll choose to do it himself," Gregor concurred.

"Why do you think he recruited Britt for the job, anyway?" Samwell enquired.

"Perhaps he met the desired criteria," the Mountain hypothesized.

"What criteria?" Tormund queried.

"Unethical, aloof, and greedy," Gregor Clegane illuminated, "Britt had no real friends at the moat, he would do most anything for a bit of coin, and he wouldn't care who got hurt or killed along the way."

"A proper lapdog," Gerion Lannister noted in disdain. Such unscrupulous, unquestioning people are worse than animals, and they should be put down as animals. That was the way Britt Warrick would go, once Lord Greatjon Umber got ahold of him. "So, how will we catch the real mastermind?"

He did not ask that question to anyone in particular, and no one supplied an answer right away.

Tormund was the one who spoke first. He professed "That should be simple enough to do. Warrick was given a key to the storeroom. How many people in the moat have such a key?"

"Only two," Lord Gregor revealed, "But we mustn't rush to any hasty conclusions. Either key could have been stolen, replicated by anyone with basic knowledge of smithing, and returned immediately after."

There's an even simpler explanation than that. Gerion was certain Lord Gregor was aware of that, but he seemed to be avoiding it. He can deny the possibility all he wants, but if it turns out to be the truth, he'll have no choice but to accept it.

"I… may have an idea," Samwell Tarly pronounced. By now, they had reached the Meeting Tower. "When we're back in the council chamber, I'll tell you."

"Very good, Sam," Lord Gregor acknowledged.

The four men entered the Meeting Tower once more, and they walked in silence until they reached the council chamber. They ended up spending another half-hour in that chamber, and most of their conversation was dominated by Samwell.

Despite the young Reachman's insecurity over his ability to come up with a worthwhile plan, Ser Gerion felt that his suggestion held some merit. Lord Gregor and Tormund appeared to think the same. It is fairly straightforward yet quite ingenious. In the end, all three of the older men agreed to consider Samwell's plan.

They implemented it shortly after their meeting ended. In the late evening, Lord Gregor publically announced that the Knowledge Tower would be closed the following day. The reason he provided was that the building's fourth and fifth floors had been deemed structurally unsound. At least that excuse is a plausible one. It had been two months since the explosion, and as of yet, the repairs to the affected area were still incomplete.
Reinforcing the foundation of the fourth and fifth floors would require the whole day. As such, Lord Gregor decreed that only builders and architects would be permitted entry to the Knowledge Tower. Everyone else, including the guards, was expected to evacuate the building before daybreak.

This command was obeyed thusly. Before midnight, everyone in the Knowledge Tower vacated the premises. The construction crew would not turn up until first light. So, for the few hours in-between those two events, the building would be completely empty.

Well, not completely...

Unbeknownst to the majority of Moat Cailin's occupants, there was a secret passageway in the Knowledge Tower which led outside the walls. It was meant to function as a means of escape if ever the moat was overrun. However, it could also be used as a means of infiltration by anyone who knew how to find it. Thankfully, Lord Gregor could find the passageway's outer door in even the harshest of weather conditions.

Shortly after midnight, Ser Gerion left the north gate of Moat Cailin alongside Lord Gregor, Tormund, and Samwell. All four of them were mounted. Together, they headed to the eastern border of the moat, and they rode until they reached the hidden door of the secret passageway.

They headed up the passageway, and they arrived in the ground floor of the Knowledge Tower. Once they were inside, they quietly crept up to the fourth floor. Soon, they came to the storage room to the printing press, and they hid in the shadows.

After that, they could do nothing more than sit still and wait. We could be here a long while, but I'm ready to wait as long as need be. The others were, as well.

"Let's hope this trap works," Tormund murmured.

"I'm confident it will," Samwell quietly, "The bait is irresistible."

"So long as he does not see through it," Gregor contended.

"He won't, my lord," Samwell insisted, speaking with assurance that was practically atypical of his timid persona, "Trust me."

"We trust you, Sam," Gerion proclaimed. Gregor and Tormund muttered in agreement.

Ultimately, they were right to trust in the Reachman. Slightly more than two hours later, they heard what sounded like padding across the ground. Ser Gerion listened closely, and he recognized the noise as footfalls. With every second, they got louder. Someone is nearing.

Lord Gregor heard it, too. He quietly drew Summit from its scabbard and whispered to the others "Get ready."

Ser Gerion wielded his longsword, and Tormund armed himself with his axe. The only weapon Samwell had brought along was a dagger, which he pulled out thusly. Gerion could tell he was hoping not to use it. He was not expecting to use it, either. If his plan worked as intended, they would not have to resort to violence.

Before long, Gerion's ears detected another sound alongside the footfalls. This new noise sounded like metal scrapping against the ground. Or maybe a... chain. Perhaps the simplest explanation is the true one after all.
A few minutes later, the footfalls and the metallic clinking finally reached them.

When that happened, the main door to the storage room slowly creaked opened, revealing a figure clad in a flowing robe and a long chain of many different metals. In one hand, the figure held a torch. In the other hand was a small barrel identical to the one that had been tossed into this same room over two months ago. *I think we can all guess what's in there.*

As the mysterious intruder stepped into the storage room, the light of the torch passed over his face.

Gerion had suspected all along, but even he was unprepared to receive such sudden confirmation of his theory. *The one time I actually prayed to the gods that I was wrong…*

Even after the maester entered the storage room, everyone remained in their hiding places. They stayed there until he was halfway between the main door and the printing press. Only then did Gregor give the signal.

Samwell rushed to the main door and slammed it shut. Gerion moved in front of the other door that opened up onto the library, blocking it, as well. Tormund stood in front of the printing press defensively. Lastly, Lord Gregor brought *Summit* up to the throat of the intruder.

Maester Kennick was clearly alarmed at being ambushed, but he seemed more disappointed than anything else.

"Put it down," Gregor barked through gritted teeth.

The maester hesitated at first. *Come on; do not make this any worse than it already is.* After a minute, he gradually crouched down and gently set the barrel on the ground. As a precaution, Tormund grabbed the barrel and moved it out of the maester's reach.

Lord Gregor Clegane kept his Valyrian steel greatsword at Maester Kennick's throat. He muttered in genuine bewilderment "Why? Why, Kennick? Why did you do it?"

His voice actually cracked a bit when he said that. He sounded so distraught; one could almost feel the pain in his tone. It conveyed such profound hurt and betrayal. Given the circumstances, Ser Gerion totally understood how Gregor must have felt. *The man delivered all five of the Mountain's children. Now it turns out two of them were almost killed because of him.*

"I was only following orders, my lord," the maester regretfully revealed. *You must be kidding. Even he is not at the top of this?*

"Whose orders?" the Mountain demanded.

Maester Kennick seemed unwilling to supply a response. After a minute of intense silence, Gregor brought the blade of his greatsword another inch closer to his throat. That was when Maester Kennick sighed and replied with "The Conclave's."
On the surface, the Dothraki may have seemed an unruly bunch. *By all accounts, they are.* Even so, they were not a *wholly* uncivilized people. Like every other thriving and widespread culture, they had their own code of conduct and their own standards. They even stuck to their own system of honor.

For instance, while the Dothraki were nomads by nature, they still had a city, which they all visited from time to time. This was the sacred city of Vaes Dothrak in the far east. Everywhere else in the world, khalasars constantly fought one another in a never-ending struggle for power. However, whatever their grievances outside Vaes Dothrak, all were welcome in this city. The khals and their riders could coexist there without generating further conflict between themselves.

Then again, that was not entirely by choice. The Dothraki were not obligated to embrace peace; they were required to. Within the confines of Vaes Dothrak, bloodshed was absolutely forbidden. Men were still allowed to carry their weapons, and in some cases, they could wield them. But only if the intent was to practice sparring, propose a duel, or issue a declaration. If steel ever made contact with flesh, it would mean trouble for the one who bared the steel. Even in self-defense, blood could not be spilled here.

*Of course, there are ways to kill a man that needn't involve opening a vein.* In that regard, the hands proved to be useful tools. They could be used to strangle a man or break his neck. There was also poison. Then again, certain poisons caused the victim to cough up blood. *Would that be the same as spilling it? What exactly constitutes 'spilling'?*

There were not many who knew this, but Ser Bonifer Hasty had a gift for spotting loopholes, breaks in logic, and alternative solutions. He could draft or help draft a contingency plan to many a quandary. That – along with his position as commander of the Holy Hundred – was what had led to Lord Gregor Clegane accepting him into the Legion without Banners. The Mountain had once remarked that in another life, Ser Bonifer might have made a good law enforcer on the political side of the spectrum. When Bonifer asked him how, Lord Gregor had used a specific term, which Bonifer could not recall. A "lawer" or something of the sort. *How can I not remember? He described the term at length.*

In spite of his analytical mindset, Bonifer Hasty could never claim to have a solution to *every* problem. No one knew that better than Ser Bonifer himself. His own history was evidence of that.

He failed to find a way to be with Princess Rhaella Targaryen. He was unable to avert Rhaella's death at Dragonstone. He did not get Rhaella's daughter out of her arranged marriage to Khal Drogo. He could not even do away with her decadent elder brother. *Not without upsetting Daenerys or others, at least.*

That last scenario was not quite out of his reach just yet, though. King Robert had ordered for Viserys Targaryen to not be harmed, but there were excusable circumstances in which keeping him alive might not have been possible. *If he poses a threat to his sister, perhaps. As of now, she is far more valuable to the Seven Kingdoms.*

However, even if such an opportunity presented itself, Bonifer was not entirely intent on going through with it. Although he held nothing but contempt for Rhaella's younger son, Daenerys still loved her brother, and at times, he appeared to love her, too. For that reason alone, he would only allow Viserys' death as an absolute last resort.
If that last resort was needed after all, Bonifer was not worried about the aftermath. Hopefully, Princess Daenerys would understand that it was only done in her best interests. Furthermore, I wouldn't have to be the one who does the actual killing. Bonifer Hasty was confident he was not the only person in the world who visualized all the numerous ways in which an "untimely" death could befall Viserys Targaryen. There were some who would be even less reluctant to do the deed than Ser Bonifer. I could imagine Prince Jon, Lady Dacey, or Lady Ellyn putting him down.

Regardless of all that, this was no place to be talking or even thinking of killing. Aside from that, Viserys seemed to be behaving himself lately. For the most part, at least. He still treated all those around him as animals, but thus far, he had made no threats, physical or otherwise. If he continues as such, there's a chance he might live to return to Westeros.

Khal Drogo and his forty thousand screamers had been at Vaes Dothrak for close to a turn of the moon. By extension, Ser Bonifer Hasty and his fellow Westerosi had been there just as long. Very little had happened since their arrival. Thankfully, there was no shortage of things to do in the city. Thankfully, there's no threat of boredom here.

The most interesting thing there was arguably the mountain that overlooked the city. It was called the Mother of Mountains, and rightly so. Even the Vale has nothing so tall.

Drogo and his bloodriders had gone up the Mother of Mountains a few times in the last month. Often, some of the people from the Seven Kingdoms had been invited to accompany them. Ser Bonifer had gone with them once, just for the sake of having the experience. The view up there was spectacular, to say the least.

Only the men were brought along on these excursions. It was an established rule that women were not allowed to set foot on the Mother of Mountains. So, none of the females amongst the ten thousand Westerosi were permitted to join. Not even Lady Dacey Clegane, despite the profound respect Khal Drogo had for her and her status as the leader of the company.

As it happened, Alyver Clegane had been invited once, but he had declined as politely as possible. He had claimed "If my mother cannot go, I shall not go, either."

He had not said that because he was afraid to go anywhere without Lady Dacey. Ser Bonifer knew he was brave enough to leave her side for hours at a time. Instead, he had said it as a way of protesting her somewhat unfair exclusion from the event. Lady Dacey had assured her son that it was alright if he went up the mountain without her, but Alyver's mind had been made up by then. He had insisted that he would only go if she could go, too.

The boy's devotion to his lady mother was commendable. Other Westerosi and Dothraki alike respected him for it. Khal Drogo had even remarked "I hope my own son is just as loyal and true to his sire."

That was Princess Daenerys's translation of what the khal had said, anyway. What he had really said in his native tongue was quite likely less amiable than that. The Dothraki were capable of praise, but they were not famous for being sentimental.

In any case, Alyver Clegane seemed to fit in just fine amongst the masses at Vaes Dothrak. He was much too young to enjoy or partake in the Dothraki practices of pillaging, plundering, and raping, but the spirit of adventure and thrill for battle which was commonplace to them was evidently present in him, too.

It also helped that he was a proficient fighter. It seemed all Cleganes were innately blessed with
excellent skills in melee combat. His father was a legend in the art, his mother was deadlier than most men, and his older brother Rickard was already rumored to be the best swordsman of his generation. Likewise, Alyver had potential to become a warrior of great renown by the time he became a man. Ser Bonifer Hasty had seen him fight with a blade, and his abilities were quite impressive for his age.

It was tradition for Dothraki to start training with weapons as soon as they were old enough to hold them. There were a number of Dothraki boys at Vaes Dothrak. All of them had literally been fighting for as long as they could remember. In the last month, Alyver had dueled the vast majority of them, and not one of them had beaten him as of yet. That included those of them who were older than him by several years.

When word of this spread around the city, a few Dothraki men had thought to challenge Alyver. Never one to decline a test, he had accepted each one of those proposals in turn. Some of those bouts did not end so well for him; some of the others did. Most of the time, they resulted in a draw.

At this time, Alyver was clashing with Kovarro, one of the riders in Khal Drogo's vast horde. Kovarro had yet to grow a beard or a braid of his own, but he was by all accounts a man grown. He may have been one of Daenerys's khas, had she been permitted more than four. Definitely a worthy opponent for the second son of the Mountain That Rides.

Since this was not a real skirmish and since they were still within Vaes Dothrak, both their weapons were blunted. This was done to ensure that there would be absolutely no chance of blood getting spilled. It never hurts to be cautious about such things. Even in mock combat, the heat of battle could incite bloodlust out of the most disciplined warrior.

While Kovarro was very quick and agile with his arakh, Alyver's strength-based tactics with his shortsword were remarkable. For a long time, it was hard to tell who had the upper hand or who would emerge triumphant. Both are equally determined; I'll give them that.

Bonifer Hasty was not the only spectator to this drilling session. To his right, Lady Dacey Clegane was standing at the edge of the dueling ring. She was vocally cheering her son on. Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn Lannister were beside her, doing the same. Some of the Legionnaires were in attendance, including two of Lord Gregor's men-at-arms, Chiswyck and Tobbot.

Princess Daenerys Targaryen was also there with her khas and handmaids. To Bonifer's left, she was seated under a covered platform with her legs crossed. Her focus was not entirely on the match, though. She was holding young Torrhen Clegane in her arms. She effectively split her time between cooing at the infant boy and watching his older brother spar.

Ever since Daenerys learned of her pregnancy, she had been spending a lot of time with Lord Gregor's wife and sister. Especially when their sons were present, as well. Evidently, she wanted to have some experience with children before she bore a babe of her own.

Her nephew and his wildling lover had been of a like mind. In fact, Ygritte was in the process of getting acquainted with Duncan Lannister. A few feet away from the platform, she was playing with the son of the Imp and the Imp's Bitch. From what Bonifer could gather, Lord and Lady Lannister had no qualms about entrusting their son to the care of the wildling girl.

Even more amazing was how well Ygritte got along with the future Lord Paramount of the Westerlands. Possible future Lord Paramount, Bonifer corrected himself. From what the Stormlander knight recalled of Ygritte, she was generally as cold and unforgiving as the land she grew up in. When she was with Duncan, however, she was as warm and inviting as the land she was currently in. Motherhood really does change some women.
By now, Ygritte was so heavy with child that she could hardly even sit a horse any more. Jon had insisted that she not travel by mount until after their child was born. Although Ygritte protested vehemently, she ultimately conceded to her lover's request. For now, she would simply walk everywhere. She made it clear that she would not resort to riding in a cart until she was within a fortnight of her delivery. Her tenacity was admired by all. *Except Prince Jon, I'd wager.*

The match between Alyver and Kovarro was certainly a close one. The Dothraki man was lighter and swifter, but also more brash and quick-tempered. He lacked the firm discipline and prowess Alyver had learned from his parents and Ser Rodrik Cassel.

That was what ultimately resolved the fight. After more than five minutes of clashing their blunted weapons, Alyver managed to breach through Kovarro's defensive stance and bring the tip of his sword all the way up to the underside of the Dothraki's chin.

Had Alyver's sword been sharpened, that move would have killed Kovarro. They had agreed "first to mortal injury wins." As such, the bout came to an end right there. Kovarro raised his hands and called out "Yield."

Alyver lowered his shortsword, smiled graciously, and extended his hand to the Dothraki, thanking him for the duel. Kovarro appeared to hesitate for a second, but after that, he accepted the boy's hand and shook it. *He is fortunate this was not a real battle.*

If this fight had been to the death, Kovarro would have lost more than his life. He would have lost his pride and his honor, too. That would have been even worse if Alyver chose to let him live instead of killing him. Fortunately, even amongst the Dothraki, there was no dishonor in defeat when it was only friendly competition. *Or what the Dothraki call 'friendly.'* Aside from that, Kovarro was far from the first man Alyver had bested in single combat.

After shaking hands with his opponent, Alyver put away his blunt blade and exited the ring. He rejoined his mother, who grinned at him and said approvingly "Excellent performance, sweetling."

"I try my best, Mother," the tall boy commented plainly. *Oh, that was hardly your best.*

It was here that Princess Daenerys rose from platform and walked over to the Cleganes with Torrhen bundled close to her breast. After carefully transferring him to Lady Dacey's arms, she turned to Alyver and stated "Best or not, that was magnificent. If you continue this streak, Al, the khal may deem you worthy of a braid of your own."

Alyver chuckled slightly and looked away. Although he was six and a-half years younger than Daenerys, he was almost of a height with her. *Another sign of his heritage.* He muttered softly "I fear my hair is not long enough to braid, Your Grace. And anyway, I have not killed anyone. Don't you have to be a killer to get bells in your hair?"

"Typically, yes," Ser Bonifer answered him. In the last several months, the Stormlander had learned plenty about the Dothraki. He had done that in effort to prepare for the possibility of coexisting with them. So far, all those hours of research and consultation had paid off. "To the Dothraki, one bell amounts to one victory. Usually, these victories are from the battles he has fought. But the magnitude of these battles can vary. On rare occasions, a battle can be won without drawing one's sword."

"You mean like a battle of wits, ser?" Alyver presumed. "My lord father is well-versed in that manner of combat."

"Yes, that is a legitimate kind of battle," Bonifer Hasty admitted. *But not the kind one is apt to find*
in the Dothraki Sea. The horselords are not the Wittiest people I've ever seen. "Words win wars just as efficiently as swords do."

Dacey Clegane shrugged and muttered "Eso puede ser, pero las únicas palabras que los Dothraki usan para ganar sus guerras son gritos." (That may be, but the only words the Dothraki use to win their wars are screams.)

He will be quite popular with the fair sex. Some would say he already was.

Although most Dothraki could not speak the Common Tongue, there were some who were fluent in it or at least had a basic understanding of it. Aside from that, Daenerys was now capable of translating almost any sentence of the Common Tongue into the Dothraki's language, as well as the other way around. For that reason, Bonifer presumed, Lady Dacey had made that statement in Spanish, which only Legionnaires knew. She doubtlessly thought some of the Dothraki might have taken her observation the wrong way. That was wise of her. Again, no harm in being cautious.

To show that he understood, Bonifer Hasty folded his arms and pronounced "Dales crédito donde es debido, mi señora. Un grito de batalla es más memorable que cualquier palabra pronunciada en un parley." (Give them credit where it's due, my lady. A battle cry is more memorable than any word spoken at a parley.)

Lady Dacey merely nodded her head in agreement.

"What are you and Ser Bonifer talking about, Mother?" Alyver asked in interest.

"Nothing, my darling," Dacey told her son, "Just expressing our views on something."

Since Alyver was not a member of the Legion without Banners, he did not know a word of Spanish. However, the Common Tongue was not the only language he spoke.

Right then, he said something to his mother in Italian, which was only known by the Cleganes of Moat Cailin and their household. Not belonging to either, Ser Bonifer could not begin to guess what the boy was saying. He was, however, able to surmise that Alyver was asking his mother a question. Lady Dacey promptly replied in Italian, and whatever her response was, Alyver seemed content with it.

Daenerys Targaryen looked just as perplexed, but she said nothing. It appeared she was not too curious to know what had been discussed there. Or maybe she just respected Lady Dacey's privacy. At any rate, she changed the subject and declared "It's nearly midday. I must be going now. I am supposed to see the Dosh Khaleen in preparation for tonight."

"Tonight?" Ser Bonifer repeated, initially baffled. Then he remembered. Ah, yes. Tonight. Now, that is something I am not looking forward to. Nonetheless, he would stay silent on this matter. The Khaleesi had made up her mind. She had chosen to endure this trial, just as she had endured every other hardship she had encountered thus far.

"Are you really going to eat a heart?" Alyver inquired, as though that was the most exciting thing imaginable.

"A horse's heart," Daenerys clarified, "And yes; I am required to consume it bloody."

Alyver smirked and murmured "I will most certainly be there for that."

"I think she will be suffering enough without you there, Al," Lady Dacey cockily stated.
"I do not mind if your son attends the affair, my lady," Daenerys reassured the Northwoman, "As long as he has the stomach for it, that is."

"I'd be more worried about your stomach, Your Grace," Tyrion Lannister said flatly. Ser Bonifer agreed with the Imp. Dried horseflesh is repulsive enough. To consume the horse's raw organs... just the thought tempts me to retch.

"I appreciate that, my lord," Daenerys proclaimed, placing a hand over her abdomen, "It'll help that I have been fasting for over a day now. Soon enough, I may be so famished that even the horse's heart sounds alluring."

"Just don't starve yourself, Dany," Ellyn Lannister cautioned the blond girl. Ever since the day before they arrived at Vaes Dothrak, she and Dacey Clegane had addressed Daenerys by that shortened version of her name and nothing else. Such informality.

"I won't, my lady," Princess Daenerys asserted, "My greatest concern is that my body will reject the heart."

"Is there anything we might do to help you?" Bonifer Hasty offered.

"Yes, now that you mention it," Daenerys stated, "It would be a great lift to my confidence if all of you were there for support."

"You needn't worry; we'll come," Ser Bonifer promptly declared. I'm certain most of us were planning on coming, in any case. Based on the conforming nods the others gave, that was indeed the case.

"There is one other thing," Daenerys thought aloud. She turned to the oldest person there and uttered patiently "Ser Bonifer, I would hate to thrust this errand upon you so suddenly, but would you please seek out my brother and invite him to tonight's ceremony?"

"Of all the people to ask, she selects me. Ser Bonifer had mixed feelings about this matter. On the one hand, he was gladdened that Daenerys trusted him to get the task done. On the other hand, the actual task was not an enviable one. Nevertheless, he stood up straight, dipped his head, and declared "Your wish is my command, Your Grace."

"Thank you, ser," Daenerys told him gratefully, giving a small smile.

Bonifer Hasty decided to carry out this task straightaway. He bade the others a good day and moved to leave. Just before he departed the vicinity, Lady Dacey called out "Intenta no matarlo." (Try not to kill him.)

Although Bonifer's extreme dislike of Viserys was no secret, she may have meant that as a jape. Regardless of whether she did, he drily stated in response "No hago promesas." (I make no promises.)

"I don't know where Haggo is, either," Daenerys interjected. She must have assumed they were speaking about one of Drogo's bloodriders. Ser Bonifer and Lady Dacey struggled not to scoff.

Bonifer Hasty spent about forty minutes searching for Prince Viserys. He expected to find him in one of his usual spots, such as the winesellers or the bordello. Alas, he was not in any of the places he normally frequented. After a while, Ser Bonifer started to get annoyed. The one time I actually hoped to run into that snake-bastard, and he's nowhere to be found.

After close to forty-five minutes of aimless wandering, Ser Bonifer had a spot of luck. He did not
find Viserys Targaryen, but he did find someone who could help locate him.

In the Westerosi encampment, he came across Allard Seaworth, the second-in-command of their company after Lady Dacey. Ever since they came to Essos last year, Allard had made it his business to know the whereabouts of everyone. Up until their reinforcements from the Seven Kingdoms showed up, he had done that fairly well. Of course, there are far more of us now than there were three months ago.

Fortunately, the second son of the Onion Knight was not the only one who had a talent for locating people. Lady Melisandre had some experience in this area, too. It happened that she was in Allard's company at this time. She had been with them since Pentos.

Generally, the Dothraki hated witches. Drogo only tolerated Melisandre's presence in his khalasar because she was already in his bride's service before their wedding. Plus, Allard assured the khal he would keep an eye on her.

Bonifer Hasty had noticed that lately, Allard Seaworth had been spending most of his time with the Red Woman. Not just his leisure time. It was still a mystery what was transpiring between them. There was certainly nothing intimate going on; anyone could tell that at a glance. Maybe they're harboring a secret of another nature.

Whether or not they were, that was not really the most important issue at the moment. Bonifer was still primarily focused on his current assignment. He swiftly approached the younger Stormlander and the priestess of R'hllor.

"Afternoon, Ser Bonifer," Allard said cordially, "Are you looking for something?"

"Someone, actually," Bonifer Hasty revealed, "Princess Daenerys asked me to find her brother. I don't suppose either of you might know where he is?"

"You came to us just in time," Allard commented.

Bonifer was baffled. "How do you mean?"

"Lady Melisandre claims Viserys will go to his sister's tent sometime today," Allard informed him, "We know he hasn't been there yet. We saw him in Western Market earlier, and he was there all morning."

"I was just there," Bonifer disclosed, "He's not in that area anymore."

"So we are aware," Lady Melisandre proclaimed, "Gentlemen, it would be in our best interests if we proceed with haste to Princess Daenerys's tent. We must intercept Prince Viserys either before or while he's there."

"I quite agree, my lady," Allard conceded, somewhat edgily. Ser Bonifer found that a little intriguing. Why is it so imperative that we get to that tent before Viserys leaves? No one is there right now. Unless... perhaps he means to...

Bonifer suddenly had a fairly good idea as to what motive Viserys might have had for visiting his sister's tent whilst she was elsewhere. He muttered sternly "Let us head there now."

He received no argument from either of his companions. The three of them speedily made their way to the section of Vaes Dothrak where Khal Drogo's horde was camped. It was easy enough to find the khalessi's tent; other than the khal's, it was the largest one. No one was guarding it at this time, but that did not entail it was empty.
Sure enough, Viserys Targaryen was inside. He had made quite a mess of the place. The blond man was rummaging through his sister's belongings, as though he was searching for one particular object amongst them. Or three.

"Looking for something?" Bonifer asked rhetorically in a sharp tone.

Viserys was quite startled by that outburst. A moment later, he grimaced and spat "Get out."

"You first," Bonifer barked, clenching his fists and stepping closer to the blond man.

Viserys did not seem to be frightened with him, but he did not appear eager to start a fight, either. He eased down a bit and muttered "Very well, Hasty. I shall leave just as soon as I find those damned eggs."

"I don't think so," Allard declared, coming a step closer, as well.

"They are rightfully mine to have," Viserys insisted, "They were given to my house."

"They were given to your sister, Your Grace," Melisandre stated calmly, "They are hers and no one else's."

Viserys scowled angrily. "You cannot stop me from taking them."

"Oh no?" Ser Bonifer snapped wryly. "Watch us."

At that, he moved in front of the entrance to the tent. Allard and Lady Melisandre stood on either side of him, effectively blocking the only way in or out.

In response, Viserys reached for his sword. As Bonifer and Allard reached for theirs, Melisandre interceded with "I wouldn't advise that, gentlemen. Remember where you are."

"We'll be careful not to bleed him, my lady," Allard reassured her. "I don't think we'd have to. I'm certain we could subdue him without harming a hair on his head. Viserys liked to pretend to be the warrior, but his capacity for actual combat left much to be desired.

Indeed, the mere hint of swordplay seemed to dissuade him. He removed his hand from the hilt of his sword and mumbled "Fine. I'll let the eggs alone for now. But my patience is nearly at its end. The khal promised us the use of his army. It has been two months, and he's yet to do anything to transport his horde to the Seven Kingdoms."

"Soon enough, my prince," Lady Melisandre claimed, "Tonight, Princess Daenerys will officially be recognized by the Dosh Khaleen. After that, she and the khal will once again be free to leave Vaes Dothrak whenever they please."

That appeared to appease Viserys. The crooked grin on his face suggested that he was satisfied, anyway.

It was then that Bonifer recalled why he had gone looking for Viserys in the first place. He stated in a genial voice "On that note, please make certain you are at the ceremony tonight."

His attempt to be courteous was wasted. Unsurprisingly, Viserys quickly returned to his usual foul mood. He uttered irately "Are you ordering me there?"

"Yes, I am," Bonifer stated stiffly, "But the order does not come from me. It comes from the khalessi."
"Who is she to give me orders?" Viserys shot furiously.

"Your sister," Bonifer told him bluntly, "Now, I personally don't give a horse's arsehole if you come or not. However, Daenerys does, and that is all that matters. So, either be there or, so help me, I will chase you down and physically drag you there."

That was not an empty threat. Bonifer Hasty was prepared to go through with it if need be. Fortunately, Viserys did not seem to doubt the old knight's claim. Instead of challenging his word, all the blond man did was give a rigid nod and mumble "I'll be there."

After that, he marched forward and pushed his way out of the tent. Bonifer Hasty, Allard Seaworth, and Melisandre kept an eye on him until he disappeared from their sight. Shortly after that, the three of them exited the tent together. They spent a while walking around Vaes Dothrak, but they had no particular destination in mind.

"Do you think he actually will be there?" Allard wondered aloud.

"Yes," Melisandre perceived, "He'll likely be more than a little drunk, though."

*That's more likely than him showing up sober.* Bonifer folded his arms and said, "Fair enough, as long as he is there."

"He will be," Melisandre asserted, "It is critical that he is."

"'Critical?'" Bonifer noted in bewilderment. "Forgive me, my lady, but how is Viserys Targaryen's presence critical in any capacity?"

"You may regard Prince Viserys as nothing more than a waste of food and space, Ser Bonifer," Melisandre pronounced. *That sounds about right.* "For the most part, he may as well be. All the same, he does have a part to play in the great game of thrones. A small part, but an important one."

"I'd very much like to know of this part," Allard proclaimed. *So would I. Up until now, I would never have imagined that Viserys would be useful for anything other than weapons practice.*

"Alas, I cannot tell you at this time," Melisandre declared, "All I can say is this: after today, you will no longer have to worry about Viserys posing any danger to his sister or anyone else."

*That could have multiple meanings. But if it turns out to be the one I am thinking of...* As much as Bonifer Hasty despised Viserys Targaryen, his sister loved him dearly. That was the main reason Bonifer had never allowed any actual harm to befall the Targaryen prince. He cared much more for Daenerys's feelings than his own.

"What should we do then?" Bonifer inquired.

"Nothing," Melisandre debated, "We should just let this scenario play out on its own. We have gotten to the point where we cannot change or prevent it. Doing either could and would yield dire repercussions."

"You should take her word for it, Bonifer," Allard counselled the older Legionnaire, "She knows precisely what she is talking about."

"It would seem so," Bonifer Hasty observed, "From what I gather, my lady, you already knew Viserys was going to try to steal the dragon eggs. It may not have seemed so obvious at first, but in the long run, what else does Daenerys have in her possession which her brother may covet?"
"An astute assessment, good ser," Melisandre confirmed, nodding her head.

Just then, Allard cocked his head and queried "Wait, do you mean to say you know the truth about the eggs?"

Bonifer was confused. "What truth? Aren't they just decorative stones?"

Allard looked as though he had just divulged his most embarrassing secret. He quickly looked away and murmured bitterly "Oh… then you don't know."

"Know what?" Bonifer said inquiringly. When he did not receive an answer, he scoffed and remarked "Are the eggs real or something?"

He meant that statement as a jest, but when he saw the expressions on the others' faces, he realized it may not have been as foolish as it was meant to sound. They couldn't be... or could they? Dragons are unnatural beings. There is no reason their eggs cannot be, too.

"We may as well tell him," Melisandre contended.

After a bit of silence, Allard Seaworth released a deep sigh and muttered "Very well. Yes, Bonifer; the eggs are real."

Bonifer Hasty was more fascinated than shocked. He raised an eyebrow and said dubiously "They are?"

Allard simply nodded his head. "They're the advantage Lord Gregor claims Daenerys and her brother have. Or will have, I mean."

"Well, why haven't they hatched yet?" the older Stormlander enquired.

"They have been dormant for many, many years," Melisandre apprised him, "They are currently in the process of awakening from their slumber. Hatching them will be difficult as well as complicated. Be that as it may, dragons are soon to return to this world. I have seen them with my own eyes."

"In your Lord's fires, I presume?" Bonifer stated flatly. Most of the Westerosi innately questioned the plausibility of R'hllor. As a devout follower and fighter of the Seven, Bonifer Hasty was especially opposed to that type of worship. Nevertheless, the Lord of Light could be useful in certain cases. This may have been one of them.

That was what Bonifer presumed, anyway. Allard Seaworth told him "Actually, not just in the fires. Believe or no, she has seen the dragons firsthand."

Ser Bonifer was downright stunned. "How could that be? The last dragons died out over a century ago. How old are you, my lady? Because you look much younger than that."

"My age is not the issue," Melisandre promptly countered, as though she wished to avoid the subject, "What Master Allard meant is that I have another outlet through which I amass my intelligence. Only he and a few others are even aware of this outlet."

"What kind of outlet?" Bonifer asked curiously.

"Basically, it's the same as Lord Gregor's source," Allard informed him.

Bonifer felt that revelation should have surprised him. Alas, truth be told, he was normally quite
hard to surprise. \textit{Anyway, I have been around long enough that hardly anything amazes me anymore.} He turned to Melisandre and supposed "Oh, then you have visions, too?"

"They're not just visions," Allard notified him.

"Yes, my outlet involves a lot more than receiving glimpses of one possible future," the Red Woman affirmed, "I can actually gaze into what is – for wont of a better term – an alternate version of the Known World. Every time I do so, I can see what is happening in this other world. Or, to be more precise, what \textbf{would} have happened here."

"And you have seen the dragons in this other world?" Bonifer conjectured. That was far from the most pressing question on his mind, but he figured that was where Melisandre was going with this tale.

"Correct," the priestess validated, "I have seen them hatch from the Khalessi's eggs in another life. This other life both was mine and \textit{wasn't} mine. Does that make sense?"

"Strange as it may seem, it does," Bonifer Hasty observed, "After all, whatever dissimilar events or circumstances between the two, I would assume that everyone in this world is present in that other world, too."

"In most cases, that is true," Melisandre professed, "However, there are some parties who exist in this world but not in the other world, and vice versa. Likewise, certain people who have already died in this world were still alive at this point in the other world, and a number of people who should have died in the other world are still living now."

"Then, would you say this world is preferable to the other?" Bonifer Hasty inquired.

"One could \textit{make} that argument," the Red Woman contended, "Even so, it is not really my place to judge."

"Well, I personally believe the other world is far worse," Allard Seaworth declared, "Lady Melisandre has told me enough about it to warrant such conviction."

"What sort of things \textbf{has} she been telling you of this other world?" Bonifer asked.

"Horrid, disturbing things," the younger Stormlander enlightened him, "For instance, according to her, most of the people on the secret council would be dead by now."

For the first time that day, Bonifer Hasty was genuinely alarmed. He murmured enquiringly "Which ones? And how would they have died?"

Allard hesitated for about thirty seconds. Then he disclosed "Maron would have perished during his father's rebellion, Gerion would have vanished during his ventures to this part of the world, Renly would have been slain by an otherworldly force, Smalljon would have been vanquished facing off his foes, and Oberyn and I would have been murdered whilst trying to bring justice to King's Landing. Depending on the circumstances, Willas and Brynden might have died by now, too. The only ones who would still be alive for certain are Lyn, Lothor, and Tormund."

\textit{Gods, that is terrible.} A moment later, he realized "What of Lord and Lady Clegane?"

Allard was reluctant to continue. Nonetheless, he brought himself to go on with "Dacey would have been brutally massacred, despite being under guest right. Even Gregor would have fallen in single combat. But he would have... come back."
"As a soldier in the Night King's army?" Bonifer presumed uneasily.

"Even worse than that," Melisandre debated.

*What could be worse than being revived as a soulless, bloodthirsty monstrosity?* Before he could ask that question or one like it, Allard muttered grimly "You don't want to know, Bonifer. Trust me; you don't. I actually envy you for **not** knowing."

"Then I won't ask you," Bonifer asserted candidly. If there really is something out there worse than a wight in the Army of the Dead, I would rather not learn of it. Then again, it could be possible they were speaking of the White Walkers. Still, Bonifer elected not to press them any further.

A thought occurred to him. He turned to his fellow Legionnaire and asked him "If this knowledge is so disconcerting, Allard, why do you let Lady Melisandre share it with you?"

"Because it is still insightful and valuable in many ways," the second son of the Onion Knight confessed, "It is also quite intriguing and informative. Anyone with an appreciation for knowledge, such as myself, can see the appeal in using this outlet. Those of a scholarly mind could compare and contrast the two worlds and take note of the events which led to the formation of each one. From there, they could decide which world truly is the better one, and they could strive to bring about an era of perseverance and lavishness by following a similar course of events."

"That is an ingenious idea," Bonifer Hasty straightforwardly admitted. The concept may have sounded overwhelming and a little too buoyant, but he could not deny that he was impressed by it. *It may not be the most realistic proposal, but it is a desirable one in any case.* "That strikes me as a goal Lord Gregor would come up with."

"I feel the same," Allard conceded, "Perhaps it's been his true ultimate goal all along,"

"Other than ensuring the world's survival against the Long Night, you mean," Ser Bonifer countered. *Then again, the one would seem to heavily concern the other.*

"Surely you do not think your commander so naïve," Lady Melisandre told Allard brashly.

"How is establishing a time of endurance and prosperity naïve?" Bonifer stated in perplexity.

"It isn't," Melisandre contended, "Hoping one might do so without obstruction is. Many individuals would love the opportunity to change the world. While the majority of them are resigned to the paths they follow, at least two of them are not. Gregor Clegane and I are in a unique position."

"Yes, your gift from the gods enables you to defy fate," Bonifer Hasty thought aloud.

"*One* god, good ser," Melisandre argued. Bonifer made no retort, but he was more than slightly irritated. *I respect her faith; why can she not respect mine?* "And we do not so much defy fate as tamper with it. Fate is controlled by a power that exists in nature. This power is beyond anything, even R'hllor. Such a power would not relinquish its control over fate to anyone."

"You mean you do not believe fate can honestly be changed?" Ser Bonifer surmised.

"Not entirely," Melisandre debated, "Fate can be exchanged, however."

"How?" said Bonifer.

Melisandre expounded with "This world would have been that other world, were it not for the Mountain's intervention and mine. In that world, every person had a purpose he or she was
expected to serve. This purpose is directly tied to fate. There are some individuals who – even when faced with different circumstances – are destined to suffer their original fate anyway. Rhaegar Targaryen was one such person. I believe his younger brother is, as well. Their fates are inescapable. Even when things happen differently than fate intended and one can no longer serve their original purpose, fate will not be denied. Thus, someone else is chosen to serve the purpose instead. The two of you are a prime example of that."

"We are?" Bonifer murmured inquisitively.

"According to her, I am serving the purpose originally meant for my father, Ser Davos," Allard Seaworth illuminated, "You see, in that other world, my father interacted with Lady Melisandre frequently. He was also meant to stand witness to a great many wonderful and terrible events alongside her, but no matter what horrors he faced, he remained one of the few truly sensible people in a predominantly hostile land. Essentially, he was what mummers would call an 'everyman character.' Now I am the everyman."

"Are those your words or hers?" Bonifer Hasty enquired. A man's opinion tends to be biased when it concerns his sire.

"Mine," Melisandre revealed, "Master Allard is one of the most sensible men in this world. Out of all the people from the Seven Kingdoms I have met so far, he is more sensible than any one of them. He is most definitely his father's son, and thus, he is aptly suited to serve his father's purpose."

A rational argument, I suppose. "And I? Whose purpose am I serving?"

"You are serving the purpose originally meant for Lord Jorah Mormont," Melisandre apprised him. "What purpose is that?" Bonifer asked.

"You are the one who protects, guides, counsels and comforts Princess Daenerys through all her struggles," the Red Woman explicated, "You do not do any of that solely out of duty or because you have been ordered to. You primarily do so because you feel a personal obligation to her."

"That sounds more like what Dacey is doing," Allard commented. Bonifer was inclined to agree, even though he could not deny that what his objectives had much the same description.

"I can see why you might believe that," Melisandre stated, "But Dacey Mormont is not taking over her cousin's purpose. Because of his history with Queen Rhaella, I am totally certain Ser Bonifer has replaced Lord Jorah as Daenerys's trusted defender. As for Lady Dacey… she is serving the purpose meant for Lord Victarion Greyjoy, as well as his niece Asha and his nephew Theon. It was they who brought Daenerys back to the Seven Kingdoms in the other world."

"Just Daenerys?" Allard noted.

"Viserys never returned to the Seven Kingdoms in the other world," Melisandre elucidated. That other world could not have been all bad, then. He noticed his brow was sweaty. He wiped his forehead of perspiration and said "While we're on this subject, my lady, there is something I would like you to tell us. Whose purpose is Lord Gregor serving?"

"His own," she promptly responded, "As am I. As I said before, he and I are not bound by fate. We are anomalies, free to inflict change any way we see fit."

"How do we know this change truly is good for the world?" Allard enquired.
"You'll have to rely on your own sound judgement to decide that," Melisandre remarked, "If I were you, I would worry more on discovering who in this world is meant to serve Lord Gregor's original purpose."

"Why is that?" Bonifer said inquisitively.

"The Mountain was a butcher in the other world," Allard told him, "He was one of the most hated, most depraved, and most murderous people in the history of the Known World."

"Not at all like the Gregor Clegane we know," Bonifer Hasty drily perceived.

"Indeed," Melisandre conceded, "We must be wary. The power that controls fate will not abide to lose one of its greatest instruments of destruction. Even if the Mountain is a good man, fate will find someone else to spread the fear and terror that the other Gregor Clegane was notorious for."

"Who?" asked Allard.

"It could be anyone," Melisandre alleged, "In all likelihood, it is someone who has yet to enter the great game. Someone who is bidding their time and looking for the most ideal opportunity to strike."

"Why would a savage bother to wait and plan an attack?" Bonifer argued.

"I never said this party would be a savage," Melisandre countered, "For all we know, it could be someone as clever as he is malicious. If so, he would be far more dangerous than any barbarian. There is no telling what damage he could thrust upon the world."

"On that note…" Allard interjected, "Earlier, when all this talk about fate began, my lady, you mentioned that there are at least two people who are not limited by fate."

"Yes, myself and the Mountain," Melisandre avowed.

"Yes, I realize that," Allard uttered plainly, "But I must ask: what did you mean 'at least'? Do you think there are more people out there who have the same gift as you and Lord Gregor?"

"To be honest, Master Allard, I do not," the Red Woman assured him, "I said 'at least' for the sake of argument. That was mere speculation. However, it would do us no harm to consider it a possibility until we can confirm its validity."

"I agree," Ser Bonifer concurred, "As it stands, we have enough problems on our plate. The last thing we need is another fate-meddler ruining everything we've worked so hard for."

"Aye," Allard said in agreement.

At this point, the three of them had reached the Westerosi encampment. It was here that Melisandre announced "Well, gentlemen, as much as I have delighted in your company, even priestesses need to be alone from time to time. I am going to my tent to rest for the next few hours."

"As you wish, my lady," Bonifer acknowledged.

"Can we expect to see you at the ceremony, my lady?" Allard enquired.

"Most definitely," Melisandre asserted, "In the meantime, please do not discuss anything we've spoken on with anyone else."

"Of course, we won't," Allard assured her. Ser Bonifer firmly nodded his head. All this talk of fate...
and the ways it can so easily change or switch hands… it's enough to incite the tamest crowd to riot.

Allard offered to escort Lady Melisandre to her tent, and she accepted. It was then that Bonifer took his leave of them and retreated to his own tent.

The rest of the afternoon was rather dull and unexciting. Bonifer managed to find ways to pass the time. After the midday meal, he spent about an hour on his knees, praying to the Seven. Recently, he had been praying a lot more than he used to. **In desperate times such as these, longer prayers are vital.**

Once he was finished talking to the gods, he decided to go back to the Western Market. He did not plan to buy anything, but he brought along his money bag, just in case. After all, virtually anything anyone could ever want was available in Vaes Dothrak.

Around the time of sunset, Bonifer Hasty heard a horn being blown. Like the Sun's rays at present, it came from the west. Ser Bonifer paused to listen, and he recognized it as a Royal Army horn from the Seven Kingdoms. Upon making that realization, he chose to investigate.

On his way to the western edge of Vaes Dothrak, he encountered several of his fellow Westerosi, such as Dacey Clegane, Brynden Tully, and Lothor Brune. He also saw Allard Seaworth again. This time, the Red Woman was not with him. **Getting ready for tonight, probably.**

By the time they reached the western gate of Vaes Dothrak, the group who had sounded the horn had entered the city. There were approximately a hundred of them, yet only about half of them were from the Seven Kingdoms. However, most of the others looked as though some of their ancestors could have been from Westeros.

The leader of this party was none other than Princess Elia Martell herself. She and her son Prince Aegon Targaryen – whom the world had believed dead until recently – rode at the head of the column. They were accompanied by Lord Renly Baratheon, Ser Loras Tyrell, Ser Lyn Corbray, and Ser Arthur Dayne, who, despite rumors, was also still alive. All the other Westerosi in that group were either Legionnaires or Royal Army soldiers.

Oddly enough, yet another person who had been presumed dead since Robert's Rebellion was there, too. That was Jon Connington, the former lord of Griffin's Roost. No one in the Seven Kingdoms had seen or heard from him in years, but Bonifer Hasty had known the man well enough to identify him at a glance even now. **It appears he did not drink himself to death after all.**

With the exception of a large, burly man who rode beside Connington, everyone else in that group was clearly from some region of Essos. There was a trio of young Volantene nobles. They turned out to be the three eldest grandchildren of Triach Malaquo Maegyr.

All the other Essosi were clad in thick, golden armor. That detail by itself was enough for Ser Bonifer Hasty to figure out who they were.

Just as Lady Dacey Clegane had been ordered by the crown to travel to Essos and take charge of Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen, Princess Elia Martell had been tasked with seeking out the infamous Golden Company. As of now, it appeared as though each of them had accomplished her directive. **Whoever says women have no business leading men in martial affairs is a halfwit.**

Lady Dacey stood at the very front of the welcoming committee. When Princess Elia reached the Lady of Moat Cailin, she signaled for the rest of her company to stop. Once all the other riders came to a halt, they swiftly climbed off their horses. Soon after, some of the Dothraki in the
immediate area stepped forward to render assistance with the mounts. *When it involves horses, these people are surprisingly accommodating.*

Once Princess Elia was standing on the ground, Lady Dacey stepped forward to greet her. The two women smiled benignly and shook hands. They did not stop there; they also embraced each other affectionately. Bonifer could have sworn he saw their lips meet for an instant, too. He was almost certain he imagined that, though. *The heat does make one see things.*

As the two women exchanged pleasantries, they and all the members of their parties headed into Vaes Dothrak together. They began to mingle and converse with one another as they walked.

Dothraki khalasars and sellsword companies were typically wary of one another, but as long as no one on either side brandished his weapon, they could all reside within the boundaries of Vaes Dothrak without quarrel. *That's fortunate. If they can't coexist here, how can we hope for them to travel or fight alongside each other in the Seven Kingdoms?*

Ser Bonifer Hasty was present when Lady Dacey and her companions brought Princess Elia and hers to meet Daenerys. Prince Jon and Ygritte were with her at the time, but Viserys was nowhere to be seen. Prince Aegon was thrilled to meet his aunt, and he was delighted to be reunited with his half-brother and future sister-by-law. They greeted him and his mother warmly, and they took the time to introduce him to Khal Drogo and his bloodriders.

In return, Prince Aegon introduced his kin to the officers of the Golden Company and the Maegyrs. Ser Bonifer noted he seemed especially pleased to present Talisa Maegyr to them. He had a theory as to why, and a careful glimpse of the boy's countenance was enough to confirm his suspicions. *I used to look at his grandmother like that.*

As everyone got better-acquainted, Princess Elia recounted the series of events that had led her group to this side of the Dothraki Sea.

After visiting Volantis and allowing the Maegyrs to join their ranks, they had spent several weeks sailing up the Rhoyne and its tributaries. They had ultimately docked at Norvos, where they picked up a lead that the Golden Company was in the northern part of Essos. They had subsequently travelled to Essos by horse, and they had found the Golden Company camped there.

After a rather tense preliminary meeting, Prince Aegon had duelled another man in single combat. This other man also claimed to be Aegon Targaryen, and the Golden Company had signed a contract with him. Luckily, the real Aegon managed to kill the imposter. That one single act had won him the services of the Golden Company.

Once Aegon recovered from injuries, they had all gone back to Norvos, where their ships were still docked. On the way down, Princess Elia had heard tell that Khal Drogo's khalasar was in Vaes Dothrak, and Lady Dacey's company was with his. She got the idea to rendezvous with them there.

Since smaller groups tended to travel faster, Elia had elected not to lead her entire party through the Dothraki Sea. Instead, she had put together a task force of one hundred units, all of whom were high-ranking members of the Golden Company, the Legion without Banners, or the Royal Army. Those were the very same people who had accompanied her to Vaes Dothrak.

For the present, the majority of the Golden Company and the soldiers from the Seven Kingdoms were camped on the outskirts of Norvos. They would remain there until either they received word via rider or Elia and her group returned to them.

Currently, Lady Dacey and Princess Elia had yet to decide their next move. They could turn west
and head back home to the Seven Kingdoms. They could make south and meet up with Elia's brother, Prince Oberyn. They could even stay in Vaes Dothrak a while longer and see if they could win over any other khals to their cause.

In the end, they decided that their next course of action could wait for the morrow. For now, they would focus on a more immediate and local matter. One that concerned Princess Daenerys and whether she truly was worthy of bearing a khal's son.

Two hours later, after Ser Bonifer Hasty and everyone else had eaten supper, Daenerys Targaryen had her own, rather esoteric feast. In the temple of the Dosh Khaleen, the petite, blond girl devoured an entire stallion's heart.

Just watching her chew on the thing made Ser Bonifer feel queasy. So, he could not imagine what it was like for her. Nevertheless, he had faith in her. She had readied herself for this ritual in every possible way. She had eaten clotted blood to prepare herself for a full organ, she had exercised her teeth so they could pierce through the tough tissue, and she had fasted for a day and a night so she would be hungry enough to eat just about anything.

Still, even with all those measures, eating the heart must have been a chore. Daenerys was required to consume every morsel of it, and it would have been a bad omen if she gagged or vomited. She dared not balk, lest she appear weak in front of the old crones.

At the very least, she had plenty of moral support. Bonifer Hasty was there for her. Prince Jon, Ygritte, Prince Aegon, Princess Elia, Lady Dacey, Lord Tyrion, Lady Ellyn, and the other members of the secret council were there, too. Alyver Clegane, Jon's maid Myrna, and the direwolves Ghost and Lyarra were there, as well.

Even Prince Viserys showed up, and he managed to stay for the entire ceremony. Still, he seemed less than thrilled to be there. All throughout the ritual, Ser Bonifer noticed how he kept casting cold glares over at Jon and Aegon. It was as though he was cross with his nephews for some unknown reason. *He does not see them as family; he just sees them as obstacles in his house's line of succession.*

Just when Daenerys took the final bit of the heart, Viserys slunk out of the room. No one else, including his sister, seemed to care or even notice that he was gone. Ser Bonifer chose not to go after him. He was more interested in the princess's welfare.

After licking the blood off her fingers, Daenerys stood up tall and straight. One of the crones of the Dosh Khaleen asked her what name she would bestow upon her son, and she announced "Rhaego, after my late brother."

Khal Drogo seemed pleased with her choice of name. Indeed, Ser Bonifer felt it had its own sort of appeal. *The Silver Prince would be honored.*

Even after the heart ceremony ended, everyone lingered in the temple for a while longer. They spent a while getting more acquainted with one another. So far, Khal Drogo was getting along quite well with Prince Aegon and Prince Jon. The three of them had an astonishingly large amount to talk about. After hearing the name his wife chose for his son, the khal was suddenly rather interested in learning more about their father. *Too bad Rhaegar died before either of them could get to know him.* Still, the princes agreed to indulge the khal. Princess Elia and some of the others were able to assist in this regard.

For about an hour, all was well.
Then Viserys came back. And he was worse than ever.

Viserys returned inebriated and with his sword drawn. He made some very unpleasant slurs about King Robert Baratheon and how he was nothing more than a usurper and a murderer. He ranted about how the Iron Throne still belonged to the Targaryens, and he was keen to mention how he should have been the one to sit it.

When he got to that part, he turned towards his nephews, waved his sword in their direction, and accused them of plotting to take away what was rightfully his. Prince Aegon and Prince Jon were quick to respond to that threat. They rose to their feet and reached for Blackfyre and Dark Sister respectively. Before they drew their family's ancestral blades, the khal gestured for them to stand down.

*Even now, he will not permit bloodshed.* That was one thing about the khal which Ser Bonifer greatly admired. He could show even greater restraint than the men of Westeros. *In certain cases.*

However, when Viserys pointed his sword at his sister's protruding abdomen and threatened to cut her unborn child out of her, that was when the khal finally stirred from his spot. He rose to his feet and told Viserys in fragmented bits of the Common Tongue "It will be so… you shall have… crown of gold… men will quiver at."

Viserys Targaryen looked happy to be told that. For the first time since Bonifer Hasty met him, he seemed genuinely merry.

His joy quickly faded. Right then, Haggo came up behind Viserys and kicked him behind the knee. Viserys yelled in pain and stumbled. Before he could recover, Qotho seized him by his arms, and Cohollo wrestled his sword from him. All three of them held him down whilst Khal Drogo made his way over to an empty black cauldron hanging over a fire.

Drogo removed his belt and deposited the heavy golden medallions into the cauldron. It was already hot enough that the medallions started to melt almost right away. It took less than two minutes for them to completely change from solid to liquid.

For the entirely of those two minutes, Viserys struggled against his captors, but the khal's bloodriders held him firmly. Soon enough, the deposed prince beseeched the other Westerosi in the room to help him. Dacey Clegane considered giving her aid, mostly for the sake of compassion and duty, but Daenerys beckoned her not to intervene.

When the khal donned a pair of thick, insulated gloves and removed the cauldron from the fire, Viserys turned to his sister and begged her "Dany… please… don't let them do this. I… I'm your brother!"

Alas, Princess Daenerys did nothing to stop her sun-and-stars. She just coolly watched this scene play out without interruption. *He's dead to her already.*

Khal Drogo stepped in front of the kneeling blond man and glared down at him. He gradually raised the cauldron into the air and mockingly announced "A crown for Cart King!"

Then he poured the cauldron's contents onto Viserys Targaryen. Viserys screamed like a banshee as the bubbling molten liquid engulfed his head. After just a few seconds, the khal's bloodriders released him and let him writhe on his knees as his shriek became louder and shriller.

The gold hardened fairly quickly. It took no more than twenty seconds to solidify. That was also how long it took for Viserys's scream to end. Once he fell silent, he collapsed onto his stomach. His
head made an ominous "clink" when it struck the ground.

That was the last anyone ever heard from Viserys Targaryen.

For a minute, no one said or did anything. Then Jon Targaryen leaned down to Daenerys and told her apologetically "I am sorry for your loss, Dany."

"You needn't feel sorry, Jon," Daenerys assured her nephew, "Viserys was never really one of us. Fire cannot harm a dragon."

"Then indeed; he was no real dragon," Aegon observed. *I would say not.*

Ser Bonifer Hasty expected to feel some sort of catharsis when Viserys Targaryen breathed his last. Strangely, he found himself pitying the man, instead. He also found himself remembering what Lady Melisandre had said of him earlier that day.

He spotted the Red Woman standing in a corner of the room with Allard Seaworth. Again, they spoke softly so no one would overhear them.

The old knight from the Stormlands casually sauntered over the Red Woman and whispered to her "Once more, you were right, my lady."

"I aim to be right always," Melisandre claimed, "I do not delight in Viserys Targaryen's death, but his loss is a necessary one."

"Necessary how?" Allard queried.

"Viserys may not have been a dragon," Lady Melisandre professed, "Even so, he had the blood of a king. Such blood is invaluable to us. In order for the dragon eggs to hatch, they will require a blood sacrifice to be made beforehand."

"Then the sacrifice has already been made?" Bonifer assumed hopefully

"No, it has only begun," Melisandre claimed, "Viserys was one man, and there are three eggs."

"You mean… someone else will…?" Allard assumed anxiously.

Lady Melisandre nodded her head and stated "At least two other people close to House Targaryen are going to have to give their lives before the eggs can hatch. This time when I say 'at least,' I mean it. There can be no less than two casualties, but there can certainly be more. I'm afraid there is no other way around that arrangement."

Allard Seaworth sighed in annoyance, and Bonifer Hasty grumbled in frustration. *Normally, I can devise a suitable resolution to any dilemma. But it appears this one is out of even my reach.* The realization of that was more terrible than words could properly convey.
Note: Happy early Thanksgiving to those of you who celebrate it! To those of you who do not, hope you're doing well, just the same! Please read the notice immediately below this.

In this chapter, I'll be accelerating all the subplots which involve Essos or take place in it by at least a marginal amount. You can expect to see a few minor time skips in future updates (say a fortnight or a month). You see, I am really eager to get everyone back to Westeros soon. I plan to be out of Essos altogether in less than ten chapters. I cannot give an exact number; it will all depend on how I structure and follow my outline.

Braavos was the northernmost of the Nine Free Cities. Geographically, it was about as far north as the Neck in the Seven Kingdoms. As such, one could supposedly sail there from Moat Cailin by heading almost due east.

In practice, the journey turned out to be not quite as straightforward as that. Navigating the narrow channel of the Cut and the frigid waters of the Bite had required some very attentive course plotting. Luckily, once clear of the North, the voyage had been a fairly brief, smooth, and simple one.

Unlike our stay here.

Bronn had visited Braavos once before. It was reportedly the wealthiest of the Nine Free Cities, yet the city itself was generally unremarkable. Visually, at least. You would think the richest Free City would think to spend a bit more on presentation.

The most impressive sight was the Titan of Braavos, a colossal stone warrior that stood vigil over the sole entrance into the city's lagoon. It was said to be one of the seven or nine wonders made by man. I've seen either two or three of them, depending on which version of Lomas Longstrider's chronicle is the correct one.

Everything else in Braavos was rather plain. That was not to say Braavos had nothing of interest to offer. There were plenty of things that could capture one's fancy, such as the Arsenal, the mummers' playhouses, the courtesans, and the Iron Bank.

And the House of Black and White.

Bronn's second trip to Braavos had been going on for over a fortnight by this point. There was no telling how long he would remain there this time, but in all likelihood, it would be far longer than his first trip. Long as I'm earning gold while I'm here, I'll stay as long as need be.

He thought it best not to mention that to Lady Daliah. She might misinterpret my meaning. Contrary to what most of the world believed, money was not the only thing which occupied a sellsword's mind. I can only speak for myself, of course. Although he was willing to do just about any task for the right price, Bronn had standards. If a rival of his employer came along
and offered him a higher wage to betray his boss, he would not accept immediately. In the case of his current employer, he would not accept at all.

House Clegane treated him with dignity and respect. Both branches of the house. That alone placed them well above anyone else he had ever worked for. In spite of his low birth, they had given him a position of authority and power in their household. After working for them for this long, Bronn had grown fond of the Cleganes, and Clegane's Keep had become a type of home to him. Bronn generally did not stay in any one place for very long, but he had no plans to leave Clegane's Keep any time soon.

Alas, he was not there at present. Right then, he was not even in Westeros. *But the keep will still be there when we return. However long that takes. Until then, this house in this foreign city will have to suffice.*

The officers of the Legion without Banners had made enough trips to Braavos to necessitate more permanent, befitting accommodations. Thus, Lord Gregor Clegane had decided to purchase a house in the city. Anytime Legionnaires were in Braavos, they would reside in this house. Otherwise, the house was normally locked up and unoccupied.

The house itself was three stories tall, and it was big enough for fifty people to live together with space to spare. As it happened, that was the approximate size of Bronn's company. Its location was ideal, as well. It could be found along the Canal of Heroes, which overlooked the Titan of Braavos. The harbor was not five minutes away by foot.

Although the house belonged to the Legion, it was always open to friends of the Legion, too. The mother of its commander and members of her household certainly went into that category. Plus, Lord Gregor had sent a few of his most trusted Legionnaires with them. In any case, the house was fully accessible to Bronn's group.

At this time, Bronn was atop a third-floor balcony on the side of the house which faced the canals. He was leaning against the rail and admiring the view of the Titan. *Good thing whoever chiseled the Titan elected to give him clothes. Otherwise, all the people on this block would have to stare at a huge stone arse whenever they looked outside.* Beside him, Lady Daliah Clegane was seated in a comfortable, wooden chair. She was gazing in the Titan's direction, too, but her mind was obviously elsewhere.

This balcony connected to the master bedchamber, which had been set aside for Lady Daliah and Tyta Clegane. But it had only been occupied by both of them on their party's first night in Braavos. Every night after, only one of them had slept there. *May as well have just given this room to her ladyship, considering her granddaughter's whereabouts.*

In the two weeks since they had come to Braavos, Bronn and the rest of his party had seen Tyta Clegane for a total of less than one hour. Closer to half an hour, maybe. For the rest of that interval, she had been living in another house. A much larger house with a most menacing and awesome collective of lodgers. *Definitely not the kind of neighbors one would wish to have.*

Of course, there was nothing that could really be done about that. The main reason they had come to Braavos in the first place was because Jaqen H'ghar intended to mentor Lady Tyta in the ways of his trade. *The trade being death.*

Lady Daliah had been horrified when she first learned of the Lorathi's plans. She had actually fainted, in fact. Still, Ser Bronn could understand and sympathize with her reaction. *If I ever had children, I would be certain they knew how to fight, and I would want them to be prepared to kill, but I wouldn't want them to make it their mission in life.*
For the present, Bronn did not plan to ever marry or sire children. All the same, he liked to think of himself as a type of secondary father to young Lady Tyta and her brothers. Then again, Maester Velix may have been better qualified for that title. *I'm a close enough third, though.*

To no one's surprise, Lady Daliah had fervently opposed the concept of her granddaughter becoming a face-changing killer. At first, she had seemed unyielding in this matter, but that had not stopped Lord Gregor Clegane from attempting to sway her mind. It had taken the Mountain no less than three hours to convince his lady mother to give the thought some serious reconsideration.

In the end, Lord Gregor won the argument, and Lady Daliah agreed to allow Tyta to travel with Jaqen H'ghar to Braavos. That was not to say she now approved of this plan or supported it; she did not. For that very reason, she insisted on accompanying her granddaughter. In turn, Lord Gregor assigned a small group of Legionnaires to escort them and their retainers to Essos. He even provided a ship to take them there. The journey across the Narrow Sea had taken no longer than a fortnight.

*Now, here we stand. And there stands the Titan.*

For fathomable reasons, Lord Gregor did not wish the fact that his niece was preparing to become a Faceless Man to be made common knowledge. For the present, he was going to keep the issue very clandestine. Other than Jaqen H'ghar and Tyta herself, there were only five people in the world who knew of it. That number would probably increase at some point, but until then, Lord Gregor would not permit anyone else to know. *Not even his own brother.*

For the most part, keeping this matter a secret was much easier than one would assume it would be. Many of the citizens of the Seven Kingdoms were unaware that Tyta and her grandmother were even in Braavos. If most of those same people learned that the two of them were in Braavos, all of them would likely not be bothered to inquire as to why they were there. All they had to do was remain disinterested or oblivious, and the secret would not run the risk of exposure.

In fact, the only people who really needed to be misled were the ones who had accompanied Lady Daliah and Lady Tyta to Braavos. Out of the fifty people in that company, only four of them knew the truth. Those were four of the five people in all the lands who knew the truth about Tyta's purpose in Braavos. Lord Gregor was the fifth.

Naturally, Ser Bronn and Lady Daliah Clegane were two of the other four.

Withholding the truth from the majority of their companions was simple enough. All Bronn and the other three had to do was not speak of it whenever anyone else was around. The difficult part had been explaining why they were in Braavos to begin with. Since they could not reveal Tyta's purpose, they had to come up with an explanation. *An excuse, more like.* Thankfully, Lord Gregor had helped them to devise an elaborate cover story. This cover story was both plausible and pragmatic.

By happy coincidence, Lord Gregor Clegane had some dealings with the Iron Bank of Braavos as part of his preparations against the Long Night. Most of these dealings could be handled overseas, but a few of them, he claimed, required his direct attention. Alas, by order of the crown, he was prohibited from leaving Westeros without the King's leave.

Fortunately, he had the option to send someone else to Braavos to speak for him. He told the men that after thoughtful deliberation, he had chosen his mother to represent him. He insisted that she would be ideally suited to the task, which was perfectly believable. Ever since House Clegane of Clegane's Keep's rise to wealth at the end of Greyjoy's Rebellion, Lady Daliah had become quite proficient at managing the keep's finances.
Lady Daliah had given merit to this cover story by visiting the Iron Bank once a day every day since they arrived in Braavos. On each occasion, she made certain some of her guards saw her enter the massive building, but no one other than Bronn ever went inside with her.

Needless to say, she never actually conducted any dealings. Lady Daliah usually brought a book with her to pass the time. She would read for about an hour, and then she would leave the building with Bronn at her side. A couple times, she had considered approaching the bankers and discussing her son's dealings with them for real. She is amply qualified to do so. She never went through with this idea. She had confessed to Bronn that it was no business of hers what Lord Gregor was up to, and aside from that, all the measures he had taken to prepare the Seven Kingdoms against the Long Night were meticulous and fragile. The absolute last thing she wished to do was risk ruining all the Mountain's careful planning.

Other than their daily visits to the Iron Bank, Ser Bronn and Lady Daliah only roamed the streets of Braavos for about a half-hour each day. They spent the rest of each day in the Legionnaire house. Unless they were eating, sleeping, or bathing, they were usually out on the third-floor balcony. The setting had been Lady Daliah's choice, but Bronn had come to enjoy that balcony, too. If need be, he was content to remain atop it for the duration of their mission.

Still, he felt the Free City was starting to grow on him. He had begun to suspect that the whole reason his first visit had been so underwhelming was because he had only passed through it. He had not lingered long enough to appreciate all that Braavos had to offer. Whereas he had more than enough time on this occasion. To his delight, this city specialized in three of his favorite things: swords, coins, and cunts. Those would at least make for a fine distraction when he was not on-duty.

On the other hand, Lady Daliah had no taste for any of those things. Needless to say, she would find no distraction in them, and, gods knew, she needed one. It is good of her to be concerned for Lady Tyta, but before too long, all this constant worrying will gradually eat away at her mind.

Bonn removed his gaze from the Titan and turned towards Lady Daliah. He asked her "Can I get you anything, milady?"

The two of them had been standing and sitting in utter quietness for at least ten minutes. This sudden interruption might have startled one who was faint of heart. Despite her slightly frail appearance, Daliah Clegane was not one such individual. At first, she did not even seem to acknowledge Bronn's statement. Then, a few seconds later, she turned to the former sellsword and asked "No, Ser Bronn. But I am grateful you asked, anyway."

"It is no trouble," he assured her. There was a pause, and then he muttered "Might I ask if something is troubling you?"

Apart from the obvious. She likely knew he meant that, as she did not sneer or glare at him. Instead, she released a gentle sigh and enquired "Would you allow me to confide my personal feelings for a minute?"

"Of course, milady," he told her sincerely.

Lady Daliah briefly looked around the vicinity, as though she thought someone might have been near. While Bronn understood her wish for discretion, he thought it unnecessary for her to check their surroundings. The nearest guards are inside and on the other side of the bedchamber, and we're three stories above the ground. I think we're safe from prying ears.

He opted not to say that, as doing so would have been discourteous and rude. Plus, it was a sign that whatever Lady Daliah was about to tell him, it was not something she would divulge to just
anyone. With that in mind, her caution was reasonable.

There was another chair next to the one Lady Daliah Clegane was currently in. Once she was done looking around, she gestured to the empty chair and bade Bronn to sit down. He did so, and then she said "As you know, I am very much against my granddaughter training to be an assassin. Just the thought of such a thing is utterly dreadful and frightening."

"I gathered as much," Bronn commented, not impertinently, "I would assume that has been your main source of discomfort for the past turn of the moon."

"You could argue that," Daliah Clegane confessed, "However, as much as I dislike the idea of Tyta becoming a Faceless Man, the idea itself is not what most unsettles me. What most unsettles me… is how her uncle was so in favor of it."

"How do you mean?" Ser Bronn stated curiously.

Lady Daliah elaborated with "I myself did not know what a Faceless Man was until recently. I have had time enough to learn of them, and by now, I can say with almost absolute certainty that they must be the most cunning, most efficient, and deadliest killers in the Known World."

"Having been to a fair share of the world, milady, I can confirm that they are," Bronn claimed.

"Gregor must have realized that, too," Lady Daliah contended, "He would not have sent his own niece to study with an organization he hardly knew anything about."

"Do you believe it was reckless of him to do so?" Bronn presumed.

"No," she responded, "I fear that he was not being reckless at all."

Bonn cocked his head. "I do not quite understand."

"My son undoubtedly knows what all the Faceless Men are capable of," Lady Daliah pointed out, "It was not until he discovered that Jaqen H'ghar was at Clegane's Keep that he asked for Jaqen and Tyta to ride for Moat Cailin. When I spoke with them at the moat, Gregor suggested that he at least suspected that Jaqen wished to recruit Tyta into his organization even before we arrived."

"Then your main concern is that Lord Gregor sees Lady Tyta as an asset?" Bronn conjectured.

"No, but that is part of my main concern," Daliah Clegane revealed, "One thing you may have noticed about my family is its political and social shrewdness. For instance, Gregor is very particular about how he runs the Legion without Banners. Every course of action, even the most selfless ones, somehow benefits the Legion in some way. Since he is aware of the Faceless Men's capabilities and accomplishments, he would not have agreed to send Tyta to train with them unless he had thought the issue all the way through. But Faceless Men generally do not pick sides in wars or other conflicts. Thus, once Tyta becomes one of them, she could be used by Gregor's rivals. Or the king's rivals."

"Lord Gregor would never let that come to pass," Bronn asserted. He may not have known Gregor Clegane personally, but the Mountain's reputation spoke for itself.

"That's what I told myself," Lady Daliah professed, "Surely Gregor must have thought that, as well. Even so, he went ahead with sending Tyta here to Braavos. He is taking an incredible risk, yet he seems totally unbothered by it. That is what really stood out to me. I thought this whole matter over, and there are only two plausible explanations. Either Gregor is extraordinarily confident that Tyta won't be used by our enemies, or… he means to make use of Tyta's newfound abilities
himself.

Bronn suddenly understood her apprehension. Her greatest fear was not that her granddaughter would become an unscrupulous, bloodthirsty murderer, but that the Mountain would employ her services in effort to eliminate his foes. *That would probably be less disturbing if he wasn't her uncle. Alas, when kin are involved, everything becomes far more complex.*

"I can see why you might think that," Bronn murmured, "As you said before, Lord Gregor would not provide another party with a possible gain unless he and his allies stood to gain from it, as well. But did Lord Gregor actually tell you that he hopes to use his niece as a weapon?"

"Never in so many words," Daliah elucidated, "However, it was heavily implied when we conversed on this topic. Gregor mentioned how a number of parties would benefit from having an intimate relationship with a Faceless Man. He never directly referred to himself as one of those parties, but all the ones he did refer to were people he is related to, people he works with, or people he corresponds with."

"Then you've nothing to fear, milady," Bronn observed, "Since he was speaking figuratively, that would suggest that these other parties would merely have the option to seek out Lady Tyta's services. Lord Gregor could not afford to be generous with such a grand advantage, especially since it's his niece. I am certain he would take steps to ensure that she is not handled carelessly or thoughtlessly."

"Are you truly certain, ser?" said Lady Daliah Clegane, dubiously.

"Yes," he firmly stated, "So much so that… I would wager a year's earnings that the Mountain would only choose to use Lady Tyta's services as an absolute last resort."

*If that doesn't reassure her, I don't know what else I could say that will.* Thankfully, that was just what her ladyship needed to hear.

For the first time in a long while, Lady Daliah smiled. Bronn actually managed to get her to smile in the midst of her apprehension. He felt oddly proud of himself for that. He could make women smile easily enough, but normally with actions instead of words. *Normally, the woman is a score or so years younger than her ladyship, too.* Still, Lady Daliah's smile was a far sight more pleasant and reassuring.

"Gregor always has said 'better to have and not need than to need and have not,'" Lady Daliah noted, "Shame on me for honestly wondering if he would use his own family as a means to an end."

"You needn't feel ashamed, milady," Bronn pronounced, "You feared for your granddaughter's humanity. And her freedom, to a lesser extent. You've every right to have qualms and doubts."

"Well, I thank you for helping me to quell those qualms and doubts," Daliah Clegane stated appreciatively.

Bronn grinned back and remarked "That is why I'm here."

"To console me?" said Lady Daliah.

"To protect you from all threats, including those which disrupt your peace of mind," Bronn clarified.

"Yes, and you perform that duty superbly," Daliah Clegane perceived.
Although it was unusual for Bronn to grin twice in one sitting, this was one instance when an exception had to be made. *It's rare that I receive such acclaim, so I shall accept her ladyship's praise with due grace.*

"Is there anything else which is bothering you at present?" he enquired.

"There are a few unresolved issues," Lady Daliah admitted "Most of them relate to this very topic."

"Such as?" Bronn muttered inquisitively.

"To begin, I am very anxious as to how we are going to explain all this to Sandor and Obara," Lady Daliah explicated, "They are completely unaware of this affair. As far as they know, Tyta and I are still at Moat Cailin, Jaqen is just an ordinary Essosi who may know something of the Golden Company's interest in Clegane's Keep, and Gregor is questioning us so that he might sooner determine the Company's motives for trying to rob and kill Sandor. Sandor and his wife haven't an inkling that Jaqen saved Tyta or why. Nor have they been told that he has taken her under his wing. Now, we have no way of knowing how long Tyta will be studying at the House of Black and White. Eventually, however, she will have to return to Clegane's Keep. Whatever her obligations as a Faceless Man, the keep will always be her home."

"Indeed," Ser Bronn conceded, "While I cannot claim to know everything of the Faceless Men, I know enough to safely say that they are not required to remain in Braavos. Even when their services are not needed, they may venture outside the city. On the whole, they are free to go wherever they please, so long as they do not heedlessly endanger their own lives or compromise the integrity of their order."

"Then there is nothing that officially binds her to the House of Black and White?" Daliah presumed hopefully.

"No, nothing at all," Bronn affirmed, "The Faceless Men are regarded as servants of the Many-Faced God, but they are not his slaves. Lady Tyta will always have the option to return to Clegane's Keep. Once her training is complete, I am confident that the keep will be the first place she'll go to."

"I am not concerned that she may decide to never return to the keep," Lady Daliah disclosed, "After all, she is still quite youthful. Girls of that age cannot imagine living apart from their families forever. Tyta thinks about her own family all the time; anyone with sense can see that she misses them."

"Yes, I do recall that when we crossed the Narrow Sea, she spoke of her parents, her brothers, and little else," Bronn recounted. *Even when she drilled with me at swordplay, her mind was usually elsewhere. Before then, she was rarely ever distracted. I pray she'll be more focused at the House of Black and White. If not, it could impact her studies. "Alas, one cannot ignore the inevitable realization that once children become of age, they begin to long for independence. At the same time, their desire to be close to their family gradually lessens."*

"But it never diminishes entirely," Daliah Clegane argued, "Gregor, Sandor, and Ellyn are all grown, but they continue to show me the same love and respect as when they were children. That aside, according to Gregor and Jaqen, Tyta should finish her studies before the Long Night. That's no more than two years from now. She will not have even flowered by then. Thus, she'll still be young enough that family will be more important to her than anything, including any vows she makes to the Many-Faced God."

"Then you've nothing to worry about," Bronn contended.
"Of course, I do," Lady Daliah refuted, "My grandest concern of all is that when Tyta reunites with her parents, she can never go back to them as the girl they remember."

*There is that. One does not join a guild of notorious killers and emerge the same person afterwards.* All the same, Bronn debated "Nonetheless, you must keep in mind, milady, that the girl they remember had already killed a man before she left them. Such an experience changes a person."

"Sandor and Obara told me as much," Daliah Clegane murmured, "However, they could be wrong. Tyta seems largely unaffected by the experience. Up until the day Jaqen took her to the House of Black and White, she still appeared wholly unfazed. It is almost as though she feels no different from before."

Apparently, she suspected the possibility that young Lady Tyta may have been… disturbed. Bronn hastily pacified her worries with "If you are wondering, your granddaughter is not one of those individuals who is unMOVED by killing, or actually *enjoys* it. I have met those types of people before, and she is nothing like them. Nothing at all."

"Yet she remains unbothered by her ordeal with Connin," Daliah countered, "You just said taking a life changes one. So, why hasn't it changed Tyta?"

"It isn't necessarily an immediate change," Bronn informed her, "The impact of one's first kill can vary, depending on the person. It could still be months more before the full weight of Connin's death sinks into Tyta's mind. But regardless of all else, killing someone for the first time is a milestone in *any* person's life. Soon enough, she will come to terms with the affair. However, Jaqen H'ghar will help her cope with it."

"How can you be so certain of that?" Daliah queried restlessly.

"Because if Tyta cannot move on from Connin's death, it was a waste of time to come to Braavos," Bronn contended, "Jaqen H'ghar knows better than to waste our precious time, or his own. Remember, milady; he saw potential in Tyta. He would not have brought her here if he even suspected that she could not stomach killing."

Lady Daliah took a minute to think on that. Ultimately, she gave a curt nod and mumbled "You've helped me put most of my sorrows to rest, Ser Bronn. Nevertheless, there is one difficulty that even you might not be able to provide ample assurances for."

"Tell me of it, and I will do what I can to reassure you," Bronn beckoned her.

Daliah Clegane pronounced "Tyta may turn out to be the most gifted Faceless Man who ever lived. She could also turn out to be the least successful one. Most likely, she'll be somewhere in the middle, closer to the former than the latter. In any case, she cannot hide her new identity from her parents. Even if we *tried* to withhold the truth from Sandor and Obara, they are going to learn it eventually. I have no way of knowing how they'll react to it."

"Alas, neither do I," Bronn grimly confessed, "Doubtless, they will be furious. At first, anyway. Even though they must already expect her to come back changed from her encounter with Connin, they are not expecting her to come back literally wearing someone else's face."

"Just so," Daliah concurred, "*How does* one tell her son and his wife that their daughter is distributing the 'blessings' of the Many-Faced God? I am struggling to put together an explanation, but as of now, I cannot think of anything that could justify what's happening here. They may not even wish to hear my tale. Worse yet, they may choose to never speak to me ever again."
"That'll never happen, milady," Bronn sternly declared, "But once more, your concerns are understandable. If you want my advice, let your elder son decide how to tell Lord Sandor and Lady Obara. After all, Lord Gregor convinced you to let Tyta learn Jaqen H'ghar's practice. Although you still have many a reservation about the process, at least you agreed to give it a chance."

"That is true; I have," Daliah Clegane thought aloud.

"Furthermore, Lord Gregor is known throughout the realm for his excellent skills as a diplomat," Bronn reminded her, "If he can negotiate a truce between the Targaryens and the Baratheons, as well as a ceasefire between the Seven Kingdoms and the Free Folk, he can most definitely sway his own brother and sister-by-law on a personal issue such as this one."

"When you put it in that perspective…” Lady Daliah said softly. After a short pause, she went on with "You're right, Ser Bronn. You are absolutely right. I shouldn't be fretting over how to break this news to Tyta's father and mother. Much as I would hate to force an undesirable task upon my children, the burden for this should fall upon Gregor's shoulders. This scheme wasn't mine to begin with; it was his. His and Jaqen's, actually, but in all likelihood, Jaqen won't be going back to the Seven Kingdoms. At least not with us. Therefore, Gregor should be the one to explain all this."

"I would not be surprised if he has already come up with two or three lengthy accounts," Bronn muttered drily, "I've heard Lord Gregor Clegane is also known for being prepared for just about any imaginable complication or outcome. And even a few unimaginable ones."

_Naturally, the Long Night is at the top of that list._

"Yes, and I know Gregor would not jeopardize his relationship with his brother for anything," Daliah Clegane remarked, "That includes a partnership with a Faceless Man. With that in mind, he must be confident that he could persuade Sandor to accept what his daughter has become. Will become, I mean."

"If there is one man who can do a thing like that, it is the Mountain That Rides," Bronn proclaimed.

There came a short interval of quiet. After that, Bronn folded his arms and muttered "Pardon me if this sounds out of line, milady, but I would have thought you'd have discussed all of this with Lord Gregor before we left the moat."

"Truthfully, I did," Lady Daliah revealed, "All of these points came up during our discussion. The things Gregor told me were much the same as what you've said. I suppose that hearing those reassurances from just one party, even my son, was not enough to soothe my conscience. Be that as it may, now that I've received them from another reliable, trustworthy source, I feel I can finally set my mind at ease."

_Reliable and trustworthy, huh? I've been called many things, but never either of those._ For the third time since he sat down, Bronn grinned at the Dowager Lady of Clegane's Keep. She merrily smiled back at him.

Ser Bronn was certain Lady Daliah was still somewhat opposed to Tyta becoming a Faceless Man, but on the plus side, at least she no longer had any misgivings on this affair.

"We've talked on this unpleasant topic enough," she announced a moment later, "Let us converse on something else. Something less unsettling."

"Such as what, milady?" Bronn inquired.
"Your career as a sellsword, perhaps," Daliah Clegane suggested, "Tyta and her brothers know all about your numerous deeds and accomplishments, but you have never shared any of them with me. I'd like to hear a few."

Bronn was stunned by the proposal. When he realized that she was being serious, he was even more stunned. He shrugged his shoulders and muttered "If you'd really wish to learn of my exploits, milady, I would gladly indulge you. However, they are not as glamorous as your grandchildren think them to be. For children, I tend to embellish my stories so they seem more exciting. You, on the other hand, are old and wise enough to see right through the embellished parts. I could tell you the true versions of my tales, but some of them are not what you'd call amusing or uplifting."

"Next to what we've talked on for the last hour, it would still be a welcome change in conversation," Lady Daliah argued, "So by all means, indulge me, Ser Bronn."

"Very well, milady," Bronn said in response. He leaned back in his chair, kept his arms folded, and began with "My very first job as a sellsword was long ago in the Riverlands, near the start of King Robert's Rebellion."

Being of low birth and plain background, Bronn was accustomed to being detached and ignored by the nobility of the Seven Kingdoms. Yet for the following hour, the story of his life was the primary topic of interest in his conversation with Lady Daliah Clegane of Clegane's Keep. Who'd have thought the events of my life would be of interest to anyone?

Ser Bronn told Lady Daliah the unadorned and unabridged versions of his many jobs and deeds across the Known World. Every now and then, he was tempted to change a couple details, but he could not bring himself to lie to Lady Daliah, even for the purpose of her entertainment. Besides, she could usually tell when people were deceiving her.

Bronn managed to cover more than half of his tales over the course of the next hour. After that, they received some company. In the midst of the recount of his time in the Disputed Lands, there was a knock from within on the door to the bedchamber. Bronn permitted this interruption, and Lady Daliah loudly beckoned the person on the other side "Come in!"

The door opened and a tall black-bearded man entered. That was Polliver, the captain of Moat Cailin's house guard and one of Lord Gregor Clegane's longest-serving men-at-arms. He was also another of the four who knew Tyta's secret.

Lady Daliah Clegane and her granddaughter had travelled from Clegane's Keep to Moat Cailin with two dozen of their vassals. When they sailed for Braavos, the Mountain had assigned two dozen Legionnaires to accompany them. Bronn and Polliver were the heads of those respective groups. The two of them shared joint martial command of the combined party, and all other orders came from Lady Daliah.

"I am not interrupting anything, am I?" Polliver queried.

He better not be insinuating anything by that. No, he isn't; he can't be that clever. Bronn looked over his shoulder and wryly muttered "You did not. We are simply talking about ancient history."

"Well, I hope you've time for current events, as well," Polliver stated cheekily, holding up a length of parchment, "I come bearing news."

So, he can be witty. And here I thought he was just another dim-witted oaf. Lady Daliah glanced over her shoulder and gestured for Polliver to come forward.
As the black-bearded man joined them out on the balcony, Bronn rose back to his feet. He felt he had been sitting for long enough, and there were only two chairs on the balcony. Polliver's status may have been the same as his own, and Bronn did not really care whether or not he was on the man's good side, but he figured it could not hurt to at least appear courteous in front of Daliah Clegane.

Once Polliver was outside with them, he held the parchment up and asked Lady Daliah "Would you like to read this yourself, milady? Or would you prefer if I read it to you?"

"I'd like to see it myself, if you please," Daliah politely requested. *Just like her to be polite to those far beneath her station, Bronn noted. Is it any wonder why she is beloved by all who know her?*

Polliver swiftly handed over the parchment to the Dowager Lady of Clegane's Keep. As she proceeded to look over its contents, Bronn mentioned "I thought you couldn't read."

"I learned how," Polliver claimed.

"When?" asked Bronn.

"The voyage here was a long one, and there wasn't much to do on the ship," Polliver cryptically responded. *True, but not all of us came alone.*

"Well, your wife was with you," Bronn pointed out. *There's something for him to do, at least.*

"Yes, but we shared a cabin with our children," Polliver bluntly mumbled, "There was only one room, and we were not about to show them how they were made."

"That's a good argument," Bronn admitted. *He's smarter and wiser than I gave him credit for, too. Did he wake up one morning and suddenly decide to become an intellectual? Bronn did not find that likely. Men like Polliver did not strive to be great thinkers. He seemed more the type who preferred to leave the thinking to other men.*

While the lowborn man-at-arms and former sellsword exchanged words, the highborn lady they were both sworn to defend read in silence. After a few minutes, Bronn looked to her and asked "Anything of worthy note, milady?"

"Some such things," Daliah Clegane proclaimed, "Most of them took place in the Free Cities or Slaver's Bay. Even so, there are some from Westeros, too."

"Might I have leave to read over your shoulder?" Bronn requested.

"Certainly, Ser Bronn." She held the length of parchment out so that when Bronn moved behind her, he could clearly see what was written on it. It was not that long ago that Bronn himself had been illiterate, too. Back then, he simply had not seen the need to learn to read and write. *Sellswords don't have to do either to get the job done. He had not changed his position until Tyrion Lannister convinced him that literate sellswords were smarter sellswords, and smarter sellswords were richer sellswords. Of course, not long after that, I gave up being a sellsword in favor of steady employment. Nevertheless, the Imp's advice paid off.*

Right away, Bronn noticed that the contents of parchment were written by several different hands. He recognized some of them; others were foreign to him. He doubted Polliver's was among the latter. Although the man-at-arms could now read, it was unlikely he had mastered how to write just yet. *That's just fine. The lads do just fine without his scribbling.*

Most Westerosi did not know that Lady Daliah Clegane and her granddaughter were in Braavos.
Even fewer knew why they were there. While Lady Daliah and her party were not concerned about remaining hidden or anonymous, they were still trying to maintain a low profile. They had several reasons for this. Namely safety, caution, and the integrity of our mission.

Because of this decision, they were not going to correspond with the Seven Kingdoms whilst they were across the Narrow Sea. They still had the option to do so; Gregor had provided them with a few ravens who were trained to fly from Braavos to Moat Cailin. However, Lady Daliah had elected to only use those ravens in the event of an emergency. Otherwise, she, Bronn, Polliver, and all the others were totally cut off from Westeros.

All the same, being in a faraway, unfamiliar land made one wonder what was going on back home, especially when one would not be returning there for an indefinite period of time. Before too long, Lady Daliah and her companions had grown curious as to what was going on in the world. Alas, their resources were somewhat limited.

Then Polliver had one of his rare moments of genius. He had proposed that they send some of the Legionnaires and Clegane's Keep retainers out into the city. Whilst they were out there, he argued, they could gather information on all the many happenings in Westeros, Essos, and the rest of the Known World. Lady Daliah had liked this suggestion, and she had ordered the men to carry it out. They had done so eagerly.

Furthermore, this task was a great distraction for the men. Although they took their vows very seriously, they had rapidly started to grow bored and restless after arriving in Braavos, much like Bronn had during his first visit. The Legionnaire house only had so many doors that required guarding, and the men were good enough swordsmen that they did not need to train for more than an hour a day. As such, Polliver had to find something else to keep them occupied, anyway.

How they amassed the information made no matter, as long as they did not upset or enrage anyone. They all went about it differently. Some headed down to the waterfront to speak with the captains and bosuns. Some ventured to the marketplace to converse with vendors, whose origins were from all over Essos. Some visited the taverns and pubs to hear the town drunkards ramble on about the latest rumors.

A few even thought to go to the brothels and see what they could pry from the lips of whores. Some of them were probably more interested in the lower lips, though.

Polliver's wife, Ros, was once a whore, but she had given that up to be with him. He must be good. Very fucking good. When Ros slept with people for coin, she had been a professional at getting her customers to divulge their most private secrets. According to Polliver, she still possessed that gift.

Ros had accompanied her husband to Braavos, and she had brought along their children, Clatton and Marga. So, unlike most of the other people in their company, she already had plenty to occupy her time. Nevertheless, she had offered to help gather intelligence. Normally, Lady Daliah did not trust whores – or even former whores – as far as she could throw them, but Polliver spoke for Ros, and that was sufficient. Whenever she went out, Polliver would look after their son and daughter.

Queerly enough, Ros tended to produce some of the most useful and insightful information. She never said where she got this information from, but she insisted she had not been at the whorehouses. Even if no one else did, Polliver believed her. When his wife was concerned, he claimed he could always tell if another man had been there. I would question his word. Then again, he is a master of the spear, so I suppose I can take it. For his sake, let us hope he is not wrong.
Bronn wondered if perhaps Ros actually did go to the brothels as a customer instead of an employee. As far as he knew, Ros had never serviced a woman in her line of work, but northern girls were known to do far stranger things than that. I don't think Polliver would mind at all if his wife laid with another woman. He might even ask to join them.

It had been a week since Polliver had first proposed to have their people ask the locals about what was going on in the world. Now, everything Ros and the men had accumulated in that interval had been compiled into this one comprehensive report. I'm learning about a week's worth of gossip, Bronn thought. All without any social interaction on my own part. How convenient.

Polliver stepped forward and disclosed "Everything here has been verified by two or more of our people. There are no one-time rumors in there, milady. Several sources have confirmed each piece of information on that parchment."

"That is good, Polliver," Lady Daliah uttered approvingly.

"But how many of the consulted persons have actually seen proof of these events with their own eyes?" Bronn debated.

"Alas, not very many," Polliver admitted. "In most cases, the information came from people who heard it from friends who heard it from friends. Who heard it from other friends."

Who heard it from other friends still, I suppose.

"This will suffice," Daliah Clegane asserted, "Even if the news was misinterpreted or misunderstood somehow, we've at least a firm notion of what actually transpired."

"True enough," Bronn conceded, peering over her shoulder, "So let's see what might be going on."

A week's worth of gossip in the richest of the Free Cities turned out to yield quite a lot of intriguing knowledge. Bronn was surprised to see how much of this knowledge involved Westeros. Apparently, the affairs of the lords of the Seven Kingdoms were of great interest to the Braavosi, particularly those from the Great Houses.

Recently, Lady Asha Tully had birthed a healthy set of twins: a girl named Minisa and a boy named Urrigon. Her lord husband, Ser Edmure, the heir to the Riverlands, had presented them to his people in the courtyard of Riverrun, which prompted great celebration. Lord Hoster Tully was still bedridden, but he had acknowledged his grandchildren and proclaimed Urrigon as the heir to his own heir.

Further south, Ser Garlan Tyrell's betrothal to Princess Arianne Martell, the heiress to Sunspear, had been finalized. Their nuptials would occur sometime before the new year. Bronn wondered what it would be like for Ser Garlan. He would likely have to exchange his family name for his intended's and submit to her authority as the future leader of Dorne. Not an enviable position for any man. That is why I remain a bachelor. No woman shall tie this sword down. Unless she was rich and comely enough.

There were even reports that Margaery Tyrell, the young wife of Robb Stark, eldest son and heir of Lord Eddard, was with child. Half a dozen different parties had provided this news, but none of them could verify that it was authentic. By all accounts, Lord Robb and Lady Margaery were trying to conceive. It was even said that at night, one could hear the Young Wolf howling from all over the North when he mounted his beautiful Rose. No wonder I could not get any sleep during our visit to Moat Cailin. I thought it was just those damned direwolves making that awful noise. If Lady Margaery was not pregnant by now, she would probably be soon enough. In the
North, newlyweds rarely stayed childless for long.

The most startling piece of news originated from King's Landing. Lord Jon Arryn, the Hand of the King, had suffered a stroke. It had rendered him unresponsive, and he still showed no sign of recovery. Already, King Robert Baratheon had appointed his father-by-law, Lord Tywin Lannister, to replace Lord Jon as his Hand for as long as the latter was incapacitated. Bronn did not know what to make of that. He had met Tywin Lannister once, and their meeting had hardly been a pleasant one. As a leader and a politician, Lord Tywin was superb. As a human being… he lacked in many qualities. The capital city is about to experience a huge shitstorm once the Old Lion graces it with his presence.

While Bronn was glad to learn of what was going on back home, he was more interested in knowing about what was happening in Essos. After all, that's where I am at present. Luckily, for every bit of news that came from Westeros, there were two more from another part of Essos. Several of the accounts from the far east were much more captivating than anything that recently took place in the Seven Kingdoms.

There were two in particular that really stood out. One pertained to a recent event at Vaes Dothrak; the other had occurred at Astapor. They had captured Bronn's fancy mainly because some of their fellow Westerosi had been in the area at the time of these incidents. Lady Daliah seemed to share his fascination, especially in the case of the first story. That's hardly surprising, seeing as some of her descendants are in that group.

Brienne of Tarth was widely regarded as the third tallest woman in Westeros, after Lady Dacey Clegane and Lady Ellyn Lannister. However, while Lady Dacey and Lady Ellyn were recognized by many for their comeliness, Brienne did not share that facet with them. Despite her moniker the Beauty, her façade was not pleasing to look upon. But appearances are far from everything.

Lady Brienne had enlisted in the Legion without Banners a couple years back. She was one of the Legionnaires who had travelled to Braavos with Lady Daliah Clegane. Lord Gregor had sent her on this mission for two reasons. Firstly, he claimed she was one of the few people he could trust with the well-being of his mother and niece. Secondly, Tyta was a bit of a warrior woman herself, and in the brief time she had known her, she had come to admire Brienne. She'll need people she can relate to in times such as these.

On the journey to Braavos, Lady Daliah Clegane had taken the time to decide what duties each member of their party would assume; Legionnaire and Clegane's Keep vassal alike. By the time their vessel sailed beneath the Titan, Lady Daliah had chosen to give Brienne the most important assignment of all: wherever Tyta went, she would follow.
So it was that Lady Brienne Tarth spent every waking moment guarding Lady Tyta Clegane. She was not allowed inside the House of Black and White, but the Faceless Men had no objections to her standing watch outside the entrance, so long as she could be inconspicuous. *That would have to be hard. Even back in the Kingdoms, she turned many a head. For the wrong reasons. Be that as it may, Lady Brienne managed to pull this feat off.*

Obviously, no one could stay awake forever. However, Lady Tyta always slept in the House of Black and White, and the House was locked at night. Knowing her granddaughter would be safe inside, Lady Daliah decided she would not need a bodyguard when it was dark out.

Thus, once the Sun vanished, Lady Brienne returned to the Legiionnaire house, ate a late supper, and turned in for the night. At the crack of dawn each following morn, she would rise, bathe quickly, break her fast quickly, and go back to the House of Black and White. She always arrived just before the doors were unlocked.

If Lady Tyta ever had to go anywhere in the city, Brienne would follow her and watch her from a short distance. She was under orders not to interfere in anything Tyta did, unless the girl's life was placed in jeopardy. And even then, she could only step in at the absolute last possible moment.

If Tyta did not go anywhere, Brienne would linger outside the House of Black and White, and she would simply stand there and wait. Sometimes she almost went entire days without moving from her spot.

One could argue that sleep was Brienne Tarth's only reprieve. Nevertheless, the heiress to Evenfall Hall did not complain. She personally felt honored to be given this assignment. *She won't be a bodyguard forever, of course. Before long, Lady Tyta will be able to go to even the most dangerous parts of the world all on her own. Still... until then, she's definitely in good hands.*

Right now, Lady Brienne was clad in a hauberk and chainmail. Tyta's garb, by contrast, was very plain. The Faceless Men were not much for presentation. Tunics, breeches, and rags were all that Tyta was afforded, and that was fine by her. *Like her mother, she hardly wore elegant finery, anyway.*

Tyta passed into the room slowly, but once she was through the threshold, she quickened her pace and practically sprinted out to the balcony. When he saw where she was going, Bronn hastily moved out of her way. By the time Lady Daliah gazed over her shoulder to see who entered, Tyta was standing directly in front of her. She rushed forward and threw her arms around her grandmother.

Lady Daliah Clegane was alarmed at first. However, once she realized who had embraced her, her surprise was speedily replaced with delight. She chuckled giddily and pulled her granddaughter into a hug.

Bronn observed this affectionate exchange, and he was amazed. Lady Tyta looked so pure and innocent, like she would never wish to harm anything or anyone. Then again, she had looked that way even before the fiasco with Connin. Additionally, the small knife she wore on her belt reminded Bronn of where she had just come from. *How can someone who's stained her hands with blood and plans to stain them with more still be so adorable?*

He did not give voice to that thought. After all, it was not his place to ask such questions, and even if it was, all he would accomplish by doing so was stir up a fair deal of unrest. Unrest which had – with great difficulty – been resolved only recently. *Remember why we're here. We've a job to do, and it is far too late to be having second thoughts on it.*
When Tyta pulled away from Lady Daliah, she stood up straight on the ground and asked her grandmother rhetorically "Did you miss me?"

"Of course, sweetling," Daliah Clegane declared, "We've seen neither hide nor hair of you in five days."

"I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner," the young girl muttered sincerely, "I've been busy. Jaqen and the others have been keeping me busy."

"How so?" Lady Daliah stated inquiringly, "Can you tell me?"

"Yes, but I can only tell you so much," Tyta claimed, "There are some things I am forbidden to say to anyone outside the House of Black and White."

*I expected as much.* By the look of understanding on her countenance, Lady Daliah did, as well. Before Tyta could say anything more, her grandmother's eyes widened and she mumbled uneasily

"They don't have you… 'giving the gift' to others already, do you?"

"No, I am not even close to that level yet," Lady Tyta illuminated.

"I can attest to that, my lady," Brienne apprised Lady Daliah, "Every time she has gone outside, she has killed no one. In addition to that, her face has always been her own."

Tyta nodded and thought aloud "It may be a time before they let me wear another face, as well. I asked Jaqen when he might let me, and all he said was 'A girl must be patient.' He seemed firm, so I said no more on the subject."

"So, what are you doing in the meantime, milady?" Bronn enquired.

"I am training, Ser Bronn," the young girl expounded, "It is very different from the training Mors and I do with you. There is swordplay, of course. But the things I learn from the Faceless Men… they are more about knowing where the opponent will strike next. Not just predicting where, but actually seeing it ahead of time."

"A useful tactic anywhere in the world," Bronn commented. *I wonder if Faceless Men give lessons to people outside their organization. I'd very much like to learn this technique.*

"For now, I am simply following Jaqen's instructions in the sparring ring," Tyta pronounced, "But he's told me that soon enough, I'll be fighting without any guidance. He says that at some point, I'll even learn how to fight blind."

"Like with a blindfold, my lady?" Brienne assumed.

"That's what I thought at first," Tyta murmured, "But the way he spoke, it sounded like he meant something bigger than that."

That revelation gave Bronn pause. *They're not going to put her eyes out, are they? Because that would be extreme, even for the Faceless Men.* Then it occurred to him: perhaps they would merely take away her vision temporarily. It was not unheard of; people losing their eyesight and regaining it after a time. It also made much more sense than the alternative. *They're the Faceless Men, not the Eyeless Men.*

"What else do they have you do?" Brienne enquired. She quickly added in "That you are free to speak on, I mean?"
"I spend a lot of time praying to the Many-Faced God," Tyta explicated, "The Seven are among those many faces, but I am supposed to kneel to all of them. The purpose of that, according to Jaqen, is to strengthen my belief in the cause of the Faceless Men."

"Strengthen it how, milady?" asked Polliver. "Do you believe this cause is a good one?"

"No, Faceless Men do not see anything as good or bad," Tyta proclaimed, "Instead, they see everything as what must be done or mustn't be done. Right or wrong is not important."

*People of my former profession would agree. Morality is a luxury some in the world cannot afford.*

"I am also learning how to lie," Tyta disclosed, "There is much more to being a Faceless Man than putting on a mask. I have to actually become that person. I cannot do that if I cannot convince others that I am who I claim to be."

*With that in mind, it would follow that deception is one of the key elements of the Faceless Men. This goal would probably be a bit of a challenge to Lady Tyta. She was generally a very honest and sincere individual. In fact, as far as Bronn knew, the only time she had ever lied was when she told him and her parents that she had defeated Connin singlehandedly. Then again, Jaqen H'ghar bade her to tell us that.*

"How good would you say you've gotten at lying so far?" Lady Daliah queried.

"Not nearly as good as I would prefer," Tyta murmured, "As Jaqen is fond of reminding me."

At that, she held out her arms, and Bronn and the others saw that they were covered with bruises. She lifted her tunic a little to reveal more bruises on her stomach, and then she rolled up her breeches to reveal even more on her legs. Predictably, Lady Daliah was shocked. Bronn was shocked, too, and a little outraged.

*What are they doing to this poor girl?*

"Do not be alarmed," Tyta reassured them, "Only a few of these are from drilling with wooden swords. The rest are from being disciplined for not lying properly. They don't hurt too badly, I swear."

"For your sake, I hope you learn to lie better quickly, milady," Bronn said drily.

"I'll try, Ser Bronn," Tyta uttered plainly. *Let's hope that's not a lie.*

Bonn noted that Brienne seemed somewhat dismayed. She almost looked as though she felt she had failed in her responsibilities. Bronn could see why she might think that, but he did not believe she was at fault. *She cannot blame herself; the Faceless Men didn't even allow her into the House of Black and White.* That aside, those bruises were important, even if they were not incurred from dueling. In Bronn's mind, bruises built character. *That aside, everyone needs to take a beating every once in a while.*

"Anything more?" Daliah Clegane inquired. She sounded somewhat desperate and hopeful, as though she was praying there was something more her granddaughter was doing to become a Faceless Man other than getting routinely beaten.

Tyta grinned and stated "Yes, there is my favorite part: Research."

"You mean like reading, my lady?" Bronn supposed.

"No," Tyta replied, "There are some books in the House of Black and White, but it is not necessary that I read any of them. Besides, it is not history I am researching; it is more recent events."
"How recent?" asked Brienne. *She must really give Tyta her space if she does not even know that.*

"Within the last turn of the moon," Tyta clarified, "You see, every day this past week, Jaqen H'ghar has had me leave the House of Black and White and go out into the city. On each day, he has told me not to come back until I have learned three new things."

"What sort of things?" Lady Daliah enquired.

"Anything, really," Tyta elaborated, "Maybe a fish merchant raised his prices. Maybe the Black Pearl has a new favorite customer. Maybe a theater performance was postponed because the lead mummer broke his leg. Maybe a khalasar laid siege to Norvos. Maybe the Wall crumbled. So long as it's something I did not know the day before, I can use it."

"What are you going to tell him today?" Bronn queried.

"As of now, I do not know," Tyta professed, "In fact, I should probably be going soon. The day's more than half over, and I've yet to find out even one new thing."

"Perhaps we might be of assistance," Lady Daliah offered. She was still holding the length of parchment Polliver had given her in her hand. She held it up for Tyta to see and declared "We've been doing a little 'research' of our own."

Tyta considered that, she shrugged and remarked "He never really said this, but I believe Jaqen expects me to acquire my three new things by listening in on other people's discussions or something like that. I think it would be cheating if someone just gave me three things."

"Well, as it happens, we gathered every bit of information on this parchment from several different sources," Polliver informed her, "It would be just the same as if you heard it from all their mouths at once, milady. Think of us as the… middleman for your research."

Tyta thought on that for a minute. Ultimately, she shrugged and murmured "I guess it would be alright if I only did this once. Jaqen never said I couldn't ask anyone for help in this task, after all. But I'll only pick two of my three things from the parchment. The third I'll learn from elsewhere."

*Just like the Cleganes; never taking the easy way out.* As Lady Daliah handed her granddaughter the length of parchment, Bronn leaned over and pointed it a place near the center of the roll. He professed "I would recommend these two, milady. They're not just isolated incidents that only concern a handful of people. They're major events that warrant the attention of much of the Known World. Even your friend Jaqen H'ghar will be astounded."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that, Ser Bronn," Tyta countered blankly, "I don't think Jaqen H'ghar can even get astounded."

*Given how impassive he always appears to be, that could be true.*

Tyta turned her attention to the two stories Ser Bronn had recommended. The first one caught her interest almost immediately. She murmured in astonishment "Viserys Targaryen is dead?"

"It would seem so, milady," Polliver affirmed, "The reports differ as to how, but everyone agrees on two things: his sister did nothing to stop his death, and it was her husband who did the deed."

Tyta raised an eyebrow. "Some would call that 'kinslaying.'"

"Not frowned upon by the Dothraki, milady," Bronn notified her. I doubt anyone else will frown upon Viserys Targaryen's death, either. From what I heard of him, he won't be missed. True
enough, even Gregor Clegane viewed Viserys as expendable. His niece, nephews, and sister, however, were not.

"Oh, I see," she commented, gazing back down at the parchment, "Well, the death of one of the few Targaryens left in the world would get Jaqen's attention. Alright, that will be the first of my three things. Now, let us take a look at this other story…"

Bronn was looking forward to seeing her reaction to this one. *Now she'll learn a bit more of her mother's heritage.*

Tyta seemed somewhat bewildered when she read the second account, which was by far the longest entry on that parchment. "Is this correct? All the slave masters of Astapor… died all at the same time?"

"Over the span of five or ten minutes would be more precise, milady," Polliver informed her, "What happened there must be confusing to say the least. There was no warning whatsoever; they all simply dropped dead. Every last one of them. Astapor was left in anarchy for several days afterwards."

"I cannot say I'll shed a tear for any of the victims," Lady Brienne commented severely.

"Aye," Bronn mumbled in agreement. *Slavery robs free people of their lives. It is only fitting that slavers have their own lives taken from them.* "Soon after this, another host of slavers marched from Yunkai to Astapor to restore order, but by the time they arrived, nearly all the slaves had fled."

"They were quick to hunt the escapees down, though," Polliver mentioned.

"How many managed to get away?" Brienne enquired.

"Alas, most of them were recaptured eventually," Bronn disclosed. He then smirked wickedly and added in, "Fortunately for us, none of the Unsullied were ever found."

"How is that fortunate for us?" Tyta muttered enquiringly.

Bronn kept his smirk and began to explain his meaning with "It just so happens that the day before the slavers perished, your grandfather visited Astapor."

"My grandfather is dead," Tyta pointed out.

"Not Grandfather Tarrence, sweetling," Lady Daliah informed her, "He means your mother's father."

"Prince Oberyn Martell," Polliver affirmed.

"Oh, yes," Tyta acknowledged, smiling a bit, "I remember now. Before we left the keep, Mother told me that he was on a quest of his own."

"Yes, he is searching for fighters to help us defend Westeros in the struggle against the Army of the Dead," Bronn disclosed, "By the time we left Moat Cailin, he and Ser Maron Greyjoy had already recruited at least three sellsword companies to their cause. Shortly thereafter, his fleet sailed to Astapor to get a closer look at the Unsullied. Apparently, a look was all they took. Prince Oberyn was vocal in how impressed he was with the Unsullied. Be that as it may, he made no effort to haggle, negotiate, or barter for them. Even after the slavers offered him a discount, the prince refused to contribute even one coin to the slave industry."
"I'm proud of him for that," Tyta declared sternly.

*You'll be even more proud once you hear the next part.* Bronn continued with "Prince Oberyn and his fleet left Astapor later that day. For the first two hours following their departure, the slavers were healthy. After those two hours... they started collapsing. As Polliver said afore, it took no longer than ten minutes for all of them to breathe their last."

"And just how does this relate to the disappearance of the Unsullied?" Brienne enquired.

"Despite his disdain for the slave trade, Prince Oberyn had appeared rather partial to the Unsullied," Polliver muttered, "Other reports claim that there were a few other slaves he took a liking to, such as a young girl who served as translator between Oberyn and the Good Master who dealt in Unsullied."

"Coincidentally, none of the slaves Oberyn had shown interest in were ever recovered," Bronn went on, "They all just vanished. Furthermore, it was later discovered that all the slavers had been poisoned. How the poison was administered to them is still a mystery, but each one of them succumbed to a different type."

Realization gradually dawned on Tyta's face. "Do you believe my grandfather brought about the masters' deaths?"

Bonn smirked again and said, "It is not without cause that he is known as 'the Red Viper,' milady."

Tyta giggled at that. *Her grandfather cleanses a city of slavers, and she laughs. That could be good or bad.*

"So, now Prince Oberyn is in possession of an army of Unsullied?" Lady Daliah presumed.

"It would seem so, milady," Polliver observed, "No one has been able to verify that as of yet. We came to that conclusion on our own. All things considered, it's the only logical explanation."

"Oh, and forgive my impertinence, but they are not his possessions, milady," Bronn told her politely, "I am certain Oberyn had enough gold to purchase some, if not all, of the Unsullied. It was more a matter of principle that he used this approach instead. He killed the masters to set the slaves free, not to save some coin."

"How do we know the Unsullied are actually with the prince?" Brienne disputed.

"There's nowhere else they could have gone," Polliver pointed out, "If they were still on land, they would have been found by now. In the midst of all the turmoil after the slavers' deaths, a fleet of Ironborn ships were seen pulling into the harbor. The same fleet had brought Oberyn to Astapor, and this time, it did not leave until less than a day before the reinforcements from Yunkai arrived. By then, the Unsullied had gone missing."

"All signs do point to Oberyn taking them with him," Bronn observed.

"I thought Unsullied only followed people who paid for them," Brienne Tarth remarked. *I'm amazed you knew anything of the Unsullied.*

"Normally, that is the case," Bronn elucidated, "But exceptions have been made. Sometimes when all their masters die, the Unsullied are left without any orders or directives. They need orders and directives to function; they are breed that way. In a situation such as that, I suppose all they can do is wait for someone else to come along and claim them."
"Some Unsullied may kill themselves after their master dies," Polliver contended, "But only if they are specifically ordered by their master not to outlive him."

"Whatever happened, Prince Oberyn must've found a way to win their allegiance," Bronn asserted, "My guess is he released them from their bondage, and he offered them to fight alongside him as freedmen. If so, they were likely quick to accept."

"Since they have nowhere else to go, I would expect them to accept," Lady Daliah remarked.

"Then we're all in agreement?" Tyta supposed, "My grandfather has forged an alliance with freed slave soldiers?"

"That appears to be so, milady," Bronn confirmed.

"Excellent," Tyta murmured happily, "I'll make that the second of the three new things I've learned today."

She then handed the length of parchment back to her grandmother, and she announced "It has been very fun to see you all again, but I'm afraid I need to leave now. Jaqen will be expecting me to return soon, and I still have to find a third thing to tell him."

"I understand, sweetling," Daliah told her granddaughter, "What do you suppose you'll use for your third?"

"I don't really know, Grandmother," Tyta confessed, "Viserys Targaryen died over a week ago. Grandfather Oberyn acquired the services of the Unsullied even earlier than that. Jaqen prefers it when at least one of my things is a little more recent. So, I'll look for something that happened today."

Lady Brienne stepped forward and stated, "In that case, my lady, I may be of assistance."

Bonn scoffed. "Haven't you been outside the House of Black and White all day?"

"Yes, I have," Brienne plainly affirmed, "What is your point, ser?"

"Simply that that vicinity is hardly an eventful place, my lady," Bronn noted. "Not ideal if one wished to look for something new."

"Unless one was to look up," Brienne sharply countered.

Bonn was perplexed. "'Up'?"

"That is what I'm trying to tell you," Brienne muttered. She looked around at everyone else and proclaimed "Even if Lady Tyta already had her three new things, I was planning to tell you all sometime today, anyway."

"Tell us what, Lady Brienne?" Lady Daliah enquired. Bronn, Polliver, and Lady Tyta all had that same question on their lips.

Brienne stayed silent for a moment before replying with "I believe someone in the Seven Kingdoms is in contact with someone in Braavos."

Bonn was stunned. So were the others, by their facial expressions.

"Explain, please," Lady Daliah requested.
"This morning, when I was standing guard, I saw a raven," Brienne recounted, "Before it flew over my head, it flew over the vast expanse of the Narrow Sea."

*Meaning it originated from across the sea.*

"Could it have been sent from Gregor?" Lady Daliah wondered aloud.

"No, my lady," Brienne Tarth promptly answered, "Moat Cailin is either due west or west-northwest of here. The raven I saw came in from the southwest."

"The southwest?" Polliver repeated. Brienne nodded her head, and black-bearded man commented "Then it could not have come from the North."

"It could not have come from the Vale, either," Brienne noted, "It must have come from the Crownlands, the Stormlands, or Dorne. By its flightpath, I am inclined to say the Crownlands."

"Then it could have come from King's Landing," Lady Daliah theorized.

"It would seem so, my lady," Bronn concurred, "However, where the raven came from isn't as pressing as who sent it."

"Or who it was meant for," Brienne debated, "I saw the raven set down somewhere in the city, but I never saw where exactly it landed or who picked it up."

"Did you at least see which district it landed in?" Bronn enquired.

"I'm afraid not," Brienne admitted, "All I know for certain is that it could have landed anywhere between the House of Black and White and the Iron Bank."

*At least that gives us an idea of the size of the area to search.* He asked no one in particular "Who do you suppose received the raven?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, ser," Brienne muttered, "I cannot even think of any potential suspects at this time. The Essosi do not use ravens to correspond with one another, and the only Westerosi in Braavos at this time are ourselves and the people who came here with us."

"You're right," Polliver validated, "I've been all over the city in the past fortnight, and I have not seen even one other person with the look of the Seven Kingdoms about him. Or her, for that matter."

"Well, *someone* must be receiving the ravens," Lady Daliah contended.

"Yes, Grandmother," Tyta agreed, "But who?"

"I suppose we'll just have to do some more 'research,'" Bronn slyly proposed.

"Should we tell Lord Gregor or anyone else back home of this?" Brienne inquired.

"Not just yet," Lady Daliah advised, "For now, we should continue to keep a low profile. But Ser Bronn is correct; we cannot afford to ignore this raven business. We should do a little investigating of our own."

"Fine by me," Polliver mumbled, "The men could always use more to do."

"I'll keep my eyes open, too," Tyta declared. After a bit of silence, she pronounced "In the meantime, I have three new things for today. I should get back to the House of Black and White
and tell them to Jaqen."

"Very well, my dear," Daliah Clegane acknowledged. She hugged her granddaughter again, and she whispered gently "Stay safe, and if possible, please do not take too long to visit again."

"Always, Grandmother," Tyta assured the Dowager Lady of Clegane's Keep, "And I promise you I'll come back soon."
From the top of the Wall at Castle Black, Westeros seemed to go on forever in every direction. Looking south, one was apt to think Dorne was infinitely far away. Looking east or west, one would imagine the space between the two points was immeasurable. Looking north, one would wonder if the vast expanse of snow-covered terrain came to an end.

In the case of the first three directions, an approximate distance had already been determined. However, no one knew for certain how far the lands beyond the Wall truly extended. Maps had been drafted and revised countless times over the ages, but no one had ever conclusively outlined the exact shape of the northern half of the continent. *All we really have are the best guesses of learned scholars.*

The Fist of the First Men was many leagues past the maximum visibility from the northern border of the Seven Kingdoms. While it was nowhere near as tall as the Wall, it still offered a superb view of its surroundings. Alas, this view had a limit. The northernmost part of the continent was still much farther away than one could see. Even on a sunny day with decent weather, one could hardly even catch a glimpse of the Frostfangs from the Fist.

*This weather is far from decent, and barely any sunlight is peering through the clouds.* In these conditions, Lord Commander Jeor Mormont could hardly even see what was directly in front of him. Then again, he did not need to see very far. *I already know what's out there, and I know it will head this way soon. If only I knew when it'll head this way.*

"Oh, ease down, you bloody beast," Jeor mumbled.

"Beast!" the raven quorked as it settled back down on the Old Bear's shoulder. "Beast! Beast!"

*It learned its own proper name,* Jeor thought sarcastically. Paying no further mind to the raven, Jeor listened for another blow of the horn. Not five seconds later, he heard it. *Arooooooooooooooo!*

Traditionally, two blows meant trouble for the Watch. These last nine years, that had not been the case. While it was not always a good thing, it was usually not a bad thing, either. If the horn was sounded a third time, however, then they would really have something to worry about.

Thankfully, there was no third blow that day. The Others were not nearing; just some wildlings. *Mance's scouts have returned.*

Lord Jeor stepped away from the northern edge of the Fist of the First Men. He solemnly made his way back to the encampment. He was not returning there because one of their parties had returned; Mance Rayder would receive that bunch. However, while the King-beyond-the-Wall spoke with the latest reconnaissance party, the Old Bear had duties of his own that required his attention.

For the duration of their stay on the Fist, Mance Rayder would manage all activities that utilized the Free Folk. Likewise, Lord Commander Jeor Mormont had autonomy over all the Night's Watch's doings. That was the agreement the two of them had reached; no interference in either's work. So long as they were aware of each other's intentions and did not withhold anything
pertaining to their plans and preparations from each other, everyone was content with this arrangement.

_It's remarkable. We're in the same place, we're on the same side, and we're eating, sleeping, and shitting together. Yet we still are not working together._ Soon enough, Jeor believed, they would be. When the Night King and his forces finally came, all the living would have to unite against him. If they did not cooperate, their only other option was to face the dead alone and die.

_We'll likely die, anyway, but at least we'll die together._

The Lord Commander swiftly carried out his responsibilities.

First, he went to the northwestern corner of the camp, and he met up with Bedwyck, called Giant by his black brothers. In actuality, he was the shortest man currently serving in the Watch, but he was the best climber in their numbers. He could reach heights twice as high as those where most other climbers would begin to return to the ground.

There were no trees or other structures to ascend on the Fist of the First Men, so Bedwyck's skills were unneeded up there. Still, he was as fine a lookout as anyone else amongst the present company. He had stood watch at the edge of the Fist for most of the morning and afternoon. In his hand, he held the horn which had sounded the return of Mance's scouts.

When the Old Bear approached him, Bedwyck dipped his head and declared "All clear, Lord Commander. Other than the group that just arrived and the occasional wild animal, there has been no movement to the north for the last few hours. Apart from that, I've nothing further to report."

"Report! Report!" shrieked the raven.

"Very good, Giant," Lord Jeor muttered in approval, "Aethan will be along to relieve you soon. Once he comes, give him the horn and go to Hake. He'll give you a horn of ale and something to eat."

"Eat! Eat! Eat!" screeched the raven. _Of course it knows that word. I just fed the fucking thing._

"He made something just for me?" Bedwyck murmured jokily, grinning a bit.

"Yes," Jeor Mormont said flatly, "He and the cooks made something just for everyone."

Secretly, the Old Bear was amused by Giant's cheeky remark. It was a sign that the shorter man was still in good spirits. _It is important that he and the rests of the brothers remain positive._ Jeor would have smiled, but he had to maintain discipline in front of his men.

After speaking with Bedwyck, the Lord Commander made his way into the encampment. The next person he went to see was Ser Mallador Locke, who had been waiting for him.

"You got here right on time, my lord," Mallador commented, "It's nearly time to rotate the shifts."

"Indeed," Lord Jeor conceded. "Any incidents?"

"None this time, thank the gods," the other Northman replied, folding his arms, "We're just about finished checking up on everyone. So far, all of them continue to draw breath."

"Breath! Breath!" the raven shrieked. _There are some things I would not mind stopping to draw it._

"Let us pray they will all wake up," the Old Bear muttered grimly. Ser Mallador nodded his
agreement.

At Craster's Keep, they had discovered that the Night King's power was stronger than ever. At the end of summer, it would take at least a half-hour or the touch of a White Walker to revive a corpse. Now, in the midst of autumn, apparently anytime something or someone died north of the Wall, the body could rise back up all on its own within a minute of expiring.

The only evidence of this had been provided by a team of wildlings who had seen it happen in the northern range of the Frostfangs. Since the Army of the Dead was just on the other side of those mountains, it could have been possible that only corpses who were that close to the Night King came back so quickly. Alas, no one could prove otherwise. Nor were they eager for an opportunity to do so. Until they determined how far the Night King's hold extended, they were expected to be on high alert and assume the worst. No matter how we fall down, we'll get back up straightaway.

A panic had almost broken out when this knowledge became common. Fortunately, Jeor Mormont, Mance Rayder, and their most trusted officers and allies had managed to quell this unrest before it devolved into widespread paranoia. Most of their units were still a little uneasy, but they had been that way when they first set out.

All else aside, Jeor did not let this new information bother him. This is simply one more obstruction we have to deal with. Subsequently, he and Mance had taken measures to account for this development.

They had issued a command for every person in their ranks to carry around a flask of pitch. That precaution served two purposes. Firstly, if anyone encountered another person who had died, he would be able to use his pitch to burn the body before it reanimated. Secondly, if the first individual's pitch turned out to be insufficient… he would use his fallen comrade's pitch to finish the job.

Luckily, they had more than enough pitch to go around. Since fire was the bane of their foe, they would need as many means to make it as possible. As such, they had stocked up on pitch and other flammable objects before they left the Wall.

Furthermore, only a quarter of their forces slept at any one time. Many of their company shared tents with at least one other, but it was without question that from this point forward, no tent would ever have more than one occupant slumbering within it. They would not dare run the risk of anyone freezing to death in his sleep and then rising back up to murder his tentmate whilst he slept.

The men slept a little more peacefully when they were alone. They did not have to worry about being butchered on their backs. Sleep is the only solace they have any more.

Nevertheless, there was still one other problem to account for. When the men slept in tents together, they had been able to share their body heat with one another. Now that the only warmth to be found was that which was provided by their clothing, the chance of freezing in their sleep was at least slightly higher than before.

As such, thrice every hour, a group of sentries checked up on their sleeping colleagues to ensure that they had not passed on during their slumber. Anyone found without pulse, breath, or heartbeat was to be burned immediately.

To date, three watchmen and five wildlings had succumbed to the frost since they left Craster's Keep. Fortunately, all eight of those bodies had been found and burned before they could cause any greater damage to their former associates.
Even here, on the Fist of the First Men, they were ready to burn anyone at any time. *Should I freeze, I pray they will not hesitate to burn me. I do not wish to contribute to the Watch’s hardships, be they in life or in death.*

"How many tents have been searched?" Lord Commander Jeor inquired.

"All but the ones assigned to Todder," Mallador Locke disclosed, "He's the last of the sentries to call in. Ah, here he comes now."

The Old Bear looked to where he pointed, and sure enough, Toad – as Ser Alliser Thorne affectionately called him – was approaching them hastily. He had been a ranger less than a year. He was still something of a green boy, but at least he was competent.

"Milord," he mumbled when he reached Jeor Mormont, bowing his head. The Lord Commander gave a nod in acknowledgment.

Mallador Locke stepped forward and asked, "Have there been any casualties, Todder?"

"I'm please to say no, ser," the young ranger pronounced. A moment later, he scoffed and added in "I had a bit of a close call, though."

"How so?" Ser Mallador stated inquisitively. *I'm interested to hear that, too. A 'close call'?*

"My tentmate, Brown Bernarr," Todder elaborated, "Whenever he and I shared a tent on the march to Craster's, he was always snoring. Always. Up until we were assigned to sleep at different times, I could barely get a moment's rest. When I stopped by him just now, however, he was lying stiff as a board and not making the slightest sound."

Jeor raised an eyebrow at that. He noticed Todder still had his flask of pitch attached to his belt, meaning it had not been used. "Go on."

*"On! On! On!"* Mallador Locke chuckled at the raven's outcry.

"At first, I feared that I would have to break out the pitch," Todder revealed, placing his hand on his flask, "Before I did, I decided to take a closer look first. Turns out Bernarr was just sleeping on his stomach. Soon as I rolled him onto his back, he started bellowing like that blasted horn."

*"Horn! Horn!" Least it's not 'corn' this time.*

"That's a relief," Mallador remarked, chuckling once more.

"Yes, it is," Todder muttered bluntly, "Never thought I would be so glad to hear that bugger snore."

"Well, he can stop snoring now," Mallador Locke proclaimed, keeping his arms folded, "Wake him and the others up and send them back to work. Then get some rest yourself."

"Aye, ser," Toad avowed, giving a salute.

As the young ranger hastened to obey this directive, Mallador Locke turned to the Lord Commander and observed "That's six more hours without any losses, my lord."

"Let us hope the next six fare the same way," said Jeor Mormont. He had come to say or think that at the end of each shift. He could only hope it to be true. Even if they were fortunate enough that all the remaining shifts passed by without complication, there would eventually be a *last* shift at some point.
The Old Bear proceeded to check up on the defenses next. He and Mance had agreed that they would not venture into the Frostfangs until they were as prepared as possible to face the Army of the Dead. In the meantime, they had also elected to prepare themselves for the possibility that the Night King would send at least a fraction of his forces their way before they were ready.

*The Fist will be as good a place as any to make our stand.* Their chances of survival would have been better on the Wall, but Lord Jeor was not going to permit the Others to march that far south without giving them a fight.

Jeor Mormont encountered Ser Jarman Buckwell, Kedge Whiteye, Dick Follard, and two other young rangers near the center of the encampment. Ser Alliser had daubed these two younger rangers Aurochs and Monkey, though their actually names were Grenn and Pypar respectively.

The Old Bear had tasked Ser Jarman with strengthening and fortifying the Fist. The man was aptly qualified for the responsibility; he was a brilliant tactician and a seasoned fighter. At present, he and the other four black brothers were gathered around a massive sheet of parchment.

"Afternoon, my lord," Jarman Buckwell bade the Lord Commander when the latter approached.

"Likewise, ser," Lord Jeor rejoined. "How come the battlements?"

"They're coming along nicely," Ser Jarman apprised him, gazing back down at the huge sheet in his hands, "See for yourself, if it please you."

*It would please me.* The others moved to make room for the Lord Commander so he could get a closer look at the parchment. On the parchment was a detailed drawing of the Fist of the First Men from a top-down perspective. The drawing had several markings on it, indicating where the defenses would ideally be placed.

"As you can see, my lord, we aim to dig trenches all along the northern and western sides of the Fist," Kedge Whiteye pointed out, "In this matter at least, the wildlings have been of great help. They did most of the digging, and we supplied most of the traps."

"I still say the caltrops would be more effective if the stakes facing away from the Fist were tipped with obsidian," Grenn proposed.

"We only have so much dragonglass to go around," Pypar muttered plainly, "Unless you've some method of replenishing our supply that I don't know about…"

"It was just a thought," Grenn said glumly.

"Yes, and those are rare enough for you already," Pypar japed, causing Grenn to scowl at him.

"He may be on to something, though," Kedge Whiteye thought aloud, "Rather than tip them with obsidian, suppose we lit the caltrops aflame. Then once the Others and their wights fall into the trenches, we can ensure that they won't climb out."

"That would be more practical," Jarman Buckwell admitted, "However, there is a problem: the wood we used to build the caltrops won't catch fire easily, especially in this weather."

"What if we doused the caltrops in pitch beforehand?" Grenn suggested.

Ser Jarman thought on that for a few seconds, and then he shrugged and murmured "That's actually a good idea, Grenn."
"He was due for one," Pydar stated slyly. Grenn rolled his eyes.

"We've certainly got plenty of pitch on-hand," Kedge noted, "We could soak the caltrops in it now, and we could have a crew on standby, ready to ignite the spikes at any moment."

"Make it so," Jeor Mormont commanded, "Assemble this crew with care and diligence. Every man on it must be bold and inflexible. Once the Army of the Dead comes, those trenches will start to fill up fast."

"We realize that, my lord," Jarman Buckwell disclosed, "The trenches are just the first line of defense. We're also putting up barricades on all sides of the Fist, including the southern and eastern ones. The best archers from both the Watch and the Free Folk will man those barricades, and they'll be armed with enough dragonglass arrows to hold off any incursion by the Others. For a while, that is."

*Fair enough. This is only one way to permanently hold off the Army of the Dead: destroy its leader.*

Deaf Dick Follard mouthed his approval of this technique. Since he advocated this approach, it must have been a sound one. Despite having absolutely no hearing, Dick Follard was an expert at reading lips, and he was a master with a longbow or a crossbow. Ever since he lost hearing, he was also utterly without fear. *If the rest of us went deaf as well, I wonder if we would be as fearless as he.*

"Excellent," Lord Jeor remarked, "Continue building up the fortifications along the Fist. I wish to be notified once they are complete."

"I shall oversee them myself, my lord," Jarman Buckwell asserted.

"*Lord! Lord! Lord!*" shrieked the raven.

"That fucking bird…" Grenn mumbled under his breath. For once, Pydar seemed to agree with him.

*Aroooooooooo!* The sound of the horn came very suddenly. It caught Grenn, Pydar, Kedge Whiteye, and Jarman Buckwell off-guard. Deaf Dick Follard did not hear the noise, but he did notice the others' reactions. While Jeor Mormont was not startled, he was a little surprised. He waited intently for another blow to follow the first. This time, however, there was no second blow.

*Rangers? How odd. We weren't expecting another party until tomorrow. Perhaps Benjen and his party had returned early.*

"It's coming from the south," Kedge Whiteye stated.

"More reinforcements from the Wall?" Grenn theorized.

"Unlikely," Jeor Mormont pronounced, "Half the Watch is already here. The other half has explicit orders to man the Wall and stay there. I told them not to come after us, even if we never return."

*In all probability, we will not. Should that be the case, I mean for us to be the last living people to ever travel north of the Wall.*

"Well, maybe they put Ser Wynton Stout in charge," Kedge Whiteye uttered, only partly jesting.

"Then gods help the brothers at Castle Black," Pydar stated cockily.
Jarman Buckwell nodded and said, "Last thing we'd need is an eighty-year-old lackwit countermanding the Lord Commander's directives."

Jeor Mormont grimaced. *Ser Wynton may have taken leave of his wits, but he has served the Watch admirably.* Wynton Stout had been clad in black for longer than any other living watchman, including Maester Aemon and the Old Bear himself. Age and experience had caught up with him in recent years, and the most he did anymore was grin foolishly and nod at everything. That was why he had not been brought along on this ranging. They needed people in control of their senses up here.

"You lot return to your duties," Lord Jeor ordered the five rangers, "I will investigate this myself."

"Yes, my lord," Ser Jarman acknowledged. The others muttered their agreement.

The northern, eastern, and western ends of the Fist could only be ascended by scaling the stone walls. They were much too steep to walk or ride up. The southern end did not share this difficulty. There, the rise was inclined just enough so that an entire caravan could climb to the top without having to leave anything behind on the ground.

When Lord Jeor reached the southern edge of the Fist, he spotted a party of mounted soldiers ascending the slope. Most of them were watchmen, as they were dressed in black. However, there were a few in the middle of the company who wore colors other than black. One of them appeared to be in red. He and his companions were also hauling a loaded cart up the hill.

That struck Jeor as queer. All the carts the convoy had brought from the Wall were accounted for, and they had not arranged to be resupplied by anyone until they went back to Craster's. So, where did *this* cart come from?

It took ten minutes for the whole group of riders to make it to the top of the Fist. They halted before Jeor Mormont, and the Lord Commander saw who was at the head of that group. He felt strangely relieved.

"We were not expecting you until the morrow, Benjen," the Old Bear muttered candidly.

"We finished our rounds sooner than anticipated, my lord," the First Ranger illuminated, "We would have gotten here even earlier than now, had we not encountered a hindrance or two along the way."

"Wights?" Lord Jeor presumed.

"Yeah, and lots of 'em, milord," Othor confirmed. "We lost five brothers."

"We would have lost more," Jafer Flowers muttered. He gestured to the people around the cart and added in "Were it not for the heroic efforts of these gentlemen."

At that, the few people there who were not dressed solely in black approached Jeor. The apparent leader of them was a young man. He wore some black, though it was interspersed with specks of white and a long, purple stripe. He looked to be a highborn souther, likely from the Dornish Marches. In any case, he and his associate were not of the Free Folk.

"Greetings, Lord Commander," the young Stormlander lord murmured cordially, "You do not know me or my colleagues, but you needn't let that trouble you. I assure you; we are friends of the Watch."

Jeor nodded slightly. *Everyone should be a friend of the Watch. It is we who guard the realms of*
men, after all. He looked around at these new arrivals, and he noted "You carry no banners."

"We have no banners," the man dressed in red proclaimed.

The truth quickly dawned on Lord Jeor. He assumed "The Legion?"

"Correct," the Stormlord affirmed, dipping his head, "I am Beric Dondarrion, Lord of Blackhaven. This red fool beside me is the red priest Thoros of Myr. I will introduce the rest of our party later. For now, I have a gift I wish to present to you."

He turned to the man seated at the cart and gestured for him to come forward. A whip was cracked, and the cart was pulled up by a pair of hardy brown destriers. Lord Jeor took a step back to make way for them. When they were past him, the driver brought the cart to a stop.

Curious as to what this gift might have been, Jeor Mormont peered inside the cart. He discovered it was loaded with over a dozen small kegs. His nose detected a distinctive odor in the body of the cart. It smelt sharp and bitter, like sulfur, coal, and... something else.

"What is this?" he inquired.

"This! This!" the raven shrieked. Thoros of Myr guffawed at that.

"Take a look inside one, my lord," Beric Dondarrion offered the Old Bear, "I caution you not to spill anything, though. This compound is precious."

'Compound?' Lord Jeor tentatively picked up the closest keg and carefully removed its lid. Inside the barrel was a type of coarse black powder. *Hold on a moment... black powder?*

"Is this black powder?" he asked no one in particular.

"Yes, my lord," Thoros of Myr validated, "We've brought you nineteen full kegs of it. All the black powder left in the world."

"Courtesy of Lord Gregor Clegane," Beric Dondarrion revealed, "The Mountain believes the powder will be of far greater use to the Watch than to the Legion or anyone else south of the Wall. Considering who you're up against, it's not hard to tell why. Thus, he decided to donate it to your noble cause."

"This is a marvelous offering," Lord Jeor proclaimed, resealing the keg and setting it back down in the cart, "My son Jorah told me of this substance. He even had the opportunity to apply it in combat. I believe he was one of only fifty who were entrusted with the use of it during Greyjoy's Rebellion."

"That is correct," Thoros of Myr commented, "I remember Lord Jorah well; I was there when he captured Rodrik Greyjoy at the battle of Seagard. I also fought alongside your son at the siege of Pyke. If not for him, my lord, I would have been the first over the wall that day."

Jeor Mormont could not help but smile proudly upon hearing that. *Jorah made a name for himself during the war, and it earned him a knighthood and a wife. Ten years later, people continue to speak of his deeds.* That made him wonder if people would speak of his deeds. Namely the one he was in the process of doing. He knew whether or not people would ultimately praise his actions did not really matter. Recognition, fame, and glory were just words to men of the Watch. Be that as it may, it was still something he liked to think about on occasion.

"I am immensely grateful for this, Lord Beric," the Old Bear insisted, gesturing to the black
powder kegs, "But are you quite certain black powder will be effective against the Army of the Dead?"

"We know it will," the Stormlord professed, "We've seen it work."

"When?"

"When! When!" the raven echoed its master.

"The other day, my lord," Benjen apprised him, "Once we completed our circuit of the Antler River and all the haunted forest south of it, we checked up on Craster at his Keep. After that, we headed to the northwest towards here. Not an hour after we left Craster's, we were ambushed by wights."

"They came on us very suddenly," Othor recounted, "Mawney and Lark the Sisterman were pulled from their saddles before we even realized what was happening."

"By the time we armed ourselves, we were surrounded," Jafer Flowers went on, "For the briefest of moments, I felt as though we were staring our doom right in the face."

"Then we happened by," Beric Dondarrion drily remarked, "Thinking quickly, I opened a keg of black powder and handed out some empty pouches to my men. In half the time it takes to make water, the pouches were stuffed, ignited, and flung at those undead bastards. Some of the wights were completely obliterated. The rest fled."

"You should have seen them scatter, my lord," Benjen mumbled with a smirk, "They seemed genuinely terrified of the explosions."

"None of ours were hit, were they?" Jeor queried in concern.

"No, we have very good aim, my lord," Thoros of Myr claimed, "We were careful not to throw too close to the First Ranger or any of his men."

"Did any of yours perish in the fight?" Jeor wondered aloud.

The red priest hesitated at first. He looked to Lord Beric, who nodded his head. After that, Thoros answered with "Just one. But we got him back."

"How do you mean?" Jeor was perplexed.

"Mean! Mean!" quorked the raven. Quiet down, or I'll show you 'mean,' you damn bird.

"I would prefer to explain in private, my lord," Beric Dondarrion hastily interjected, "It is not a subject to be discussed so openly, even though you are the only one amongst present company who does not know of it."

"As you wish," the Lord Commander conceded. There was an interval of quiet, and then he announced "I imagine you are tired after your journey. Follow me back into the encampment. There is food and shelter for all."

"Much appreciated, my lord," Thoros of Myr said merrily.

"Any friend of the Watch shall be accorded as a guest of the Watch," Lord Jeor asserted.

"Watch! Watch!" screeched the raven.

"Does that fucking bird ever shut up?" Lord Beric asked irritably. He was rather brash and
forthright, Jeor noted.

"No," the Old Bear told him flatly.

"No! No! No!" went the raven.

Although he was still on foot, Lord Jeor led the mounted company back to the vast campsite in the center of the Fist. He assigned a dozen of his most observant rangers to guard the cart of black powder kegs. Then he ordered Chett and the other stewards to see to the new arrivals' needs, especially those of the Legionnaires. They were honored guests, after all, and the Watch's hospitality did not end with the Seven Kingdoms at the Wall.

A half-hour after everyone was fed and rested, Jeor Mormont called for a meeting in his tent. The other high-ranking watchmen, Mance Rayder, several wildling leaders, Lord Beric Dondarrion, and Thoros were among the attendees. The Lord Commander's tent was easily big enough for all of these men to stand together with enough space to move and breathe.

Lord Jeor did not specify the purpose of the meeting right away. At first, he claimed it was just to follow up on everything they had done so far to prepare for their inevitable struggle against the Others.

Mance spoke first. He revealed "My scouts report the Army of the Dead still has not moved. Their forces remain amassed in the Lands of Always Winter, and not one of them has tried to cross the Frostfangs. Even so, their numbers continue to swell with each passing day. West of the Fangs, the land is completely overrun with the undead as far as the eye can see. All the same, I believe the Night King has yet to marshal his full strength."

"I can attest to that," Benjen Stark pronounced, "We stumbled upon a mob of wights due southeast of here. For all we know, the haunted forest is still swarming with them."

"So, what are we going to do about that?" asked Thoros of Myr.

"'We?'" Alliser Thorne repeated. "When did anyone say this concerned you or yours, priest?"

"It concerns all of us," Beric Dondarrion contended, "We may not have been born on this side of the Wall, and we may not wear all black. Nonetheless, we of the Legion have just as much of a right to protect the realm and battle the White Walkers as the Free Folk and the Watch do. My men and I wish to aid you in the coming conflict between the living and the dead."

A friend and an ally. Despite the generosity of that proposal, the Old Bear had mixed feelings about it. "We are thankful for the offer, my lord, but I am reluctant to accept it. You have already aided us plenty by supplying the black powder."

"Do you know how to use the powder?" Lord Beric asked rhetorically.

Lord Jeor was taken aback. He confessed "No, we do not."

The young Stormlord smirked and pointed out "We could withhold that knowledge from you just so you'd be forced to let us stay, but we will not. We do not resort to extortion. We will teach you, regardless. All we'd like in return is to fight alongside you when the Army of the Dead arrives."

"We cannot ask you to die up here, my lord," Thoren Smallwood debated.

"No one is asking us to," Thoros of Myr refuted, "Lord Gregor Clegane did not send us here just to deliver the black powder. Given the perils associated with that errand, there was a chance we
would not come back anyway. He knew that, and so did we. Thus, he told us that even after we completed our errand, we could stay here and join up with your great host."

"No one in our party was chosen for this job," Beric Dondarrion disclosed, "Every man of them freely volunteered to be here, myself and Thoros included. Before we met up with the First Ranger, we had a long discussion on this matter, and we unanimously agreed not to go back to the Seven Kingdoms. Not until you do, too."

"There is a chance we'll be going back as different people," Mance Rayder hypothesized, somewhat ominously. Not even people. Soulless shells, more like.

"We're willing to risk that," Thoros insisted, "We did not make this decision on a whim. We had time aplenty to change our minds or rethink this issue. For a while, I admit some of us did have second thoughts."

"No longer, though," Beric Dondarrion continued, "Those thoughts have been cast aside, and we've chosen which path we shall take. It shall be the same as everyone else in this tent. We're all prepared to die, same as the rest of you."

There was a long period of silence following that bold, outspoken declaration. It was only interrupted by the raven crying "You! You! You!"

A few seconds later, Jeor smiled lightly and muttered "We would be fools to turn away such valiant, capable, and willing warriors. If this is indeed the course you mean to take, we gladly welcome you and your men into our ranks, Lord Beric."

Lord Beric Dondarrion and Thoros of Myr were evidently pleased to be told that. Let us see if they will remain pleased once they hear my next announcement.

Jeor Mormont looked around the people gathered there and declared "Now that we've resolved that affair, we should move on to more pressing matters. Mainly planning an offensive."

"An offensive, my lord?" Ser Ottyn Wythers said in bewilderment "Aren't we simply holding the Fist?"

"For now, Ser Ottyn," the Lord Commander affirmed, "But not indefinitely. Every day we linger here, the Night King and his Army grow stronger. Before very long, their numbers will be so great that they could crash upon the Fist like a wave. I have no intention of waiting around for that to happen. No; gods willing, the Night King will never reach this side of the Frostfangs."

"I am with the Old Bear on this one," Mance Rayder stated. The one time he and I agreed on something, and it's something that involves a matter of life and death. That's a blessing by itself. "I personally believe we could afford to stay here and let the Others come to us. Nevertheless, I cannot deny that our defenses will only hold out for that to happen. No; gods willing, the Night King will never reach this side of the Frostfangs."

"If we somehow manage to kill the Night King, the Fist's defenses will not be needed at all," Beric Dondarrion pointed out.

"Precisely," Benjen Stark concurred. It's comforting to know that they are with me, too.

"Then the time has come when we must begin to prepare the advance into the Frostfangs," Jeor Mormont pronounced, "Over the coming weeks and months, we are going to devise the most optimal strategy for facing off the greatest threat the world has ever seen. We are not going to rush in inadequately equipped, and we will not squander our time by sitting idle. Not one single factor
will remain unaccounted for."

"Lord Gregor would admire such thoroughness, my lord," Thoros of Myr commented, "For the sake of my curiosity, what's the longest you are willing to wait before we seek out the Army of the Dead?"

"Year's end," Lord Commander Jeor Mormont replied. *Just six turns of the moon from now.* "By or before then, I mean for us to traverse the Frostfangs and engage the Army of the Dead in battle. I expect most – if not all – of us will not return. But that does not matter. All that matters if that we at least try to stop the Night King before he reaches the Wall. That, above all else, is the priority. If need be, I will face him in single combat and dispatch him on my own."

"Own!" quorked the raven. "Own! Own! Own!"

…

"Own! Own! Own!"

*That bird has no idea what it is saying, but it makes for a fine observer, all the same.*

Bran Stark was starting to tire of this conversation, so he elected to pull out of the raven. He shut his third eye, opened his first two, and returned to the cave.

He found Summer laying on his haunches at his side. Meera and Jojen were kneeling by his other side, as usual.

Most of Father's men and the horses were not in the vicinity. They had likely gone out hunting. *Hopefully they'll be back soon.* Considering what was out there, it was not safe for anyone to stay outside the cave overlong. Even the children did not go out there unless absolutely necessary.

Currently, Desmond, Hallis Mollen, Alyn, and Poxy Tym were the only guards present. Hodor was leaning against the far wall, his usual naïve grin spread out across his face. Next to the stableboy, Ser Brynden Rivers was in his usual spot, entangled in the weirwood trees.

"How long…?" Bran began to ask.

"Four hours," Jojen interrupted, "You should pace yourself, my lord. If you spend too much time outside of your own body, you may not be able to return to it."

"I've stayed in Summer much longer than that," Bran debated.

"Summer is always close-by," Meera pointed out, "The Fist of the First Men is miles and miles away. You mustn't let your mind remain so far away for too long. Not until you've mastered skinchanging."

Bran sighed. "Very well. I will use more care for this point forward."

The Reeds were clearly reassured to hear that.

Just then, Leaf and one of her sisters, whom Meera had daubed Snowylocks due to her white hair, entered the area. Leaf was carrying a weirwood platter in her hands, and Snowylocks held a weirwood bowl. The two of them made their way over to Bran

Leaf knelt to his level and held out the platter, saying "You need to eat something, my lord."
Bran immediately realized how hungry he was. *I could eat as much as Summer right now.* Even so, he merely shrugged, accepted the platter, and mumbled "If you insist."

When they left the Wall, Father's men had brought enough food along to last them several weeks. Alas, their rations had run out almost a fortnight ago. Thankfully, the cave provided adequate sustenance. The platter Leaf gave Bran contained oats, barleycorn, dried fruit, cheese and milk from the goats who resided in the cave, a blind white fish from the subterranean black river, and three types of mushrooms. *They claim to have a hundred kinds of mushrooms in these caves. By now, I'm certain I have sampled all of them at least once.*

The food may not have seemed like much, but Leaf and the other children had lived off of it for millennia. *If it is suitable for them, it should be suitable for us of the Seven Kingdoms, too.* Jojen, Meera, Hodor, and most of Father's men ate it without complaint. Every now and then, some of them felt a bit of a craving for meat. Hence, their occasional ventures outside the caves to hunt. *As long as whatever they bring back is dead but will not get up, I will not protest.*

While Bran was fond of meat just as they were, he was content with the food from the caves. He started with the dried fruit. As he chewed on some berries, he looked to the Reeds and queried "Would you like some food, too?"

"We just ate about thirty minutes ago," Jojen informed him.

Bran gave a light nod. *More for me then.* He gave Summer the fish, but he kept everything else for himself.

It only took Bran about five minutes to clean his platter. Once it was empty, Snowylocks stepped forward and handed him the bowl. *Time for the second course,* he thought humorously. He accepted the bowl and told her graciously "Thank you."

She nodded, but said nothing. There were around sixty children of the forest living in the cave of the Three-Eyed Raven. Leaf was the only one of them who spoke the Common Tongue. Whenever one of the other children spoke to Bran or his companions, she would mediate as translator. She did not have to do this very often, as the other children hardly ever spoke, even to each other.

Inside the bowl was a paste of weirwood seeds and sap. It was made from the roots of the massive weirwoods imbedded in the caverns. According to Leaf, consuming it was supposed to enhance his warging and greenseeing abilities.

Bran had despised this substance when he was first given it. However, he found that the more of it he ate, the more he enjoyed it. An interesting contrast to other forms of sustenance. Mainly mushrooms.

It took Bran even less time to eat the weirwood paste. His hunger had already been satisfied by the food Leaf had given him. He was merely eager to improve upon his skinchanging capabilities. *If doing so will make me the best warg and greenseer of all time, I'll swallow every last weirwood seed in this cave.*

After finishing his paste, Bran handed the bowl and the platter back to Snowylocks and Leaf. The two of them bowed respectfully and departed from the room.

Once the children were gone, Ser Brynden Rivers stirred atop his weirwood throne. He tilted his head upward and called out "Come to me, my lord."

Meera and Jojen helped Bran back to his feet. He proceeded to walk the length of the cave;
Summer padded alongside him quietly. When they reached the former Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, Bran dipped his head. Although he was not required to bow to the Three-Eyed Raven, he did so anyway by reflex. Mother and Father had taught him to always demonstrate his courtesies.

"What did you see this time?" Bloodraven enquired, gazing down at him with his one remaining human eye. A root was lodged in the socket where the other eye should have been.

"I saw the task force of black brothers and the wildlings on the Fist of the First Men," Bran Stark recounted, "Earlier today, My Uncle Benjen and most of his party reached the Fist safely. They arrived with a small group from the Legion without Banners."

Saying those words brought a bit of solace to Bran Stark. It had been more than a month since he last saw his Uncle Benjen Stark. Lord Commander Jeor Mormont had permitted the First Ranger to take two dozen rangers and escort his nephew and his company to the cave of the Three-Eyed Raven.

The trek to the cave had passed without incident. When they reached the cave, however, they were attacked by a swarm of wights. Three of Uncle Benjen's men were slaughtered in the ensuing skirmish. Donnis was the only one of Father's men who lost his life then.

*One Winterfell guard is worth three watchmen,* Bran observed. He did not give voice to that thought, as doing so would have seemed insensitive or indiscreet.

"How did you witness this event?" asked Ser Brynden.

"Through the eyes of the Lord Commander's pet raven," Bran replied. "It appears Lord Jeor is planning to attack the Army of the Dead before year's end. Is his effort folly?"

"That is not for us to judge," Bloodraven pronounced, "Nor is it the purpose of your training. The purpose is to prepare you for when you become my successor."

"With respect, ser, I am nowhere near ready to replace you," Bran Stark perceived.

"No, you are not," Ser Brynden Rivers concurred, "You will not be for a while yet. But you are young, and you are only beginning your lessons. In time, you will be an even greater Raven than I."

"How can you be certain?" Bran said dubiously, "Have you seen that?"

"No, but I have seen what you are already capable of," the ancient man proclaimed, "There is power in you, Brandon Stark. More power than you realize. I will guide you to embrace and use that power for the good of the world. But only if you allow me to."

Bran promptly dropped to one knee and declared "I will do whatever you ask of me, my lord."

"Hodor," said Hodor. He sounded amused. *Is there anything that does not amuse him?*

"Rise, my lord," Bloodraven bade the young boy. Bran returned to his full height, and the former Lord Commander of the Night's Watch told him "So far, you have used your third eye to see the world through beasts, birds, and the faces of weirwoods. In time, you will be able to see everything without the use of animals or trees. That is what we shall practice next."

"As you say," Bran acknowledged. He stepped forward and sat down at the base of the ancient man's weirwood throne. Once he was settled, he glanced over his shoulder and asked, "What would you have me do?"
"Right now, I would have you test the range of your third eye," Bloodraven pronounced, "I want you to open it onto ten different places in the world. These places will be of your choosing. They can be anywhere you wish to look, but I would advise you to spread them out. If there is currently a limit to your eye's reach, we must learn what it is."

"It will be done, my lord," Bran Stark declared. He turned his head back to its front and leaned back against the weirwood throne. He prepared to use his third eye once more.

"One more thing," Ser Brynden interjected, "Whenever you open your eye, I want you to do so without using a buffer. No animals, trees, or other mediums. That includes men."

Bran was astonished. He glimpsed over his shoulder again and stated "But, my lord, I haven't learned how to do that yet."

"Today you shall," the ancient baseborn son of Aegon the Unworthy contended, "Lean further back into my throne. The roots will supply all the power and strength you'll need for this endeavor. Simply focus on whatever places you wish to go to. Even if you have never seen those places in person, the roots will show you the way there."

"Very well," Bran said in acknowledgement. He sat up straight for a moment, and then he allowed his body to relax. The base of the weirwood throne became strangely comfortable all of a sudden. He felt some of the roots enclose around his arms, legs, and torso. Summer started to growl hostilely, but Bran calmed him with "It's alright, Summer. I'll be fine."

Once Bran was entangled in the roots, he asked aloud "How long would you like me to open my eye on these ten places?"

"Just long enough to take note of your surroundings," Brynden Rivers responded, "As your young friends from the Neck said, it would do us no good if your mind was left to wander for a prolonged period. So, while we are determining the current extent of your range, you should not linger in any one place for longer than a minute apiece."

Bran nodded in understanding. Ten places in as many minutes... I better choose widely. He tilted his head back and let it come to rest on a soft patch of earth against the base of the throne. Once he was settled, he closed his two human eyes, and he opened up his concealed third eye.

He suddenly found himself gazing at what appeared to be a map of the Known World. It took him a few moments to realize that it was no map; he was looking down on the actual world! It almost felt as though he was looking down on everything and everyone from the point-of-view of the gods.

As marvelous and breathtaking as this experience was, it was not the sole point of this exercise. He had to turn his eye toward ten particular locations in the Known World, and he had to focus in on them. Without any outside assistance whatsoever, except that which the Three-Eyed Raven's throne provided.

At first, Bran thought about visiting the ancestral home of each of the Great Houses in the nine main regions of the Seven Kingdoms, and then going somewhere outside of Westeros for the tenth attempt.

He decided against this approach. After all, there was nothing of real interest in the Vale or the Stormlands. Mother's sister, his Aunt Lysa, was the Lady of the Eyrie, but she was in King's Landing with her husband, Lord Jon Arryn, the Hand of the King. At present, the Eyrie was devoid of Arryns. Likewise, there were no Baratheons in Storm's End at this time. Other than Lord Renly, all of them were in the capital city, as well.
For a similar reason, Bran opted not to take a peek at Highgarden, either. Although the Tyrells were now his family by marriage, he was not very interested in the affairs of Lord Mace and Lady Alerie. Aside from that, he could vividly recall his experience with Lady Olenna Tyrell before she went back south. She had been grateful for their hospitality, but her eloquence and prickliness had made Bran uneasy. For now, I'll avoid spying on her, if I can help it.

Bran also wanted at least two of his ten places to be in the North. He had been away from his homeland for months now, and while he had not seen very much of it in his life, he yearned to at least see more of it.

He thought about looking in on Greywater Watch. That way, he could do a kindness for Meera and Jojen by letting them know how their lord father and lady mother were faring. Then again, he had heard how the Reeds' ancestral home was built atop a moving island, and he was uncertain if he could locate a castle that was never in the same place for very long. Plus, the Neck was a very disorderly place; swamps and bogs everywhere. I guess Meera and Jojen will have to remain as unaware of their parents' well-being as Lord Howland and Lady Jyanna are of theirs.

Ultimately, Bran decided the first eight of his ten places would be Winterfell, Bear Island, Moat Cailin, Pyke, Riverrun, Sunspear, Casterly Rock, and King's Landing. The last two would be someplace across the Narrow Sea. He would decide where specifically when he got there. Provided I can see that far.

Naturally, Bran started with his own ancestral home. He had already visited Winterfell many times since he became Bloodraven's apprentice. However, he had only seen it through the heart tree in the godswood, or through the eyes of Grey Wind or Shaggydog. Sometimes, he had been lucky enough to catch his father or brothers at prayer. He had noticed that Lady Margaery had begun to accompany Robb to the weirwood whenever he prayed. She's really adapting to the northern lifestyle.

Remembering Ser Brynden's instructions, Bran searched for another place to focus his third eye. The Great Hall and the training yard appeared to be empty, so he went to his next favorite place: Maester Luwin's office.

The maester was not alone right then. Robb, Margaery, and Mother were with him. Grey Wind was at Margaery's feet, and she was stroking him behind the ears. That was another sign that she was becoming a Northwoman; the direwolves had taken a strong liking to her. Bran made an effort to suppress the urge to warg into Grey Wind's body. It was not easy, but he managed.

He observed as Maester Luwin examined Margaery's abdomen. Is he giving her a physical exam? As it happened, he was not. The maester looked up at the Rose of Highgarden, frowned, and muttered sadly "I'm afraid not, my lady."

Margaery seemed dismayed. She stared at the ground and remarked "I was so certain this time, we would do it."

Robb wrapped his arm around Margaery and pulled her close. He told her reassuringly "We'll get there."

As the young husband comforted his wife, Mother looked to Maester Luwin and enquired "Maester, you are sure nothing is wrong with them?"

"Quite sure, my lady," the man in the chain proclaimed, "Robb and Margaery are both very healthy and fertile. By all accounts, she should be with child by now."
"Then why am I not?" said Margaery, almost demandingly.

"Would that I knew, my lady," Maester Luwin confessed.

Robb and Margaery are trying to conceive? And they're unsuccessful so far?

Bran wanted to hear more, but his minute was up. He removed his third eye from Winterfell and went to the second location on his list: Bear Island.

Historically, House Mormont had been one of the smallest houses in the North. Nevertheless, they had always been loyal vassals to the Starks. In recent years, they had risen in prominence. One of them married into Dorne and was a hero of Greyjoy's Rebellion, another married into the Westerlands and was a captain in the Legion without Banners, and a third commanded the Night's Watch and was preparing to face the Army of the Dead.

Bear Hall was an unremarkable edifice, but only strong and hardy men and women resided there. Bran saw Lord Jorah gathering his soldiers in the courtyard. They were lined in columns, and they all stood at attention. They were relatively few, but each one looked as though he – or she; there were females in those ranks, too – could singlehandedly take on at least ten wights.

Lord Jorah's wife, Lady Nymeria, formerly a princess of House Nymeros Martell, stood at her husband's side. Their son Edwyle was with them, dressed in a small suit of chainmail. Edwyle's sisters Jeyne, Alys, and Bessa were nowhere to be seen. Likely, they're indoors. However, Lord Jorah's Aunt Maege and her three younger daughters Lyra, Jorelle, and Lyanna were nearby. All four of them were garbed for war, just like the house's lord, lady, and heir.

Lord Jorah was addressing his units. He announced "If my father's campaign against the Army of the Dead fails, the Watch will need all the help it can receive to reinforce the Wall. Lord Eddard could issue the order for his bannermen to march north at any time. I want every one of you to prepare for that day. It may not come for a while yet, but we must be ready for it! Is that understood?"

"Aye, m'lord!" the soldiers declared in unison.

It's reassuring to know that Father is taking steps to prepare the Seven Kingdoms from the Night King's invasion. Be that as it may, Bran was still holding out hope that Lord Commander Jeor's offensive would be successful.

Lord Jorah's family seemed quite pleased with his motivation speech. Especially Edwyle and Lyanna.

Bran knew Edwyle Mormont. The two of them were nearly of an age, and they were good friends.

He knew Lyanna Mormont almost as well. She was just a little younger than he, and she had often accompanied her cousin to Winterfell. On more than one occasion, Father and Mother had hinted of a betrothal between her and Bran.

She would probably have some misgivings about wedding a raven, Bran supposed. That aside, Bran did not think the Three-Eyed Raven could afford to be so invested in any one person in such a way. I cannot worry on that now, though.

Bran next turned his eye towards Moat Cailin. That was the furthest south he had ever been in his physical form. It was also one of his favorite places to be. He had considered joining the Legion without Banners when he was older. The idea was even more appealing to him than enlisting in the Night's Watch, as he would not be bound to the Legion for the rest of his life. Perhaps the
Lord Gregor Clegane was in his solar. He was with Samwell Tarly, his personal notary and the best friend of Bran's cousin, Jon Snow. Targaryen, he corrected himself. Even now, after being aware of Jon's true heritage for more than half a year, Bran still occasionally forgot he was not a bastard.

Lord Gregor was seated at his desk. Samwell was on the other side of it, writing something on a piece of parchment. Once he was finished, he picked the parchment up, held it out for the Mountain to see, and enquired "How does that look, my lord?"

Gregor Clegane took a few seconds to study the contents of the parchment. Then he nodded in approval and perceived "It appears you have finally mastered writing in Maester Kennick's hand, Sam."

"I hope so," Sam uttered anxiously, setting down his quill pen and the parchment, "I shudder to think what might happen if anyone was to discover it was a forgery."

"As long as the Citadel does not find out, you needn't worry on that," the Mountain assured him.

Bran was bewildered. What's wrong with Maester Kennick? Is he unwell? Was he hurt?

"If you don't mind my asking, what will happen to the maester?" Samwell asked curiously, "It's been weeks, and you still have not made a decision regarding him."

"For now, he will simply remain confined to his quarters," Lord Gregor professed, "Until we've learned more of the Conclave's intentions, he will continue to perform his other duties from there, but he will always be under heavy guard."

"The people of the moat will undoubtedly notice," Samwell pointed out, "What will we do if they start to ask questions?"

"We will claim we suspect Kennick's life may be in danger, and that the guards are there for his protection," Gregor Clegane contended.

"Do you think they'll believe that?" the heir to Horn Hill queried.

"Would you?" the lord of Moat Cailin countered.

Samwell thought on that, and he murmured "I… I guess I would."

"Then you've nothing to fear, Sam," the Mountain debated, grinning lightly.

What is going on here? Have they arrested the maester? Before Bran could try to investigate this affair any further, he was forced to exit the moat.

Bran made a note to revisit Moat Cailin sometime soon. So far, this was the most interesting discussion he had listened in on.

At any rate, he swiftly turned his eye west, towards the Iron Islands. Theon Greyjoy had spoken with pride of his ancestral home on many an occasion. Bran wanted to see if it was as magnificent as his elder brother's closest friend claimed it to be.

Soon, he gazed upon the formidable castle of Pyke on the island of the same name. It is impressive; I will admit that much. Bran spotted Theon's uncle, Lord Victarion, standing on the
balcony of his solar in the outermost of his ancestral home's towers. *The Sea Tower, I believe it's called. Good thing I did not choose to ignore Theon whenever he talked about the Islands.*

Victarion Greyjoy was admiring the view of the sea with his young son, Gregor, who had been named after the Mountain That Rides. His lady wife Gysella, formerly of House Goodbrother, was sitting on a chair beside her husband. She was heavy with child. *She could give birth any day now.*

Just as he had that thought, Lady Gysella doubled over and let out a soft gasp. Almost immediately, Lord Victarion turned to his wife and asked her "Are you alright?"

She did not answer him right away. She just held her hands against her protruding abdomen and moaned lightly. Then, she looked up at her husband and whispered "It's time."

At that, Victarion knelt before his son and told him "Gregor, stay with you mother. I must go find the maester."

"Yes, Father," the little boy avowed. As the Lord of Pyke left the solar, his heir approached the Lady and said gently "I'm here, Mother. Don't be afraid."

She smiled softly and took his hand in hers, saying "I'm not, dearest. Not with you here."

Seeing them interact made Bran remember how much he missed his own mother. He missed her more than anyone else he had left behind in the North. He missed her warm embraces, her sweet kisses on his forehead, and the kind words she spoke whenever he was hurt. He even missed the way she scolded him whenever she caught him climbing the walls of the Great Keep. *You'll go back home soon enough,* he reminded himself, though he could not say when that would be. *Do not get distracted. Move on.*

Bran looked away from Pyke and turned his focus to Riverrun, his mother's ancestral home.

Although he had never met his grandfather, he did know that for over a year now, the Lord Paramount of the Trident had been bedridden by a debilitating illness. Out of concern, he peered into Lord Hoster Tully's bedchamber.

Sure enough, Lord Hoster was abed. However, he was not alone. A young man and a young woman were seated in comfortable chairs beside him. The man looked an awful lot like Mother, only a few years younger. He must have been Bran's uncle, Ser Edmure Tully, the heir to Riverrun. If so, the woman next to him must have been his wife, Lady Asha of House Greyjoy, Theon's older sister. *Does that make Theon my uncle-by-law?*

Asha Tully's top was unfastened, and was holding two small babes close to her breasts. She was feeding them in plain sight of her father-by-law. *She is even bolder than Theon.* The babes themselves could not have been more than a few weeks old. *It seems I have two more cousins now.*

As Lady Asha nursed her twins, Lord Hoster gazed at them happily. Bran noticed something peculiar. *Grandfather Hoster is clearly looking at the babes, but Uncle Edmure seems to be staring at Lady Asha's chest, instead.*

Bran was aware that grown men were strangely enamored with women's bodies. He, however, generally tried to avoid looking at girls when they were unclothed. A few days past, he had gone to the underground black river whilst Meera was bathing, and he had seen everything. He had apologized countless times, despite her reassurance that he had done nothing wrong.

As it happened, Bran had not been entirely repulsed by Meera's physique. Needless to say, he did not mention *that* to her, but it struck him as intriguing.
"They are incredible," Uncle Hoster commented on his new grandchildren. At least he still has his wits.

"Yes, they are," Aunt Asha agreed with her goodfather, grinning happily. "Once Maester Vyman clears me for sea travel again, I aim to take them on their first voyage down the Trident."

Uncle Edmure scoffed and murmured "As long as you can guarantee their safety and yours, I will not protest."

Aunt Asha giggled at that. "You are welcome to come along, you know."

"Of course, I will come along." Uncle Edmure drily proclaimed, "I am not about to send out you and my heirs out by yourselves. You may be the captain of the Black Wind, but I am still your lord."

"I never thought otherwise," Aunt Asha remarked, smiling slightly.

Bran was glad to see his mother's family doing well, but his time there was already up. He pulled out of the Riverlands and made his way as far south as his third eye could see.

The North and Dorne used to have almost nothing in common. However, after Prince Oberyn Martell enlisted in the Legion without Banners, relations between the two kingdoms had gradually begun to flourish. They had been strengthened even further when Prince Oberyn's second daughter married the Lord of Bear Island. Having heard much of the Red Viper's exploits, Bran had become fascinated by their culture and history. Off to Sunspear, then.

At present, Prince Doran Martell was in a meeting with the members of his household. That did not interest Bran, so he let his eye roam through the castle, looking for something more noteworthy. Soon he came across another young man and woman. They were walking hand-in-hand, though the man seemed a little tentative to do so. The woman appeared to notice his apprehension, and it amused her.

Bran quickly discovered it was not the holding hands that disturbed the man. It was where the woman was leading him.

They arrived at what must have been her bedchamber.

As she pulled him inside and locked the door, he muttered restlessly "Are you certain you want to do this now? I mean… I am perfectly willing to go along with it. I just want to ensure you are, too."

"What do you think?" she asked rhetorically, reaching out and running a smooth hand along his bicep, "Your brother and my cousin probably had this very same debate, and I bet she swayed his mind easily."

"If she is as persuasive as you, he definitely gave in before long," he contended, smirking deviously. After a pause, he stated "Alright… let us proceed."

"Gladly," was all she said in response, stepping forward and kissing him on the lips furiously.

Based on the man's hair, age, and build, Bran ruled that he could only be Garlan Tyrell, the brother of Willas, Ser Loras, and Margaery. If so, the woman must have been Princess Arianne Martell, the heiress to Dorne and Ser Garlan's possible intended. It would seem she is his intended now.

Ser Garlan and Princess Arianne began to undress each other, and they made their way to the bed.
That was when Bran decided he had seen enough. And… I'm done here, he thought sarcastically. Well, they likely won't be 'done' for an hour or so.

This was not the first time Bran had almost witnessed a man and a woman getting intimate with one another by accident. Once, Robb and Margaery had spent the night in the godswood. They had slept just before the heart tree. Thankfully, Bran did not see them until after they finished. He did not know what incited them to do something so brazen. Maybe they simply wished to do something audacious. I wonder if they were ever caught. Probably not, otherwise Father would never have let them go there to pray by themselves again.

Bran turned his attention back up north, and he went west once again. This time, he focused on Casterly Rock. Although Father had typically spoken of the Lannisters with disdain, Bran had always been a bit of an admirer of Ser Jaime. Especially after he had that bizarre vision of the Kingslayer holding his twin sister, Queen Cersei, on the night of Robb's wedding. That was what led me to where I am now, he realized.

Having been summoned to the capital city, Lord Tywin Lannister was away from the Rock. Thus, Ser Jaime was managing the family's household in his absence.

Right now, Ser Jaime was in his father's solar, talking with two other individuals. One of them was a short yet muscular and comely woman who somewhat resembled Prince Oberyn Martell. The other was a burly man who stood almost as tall as Gregor Clegane. He had the same build as Lord Gregor, too. Bran could tell he was not Lord Gregor, as the Mountain did not have an extensive scar burn on the right side of his face. His brother, the Hound, however, did.

Straightaway, Bran figured out who Ser Jaime Lannister was conversing with. Lord Sandor and Lady Obara Clegane.

"What exactly are you implying, Jaime?" Lord Sandor asked, somewhat irately.

Apparently, Bran had arrived right in the middle of a conversation. If only I came to this one sooner. Nevertheless, he listened to what the Kingslayer had to say.

"What I am implying, dear Sandor, is that that fiasco with the Golden Company might not be over just yet," Ser Jaime patiently told his friend and vassal. "Don't you ever wonder why a member of the Company came into your household?"

"Of course, we do," Lady Obara insisted, "How could we not? That bastard Connin plotted to murder Sandor, he nearly murdered Tyta when she found him out, and Mors and Dermot are all but convinced that one of the other new guards might try to do the same."

"They need not worry on that," Ser Jaime pronounced, "I am confident that the rest of your guards are true. However, I did a little digging of my own, and I believe the attempt on Sandor's life goes well beyond just House Clegane of Clegane's Keep."

That captured the Hound's interest. He supposed "You have evidence of this?"

"You could call it evidence," the Kingslayer contended, "The information has not been officially verified, but it is still something to go on. I can produce it for you within the hour. Before I show you, however, I must have your word that you will not disclose it to anyone. Unless I permit you to."

"You have my word," Lady Obara promptly muttered.
And mine," Lord Sandor pledged.

Ser Jaime nodded and remarked "Then come back here tonight, straight after dinner. I'll have it ready for you by then."

The Lord and Lady of Clegane's Keep agreed to this. *I wonder if Ser Brynden will let me come back for that, as well.* Bran would certainly ask for permission, even though he was not likely to receive it.

Bran took his concentration off of Casterly Rock and looked to the east, until he came to King's Landing.

Much like Winterfell, Bran had already opened his third eye on the capital city many times before that day. Also like Winterfell, he had only seen King's Landing through the heart tree in the godswood of the Red Keep or through his sisters' direwolves, Lady and Nymeria.

Now, for the first time ever, he was getting a glimpse of the throne room in Maegor's Holdfast. Unlike his most previous stop, his timing here was ideal. King Robert was currently holding court, and a herald had just called out "Tywin Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock, Lord Paramount of the Westerlands, Warden of the West, and father to Her Grace, Queen Cersei!"

Bran watched alongside the gathered noblemen and noblewomen as the Old Lion of the Rock marched down the length of the vast chamber. This was his first time seeing Lord Tywin in person. Bran would never admit this freely, but he thought the man was even more intimidating than Lady Olenna Tyrell.

He spotted Sansa and Arya in the crowd. They were with Rickard Clegane, the heir to Moat Cailin. They were also with Princess Rhaenys Targaryen, Lord Willas Tyrell, and Lady Ashara Dayne. They all stood to the right of the Iron Throne. Prince Jasper Baratheon was the only member of the royal family who stood with them.

The rest of the Royal Family – meaning the Queen, Prince Tommen, and the princesses – stood to the left of the Throne with the small council. Bran knew the names of the men who served on this council, but he could not tell who was who straightaway. Even so, it was fairly easy for him to figure that out.

The sour-faced man with the shaggy beard and prosthetic half-hand had to have been Rodrik Greyjoy, the Master of Ships. The old knight in the white armor was obviously Ser Barristan Selmy, the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard and one of Bran's idols. The tall black-haired man with the receding hairline who resembled King Robert was clearly his brother Lord Stannis Baratheon, the Master of Laws. The man in grey robes with a long chain around his neck must have been Grand Maester Marwyn. The blond knight standing near the Queen had to be Lord Tywin's brother Ser Kevan Lannister, the Master of Coin. That meant the bald, plump foreign-looking man could only have been Varys, the Master of Whisperers.

*I got here just in time, it seems.*

There was very little in the way of dialogue this time. The entire court had gone silent upon the entry of Lord Tywin, and it took almost the entire minute for him to reach the base of the Iron Throne.

As Tywin neared the Throne, Bran noted Princess Rhaenys's reaction to his presence. She seemed very restless, and even a little frightened. Seeing as how Lord Tywin had ordered the death of her family at the end of Robert's Rebellion, that was totally understandable.
Lord Willas soon noticed his betrothed's uneasiness, and he pulled her close to him. At the same time, Lady Ashara whispered something kind into Princess Rhaenys's ear. Those friendly actions seemed to soothe her for now. *Princess Rhaenys and Lady Ashara were guests of the Reeds for most of her life. I bet Meera and Jojen would like to know that they're doing alright at least.*

Near the end of the minute, Lord Tywin reached the Iron Throne. Just before Bran had to close his eye to the capital city, he saw King Robert rise from the Throne and hold out a hand-shaped pin to his father-by-law. *The badge of office for the Hand of the King.* Evidently, Lord Jon Arryn had been replaced.

Bran still meant for the last two places to be somewhere across the Narrow Sea. He decided both of them would be somewhere in Essos. After all, he hardly knew anything about Ulthos, Sothoryos, or anywhere else in the Known World. Apart from that, he did not wish to push himself too far. *This is meant to determine the farthest my third eye can see.* He would not forget that.

Since Braavos was the nearest of the Nine Free Cities, he thought to go there first. He was delighted to get his first close look at another continent. He was also delighted to discover that Braavos had many wondrous sights. Unable to single out any one thing in particular, he divided his time up amongst the chief attractions.

He spent a few seconds at the Iron Bank, a few seconds at the Titan of Braavos, a few seconds at the Arsenal, and a few seconds simply browsing through the lagoon and the streets.

When his time was about halfway over, his gaze fell across the House of Black and White. Something caught his eye, so he stopped there to get a better look.

A tall blond woman was outside the building. Her face seemed vaguely familiar. Then Bran recognized her as Lady Brienne of House Tarth. He had met her about two years ago, when Father allowed Bran and his siblings to travel to Moat Cailin and pay homage to the Legion without Banners.

As Bran recalled, Arya had taken a liking to both Lady Brienne and Lady Dacey Clegane, Lord Gregor's wife. Likewise, the two warrior women had taken a liking to Bran's sister. *Rickard may have, as well.* Bran could not confirm that, but based on what he had seen, it was a possibility.

Bran wondered what Lady Brienne was doing in Braavos. Before he could come up with a hypothesis, however, the doors to the House of Black and White opened up, and someone stepped outside. Bran redirected his gaze to the huge double doors, and he saw it was a girl, younger than even he.

He did not know the girl, but she looked slightly familiar. All he could tell right away was that she was Westerosi. Then he concentrated more closely. He noted that she was shaped like a Clegane, yet her complexion suggested Dornish heritage.

That made him think of Lord Sandor and Lady Obara again. *Could that be their daughter?*

When the girl left the vicinity, Lady Brienne followed her. Bran followed both of them for as long as he could. They were almost at the marina when he was forced to pull out of Braavos.

*Curious. Oh, well; I'll have time to revisit this later. I've still one place left. I better choose wisely.*

The last thing Bran had learned before he ventured north of the Wall was that Lady Dacey Clegane had secured an alliance with a Dothraki khal named Drogo. Bran's cousin, Prince Jon Targaryen, had gone to Pentos with Lady Dacey's company. Since he had not seen Jon at Winterfell, Moat
Cailin, or King's Landing, Bran thought it was possible that he had not yet returned to Westeros. *He must be in Essos still.*

If that was the case, assuming Lady Dacey's company was not still in Pentos, Bran could only think of one other place Jon might be.

Thus, he turned his eye to the far east, towards the Dothraki city of Vaes Dothrak. He had no way of knowing if Jon and his party had even gone there, but he wished to find out, anyway. He did not know much of Dothraki culture, and this would be as good a way as any to learn more about it.

Alas, he never found out if Jon and his company were in Vaes Dothrak. Just before he reached the end of the Dothraki Sea and the city came within his sight, Bran felt a sharp pain in his forehead. An instant later, his normal eyes shot open and he was back in the cave of the Three-Eyed Raven.

Although he was still wrapped in the roots of Bloodraven's throne, Bran effortlessly pulled himself free of the weirwood. As Meera and Jojen helped him sit up, he placed his right hand again his forehead and groaned. It stung, like someone had slapped him.

"Are you alright, my lord?" Hal Mollen enquired in concern.

Bran just rubbed his hand against his forehead. Then he glared around the cave and demanded "Who slapped me?"

"No one, my lord," Jojen claimed.

"No one's laid a finger on you since you laid down, milord," Alyn affirmed.

Bran Stark was not convinced. He was certain someone had struck him. He narrowed his eyes and looked around the room suspiciously.

Then he noted that Summer was by his side. The direwolf was standing at attention, but he was neither growling nor showing his teeth. If someone *had* slapped Bran, he would have done one or both of those things.

The second son of Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn Stark gradually eased down. He mumbled "Very well; no one struck me. That does not explain why my head ached a moment ago."

"It was not your head that ached, my lord," Ser Brynden Rivers announced, "It was your third eye. You very nearly overexerted it. You are quite fortunate that your body called you back before you could. If you had gone past your tolerance threshold, your mind would have been lost."

Bran sighed and observed "Then the farthest I can see is Vaes Dothrak."

"No," Bloodraven refuted, "Even closer than that. Braavos is the farthest."

Bran was astounded. "How did you know-?"

"I see everything you see," the ancient bastard professed, "For as long as you sit in these roots, your thoughts are my thoughts. I know the nine places you visited, I know why you selected them, and I know you picked the tenth one in hopes of finding your cousin."

"Can you see him?" Bran enquired.

"Yes," Ser Brynden Rivers declared, "I have had my eye on him for a while now. He is as much my kin as he is yours. He carries the very same sword I wielded against my half-brother, Aegor."
That is true. Bran had gotten a glimpse of *Dark Sister* when Jon came back from his visit to the Wall. He had claimed it was a gift from Castle Black's elderly Maester Aemon. Bran had confirmed the truth of that long ago.

"Well, where is he?" Bran asked, trying not to sound impatient.

"He is not in Vaes Dothrak," Ser Brynden revealed, "He was there a fortnight ago, but not now. Now… he and his company are headed west."

"Where are they going?" Bran said inquiringly.

"To rendezvous with the fleets of Ironborn ships that brought them to Essos," Bloodraven expounded, "They mean to board those ships once again."

Bran's eyes lit up at that. Suppressing the urge to grin, he presumed "You mean…?"

The Three-Eyed Raven merely nodded and announced, "Your cousin will be coming home soon."
"You are sure you are well?" Jon asked in concern.

Ygritte sighed in annoyance. "Yes, Jon. For perhaps the five hundredth time in half as many days, I am fine. I am not helpless; I'm just with child."

Very heavily with child. "Your delivery date could be any day now, Ygritte. I am only looking out for your best interests."

"As well as your own?" Aegon presumed.

"Of course," Jon affirmed, smiling gently. *I want both my girls to be safe.*

Although he would not know his child's gender until the moment of birth, Jon was inclined to think Ygritte was carrying a girl. He was secretly hoping it would be a girl. He could imagine having a daughter. In his mind, she would have Ygritte's flaming red hair, but in terms of behavior, she would be just like his mother or his cousin Arya. *She'd be a challenge, but one I'd be most happy to face.*

That was not to say Jon would have been disappointed if Ygritte birthed a boy instead. If she ended up giving Jon a son, he would be just as happy. *Besides, Dragonstone will need a proper heir at some point.*

"You need not fret, dear brother," Aegon assured the younger Targaryen prince, "By midday, we'll be at Pentos. Then there will be no more riding until we're back in Westeros."

*By then, the babe will be here.* He left the Seven Kingdoms a boy and a lover of a wildling. He would return a father and a young man engaged to be married. The realization of that made Jon smile even wider.

When she saw how ecstatic he was, Daenerys grinned, too. She brought her mare alongside his destrier and noted "You must really being looking forward to becoming a parent, Jon."

"Aren't you, Dany?" Jon Targaryen supposed, turning his younger aunt.

"Oh, absolutely," she confirmed, placing her hand on her abdomen. Her bump was just beginning to show. "Truthfully, I am a little envious of you. You'll see your child within a week at most. I might not see mine until sometime after year's end."

*Yes, and since Ygritte waited until the fourth month to tell me, you'll end up waiting a lot longer than I did.*

"Still, you should count your own blessings, Dany," Aegon cheekily muttered, "Not every woman is blessed to give birth to 'the stallion who mounts the world.'"

Jon and Ygritte snickered at that. Daenerys lightly rolled her eyes and remarked "You're not going to let up on that, are you?"

"Not until that stallion comes into the world," Aegon humorously retorted, "After all, I know every
expectant parent wants their child to be great, and some even wish for their children to surpass them in some way. But as far as Rhaego is concerned, Khal Drogo seems to be reaching for the stars."

"Well, the Dothraki do believe everything of importance should be done under the stars," Jon recalled.

Aegon scoffed. "You know what I mean."

I always know what you mean, 'dear brother.' Jon had been aware of his brother for less than a year now, but he felt as though they had always known each other. It felt so good to be with Aegon again after being apart for the first third of the year. All they needed was to reunite with Rhaenys, and the dragon would have three heads once more.

It had been over a turn of the moon since they and their fellow Westerosi departed from Vaes Dothrak. Originally, the only khalasar they had planned to leave with was Khal Drogo's. However, this was one of the rare instances when all the khals in all the lands were gathered there. That was either a coincidence or destiny at work. Or maybe they were just there for the naming of Khal Drogo's heir.

At any rate, Lady Dacey Clegane chose to take advantage of this opportunity, and she made an announcement to the khals. She apprised them of the coming war against the Others, and how she and her people had travelled to Essos to recruit as many fighters to their cause as they could possibly find. She told the khals that if they went back to Westeros with her, there would be wealth, glory, and fame for all.

Initially, Lady Dacey had expected only one or two of the khals to join her. Three at most; she dared not hope for more than that. To the astonishment of all, every single khal chose to rally to her side. Every last one of them.

Jon and everyone else still did not know how Lady Dacey managed to win them over. Dothraki generally steered clear of the Narrow Sea, as horses could not drink the water in it. Neither could men, on that note, but Dothraki were typically more concerned for their mounts than for themselves.

If the Dothraki are willing to sail across the Narrow Sea now, Dacey Clegane must have swayed their minds somehow. Perhaps it was her talk of wealth, glory, and fame. Perhaps it was the offer of a new challenge. Perhaps it was her mention of a supposedly unbeatable adversary. Perhaps the Dothraki simply respected the Lady of Moat Cailin that much.

Any of those possibilities was plausible, even the last one. Jon just hoped the khals did not expect anything sensuous to come of their respect. They may be renowned and feared on this continent, but back home, there is one man who towers over all of them. One who is even more renowned and feared by his enemies, and he happens to be the one who shares a bed with Lady Dacey.

Vaes Dothrak was completely empty when Jon Targaryen and his companions last saw it. Even the merchants, the traders, and the Dosh Khaleen had packed up their wares and left with the Westerosi units. Once the city was evacuated, they all headed west in one mass exodus. Jon could not even begin to count the number of the Dothraki, but if he were to guess, there had to be around one hundred thousand altogether. Or more.

Although all the khalasars had the same destination in mind, each khal still rode apart from the others. Evidently, none of them wished to merge his horde to any of the others. Jon could somewhat understand their motives. If the khals themselves could be persuaded to sail across the
Narrow Sea, their subordinates could probably be influenced to switch to another khalasar just as easily.

Once the Targaryens and their allies left Vaes Dothrak, they proceeded to Norvos. There they rendezvoused with the rest of Princess Elia Martell's company and the majority of the Golden Company.

Interestingly, they encountered another man from the Seven Kingdoms there. He had not been part of Princess Elia's procession. He was Ser Daemon Sand, a member of Prince Oberyn Martell's entourage. When he was given an audience with Lady Dacey, Princess Elia, and the Targaryens, Ser Daemon claimed to have ridden all the way from Qarth to deliver a missive. Apparently, the Red Viper had heard that his sister had been in Norvos recently, and that her forces were still camped there. According to his missive, Prince Oberyn was determined to meet up with Princess Elia before either of them returned to the Seven Kingdoms. As such, he proposed that they regroup in Pentos.

Princess Elia found that she liked this proposal. So did Lady Dacey. With regards to both presentation and morale, it would be best if they and their forces all went back to Westeros together. Besides, the alternative was to meet up at Norvos. Not only would that have put Prince Oberyn drastically off-course, but the Rhoyne was also only so wide. The amount of traffic they would face on the river was not even worth thinking about. *It would take about a month just to get all our ships out of the channel.*

In any case, a third of their armada was still docked at Norvos. Those were the ships they had brought Princess Elia and her company to Essos. She had the option to board those vessels with her units, the Golden Company units, and a third of the Dothraki forces. They could have gone ahead and sailed to Pentos then.

Princess Elia and Lady Dacey had ultimately decided that the ships *would* set sail, but only with a skeleton crew on board. They would send those vessels ahead to Pentos, where the ships in Lady Dacey's fleet were still docked. There the two fleets would wait until Dacey Clegane, Elia Martell, and everyone returned. If Prince Oberyn and his vessels were not in Pentos by then, they would all wait on him, too. *Knowing the Red Viper, he's already gotten there days ahead of us.*

Jon and his associates had remained at Norvos for one lone night. That was the longest Lady Dacey and Princess Elia were willing to linger. Aside from that, having so many Dothraki in the general vicinity made the city's populace restless.

The following morning, they resumed their march west. From then on, it was a relentless trek to Pentos. They stopped only at night to sleep, and they almost always ate whilst on the move. To encourage their associates, Lady Dacey and Princess Elia had declared that anyone who could not keep up would not be waited upon.

The Dothraki had no reservations about that proclamation. If anything, it just made them think more highly of the two highborn women. Furthermore, none of the sellswords or the Seven Kingdoms soldiers had the authority to question their orders. Thankfully, no one ended up getting left behind.

From Jon's perspective, no one seemed more eager to return to Westeros than Lady Dacey or Princess Elia. *Egg, Dany, and I are probably on the same level as them, though. Dany in particular.*

After riding for three whole weeks, they were finally nearing the end of their journey. *Our journey on land, at least.* At this moment, Jon could see the outskirts of Pentos and the western coastline of
Essos in the distance. He grinned at the sight of that.

We're almost there. We just need one day more. After that, we'll be out of this desolate, foreign land. Despite that cynical thought, Jon had actually enjoyed his time in Essos. All the same, he longed for home. He yearned for Winterfell. He missed his family. He even wished to revisit the chilly climate of the North. It'll be a welcome relief from all this heat. It occurred to him that soon enough, he would miss this heat. Nevertheless, he was confident that this would not be the last time he would ever feel warm. Westeros endured the Long Night once. It'll survive it again, and no one will convince me otherwise.

An hour later, they were beneath the walls of Pentos. Straightaway, they noticed that the gates were shut tight. That was hardly a surprise. Who wouldn't seal their gates upon spying a host of Dothraki rapidly approaching? Moreover, this host was composed of just about every Dothraki in the world.

Fortunately, the harbor was not entirely closed to them. The postern gate on the stone wall along the marina was shut just as tightly as all the other gates were, which meant that most of the docks were currently inaccessible to them. However, they still had access to the uncovered part of the harbor. So, they went there.

When they got to the commercial docks, they encountered another friendly party.

As Jon predicted, Prince Oberyn Martell had reached Pentos before they did. Princess Elia's ships had already gotten there, as well, but the Red Viper had arrived even before them.

Jon, Ygritte, Aegon, and Daenerys were at the very head of their massive army with Lady Dacey Clegane, Princess Elia Martell, Lord Tyrion Lannister, Lady Ellyn Lannister, Allard Seaworth, Lord Renly Baratheon, Ser Lyn Corbray, Ser Brynden Tully, and Ser Lothor Brune.

Prince Oberyn Martell and Ser Maron Greyjoy came to greet them personally. Ellaria Sand had accompanied her paramour there, as had their daughters.

"You've been busy," Prince Oberyn drily commented, gazing around at the Golden Company and the masses of Dothraki spread out across miles of land immediately south of Pentos.

"Yes, we have," Princess Elia wryly murmured, "And what have you brought into the fold, beloved brother?"

"Not as much as you, darling sister," Oberyn Martell bluntly replied, "But nothing that wouldn't warrant just as much boasting. We have an army of our own. Four, actually. Three are among the greatest sellsword companies in the Known World. The fourth is composed of the finest warriors you'll ever see."

That's debatable. Based on what I've already seen in this part of the world, the title of 'finest warrior ever' is a fairly competitive one.

"This is a free army, mind you," Maron Greyjoy hastily added in.

Lady Dacey was perplexed. "What does he mean by that?"

"This is a free army, mind you," Maron Greyjoy hastily added in.

Lady Dacey was perplexed. "What does he mean by that?"

"We have around ten thousand Unsullied soldiers who are fully committed to us now," Prince Oberyn disclosed.

Jon had heard of Unsullied once before, albeit briefly. As he recalled, by definition, they were slaves. Princess Elia, Ser Lothor, and Lord Tyrion all appeared astounded. Before they
could speak out, the Red Viper hastily said "They were not bought like horses or dogs. Nor are they slaves any longer. We released them from that bondage. They have joined us by their own volition."

"You are certain of that, my prince?" Lord Tyron asked, narrowing his eyes.

"You can trust him, my lord," Ser Maron asserted. He pointed over his shoulder to the vessels in the water, and he pronounced "No one on those ships was taken aboard unwillingly. We've no human commodities in our possession. The captains of the sellsword companies are the only people we paid to supply us with soldiers."

That appeared to be enough to set Elia Martell's mind at ease. She muttered "Then I suppose there's no harm in working with Unsullied."

"But are we paying them?" Ser Lothor wondered aloud. *We should. Only slaves work for free.*

"We plan to compensate them for services rendered," Maron Greyjoy contended, "But we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Truthfully, I don't think the Unsullied have any interest in money at all. They're probably willing to fight alongside us without pay simply because we gave them back their freedom."

*That's as legitimate a reason as any.* After all, the knights and lords of the Seven Kingdoms were not expecting any reward to come from their conflict against the Army of the Dead. Aside from the ability to continue breathing, of course. *All things considered, the right to keep living is its own benefit.* At the end of the day, it was the only one that truly mattered.

"We'll address the subject of wages later," Lady Dacey proclaimed, "Not just for the Unsullied, but for the Golden Company and the other sellswords, as well. Maybe even the Dothraki, too. For now, we should remain focused on our current objectives."

*The return to the Seven Kingdoms being the foremost of those.*

"We should seek out the harbormaster," Lyn Corbray suggested. He gestured to the stone wall that divided the marina, and he contended, "We need to get him to open that gate. It'll take us far less time to board if we have access to the whole of the harbor."

"I doubt we'd have much luck with that," Allard Seaworth observed, "You saw how quickly they closed the gates when we approached."

"I think it was only the Dothraki they closed the gates to," Lady Ellyn debated. *Exactly thoughts of mine.*

"Then couldn't we just load the Dothraki out here?" Lord Tyron proposed. "Once the horselords are all on board, the Pentoshi should be willing to let the rest of us use the whole of the harbor."

"I suppose that's our most feasible solution at present," Lady Dacey muttered, "It'll take hours, but it can be done."

"Then let's get started," Jon stated candidly, "No sense in wasting daylight."

"That is what brought us all here, Jon," Dacey Clegane wittily remarked. *Indeed. We've all gathered together in preparation of a very long, very dark, and very dangerous winter.* Jon casually nodded his head and said "Yes, I know that, my lady."
"You know nothing, Jon Targaryen," Ygritte disputed. Everyone laughed at that, including Jon. *One of these days, I'll learn.*

The rest of the morning and the entirety of the afternoon was spent loading their armies onto the ships. That was a long and arduous process.

There were around a thousand vessels, most of them Ironborn in make. Fifty of them had been set aside for the Unsullied and the sellswords from the Windblown, the Stormcrows, and the Second Sons. Seven hundred were needed to hold the Dothraki. Getting them on board was practically an all-day job. Worse yet, some of the khals were finally beginning to have second thoughts about traversing the length of the Narrow Sea. It was only because of Lady Dacey and the rest of the secret council's calm, patient, and persuasive reasoning that they did not back out.

By the time all the Dothraki were loaded onto the ships, the Sun was in the western horizon. It would still be hours before sunset, but when this endeavor began, the Sun was still in the east.

Fortunately, once the Dothraki were on board and out of sight, the gate to the harbor was reopened, and the Westerosi were allowed entrance to the rest of the docks.

Another hundred vessels were selected for the Golden Company. They proved far more cooperative and orderly than the Dothraki, and they had much more space to work with, now that the whole of the marina was open to them. They barely needed more than an hour to board their ships.

The last one hundred and fifty vessels were reserved for the Legionnaires and Royal Army soldiers who had come to Essos. Actually, nine of those were Volantene galleys that belonged to Vereld, Hollistor, and Talisa Maegyr. So, only one hundred and forty-one of them were almost exclusively for the Westerosi.

Jon expected them to set sail as soon as the last of the ships were loaded. That was the original plan, at any rate. However, as the Sun began to set in the east, something unforeseen came up.

At the time, Jon was standing on the bridge of the *Zenith* with Ygritte, Daenerys, and Aegon. Ser Gerold Hightower, Ser Arthur Dayne, and Ser Bonifer Hasty were standing nearby. Ser Bonifer had never been one of the Kingsguard, but he was obligated to protect Daenerys just as Ser Gerold and Ser Arthur were obligated to protect Jon and Aegon respectively.

The four of them were talking about what they would do once they returned to the Seven Kingdoms. That included what they would do after the Long Night.

Firstly, Daenerys would ensure the Viserys was given a respectful burial. There had been some Silent Sisters at Vaes Dothrak, and they had embalmed his body shortly after death. They were unable to remove the solidified gold from around his head, but at least they managed to preserve his remains. *She treats him with more respect in death than he ever treated her with in life.*

Sometime in the indeterminate future, Aegon would see to the rebuilding of Summerhall. Once the Targaryen stronghold was restored, he would claim his title as its prince and move in. Needless to say, his mother would live there with him. Furthermore, he wanted the Maegyrs to take up residence with him. As it happened, Vereld, Hollistor, and Talisa had been thinking about moving to the Seven Kingdoms permanently. If they chose to stay there, Aegon thought he might petition King Robert to grant the Maegyrs lands and incomes of their own. Maybe he could even establish House Maegyr of the Stormlands. *He should not get too ahead of himself. The Maegyrs have not even seen Westeros yet. First we better wait for them to decide if they actually like it there.*
Jon had plans of his own. His babe would be born on the voyage back home. With that in mind, he would have a few weeks to grow accustomed to fatherhood before they returned to the Seven Kingdoms. The very first thing he planned to do once they were back was arrange the wedding between himself and Ygritte. That would require a lot of detail, of course. As of yet, he had not even decided on a date or a place. He planned for it to be as soon as possible, though. As for location, it would either be at Winterfell or Moat Cailin. Both holdfasts were special to him. The former was his mother's ancestral home, but he had learned the truth of his heritage at the latter. Once he and Ygritte were wed, he would help to prepare for the fight against the Night King. Eventually, he would claim his title as the Prince of Dragonstone, and he, Ygritte, and their child would occupy the island fortress. *Mother will come, as well, naturally.*

Daenerys had no plans to settle anywhere just yet. After the Long Night, most of the khals and their khalasars would probably return to Essos. But Dany was hoping she might convince Drogo to stay in Westeros. Jon did not have the heart to tell her that that was almost certainly impossible. Dothraki were not know for coexisting peacefully with other cultures outside of Vaes Dothrak, and they did not adapt to other lifestyles. Aside from that, King Robert would hardly allow a horde of forty thousand Dothraki screamers to roam his lands and terrorize his people.

Still, if the Dothraki could be made to cross the Narrow Sea, maybe they could be made to adapt to the customs of the Seven Kingdoms for an extended interval. *That is not very probable, but it never hurts to be hopeful.* Whatever the case, Jon assured Dany that he would always keep the doors of Dragonstone open to her. Likewise, Aegon told her the doors of Summerhall would always be open to her, as well.

It was around the time they were finishing up this conversation when Jon spotted a litter coming towards them from the far end of the marina. Dany recognized it as the litter Magister Illyrio Mopatis travelled around in.

Lady Dacey Clegane noticed the litter at almost the same moment as Jon, and she went out to intercept it. It stopped as she came near it, and Magister Illyrio opened the curtain so that he was face-to-face with her. Jon watched as the tall woman and the morbidly obese man conversed. They were much too far away for him or anyone else to hear what they were talking about, but they only spoke for about one minute.

When Lady Dacey rejoined her people, she called for an impromptu meeting. About thirty minutes later, just before the last of the vacant ships were occupied by the last of the Golden Company, Legionnaires, and Royal Army soldiers, the meeting took place. It occurred on the bridge of the *Zenith,* and everyone of importance was gathered there. That included – but was not limited to – Legionnaire captains, secret council members, Golden Company officers, Royal Army officers, sellsword captains, Dothraki khals, Volantene nobles, and Targaryens. There were around fifty of them collectively.

Once she had their attention, Lady Dacey revealed the purpose of this gathering. She announced that Magister Illyrio Mopatis had invited the lot of them to dine with him at his manse that night. Apparently, that would be his way of seeing them off, his way of congratulating them on all their accomplishments, his way of reminding them that Westeros would always have allies in the east, and his way of bidding them luck in their struggles against the Others.

Lady Dacey explained that she was inclined to refuse the offer as politely as possible, but this was one situation where she felt she could not speak for all of them. As such, she wished to consult before giving the Magister a reply.

While Jon would have appreciated an elaborate banquet before living off packaged rations for the
next few weeks, he was looking forward to beginning the voyage back to Westeros sooner rather than later. Alas, most of the others present seemed in favor of banquet. They were perfectly willing to delay the voyage for another night if it meant they could have one last decent meal.

Lady Dacey ultimately put it to a vote, and three times as many people voted to accept the magister's invitation than the number who voted to decline it. As much as Lady Dacey wished to satisfy all the involved parties, she knew she could never please all of them. Just most. Would that I was part of 'most.' Oh, well. At least we'll get a free dinner out of the evening.

Allard Seaworth, Melisandre, and Ygritte had also been among the ones who voted against supping with the magister. Allard would still attend the meal for the sake of graciousness and ceremony, and because every other member of the secret council advocated accepting the invitation.

Nonetheless, Lady Melisandre and Ygritte opted to remain behind on the Zenith. Both of them gave the same primary reason as to why: there was no longer anything of interest to them in Essos.

Jon noted that Lady Melisandre seemed adamantly against him and the others attending the dinner. However, it was not the dinner itself that troubled her. She debated that with everything going on back in Westeros, they could not afford any more delays. At this point, she argued, even lingering in Pentos for a few hours could mean the difference between the salvation of the Seven Kingdoms and its destruction. While Lady Dacey always valued cautionary input, she concluded that the Red Woman was simply being a little too melodramatic in this case. Winter is coming, but it won't be here for another year or two. A few more hours here won't make any real difference.

Ygritte had another reason for abstaining, which she confided in Jon. She told him that if she did much more walking or riding, she felt as though she would probably give birth standing up or in a saddle. I'd like to think she's exaggerating, but I would rather not find out if either scenario could actually transpire. Women have given birth in stranger, more undesirable circumstances.

At any rate, once a verdict was reached, Lady Dacey swiftly went back to Illyrio Mopatis's litter, and she informed him that she and her colleagues had agreed to his offer. Jon could imagine the magister was delighted.

Jon watched as Magister Illyrio's litter was carried back through the western gate. By the time it disappeared from view, Lady Dacey was back onboard the Zenith. There she announced that they would head into Pentos in exactly one hour.

Jon spent most of that hour in the cabin he shared with Ygritte, Ghost, Lyarra, and his mother. The four of them were there to pass the time with him.

"You sure you don't want to come?" Jon asked Ygritte for either the third or fourth time that night.

"Quite sure," Ygritte sternly confirmed, "If you want, you can bring me back something you think I might like."

"Well, what would you like?" Jon inquired. Her food preferences have changed so much in the last few months that I can't even remember her favorite food anymore.

Ygritte merely shrugged and said "These days, I'll eat just about anything. I might even tear into some raw meat, depending on what mood I'm in."

"I don't think they'll have that," Jon muttered frankly. Even if they did, I'd much sooner feed it to Ghost and Lyarra than to you. "Actually, no; I know they don't have that."

As if by reflex, Ygritte refuted "You know nothing, Jon Targaryen."
Mother started to chuckle. Jon only snickered slightly, and then he gazed down at Ghost. He commented jokily "Least you won't ever mock me. Right?"

Ghost gave no response, but if he could speak, he probably would have given a sarcastic retort. That was the type of feedback Jon would usually expect a human to give him in this context. Wolves aren't people, though. Indeed; sometimes, they were better.

Although Jon wished to bring Ghost with him to Magister Illyrio's place, he knew he could not. After all, dogs were not permitted at formal, stately feasts. While direwolves were far above dogs, they were still beasts. So Ghost and Lyarra had to stay behind on the Zenith.

Since his mother was still posing as his maid, Jon could not bring her along, either. A highborn man does not eat at the same table as his servants. Jon actually had no issue with the concept of that, but not everyone in the world was as openminded as he. Besides, Mother had already agreed to look after Alyver Clegane, Torrhen Clegane, and Duncan Lannister while the boys' own mothers were at supper.

Before very long, Lady Dacey Clegane showed up at the cabin with her sons. Torrhen had just been fed, and he was sound asleep. Alyver was a little disappointed about not being allowed to go to the magister's manse, but he promised his mother that he would behave for Princess Lyanna. I hope he only calls her that when no one else is around. Alyver was not the kind to gossip, but he still had yet to celebrate his tenth nameday. In Jon's experience, boys generally did not keep secrets very well at that age. Cleganes seem to be an exception to that, as well.

Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn turned up a minute later with Duncan. He was still awake, but he was being very quiet. Well, I can count on him not to give Mother any grief. He had also seen Ygritte play with Duncan at Vaes Dothrak. The two of them had come to forge some manner of special bond. Looks as though she's ready for a child of her own. Jon only wished he could be as confident in his own ability.

Once all three of the young boys were in her care, Mother bade their parents and her own son a pleasant evening. She told them sweetly "We'll have plenty of fun, but they may be asleep by the time you get back."

"That is alright by me," Lady Dacey muttered plainly. Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn nodded in agreement.

Jon kissed his mother and his fiancé good-bye, and then he, Dacey Clegane, Tyrion Lannister, and Ellyn Lannister exited the cabin. As usual, Ser Gerold Hightower was standing vigil outside the door. He followed Jon and the other three highborn individuals up to the bridge of the Zenith. Everyone else was already assembled there.

his son Rhogoro. Khal Jommo. Khal Zekko. Khal Motho. Several other khals whose names escaped Jon at the moment. *So much power and influence in this one crowd… it's enough to fill anyone with awe.*

While they were many in number, those people accounted for less than half of the total number of their company. Scores of retainers of the aforementioned individuals would be accompanying them to Magister's manse, but they would not be dining with them. *They'll just stand by, watch us eat, and have their own supper when we get back here.* Jon knew several of those people, as well. Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning. Ser Gerold Hightower, the White Bull. Watkyn, Homeless Harry's squire. Ser Rolly Duckfield. Chiswyck. Tobbot. The Tickler. Dany's handmaids Irri, Jhiqui, and Doreah, and her kos Aggo, Jhogo, Quaro, and Rakharo. Khal Drogo's bloodriders Cohollo, Haggo, Jhaqo, Pono, and Qotho. Each of the other khals brought five of his own kos, too, but Jon had not bothered to learn their names beforehand. There were also a handful of house guards for each member of the secret council, as well as for some of the other highborn guests.

Once she stepped onto the bridge with Jon and the others, Lady Dacey briefly looked around the area, as well. After that, she perceived "It looks as though we're all accounted for. Let us not keep the Magister waiting."

Over the next several minutes, more than one hundred people disembarked the *Zenith*, and they all headed towards the western gate of Pentos at the eastern end of the harbor.

Drogo and all the other Dothraki had insisted on going to the manse on horseback. Jon and virtually everyone else were content to go on foot. *I've had enough of horses for a while.* That seemed to be the general consensus amongst the Westerosi.

Naturally, Daenerys went on horse, as well. Jon noticed Khal Drogo was the only one of the khals who brought his khalessi along. That was a little unorthodox by Dothraki standards; normally, the men and the women ate separately. Drogo was probably making an exception here because the magister was the one who had presented Dany to him in the first place. *Anyway, she was acquainted with Mopatis long before she ever met her husband.*

Although the Westerosi vessels took up the vast majority of available dock space, the harbor was still swarming with activity. Merchants, traders, and captains from all over Essos were conducting business or hauling cargo in every section of the marina. They shied away from Jon's group whenever it came near any of them. Once again, Jon suspected that was chiefly because of the Dothraki. *I wonder how many strings the magister had to pull just to grant the khals entrance to the city?*

As he and everyone else made their way to the western gate, Jon glimpsed over his shoulder back at the *Zenith* every few seconds. Aegon and Prince Oberyn were walking close to him at the time. The latter muttered in concern "Something on your mind, lad?"

"Yeah," Jon responded, "It's about Ygritte and her… condition."

"Oh, yes," Oberyn Martell remarked, grinning, "I don't believe I ever properly congratulated you, by the way."

"Thank you," Jon mumbled quietly, though he still felt uneasy.

"You didn't even know she was with child until today, did you, Uncle?" Aegon assumed.

"I did not," the Red Viper affirmed, "One look at her, and *anyone* could have figured that out."
"That is just the problem. Jon thought aloud "I'm a little nervous. What if she goes into labor while I'm out?"

"They'll send someone to find you and inform you," Aegon contended, "I'm certain you'd make it back to her in time."

"Getting back before the birth is not what worries me," Jon disclosed, "What if there are… complications?"

"If she does, she'll get through them," Aegon insisted, "Don't forget; she's in the care of 'Myrna.'"

"Besides, Maester Qyburn and Maester Haldon are just one deck below them," Oberyn pointed out.


Then again, Jon was aware that Haldon Halfmaester was at least capable. The man had treated Aegon's wounds after his duel with Young Griff, and none of his injuries had been infected. Other than a couple scars, Aegon seemed to have fully recovered from that affair.

Qyburn, on the other hand, had yet to prove his worth. He had only been with the Westerosi since they left Norvos. Ser Daemon Sand had found him and presented him to Lady Dacey and Princess Elia. After careful consideration, the two women had agreed to allow Qyburn to join their ranks. They believed that even a disgraced maester had some usefulness.

Qyburn used to be a maester of the Citadel, but he had been stripped of his chain for practicing necromancy and other distasteful arts. After that, he had ventured across the Narrow Sea. He had resided there for the last few decades, applying his services where he could. Until recently, he had been a member of the infamous Brave Companions. He had been their primary healer.

Less than half a year back, he had been forced to leave the Companions. The main reason for his dismissal was his age. He was nearly twice as old as the next oldest member of the Companions, and their commander, the dreaded Vargo Hoat, had told him that they would not abide having "wrinkled old codger who could drop dead any day now" in their ranks. Those were Hoat's own words.

Qyburn counted himself lucky, though. Often, when Vargo Hoat removed someone from his service, he also removed one of their hands or one of their feet. In extreme cases, he removed their heads. Qyburn was allowed to leave the Brave Companions with all his limbs intact.

Still, he was hoping not to encounter the Brave Companions ever again in this lifetime. So much so that he beseeched Lady Dacey and Princess Elia to avoid them at all cost. As a way to ensure that they steered clear of the Companions, Qyburn had provided the secret council and the Targaryens with elaborate physical descriptions of what Vargo Hoat and each of his lieutenants looked like. That way, they would know who to keep their eyes out for, as well as who to stay away from. His descriptions were so detailed, in fact, that Jon was confident he would recognize Hoat and his lieutenants on sight, even though he had never met any of them. I doubt we'll ever see the Companions now, but Qyburn's input will definitely be useful.

"Both are just as competent as the real thing," Aegon disputed, "Have a bit of faith, little brother. Your child will be perfectly safe, should anything happen while you are away."

Jon let out a slow, steady sigh and muttered "I suppose you are correct, Aegon."

"Of course, I am," the older Targaryen prince drily remarked, "Now, just relax and try to enjoy this evening."
"But don't enjoy it too much," Lady Dacey Clegane interjected in a quiet voice.

She and Princess Elia had been walking directly in front of Jon, Aegon, and Prince Oberyn. They were at the very head of the party.

Jon was perplexed. "Why do you say that, my lady?"

"I am simply recommending that we keep our guard up," Dacey Clegane softly murmured. That is sage advice on any occasion. She gestured to their docked armada and stated "Think on this: every person on board those ships is subject to at least one person in this large group."

Jon had not thought of this scenario like that, but now that he did, it was essentially correct. Every single person who had stayed behind in their armada was a servant, a vassal, or a bannerman of someone in the crowd of people who were headed for Magister Illyrio's manse.

Suddenly, Jon realized what Lady Dacey was insinuating. He uttered under his breath "If someone wished to disrupt or disband our grand army, the quickest and most effective way to do so would be to wipe out the leaders."

"Precisely," the lady of Moat Cailin affirmed, "With all of us in the same place at the same time, our enemies would never get a better opportunity than tonight."

"Do you believe the Magister is our enemy?" Princess Elia queried.

"I'd like to think not," Dacey Clegane stated, "After all, he allowed Allard and a hundred of our people to live in his manse for over a year. He sheltered Dany and her brother far longer than that. But take a look at this."

At that, she produced a length of parchment from her doublet. It had been crumpled up in the shape of a ball. She uncrumpled it, smoothed it out, and showed it to Elia Martell.

"What is that, Mother?" Aegon enquired curiously

"It's... a list of names," the Dornishwoman pronounced in bewilderment.

"Yes, our names," Lady Dacey revealed, "The magister gave me that list when last I saw him. He said those are all the people he wished to attend the dinner. All but two of them are in this party."

"Which two aren't?" Oberyn queried.

"Lady Melisandre and Ygritte," Lady Dacey answered him.

Jon's restlessness was beginning to resurface. I can understand why the magister would want the Red Woman at the dinner. In a way, she was the one who made all this happen. But why would he ask for Ygritte? Then it occurred to Jon. Perhaps Magister Illyrio invited Ygritte for his benefit. After all, she may not be one of the leaders of our forces, but she is betrothed to one of the few remaining Targaryens.

"How confident are you that this dinner is actually a trap, my lady?" Aegon inquired.

"Truthfully, not very," Dacey Clegane confessed, "I admit it is much more likely that the Magister is simply feeling generous and wants to hold a feast as a send-off for his allies from the Seven Kingdoms. Nonetheless, we cannot afford to ignore the possibility that his intentions are ill. So, until we can confirm otherwise, everyone should remain on alert."
"That would be wise," Oberyn Martell conceded, "We've been so focused on our dead adversaries north of the Wall that we've nearly turned a blind eye to dangers that are still living."

"No longer," Lady Dacey proclaimed, "That blind eye must see once more. We did not come all this way just to have all our hard work end up being for naught."

"My lady, if you are so concerned that we could be walking into a trap, why did you accept the magister's invitation in the first place?" Jon questioned.

"I must see for myself if it is a trap," the tall woman expounded, "If Magister Illyrio means us harm, then he is a danger to us. We could ignore or escape that danger for a time, but never for good. If a ploy to lure us into the magister's home failed, he would probably resort to having our ships seized or commandeered. Even if we got away before that, he would still pose us a threat to our people the next time they ventured across the Narrow Sea."

"I agree," Oberyn Martell concurred, "The only surefire way is to expunge a danger is to eliminate the threat of it."

"Should we tell the rest of our people about this?" Aegon suggested.

"We needn't tell them everything," Lady Dacey debated, "We should simply caution them to remain on guard and alert. Since they should be like that anyway, that should prepare them for any possibility of danger without them asking questions or causing them unrest."

"Fair argument," Princess Elia remarked, "But if it is a trap?"

"Gregor once said 'the best way to foil a trap is to spring it,'" Dacey Clegane illuminated, smirking a bit, "So, I propose that we remain casual throughout the dinner and act as though we suspect nothing. However, if Mopatis means us harm, I intend to neutralize him as a threat. So, at the first sign of trouble, be prepared to draw your weapon. But do not attack until I give a signal."

Jon and the others found that an acceptable arrangement. He placed his hand on the hilt of Dark Sister, as if to reassure himself. He would draw that sword and use it if he had to.

As they continued up to the western gate of Pentos, everyone in the column was advised to remain on guard and alert. As Lady Dacey predicted, no one asked any questions or became restless; they simply heeded the counsel and continued on as if nothing was amiss.

Soon enough, they were at Illyrio's manse. The magister himself was there to greet them at the gate. He welcomed them into his home with zeal. His excitement seemed genuine, but anyone could take up mummery. If only they had guest right in Pentos like they do back in the Seven Kingdoms. I would feel a little better if Mopatis offered us some bread, wine, and salt.

Jon expected Magister Illyrio to lead them indoors to his dining room. Instead, he brought them to the courtyard. A huge table composed of several smaller tables had been set up there. Magister Illyrio declared "Since so many of you are Dothraki, I thought it more appropriate to dine outdoors."

That was a fairly legitimate reason. Torches had been erected and lit all around the courtyard. Since the Sun would probably set within the next quarter-hour, they would not have to eat in the moonlight. We may be out in the open, but at least if anyone tries to attack us, we'll see them coming.

Before anyone took a seat at the huge table, Illyrio Mopatis offered for them to take off their weapons first. That made Jon, Lady Dacey, Aegon, Princess Elia, Prince Oberyn, and a few other
individuals somewhat wary. However, their anxiety was lessened a minute later when the magister remarked "I merely thought you would be more comfortable with your weapons beside you or behind you, and not attached to you whilst you sit. If you wish to keep them on, then by all means, do so. They are yours to brandish, after all."

Nearly every person in Jon's company decided to hold onto his or her weapons. Most of them likely did not suspect the magister of foul play; they were just accustomed to being armed at all times.

The officers, captains, khals, and other leaders in the party proceeded to sit down at the table. The kos and the other subordinates all went off to the sides of the courtyard and stood there, as though they were on guard duty. Jon felt somewhat reassured by their presence. Just remember; Ser Gerold is not ten feet away from you.

Magister Illyrio did not bother with speeches or any other announcements that were often given at grand feasts. He just ordered for the first course to be brought out. I'm not too surprised that he'd be eager to get to the meal. After all, given the size of the magister…

As soon as the food for the first course was served, Mopatis bade everyone to tuck in. They certainly did, especially the Dothraki. Utensils are wasted on that lot.

The feast was soon well underway. There ended up being a total of nine courses served that night, and each one lasted no more than fifteen minutes. With every passing course, the likelihood of danger seemed to dwindle more and more. By the eighth course, Jon was beginning to feel as though Lady Dacey had been needlessly fretting over naught. Still, she should be commended. She is always looking out for our best interests.

All throughout the meal, Jon opened his mouth only to put food into it. He did not bother talking with anyone else there, as he did not feel particularly talkative right now. Be that as it may, many of the other people there spoke to one another on various topics. Some of them were actually discussing some fairly interesting things.

By listening closely, Jon could pick up on bits and pieces of several conversations.

During the third course, he heard Brynden Tully and Lyn Corbray telling Maron Greyjoy of their stay at Vaes Dothrak.

"I heard of Viserys Targaryen's 'coronation,'" Ser Maron remarked, "Were you there when it happened?"

"Yes, unpleasant bit of business, that was," Ser Lyn recounted, grimacing.

"But, one could argue, a necessary one, just as well," Ser Brynden disputed, "After all, Viserys tended to cause more problems than he could help solve."

"I heard that, as well," Maron Greyjoy commented wryly.

"You know, perhaps we could have encased his entire body in gold," Ser Lyn speculated.

"Then he'd literally be more valuable dead than alive," Ser Maron japed.

Yes, but the only valuable thing would be the gold. Still, preserving a body in gold had a strange type of appeal. Jon wouldn't want to be laid to rest like that, but he could imagine some who would. Tywin Lannister would probably want to be buried that way. Some would say he'd be buried in his own shit. He giggled at his own joke. I should tell that to Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn later. They'd laugh their arses off.
During the fourth course, Jon overheard the Maegyr siblings talking about what they would do once they arrived in the Seven Kingdoms.

"Where do you suppose we'll land first?" Talisa asked her brothers.

"Since it was the King who commissioned the Westerosi to sail across the sea, we'll probably go to King's Landing first," Vereld muttered, "It would be most appropriate to go to the capital city before anywhere else."

"That may be," Hollistor remarked, "But it was Lord Gregor Clegane who organized this campaign and gave the idea of it to King Robert in the first place. Besides, the Others will come from north of the Wall. As such, it would make more sense if we travelled to Moat Cailin first instead."

"Either is fine with me," Talisa commented, "I'm hoping we might go to Oldtown at some point, too. Perhaps I could learn more of healing from the Conclave."

"Haldon and Qyburn could do that if you asked them," Vereld reminded his sister.

"I know," Talisa remarked, "But I would still prefer a maester who actually wears a chain."

"Suit yourself," Hollistor said plainly, patting his sister on the back gently, "I must admit that I'd like to visit the Citadel, too. There is so much I could study there."

Vereld scoffed and folded his arms. They were much more muscular than those of his scholarly younger brother. "There are times when I am amazed that the three of us are relatives."

That was not meant as a slight. It was just playful banter between siblings. Jon could tell the difference. Even before he met Rhaenys and Aegon, his cousins had always been like siblings to him.

During the sixth course, Jon heard something else that was centered around family. That was when Aegon addressed the matter of Young Griff with his mother. Apparently, his encounter with the boy from Pisswater Bend had generated a fair amount of apprehension in him. Most of that apprehension had subsided after his victory against Young Griff, but some still remained. He was speaking with Princess Elia right now for closure.

"There is no chance that I could have been switched before the Sack without your knowing," Aegon supposed, "Is there?"

"There is no chance at all," Princess Elia Martell asserted, "I know you are my son. Trust in a mother's intuition. That is something no magic, disguise, or trickery could ever triumph over. If Young Griff turned out to be you, I would have known the moment I first saw him. But I immediately knew he was an imposter."

"But what if he wasn't?" Aegon conjectured. Does he think she would have denounced him?

"I might have spoken out," the Dornishwoman muttered straightforwardly, "Then again, I might have held my tongue. But none of that matters now. All that does matter is that you are the real Aegon. The one I brought into this world. No one can doubt that any longer. Least of all you yourself."

That gave Aegon the peace of mind he must have been yearning for. He broke into a grin and embraced his mother, as if to express his gratitude for reassuring him. I know exactly what he's going through. It's a terrible thing; never knowing who you really are. Jon was fortunate he had only gone through that once. Aegon had been through it twice now. Like myself, he thought his
mother was his aunt until less than a year ago.

There were several other discussions Jon overheard at least part of.

He heard Lady Dacey Clegane telling her sister and her sister-by-law of how much she was looking forward to her reunion with her husband when she returned home to him. The devious grins on Lady Alysane and Lady Ellyn's faces were all Jon needed to imagine how Lord Gregor would welcome his lady wife back. *The Mountain certainly knows how to keep the Bear warm, Jon* thought in amusement.

He heard Elia Sand asking her mother why she was the only one of the Sand Snakes that had been allowed to come to the feast. Ellaria Sand claimed it was because Elia was the only one of her four daughters who was a woman now. Jon noted she gazed over at Ser Maron when she said that. He quickly figured out what that entailed. *Elia Sand and Maron Greyjoy? Who would have thought?*

He heard Allard Seaworth and Ser Bonifer Hasty talking about Lady Melisandre. They spoke in very hushed voices, so Jon had to listen intently to pick up on what they were saying. It was no secret that Allard Seaworth had been spending a lot of time with the Red Woman since they left Pentos, but Jon doubted the fact that Allard was a man and Melisandre was a woman had anything to do with their association. Apparently, Allard knew more of the mysterious priestess than anyone else. Even so, he was convinced that Melisandre was still hiding something from him, and he and Ser Bonifer were speculating as to what it might have been. *They're determined; I'll give them that much. I just hope they don't come to regret their inquisitiveness.*

Jon heard Prince Oberyn Martell telling Ser Lothor Brune, Ser Loras Tyrell, and Lord Renly Baratheon of his visit to Qarth. The Red Viper and his company had gone there immediately after they acquired the Unsullied. They had hoped to establish an alliance with the Thirteen, the merchant princes, or the House of the Undying.

None of those alliances came to be, but Oberyn *did* recruit a number of freelance sellswords whilst in Qarth. That included two pit fighters named Strong Belwas and Beshka. Both of them had come from Meereen just a few days before Oberyn's company arrived in Qarth. Apparently, some exceedingly wealthy nobleman had come along and paid for the freedom of all the pit fighters in Meereen. That same nobleman had offered the freed pit fighters the opportunity to work for him. This time, however, they would be paid to kill.

Most of the pit fighters accepted his offer. Khrazz, the Spotted Cat, Steelskin, Barsena Blackhair, the Brindled Butcher, Belaquo Bonebreaker, Goghor, Ithoke, Amaya, and the Beast were among those who agreed to serve that nobleman. Strong Belwas and Beshka were two of the few who refused. After having regained their freedom after being deprived of it for so long, they were far more interested in seeing more of the world. *Maybe that's why they accepted Oberyn's offer instead. The Seven Kingdoms would definitely be 'more of the world' to them.*

One of the feast's most intriguing conversations took place during the ninth and final course. This one was spoken between Jon Connington and Harry Strickland. Jon Targaryen did not even pick up on it until it reached its most fascinating part.

He managed to overhear Homeless Harry saying to Connington "Did I hear you right, Jon? You think Young Griff sent Connin after Lord Sandor Clegane?"

"It's the only explanation that makes total sense," Connington contended, "The boy was brash and arrogant. He never took threats as seriously as he should've. And you know as well as I that he was overeager to win back his 'father's' throne. The quickest way to get started in that pursuit would have been to attract the notice of one of the greatest threats to Young Griff's invasion plans."
"You mean Lord Gregor Clegane?" Harry Strickland presumed.

"Precisely," Jon Connington affirmed, "The assassination of the Hound would certainly have gained the Mountain's attention. Of course, Connin failed to kill the lord of Clegane's Keep, but the attempt on Sandor's life was still enough to incite Gregor to send the Legion after us."

Homeless Harry unleashed a deep sigh. "The sad part is... that honestly sounds like something Young Griff would have done. That idiot boy... he could have ruined the Company's reputation with that stunt!"

"Be thankful he did not," Jon Connington contended, "For the longest time, I believed he was my late best friend's son. There were many occasions when I wished he wasn't. I was actually quite relieved to discover he was not. In hindsight, he would have been almost as bad a king as Viserys."

"Is that why you did not weep for him?" Harry Strickland hypothesized, "Even though Young Griff was not the real Aegon, he was with you for most of his life. You must have cared for him slightly."

"I tried to care for him," Connington insisted, "I raised the boy, nurtured him, educated him, and protected him. Yet in spite of his upbringing, he turned out to be an appalling person. I never truly loved him. By the time he reached manhood, I came to dislike him. The only thing that made me continue to watch out for him was my belief that he was Rhaegar's. When I learned that even that was not true, I stopped caring. He was dead to me well before Aegon shoved Blackfyre through his throat."

"My father made some rather dispassionate friends in his lifetime. Still, Jon could understand where Connington was coming from. Family, friends, friends of family, and family of friends were always viewed differently from strangers."

Twenty minutes later, the final course was ended. Some of the guests looked full to bursting, but other than that, they seemed totally fine and healthy. None of the courses were poisoned, and no one unexpected showed up. In the end, Lady Dacey's qualms were unfounded after all.

No one seemed more pleased by that than Lady Dacey herself. She turned to the Illyrio Mopatis, dipped her head, and told him "We thank you most sincerely for your hospitality, Magister. Alas, we must leave you now. It is a month-long voyage back to the Seven Kingdoms, and we wish to begin it before the night is out."

"I understand, my lady," Mopatis asserted, wobbling to his feet. "I would like to accompany you and yours back to the harbor. I am compelled to see you all off myself."

"As you wish," was all Lady Dacey said in response. She did not even bother to argue with that request. It was a reasonable one, though. She probably feels a little ashamed for having misjudged him."

Ten minutes later, Magister Illyrio was back in his litter, Drogo and the other Dothraki were back on their horses, and Jon and everyone else were back on their feet. All of them headed back to the harbor together. At this hour, the streets of Pentos were practically empty.

When they got to the harbor, they found it completely empty. That was queer. From what Jon heard, the docks of Pentos were always bustling with activity. Even though they were far less busy at night than at day, at least a few dozen sailors could be found out and about at any hour.

I don't think the Dothraki can be blamed this time. Maybe the Pentoshi are just waiting for us to clear out before they resume their regular activities.
The Westerosi, the sellswords, and everyone else on the ground reentered the harbor first. The Dothraki followed after them, and Magister Illyrio's small party came last. Just after his litter passed through the western gate, the Magister announced "If you do not mind, I will remain up here. At this hour, my servants could stumble and fall easily if they have to carry me down this steep incline."

Neither Lady Dacey nor anyone else spoke a word of protest. Daenerys turned towards Mopatis and softly murmured "I suppose this is good-bye, then, Magister?"

"Yes, this would be good-bye, Your Grace," Illyrio Mopatis confirmed, tilting his head forward, "I fare you well. Your hardships are only just beginning."

Indeed, they are.

Jon and his company swiftly made their way down to the harbor. Some more torches had been erected on the docks. Those flames combined with the overheard light of the Moon were enough for them to see what was in front of them.

As before, Jon walked near the front of the crowd with Dacey Clegane, Aegon Targaryen, Oberyn Martell, and Elia Martell. However, they were not at the very front of the company. This time, Jon Connington, Harry Strickland, Ser Rolly Duckfield, and Watkyn were at the front. They must be eager to head out.

When the group reached the center of the harbor, Lord Jon Connington turned to Homeless Harry Strickland and enquired "Say, Harry, for my curiosity's sake, have you given any thought to your retirement?"

"'My retirement?'' the Captain General repeated in confusion. "Are you asking if I intend to stand down from my position soon?"

"It doesn't have to be soon," said Connington, "But, yes; I suppose that is essentially what I'm asking."

"Well, considering where we're going and what we're up against, the Golden Company will need a commander," Harry Strickland thought aloud, "I cannot afford to even think about resigning until after the Long Night."

That's good. We'll need steadfast men like him on our side when the Others journey south.

"What about after that?" Jon Connington inquired.

"After that, I might think about choosing a successor," Harry Strickland contended. He turned to his colleague and muttered inquisitively "Why are you asking me this, anyway, Jon? Can you think of an ideal time for me to stand down?"

"Actually, yes," Jon Connington replied. He turned to face the Captain General, and he candidly said "Now."

Before Jon Targaryen knew what was happening, Lord Jon Connington drew a dagger, seized Harry Strickland by his shoulder, and thrust the blade into his midsection. Homeless Harry tried to yell, but his breath was caught in his throat. Connington had caught him off his guard.

Watkyn promptly came to the Captain General's aid. He drew his shortsword and shouted at Connington "You son of a bitch!"
He did not even go two steps before Ser Rolly Duckfield intercepted him. Ser Rolly produced his own sword and slashed at Watkyn's upper body. The big-nosed squire dropped his blade, clutched his chest, and collapsed onto his back. His entire torso had been cut open from shoulder to crotch.

By now, Homeless Harry was on his knees. When it was clear he would not get back up, Jon Connington withdrew his dagger, and he turned to face the crowd. The expression on Connington's face had to be the most malignant one Jon Targaryen had ever seen in his entire life.

Just then, someone behind him screamed. He turned and saw that it was Doreah who screamed. Then he saw why she screamed.

Doreah had been riding near Cohollo, and a spear was jutting out of Cohollo's chest. The elderly bloodrider was struggling to remain ahorse, but he quickly gave out and fell out of his saddle.

Jon looked to the south, and he spotted a large silhouette with the right arm in an outstretched position. The one who threw the spear, he realized. A moment later, he also realized that silhouette was just one of dozens. Scores of armed figures were coming from the south.

Jon turned to the north, and he saw scores of armed figures coming from that direction, too. One of those figures soon reached Tobbot, who was standing apart from the rest of the company. Before the Clegane man-at-arms could produce his own weapon, the armed figure drove its sword through Tobbot's stomach and disemboweled him.

As the figure withdrew its weapon, Jon caught a glimpse of its face. He recognized it as Ser Jon Lothston, a serjeant in the Golden Company. What the fuck is going on?!

Things only got worse. He turned back to his front, and he saw another group of armed figures coming from the west behind Jon Connington and Rolly Duckfield. One of them carried a crossbow. Jon recognized him as Ser Denys Strong, another serjeant in the Golden Company. As Ser Denys and the other armed figures reached Jon Connington and Rolly Duckfield, he loosed a bolt.

Jon's eyes followed the bolt, and it ended up hitting Jhiqui just below her breast. The Dothraki handmaid yelped in pain and collapsed onto her stomach. Jon could tell she had not been the target. Apparently, she had moved right in front of Daenerys the split-second after Ser Denys Strong fired. Whether that was a selfless sacrifice or a grim misfortune on Jhiqui's part, Jon would never know.

Less than fifteen seconds had elapsed since Connington stabbed Harry Strickland, and already four of the company had been killed. Thankfully, Lady Dacey Clegane took charge of the situation before any more of them fell. She hastily drew Bearswrath, raised it up high, and yelled "Ambush! Everyone, to arms!"

In response, every remaining person in that crowd brought out their own weapons. If they had any. Dany and her two remaining handmaids did not. I just pray Jhogo and the others can keep them safe. Jon drew Dark Sister and Aegon drew Blackfyre simultaneously. Ser Gerold and Ser Arthur drew their swords and took up a defensive stance close to the princes.

As the armed figures came closer, Jon soon discovered that Ser Jon Lothston and Ser Denys Strong were not the only serjeants of the Golden Company among them. Worse yet, not all the figures were Golden Company men. Several of the others resembled some of the more famous pit fighters of Meereen.

When they were close enough, he realized they were the pit fighters!
Two of those pit fighters were rapidly getting closer. One was a gigantic Ghiscari with a bronze ring in his nose. *Goghor the Giant*. The other was also Ghiscari, and he was thin and lanky with a scar that covered the length of his bare chest. *Togosh*. Somehow, he managed to identify them from their posters before they were upon him.

Jon was prepared to fight the champions, but he did not have to. Togosh hardly had time to raise his weapon before Prince Oberyn Martell lunged forward and impaled him with his spear. At the same instant, Lady Dacey Clegane moved to engage Goghor the Giant. She parried his blows thrice, and then she slashed at a low angle and sliced his toned belly open. Goghor was absolutely still for a moment, and then his intestines began to slide out of the opening in his torso. That was when he fell flat onto his face.

As the Red Viper extracted his spear, the lady of Moat Cailin lifted her Valyrian steel longsword and shouted "Spread out! Don't let them surround us!"

Everyone who spoke the Common Tongue hastened to obey her command. Most of the Dothraki could not have understood Lady Dacey, but they did not need to. The horselords – along with everyone on the ground – understood enough of the situation to grasp that they were in mortal peril.

Despite being legends in the field, Dothraki were not very efficient in close quarters combat. That soon became painfully obvious. Here, in this crowded labyrinth of narrow, uneven, and unstable walkways, their horses' movements were severely limited.

A group of archers from the north released a volley of arrows at the Dothraki. Drogo, Dany, and their kos managed to avoid getting hit. Some of the other riders were not so fortunate. Khal Motho and all of his bloodriders were wiped out.

After the arrows struck their targets, another pit fighter rushed forward. He appeared to be a native of Yi Ti, and he carried a javelin. *Bloodsong*. Bloodsong was so fast that it was difficult to keep up with him. He managed to reach Khal Ogo's group, plunge his javelin through Ogo's head, and sprint away before anyone could stop him. Khal Ogo's son, Fogo, cried out in grief when he saw his father slump off his saddle.

Not all the Dothraki were hopeless. Jon saw Khal Jommo urge his horse towards Ser Caspor Hill. As he neared the Golden Company sergeant, Khal Jommo lifted his arakh and swung it underhand. With that single blow, he sliced off a large chunk of Ser Caspor's head.

By now, Ser Denys Strong had reloaded his crossbow. Even before he took aim, Jon was certain he was going to try to shoot Dany again. *I'll teach you a lesson, you craven*. With no regard for his own safety, Jon rushed towards Denys Strong with his sword raised. Ser Denys noticed, and he aimed his crossbow at the prince instead.

Just before he pulled the trigger, Jon swung at him with *Dark Sister*. As a result, he cut the crossbow – and Denys Strong's hand – in half. Ser Denys shrieked in anguish, dropped his broken weapon, and grasped the stump where four fingers were now missing.

*I'll put him out of his misery*, Jon thought maliciously. He raised *Dark Sister* again and slashed at Ser Denys Strong's throat. He cut right through the man's shoulder blade. The edge of Jon's sword stuck for a moment, and then he pulled it out. Denys Strong collapsed onto his side, and just like that, Prince Jon Targaryen had killed a man for the very first time.

The first of… gods, I have no idea. How many more will I kill before the night is over? At this point, Jon did not even know if he would *survive* the night.
He had no time to lament on that, though. There was a battle going on, and it required his full attention. If I stand still for too long, I'll be an easy target for the archers and spear-throwers. Jon made certain to keep moving. Ser Gerold stayed close to him. Standing back-to-back, the two men cut down any foes who came too close to them.

Lady Dacey Clegane was not too far away. Jon called out to her "What's the plan, my lady?"

"The plan is..." she began. She had to pause when a Golden Company officer swung a mace at her. She dodged the blow, hacked at the officer's upper body, and opened his throat. As he bled out, Lady Dacey finished with "Fight or die!"

"Sounds good to me," Ser Malcolm Branfield commented brazenly, pulling his own sword from the throat of a pit fighter.

Twenty feet away, Prendahl na Ghezn had thrown down his weapon. The commander of the Stormcrows had his hands in the air, and he was on his knees, trying to surrender to Ser Marq Mandrake. The Ghiscari frantically screeched "Yield! I yield!"

The serjeant paid no heed to his begging. He stoically lifted his battle axe and gave it a horizontal swing. Two seconds later, Prendahl's head slid off his shoulders and onto the ground. The rest of his body swiftly followed it.

They'll take no prisoners. Jon looked around at this vast onslaught of mayhem. This was his first true taste of battle. It was terrifying, but he kept his emotions in check. He had no time for worry. He had no time for fear. He had no time for panic. Fight or die. Those are our only options.

Jon struggled to remain aware of everything that was going on around him, much like he had at dinner. Except now, the lives of my friends and allies could depend on how aware I am. His own life would certainly depend on that.

By now, Bloodsong had found another intended victim. This time, he went for Lady Alysane Mormont. The She-Bear's size must have made her seem an ideal target. However, the short, quick pit fighter from Yi Ti had severely underestimated the Bear Islander's agility. When he thrust his spear at her neck, she darted away from him, and then she clubbed him in the head with her Morningstar.

Bloodsong is now Bloodface, Jon thought humorously.

The Mormonts were not the only women there who were capable of putting up a fight. A little further away, Lady Ellyn Lannister had just been approached by Ser Will Cole. He tried to cut her down with his sword, but she deflected with her own sword. After parrying that blow, Lady Ellyn stabbed Will Cole upside his chin with her dagger.

Those three could probably take on half of these

The literal moment after he had that thought, a throwing ax came flying past his head. Jon had no idea who threw it, but he saw it where it ended up. It sank into Lady Alysane's forehead. She immediately dropped her Morningstar and stumbled onto the ground.

At the sight of watching her younger sister fall, Lady Dacey bellowed in rage and went after the man who threw the ax. Jon did not see her get her vengeance, or if she even got it. He had to keep his focus. Lose your focus, and you'll lose your head.

Within the next minute, he discovered that there were three groups of people who were attacking him and his associates. The high-ranking Westerosi officers of the Golden Company (so far, the Essosi ones were nowhere to be seen), the pit fighters of Meereen, and… the Brave Companions.
He knew they had to be the Brave Companions because several of them perfectly matched the vivid descriptions Qyburn had provided of his former colleagues. The one closest to Jon appeared to be wearing the robes of a septon beneath his chainmail. He must have been the disgraced boy-loving Septon Utt.

_He'll probably go for me or Aegon. We're the youngest men here._ He went for neither of them.

Before Septon Utt could notice either of Rhaegar Targaryen's sons, he spotted Ser Loras Tyrell engaged in combat with the three Peakes. He moved to approach the young knight from the Reach, but Ser Bonifer Hasty interceded. Utt was cut down on the spot by a true follower of the Seven. He died weeping at the hand of Ser Bonifer Hasty. _Now that is poetic justice._

Meanwhile, Ser Loras Tyrell was locked in combat with the three Peakes. They were older men and veterans of many conflicts, but Loras was clearly the best swordsman.

In the first minute of their skirmish, he killed Lord Laswell Peake. In the second, he killed Ser Torman Peake. But in the third minute, Ser Pykewood Peake made a startling comeback. Infuriated by the deaths of his brothers, he delivered a barrage of deadly blows onto the Knight of Flowers. Loras struggled to parry them all, but some got past him. He soon had minor injuries in both his arms, both his legs, and his torso.

The duel ended in the fourth minute, when Ser Pykewood thrust his sword through the middle of Ser Loras's face.

Right after the Knight of Flowers fell, Jon heard someone guffaw. He turned to the source, and he saw a number of the Brave Companions advancing on Drogo and Daenerys. The guffawing one was clad in green and pink motley. That had to be Shagwell the Fool, one of the worst of the Companions.

For a moment, Jon thought his eyes were deceiving him. It looked as though one of the Dothraki was fighting alongside the Brave Companions. Then he remembered; two of the Companions _were_ Dothraki. This one was thin and scarred, so he must have been Iggo.

Quaro rode in front of Daenerys to protect her. He managed to put down two of the lesser Companions before he himself was pulled from his saddle and struck down by Shagwell's three-headed flail. The Fool simply continued laughing maniacally as he beat Quaro over and over again.

At the same time, Iggo went for Khal Drogo. Haggo was between him and the khal, but Iggo drove a dirk through Haggo's side. Once Haggo fell off his mount, Iggo pushed past him. There was a flash of steel, and Khal Drogo's arakh sliced clean through Iggo's scalp. The khal avenged his bloodrider almost as quickly as he lost him.

A few members of the secret council quickly came to Drogo and Daenerys's aid. Ser Brynden Tully and Ser Maron Greyjoy helped the khal to fend off the Brave Companions whilst Allard Seaworth and Renly Baratheon led Daenerys and her handmaids to safety.

At the same time, Ser Lothor Brune climbed onto a platform and armed himself with his longbow. He proceeded to shoot down any Companion, Golden Company officer, or pit fighter that came within range. He was careful not to waste arrows.

Lord Tyrion Lannister was of a like mind. He climbed onto a crate and displayed his battle axe, beckoning the enemy to fight him. Some answered this challenge… and ended up with three inches of solid steel in their heads, necks, or chests.

Once Daenerys was out of harm's way (for the moment, at least), Allard and Renly rejoined the
Meanwhile, Princess Elia Martell, Lady Ellaria Sand, Elia Sand and Talisa Maegyr were struggling to find some cover. The four of them knew how to fight, but they were not proficient in this type of warfare.

Vereld Maegyr and Hollistor Maegyr were defending their sister and the Dornishwomen from anyone who meant them harm. Hollistor was decent at best with a dirk and a shortsword. Vereld, however, was incredible with his bastard sword.

Pyg, another of the Brave Companions, tried to attack Talisa. Vereld effortlessly defeated Pyg. He gutted the homely man like the animal he resembled.

Even now, it was difficult to tell which side was winning the battle. Jon's side seemed to have lost more soldiers than the other side, but numbers were not all that mattered.

Somewhere in the harbor, he heard Jon Connington announce "The Targaryens are the priorities! Concentrate on them!"

Jon quickly found himself, Aegon, and Daenerys the target of a great many of their foes.

A small group of Golden Company officers led by Ser Rolly Duckfield charged towards Daenerys and her kos. Once more, Ser Bonifer Hasty interceded. The old religious knight opened the throat of one Company officer, stabbed a second one clean through the heart, and broke the neck of a third.

Ser Bonifer would have continued this rampage, had Ser Rolly Duckfield not jumped him from behind a moment later and shoved his sword through his back. Bonifer Hasty sputtered briefly, and then he crumpled onto the docks.

Ser Bonifer's sacrifice was not in vain; it had bought Dany and her kos enough time to flee from the scene.

Jon himself soon came under attack by a pit fighter whose skin pigmentation made him quaintly resemble a leopard. The Spotted Cat, obviously. This adversary's blades were shaped like claws, and they were attached to his leather gauntlets. Dark Sister may have been sharper, but it would have been much harder to block those claw-like blades.

Fortunately for him, Ser Gerold was still there. The White Bull helped Jon to combat the feral pit fighter. His thick plate armor protected him from the worst of the Spotted Cat's attacks. Other than his leopard pelt, the Spotted Cat was topless. Ser Gerold quickly made that work to his advantage. When the Spotted Cat threw an underhand slash, Ser Gerold drove his sword through the pit fighter's upper chest.

Aegon and Ser Arthur Dayne were currently fighting off four Golden Company officers. They had to give the Company men their full attention. They did not even notice that the other Dothraki member of the Brave Companions, Zollo, was nearby. The fat Dothraki began to move towards this skirmish. He meant to assist the Golden Company men.

He did not get far. As Zollo approached Aegon and his bodyguard, he walked right by the stack of crates Lord Tyrion Lannister was currently perched on. The dwarf noticed the fat Dothraki, and he quickly realized what his intentions were. He moved across the row of crates until he was right behind Zollo. Then he raised his axe and sank it into the fat Dothraki's cranium.

Zollo froze in his stance for a few seconds, and then he went limp and tumbled over. Lord Tyrion
gave a proud smile of triumph. *Bless that dwarf and his ax,* Jon thought, allowing himself a grin.

His grin vanished less than five seconds later. That was when Ser Lyn Corbray was cut down by Ser Franklyn Flowers. About ten seconds after that, Chiswyck was impaled in the chest cavity by Barsena Blackhair's spear. Not twenty seconds after that, Khal Moro had his arm cut off by Vargo Hoat himself, followed by his head. An angered Rhogoro moved to attack the man who murdered his father, but his thirst for vengeance brought about his own downfall. He was surrounded, overwhelmed, and butchered by the Companions before he could get anywhere near their captain.

*This is terrible. We're losing this fight.* Perhaps they were not actually losing, but the tide of battle was starting to rise in Connington's favor.

Jon felt a modicum of reassurance when he saw Ser Brynden Tully cut down Ser Duncan Strong and a few other members of the Golden Company. Alas, that small amount of reassurance was destroyed almost immediately, when Jon saw Lord Renly Baratheon had his throat sliced open by Urswyck the Faithful, Vargo Hoat's second-in-command.

*It's as though for every one of them we defeat, two of us perish, as well.* Jon could only hope that they could gain the upper hand before it was too late.

At the very least, Aegon and Ser Arthur Dayne had fought off their Golden Company attackers by now. Ser Arthur had killed three of them, and Aegon had managed to finish off Young John Mudd all on his own.

Mero, the commander of the Second Sons, had been striving to avoid getting into a skirmish with any of the pit fighters. But when he crossed paths with Khrazz, there was no way out. Actually, there was one way out. Khrazz provided it when he hacked at Mero's thighs until they were steadily leaking red. Within moments, Mero was laying on the ground, twitching erratically. Khrazz kept up the assault until the twitching stopped.

At some point, the Maegyrs had gotten separated from Princess Elia Martell, Ellaria Sand, and Elia Sand. Vereld and Hollistor managed to keep Talisa safe, though Vereld was doing most of the killing.

Right then, the three Volantenes came upon a pit fighter whose face was concealed by a heavy iron mask. This man was a Ghiscari, he was nearly as tall as Lord Gregor Clegane, and his hair was longer than Khal Drogo's. He must have been Belaquo Bonebreaker.

Vereld gestured for Hollistor to stay with Talisa, and he prepared to face the huge pit fighter in single combat. He may have seemed bold and fearless, but Jon could see his legs quivering. Even so, Vereld chose to ignore his fear.

That did not do him any good in the end. With a single blow of his greatsword, Belaquo Bonebreaker knocked Vereld's bastard sword out of his hands. Belaquo then stabbed the Volantene nobleman clean through his chest, and he physically lifted Vereld off the ground whilst he was skewered on the blade.

Talisa screamed, and Hollistor could only stare in horror. Belaquo held Vereld in the air for about ten seconds. Then he gave a powerful wave his sword to throw Vereld off it. Vereld Maegyr crashed into an empty fish vendor's stall, and he laid absolutely still.

If Belaquo so wished, he could have cut down Hollistor and Talisa just as easily then and there. But he did not attempt this straightaway. Instead, he seemed to delight in his most recent kill. Belaquo Bonebreaker started to cackle. He cackled in satisfaction and sadistic pleasure.
That cackle was soft, but it triggered something inside Hollistor Maegyr. Maybe it was fury over what had become of his brother or the concept of the same thing happening to his sister. Whatever the case, Hollistor threw his full weight against Belaquo Bonebreaker.

The iron-masked man only needed a second to regain his balance, but he lost it again almost right away. For in that one second, Hollistor had reached his arm around Belaquo and plunged his dirk into the back of the pit fighter's throat. A split-second later, Hollistor drove his shortsword into the Bonebreaker's abdomen and twisted it around.

Belaquo Bonebreaker may have been the tallest person there, but in the end, his height did not matter. Hollistor Maegyr stood over him, panting heavily. After ensuring that Belaquo would never get back up, he and Talisa ran over to the stall where Vereld had landed. They looked hopeful, but Jon knew what they would find.

Jon swiftly averted his gaze from the Volantenes. Sadly, that dismal sight was replaced by an even grimmer one. The very next thing Jon saw was Ser Maron Greyjoy getting a spear through his chest by… a Dornishman?

Then it dawned on Jon. There was a Dornish member of the Brave Companions. Timeon, his name was. And he just killed the Iron Captain of the Iron Fleet.

The instant Ser Maron dropped to the ground, Jon heard a shrill shriek. He turned in the direction of the shriek, and he saw Elia Sand running with a knife in hand. Ellaria Sand called after her daughter "Elia, no!"

The Sand Snake disregarded her mother's pleas and continued rushing toward the Iron Captain's killer.

She must have a death wish. She cannot possibly take on a Brave Companion all on her own. If Elia Sand knew that, she did not seem to care.

Out of concern for the girl's well-being, Jon Targaryen hurried to her aid.

Sallor the Bald was close enough to render aid to Elia Sand, as well. Unfortunately, he was in no position to help anyone, as he was surrounded by Steelskin, Orlos, Camarron, Senaera, and Ithoke. Jon never actually saw Sallor die, but he could hear the Qartheen squeal as the pit fighters practically tore into him.

Despite Jon's haste, he did not reach Elia Sand in time. Mere moments before he got to her, Timeon knocked away her knife and dispassionately shoved his spear through the Sand Snake's neck. Ellaria Sand's scream could be heard all over the harbor.

It was too late to save Elia Sand, but it was not too late to prevent others from sharing her fate. Before Timeon could extract his weapon, Jon was upon him. He slashed at the Dornishman and severed both his arms from his body.

Now Timeon was the one screaming. Jon let him scream for a full twenty seconds before silencing him. He did so by bringing the edge of Dark Sister up to Timeon's neck and slicing through his jugular vein.

By the time Timeon bled out, Ellaria Sand was on the scene. She knelt before her daughter, gently picked her up, and held her close to her chest. She slowly began to weep.

Jon wanted to comfort her, but the fight was far from over. He still had other allies who needed him to be there for them.
Ser Lothor Brune was still perched atop his platform, dealing out damage with his longbow. Jon
did not know exactly how many foes Ser Lothor had shot down. He was probably up to five and
ten by now. But his streak did not last.

As Ser Lothor reached into his quiver once more, he was hit by two arrows from the ground below.
One hit his shoulder; the other his pectoral muscle. In response, he let go of his longbow and fell
off the platform, landing in the bay.

Ser Brynden Tully was close by when that happened. When he saw his colleague fall into the
water, the Blackfish valiantly fought his way to the edge of the docks. Then he sheathed his sword
and dove in to rescue Ser Lothor.

However, as the Blackfish swam towards his colleague, half a dozen Golden Company archers
appeared at the edge of the docks. When the Blackfish reached the Crownlander, they unleashed six
arrows into the water. While none of those hit Ser Lothor, at least three of them hit Ser Brynden in
the back.

The Blackfish cried out in pain, but he did not relent. He struggled to get Ser Lothor back on land.

Before the archers could lose another round of arrows, Allard Seaworth, Daario Naharis, and the
Tickler were upon them. All six archers were dealt with quickly. Actually, only the four killed by
Allard and Daario went down quickly. The two who fell to the Tickler went down
slowly. Very slowly.

Lady Ellyn Lannister helped Ser Brynden lift Ser Lothor out of the water. However, once the
Blackfish was back on solid ground, he collapsed and did not get back up.

Miraculously, Homeless Harry Strickland was still alive. Thus far, he had spent the entirely of the
battle on his knees. Here, he finally found the strength to stand up and the strength to speak. As he
held the open wound in his midsection, he called out in a weak yet still somewhat imposing voice
"Men of the Golden Company! Stand down! Stop this madness! I beg of you; do not forsake your
honor so heedlessly!"

It was an admirable attempt on his part, but his words were wasted. None of the dissenting Golden
Company serjeants listened to him. When a commander must plead with his soldiers, he’s already
lost them for good.

Despite his initial failure to sway his men, Homeless Harry looked as though he was not about to
give up. Perhaps he was going to try to make another announcement to reach out them. Alas, he
never got the chance to make another one. One minute later, Harry Strickland was seized by
Shagwell and Togg Joth. The two Brave Companions forced the deposed Captain-General back
onto his knees whilst Vargo Hoat walked up to him with a thin knife in hand. Hoat began to
mutilate Homeless Harry in the most grotesque ways imaginable. Jon covered his mouth with his
free hand and turned away.

I think I'm going to retch.

Someone else must have retched by now. The harbor's usual scents of fish and saltwater were now
masked by the much stronger odors of blood and entrails. The area also reeked of piss, shit, and
vomit.

As overwhelming and unpleasant as those foul odors were, the sights and sounds were still vastly
more unsavory.

Amidst all this chaos, Lady Dacey Clegane was striving to establish some order. As she
withdrew Beawrath from Ser Marq Mandrake's abdomen, she called out "Anyone who's still
alive, rally behind me! We must clear a path to the ships!"

Everyone who was still on their feet or on horseback hurried to regroup with the lady of Moat Cailin. Jon and a few others managed to get to Lady Dacey without too hassle, but most everyone else had to fight their way there.

Daenerys came under attack again. An archer from the Brave Companions unleashed three arrows in her direction. All three of them missed her, but only two of them hit nothing. The third hit Doreah in her temple.

Before the Companion archer could draw another arrow, Lady Ellyn Lannister flung her dagger at him. Even when moving from over twenty away, she managed to land the blade in his neck. Lord Tyrion Lannister happened by the archer as he crumpled to the ground. Although he was not a fast runner, the dwarf took the time to retrieve his lady wife's dagger and return it to her.

By now, Jon and Ser Gerold had reached Lady Dacey. Nearly everybody else was already there or on their way there. A few unlucky individuals were still cut off by the foe. Of those few, the Tattered Prince was in the most desperate situation. He was totally isolated from everyone else on the eastern side of the dock.

However, he did not appear to be making any attempt to move towards the bay. In fact, he was moving towards Pentos instead.

"I was chased out of this city once," the elderly Pentoshi announced, "I will not suffer that disgrace a second time."

He's prepared to die, Jon realized.

The Tattered Prince charged up the incline towards the western gate of Pentos. For an old man, he was rather quick and resilient. Jon was mildly impressed by his determination to reenter the Free City.

For a moment, it looked as though he would actually succeed. Alas, Illyrio Mopatis's litter was in front of the gate, blocking it both ways. Lord Jon Connington and a pair of Golden Company serjeants were standing before the magister. When the Tattered Prince was close enough, they drew their swords and engaged him in combat.

The Tattered Prince managed to kill both the serjeants, but the exiled lord of Griffin's Roost disarmed the captain of the Windblown and drove his sword through his lung. Connington then kicked the Tattered Price off his sword, and the elderly Pentoshi tumbled all the way down the incline to the harbor below.

"Your Grace, get behind me!" Ser Gerold abruptly urged Jon. Without even thinking, he obeyed his sworn shield's directive. A moment later, he saw what had incited it. Ser Franklyn Flowers, Barsena Blackhair, and Khrazz were coming right for him!

Ser Gerold intercepted them before they came anywhere near Jon, and he fought back all three of these fearsome warriors singlehandedly. At the old knight's insistence, Jon stayed out of this skirmish. He did not remain idle; he still made himself useful by striking down any other foe who close. Still, Ser Gerold put up a more valiant fight.

Ser Franklyn's brute strength, Barsena's agility, and Khrazz's ferocity were all incredible, but Gerold Hightower was a legend with a blade and a veteran of numerous wars and conflicts. *He can stop them, and if he needs aid, I'm right here.*
After a couple minutes of exchanging blows, Ser Franklyn Flowers was the first to draw blood. He nicked Ser Gerold on the cheek. It was only a scratch, but the old knight was momentarily stunned. He quickly recovered and retaliated. The cut he gave Ser Franklyn was much bigger, and this one was in the throat.

Once the Golden Company serjeant fell, Ser Gerold was able to split his focus between the two fighters. In turn, they redoubled their own efforts to get past him.

After Jon cut down a Brave Companion underling, he tried to become fully aware of his surroundings again. *I must keep up with what's going on,* he told himself. The situation was worse than ever now.

Allard Seaworth suffered a crossbow bolt in the leg and stumbled face-first into a solid wooden pillar. Brown Ben Plumm was jumped on from behind by the pit fighter Ithoke. Ser Malcolm Branfield was clubbed in the head by a Brave Companion carrying a mallet. Khal Zekko was surrounded by a group of spear-wielders, and his kos were quickly dispatched.

There was no longer any question in Jon's mind; his side was losing. *We're all going to die here.*

Even so, he was not going to die on his knees. He resolved that he would die fighting. *I'll take as many of these treacherous bastards with me as I possibly can.* The very instant after he had that thought, he used *Dark Sister* to behead another Golden Company man.

Just then, two terrible things happened at almost the exact same instant. First, Barsena Blackhair thrust her spear through an opening in Ser Gerold's armor beneath his right shoulder. Second, Princess Elia Martell was met by the Brindled Butcher. Before she could get away, he raised his axe and buried it in her face.

Jon did not know which sight was more shocking. The choice was not so hard for certain others, though.

"Mother!" Aegon shouted in distress. Jon's heart ached for his half-brother, but there was nothing he could do to help or comfort him.

Barsena Blackhair's spear was still wedged in Ser Gerold's side. She was trying to plunge it even deeper into the White Bull's torso. Lady Ellyn Lannister hastily came to the old knight's aid. She seized Barsena from behind and thrust her dagger into the back of the female pit fighter's head.

As Barsena fell to the ground, Ser Gerold pulled her spear out of his side. He moaned in anguish, but he did not falter. Khrazz was still keeping up the offensive.

Lady Ellyn moved to assist Gerold Hightower once more, but she was taken out of commission before she could.

Most of the horses of the fallen Dothraki were still standing. The spilling of so much blood had driven these horses to a frenzy; they were galloping all around the docks with no destination or intention in mind.

As the exact moment Lady Ellyn Lannister lifted her sword to engage Khrazz, the horses passed onto the same dock she was currently on. One of them ran into Lady Ellyn and knocked her off her feet. She landed roughly against the ground, and she laid totally still.

Lady Ellyn's lord husband saw her faint, and out of concern, he hurried towards her. But on his way there, Lord Tyrion Lannister waddled past a tall pile of crates. Two Golden Company men on the other side of the pile noticed the Imp, and they pushed their weight against the pile until it
toppled over. Lord Tyrion yelped as he disappeared beneath the falling crates.

By the time the Lannisters were subdued, Aegon was upon the Brindled Butcher. He viciously drove *Blackfyre* into the pit fighter’s groin. In response, the Brindled Butcher unleashed a high-pitched screech. His cry of agony brought a wicked grin to Aegon’s face.

Aegon was not content with simply castrating his mother's murderer. After pulling out *Blackfyre*, he started hacking at the Butcher's arm. He did not sever the limb, but he *did* cut clean through the bone.

Prince Oberyn Martell soon arrived on the scene. He thrust his spear through the Butcher's knee, causing the pit fighter to stumble and fall. Even when the Brindled Butcher was on the ground, Prince Aegon and Prince Oberyn maliciously kept up their attack on his person. They stabbed and slashed every part of his body they could touch. Jon was certain the Brindled Butcher was already dead, but that was no longer the point.

Suddenly, Daenerys screamed. She and Drogo were almost completely surrounded. Jhogo tried to use his whip to keep them at bay, but his horse was killed by a pit fighter. As his mount died, Jhogo was thrown from his saddle. He landed painfully on his head and snapped his neck.

Although Ser Franklyn Flowers and Barsena Blackhair were no longer Jon's concern, Khrazz proved a more skilled warrior than either of them. He was more than a match for the wounded Gerold Hightower. It was here that Jon entered their clash, despite Ser Gerold's request for him to stay out of it.

Even with Jon helping Ser Gerold, it was clear that Khrazz would not be easily defeated. The pit fighter pushed Jon back, and then he slashed Ser Gerold Hightower across his face. He took off part of the old knight's ear and some of the skin on the side of his neck.

Somehow, Ser Gerold remained afoot, but he looked as though one more injury would finish him. Ser Arthur Dayne arrived just as Khrazz delivered what would have been the killing blow. The Sword of the Morning deflected Khrazz's blade away from the previous Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, and then he thrust his own sword into the pit fighter's stomach. Khrazz coughed violently twice and spat out a bit of blood. Ser Arthur removed his blade, and Khrazz dropped onto his stomach.

Mere moments after the pit fighter fell, Ser Gerold Hightower slumped backwards. Jon and Ser Arthur caught him before he landed on his back, and they gently sat him up against a vacant booth. Despite their attempts to handle Ser Gerold with care, his wounds were already beyond hope of recovery. Already, he was rapidly fading away. Jon watched helplessly as all signs of life vanished from the White Bull's eyes.

This loss hit Jon harder than any other one had so far. *This man protected me my entire life. Now he's dead. Because of me.*

Ser Arthur Dayne gave him no time to grieve, though. The Dornish knight touched Jon's shoulder and told him not unkindly "You must leave him, Your Grace. We have to keep moving."

Jon turned to Ser Arthur and solemnly nodded his head. He rose to his feet and followed the Sword of the Morning back over to his half-brother and the Red Viper.

Prince Oberyn was still mutilating the Brindled Butcher's cold remains, but Aegon was kneeling beside his mother's body. Although he was not sobbing, even a lackwit could tell he was
devastated.

By now, nearly everyone on Jon's side was dead or wounded. More than half of the foes were still in good health. Most of them were closing in around Khal Drogo and Daenerys. Pono was pulled down from his saddle and stabbed to death by Ser Rolly Duckfield, and the pit fighter Camarron struck down Qotho with the spiked ball of his mace.

If this kept up, Dany and her husband would soon be lost, too. *That mustn't happen.* Jon looked around frantically for Lady Dacey Clegane. *She'll know what to do. I hope.*

Soon, he spotted the lady of Moat Cailin. She was almost as far away as Dany, but in the opposite direction. Just a few seconds after his eyes fell across her, Marrigo the pit fighter sank his axe into the front of Lady Dacey's torso. She stumbled backwards and landed sitting up against a wooden shack.

Ignoring his desire to panic, Jon rushed to the Bear Islander's aid. Marrigo did not even have time to extract his axe from Lady Dacey's doublet before Jon reached him and sliced him open with *Dark Sister.*

After putting Marrigo down, Jon knelt beside Lady Dacey. He removed the axe from her doublet. There was no blood on it. *Good, but quaint…*

Jon took a closer look at Lady Dacey's doublet, and he discovered that the axe had not actually drawn blood. It had simply gotten wedged in her chainmail. Even so, the blow had knocked the wind out of Lady Dacey.

Nonetheless, by the time Jon finished evaluating her chest injury, he realized that she was unconscious. *She must have hit her head when she fell against the shack.* Jon gently shook her shoulder, hoping to revive her. No matter how hard he tried, he could not.

Lady Dacey Clegane was out of commission. Prince Oberyn Martell was overcome with grief by the deaths of his sister and daughter. Every other member of the secret council was either dead or overwhelmed. It was the same with the sellsword captains, and every other highborn Westerosi.

*There is no one left to lead us now.* Unless…

Jon knew what needed to be done. He rose to his full height and ran back to Aegon. He grabbed his elder half-brother and pulled him to his feet, yelling "Come on, Aegon! Get up!"

Aegon was jolted out of his misery. He spat heatedly "What? What the fuck?!

"Dany is in danger!" Jon informed him, pointing towards their aunt with *Dark Sister,* "We have to save her!"

Aegon was still overwhelmed by the death of his mother, but his grief was undermined by his desire to protect the rest of his family. He picked up *Blackfyre,* lightly nodded his head, and resolutely muttered "Let's go save her."

Apart from some of the khals and their bloodriders, the only other capable fighters remaining were Arthur Dayne, Daario Naharis, Hollistor Maegyr, and the Tickler. Ellaria Sand and Talisa Maegyr were hiding behind an abandoned kiosk, and Oberyn Martell was too busy mangling the Brindled Butcher's already-unrecognizable corpse.

Jon and Aegon summoned Ser Arthur, Daario, Hollistor, and the Tickler to their side, and together, they charged towards the mass of foes surrounding Daenerys and Khal Drogo.
By staying close to each other and standing back-to-back-to-back, the six men managed to dispatch over a score of their adversaries without losing even one of their own. Hollistor, Daario, and the Tickler sustained injuries, albeit minor ones. It only took them two minutes to cut a path through the enemy ranks.

If they were just a little faster, they might have reached Drogo in time. Alas, the enemy got to him first.

Ten seconds before the six men reached Daenerys and her husband, a Golden Company serjeant shoved a javelin through the body of Khal Drogo's horse. The hardy red stallion whinnied in pain and swayed violently. The khal came tumbling down with it.

Before he could struggle to his feet, he was overtaken by foes. A flurry of knives rose and fell over the mighty horselord in rapid succession. Daenerys screamed when her husband was overpowered. Jon never heard Drogo scream, though. All he heard from the khal was the soft jingle of the many bells in his uncut braid.

Jhaqo was the only one of Drogo's kos still alive. Two of Dany's – Aggo and Rakharo – were alive, and Irri was her only remaining handmaid. Although Jon failed to save Drogo, he managed to save those four, along with Daenerys.

Once the five of them were together, Jon called out: "Ser Arthur, Hollistor, stay at the front and get us out of this crowd! Tickler, Daario, keep them off our tail! Aegon, you and I will cover the middle!"

All five of those men were older than Jon, but they hastened to obey his orders. They're counting on me, he realized. They trust me. He hoped their trust would not be unfounded.

By staying organized and holding their ground together, the eleven of them made their way out of the mass of Golden Company men, Brave Companions, and pit fighters.

Mere seconds after they were clear of that crowd, Vargo Hoat and Rolly Duckfield lunged forward from it and simultaneously swung their swords at Daenerys. They slashed low, so the blows did not touch Daenerys herself. They did, however, slice through the front legs of her horse.

In response to this rush of pain, the silver filly reared back on its hind legs and neighed intensely. Dany clung desperately to the reins, but she lost her grip and fell out of the saddle.

She landed directly on her abdomen. She lay there for a moment, totally motionless. Then she cried out not in pain, but in grief. Her husband and her son... Just the thought of that enraged Jon.

Before Vargo Hoat or Rolly Duckfield could do any more damage, Jon and Aegon took it upon themselves to neutralize them. While their backs were turned, the two princes did so. Jon slammed the hilt of Dark Sister against Hoat's head, and Aegon rammed Blackfyre against Duckfield's. Both men were effectively knocked out.

After taking out the commander of the Brave Companions and Jon Connington's squire, Jon Targaryen and Aegon Targaryen turned back to the rest of their opponents. There were scores of them left. We are... ten at the most? Assuming Prince Oberyn comes back to his senses.

Although they were hopelessly outnumbered, Jon no longer felt afraid. Instead, he smirked, pointed his sword at the foe, and muttered cockily "Who else wants some?"

In response, some of them scowled and began to advance forward. I hope those won't be my last words. They'd work if one was in a brothel, but not in a battle.
All of a sudden, the enemy ceased advancing. Jon saw something in their eyes. It was either fear or surprise, or a mixture of both. Interestingly, the assailants did not seem to be looking at Jon or his associates. They seemed to be looking… at something behind them.

Jon allowed himself a brief glimpse over his shoulder, and he discovered the source of the enemy's sudden disquiet. What troubled them brought a wave of relief to him.

*Help has finally arrived.*

Dozens of Unsullied, sellswords, and Westerosi soldiers alike were pouring out of the docked vessels of the Iron Fleet. They ran in silence until they were on the marina, and then each and every one of them let out a firm battle cry as they charged to the Targaryens' rescue.

With a minute, the reinforcements were upon the treacherous assailants, who were dealt a fitting amount of comeuppance. The pit fighter Steelskin was slain by a small party of Legionnaires headed by Dolorous Edd Tollett. The Golden Company serjeant Ser Lorimas Mudd was speared by Grey Worm, the commander of the Unsullied. The Brave Companion Three Toes had his neck sliced open by Beshka.

The Essosi officers of the Golden Company finally appeared, but Jon noticed they were fighting on his side. *That's some good news, at least. The Essosi members and serjeants in the Golden Company outnumber the Westerosi ones by a factor of ten.*

"Lord Jon, what are we to do?" Ser Tristan Rivers asked anxiously.

Jon had lost track of Lord Jon Connington during the battle. For a while, he seemed to have just disappeared from the harbor altogether. Nevertheless, he was clearly amongst the enemy's ranks right then. He looked furious, yet strangely content.

Ser Perwyn Frey made a daring move against Jon Connington, but the exiled lord would not go down so easily. In under a minute, he cut down the young knight from the Twins.

As his sword dripped with Ser Perwyn's blood, Jon Connington announced "We've accomplished what we came to accomplish! Now, we must fall back! Back to the city!"

Straightaway, every remaining Brave Companion, Westerosi Golden Company member, and pit fighter turned around and fled from the harbor.

"Should we go after them?" Aegon wondered aloud.

"I think we should," Jon replied.

The two Targaryen princes and a number of their loyal soldiers chased after the ambushers. All of them ultimately got away, including Connington. However, not all the remaining traitors escaped.

Magister Illyrio Mopatis had lingered just outside the western gate of Pentos for the whole duration of the battle. Even after the reinforcements arrived, Mopatis had not retreated into the walls of his city. He waited until Connington and his men came charging up the incline. Waiting for so long proved to be a grave error in judgement.

In their haste to depart the area, Connington and his men knocked over Illyrio Mopatis's litter. The morbidly obese magister fell out, and he physically *rolled* down the incline. That had to be the most amusing thing Jon had seen all night. As well as the most satisfying.

The magister was so round that Jon doubted he could get up on his own. All the same, when he
and Aegon reached Mopatis, they held the tips of their swords in front of his face. As tempting as it was to "trim the fat," Jon and his brother decided not to harm Magister Illyrio. Yet.

"Ser Arthur, Edd, take the magister into custody," Jon commanded, "Put him in the brig of the Zenith. Then come back here for Vargo Hoat and Rolly Duckfield, and put them in the brigs of the Leviathan and the Sea Serpent. If they try to escape, put a knife through their feet. If they try to grab a weapon, put a knife through their hands. If they try to claim they are innocent of this atrocity, put a knife through their tongues."

"How about one through their cocks if they don't learn the first time?" Dolorous Edd drily uttered.

Arthur Dayne ignored that and declared "It will be done, Your Grace."

The Dornish knight and the dour Valeman pulled the morbidly obese magister to his feet. They and a dozen armed guards proceeded to lead Mopatis back to the western end of the harbor.

Aegon rushed to his mother's side. Jon did not stop him. Nothing I can say will be of help to him. I should just give him some space and let him mourn. Were our places reversed, he'd do the same for me.

Jon went around the docks and surveyed the damage of the battle. The immediate aftermath left many unanswered questions in his head. How many did we lose? Who did we lose? Who will we lose? How many will survive the night? How many will survive at all?

Those questions pertained only to the battle itself. He had other questions that related to the scheme behind it. Who could have caused this? Why was it done? What did Connington and his men 'accomplish'? If their goal wasn't to kill me, Aegon, and Daenerys, what was it?

In the midst of his pondering, Jon was approached by someone he did not regard as either his ally or his enemy.

On any other day, Jon would have become mindful when the Red Woman approached him simply because his instinct told him to be wary of her. Today, however…

Could she have known of this? If she did, could she have let it happen anyway? Or… maybe she's the one who amassed the reinforcements.

Before Jon could investigate this matter, Lady Melisandre firmly told him "Your Grace, you must come with me at once."

Her tone suggested urgency, and her countenance suggested she was shaken. Those were not good signs. Usually, Lady Melisandre was an extremely stoic person. Jon himself was typically quite stoic, as well, but not quite as stoic as the Red Woman. What could be so unsettling as to worry her?

"Alright, my lady," Jon remarked.

The priestess of R'hllor led him back to the Zenith. When they were on board, Jon though he saw some blood on the floor of the bridge. Where could that have come from? The battle never extended all the way up here.

Be that as it may, there was indeed a trail of blood that led all the way down to the next deck. They followed it to Jon's cabin, and he discovered the source of the blood trail and the reason for Melisandre's unrest.
A Westerosi Golden Company soldier lay dead in the center of the hallway. Alyver Clegane was leaning against the wall nearby. He had a bloody gash on his forehead and an extensive cut across his left arm.

Jon rushed over to the boy and knelt beside him. He said softly "Alyver? Alyver, are you alright?"

The Clegane boy stirred and looked up at the Targaryen prince. He muttered weakly "Where's Mother? Is she hurt?"

"Lady Dacey is fine," Jon assured him, "You'll be fine, too. I promise you."

Alyver seemed relieved to hear that his mother was alright, but he did not seem to care about his own well-being. He stared at the ground and mumbled quietly "I'm sorry, Jon. I'm so sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Jon told him.

"They took Duncan," Alyver revealed

Jon was astounded. "Who took your cousin? Lord Connington and his men?"

Alyver lightly nodded and revealed "They took Princess Lyanna, too."

Now Jon was flabbergasted, and he was quickly becoming horrified, too. He whispered softly "What?"

"I tried to stop them," Alyver declared, gesturing to the adjacent body, "I even killed one of them."

"I know," Jon muttered, trying to remain calm. "You did the right thing."

"I didn't do enough," the wounded boy murmured, "Jon… it gets worse. They only Duncan or Princess Lyanna, and they didn't harm either of them. But… the others…"

It was there that Alyver passed out. His final words stayed with Jon. They sent a chill down his spine. The others…

Jon jumped back to his feet, ran to the door of his cabin, and forced it he saw what was on the other side of it… his breathing stopped for no less than ten seconds. It was a wonder he did not faint or vomit.

The interior of the cabin was like an excerpt from Jon's worst nightmare. Four more Golden Company men lay dead throughout it. Two of them had been savagely mangled. Lyarra was lying close to one of them. A dagger was protruding from her neck and a spear was sticking out of her side. Ghost was standing over his mother and licking her wounds, whimpering despondently.

The only thing in that room that did not disturb Jon was located on his mother's bed. Torrhen Clegane was asleep there. He was bundled up tight, and he seemed uninjured. He may have slept through the entire battle.

Ygritte was lying on top of the bed she and Jon shared. She was holding her hand against her swollen belly, as though she was holding something in. Jon went to her and whispered "Ygritte? Ygritte?"

At first glance, Ygritte appeared unharmed. Then Jon looked again, and he realized the clothes on the lower half of her body were damp. They were also red.

He tentatively moved Ygritte's hand away from her abdomen… and his worst fear was confirmed.
She had stabbed right through her abdomen.

"No..." Jon uttered in denial, "No, no, no. Gods, please... no. This is not happening. This cannot be happening. This could not happen."

"Yet it is," Ygritte croaked weakly. She sounded so frail and helpless. She had always been such a strong and fearless woman. Just to hear her talking like that was a shock. To see her in this state...

"It cannot end like this," he insisted, starting to sound hysterical, "I... I know it cannot end like this."

Ygritte managed a faint smile and countered quietly with "You know nothing, Jon Targaryen."

_Is she fucking serious?!_ Jon wanted to get mad, but if these truly were Ygritte's final moments, he did not want her last memory to be him angry at her.

*What do I do? What am I supposed to do?*_ He did not even know who to ask those questions. He felt so hopelessly lost.

Ygritte then murmured quietly "No, I am wrong. You must know one thing."

"What?" Jon asked, as if that was the most important thing in the world.

Ygritte gazed into his eyes and told him "You should know... you're the only person I've ever loved. The only one."

She then used the last of her strength to place her hands on her abdomen, and she quietly added in "But if I lived just a few more days... there would have been... two whom I loved. My only regret... is that you will only be the only one. Even so... you... were still enough. Know that, and... never... forget it."

That was what finally broke Jon. He shed his manly walls and starting sobbing like a small child. For the first time in his life, he knew what loss truly felt like.

He did not know how long he wept. All he did know was that by the time Lady Melisandre placed her hand on his shoulder and brought him back to reality, Ygritte's hands had fallen to her sides, and her eyes were empty. There was nothing in them. Nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Note: If you have made it this far... I applaud you and salute you. And I offer my most sincere apologies for putting you through this. I know this update must have been difficult for some. Regardless, you all knew this was coming. I revealed to you that I was working on a "Red Wedding" type tragedy at the start of Chapter 32, and I reminded you of that at the start of Chapter 48. I have been planning this ambush ever since I composed my very first outline of this story. This may make me sound like a sick fuck, but I have actually been looking forward to writing this chapter for the longest time. More so than any other chapter to date, in fact.

Some of you must have questions. Questions similar to the ones Jon had immediately after the Battle of Pentos ended. Whatever those questions are, they will be addressed.
The following updates will reveal why Jon Connington and Illyrio Mopatis betrayed the Targaryens, how they arranged this massacre, why Lyanna and Duncan were kidnapped, and every other unexplained aspect.

If you are wondering, a total of sixty-two named characters died in this chapter. More than half of them were on the good side. I purposefully left the fates of some of the characters ambiguous so that you'll be wondering who I spared and who I killed off for a while. I'm just cruel like that.

You won't have to suffer this uncertainty for very long, though. By either the next chapter or the chapter after that, you'll know who officially survived and who officially perished. Of course, with the holidays coming up and since I'm going on vacation next weekend, the next update might take a little while. I can assure you it'll be up sometime before Christmas, though. So please, don't give up on me.
"I've been through the desert on a horse with name," Jon murmured softly under his breath, "It felt good to be out of the rain. In the desert… you can't remember your name. Because there is no one who can put you in pain… Laaaaaa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-laaaaa-la. Laaaaaa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la.

Normally, he did not sing. However, the empty vastness of the landscape and the relatively silent atmosphere were disquieting to him. There is no knowing who is out there, or who could be following us. In a scenario such as this, songs were a pleasant distraction. Given the context, this song is quite appropriate. It matches the setting and the overall mood of this party.

Although he was singing quietly to himself, some of others could still hear him. A few could even make out what he was saying. They did not seem bothered, thankfully.

Dick Cole was riding alongside Jon. He turned to him, flashed a grin, and remarked "That's a good song, isn't it, my lord?"

"Yes, Dick," Lord Jon Connington bluntly replied. "If it was a bad song, why would I sing it?"

"What song is that?" Orlos the pit fighter queried in interest, "Don't believe I've heard it."

"I'd be surprised if you had," said Dick, "It originated in the Seven Kingdoms."

"I've heard songs from the west before," Orlos proclaimed, "There's the one about the man from Dorne, the one about the bear and his woman, and the one about thunderstorms."

"Thunderstorms?" Dick was perplexed.

Jon Connington figured that out first. "Do you mean the Rains of Castamere?"

"Yes," Orlos confirmed. "We should have played that one at the feast. It would have been poetic. "Never heard the one milord was singing just now, though."

"The aforementioned songs are all several decades old or more," Dick apprised the pit fighter, "The one about the nameless horse was written only a few years ago. It's not likely to have been played anywhere east of Qohor yet. I myself did not first hear it until about nineteen months past, when we were in the Disputed Lands."

"That's where I first heard it, as well," Jon Connington commented. "And I cannot seem to get it out of my head. Not that I wish to complain."

"Who wrote it?" Orlos said inquiringly.

"Lord Gregor Clegane," Dick Cole disclosed. When he saw the look of surprise on the pit fighter's face, the Golden Company serjeant added in "While he is most famous as a lord of the Seven Kingdoms and a leader of his own private army, the Mountain That Rides is also an inventor of many things, including songs. He's written dozens of them since he rose to power in the North. At least half a dozen each year since Robert's Rebellion."
"So, I see," was all Orlos was in response.

For a while after that, there was no more talking. Just some more singing of songs, mainly ones written by the Mountain. *By the time all this is over, those songs may be the only things of Gregor Clegane’s legacy that remain.*

They had been on this journey for four days now. Their course had been due north, with the occasional adjustment of a few degrees to the west. They had spent almost all of that interval riding.

In the last one hundred hours, each of them had slept maybe ten. Those who could manage to fall asleep in their saddles had gotten perhaps twice as many. They only stopped once ever six or so hours to piss, water the horses, and to get a bite of food. In some cases, a bite was all some actually got. Many of them quickly learned to eat whilst on horseback.

Thus far, they had not lost anyone else since they left Pentos. However, if they kept on like this, it would only be a matter of time before hunger, fatigue, and exposure began to take its toll on Connington and his company. *And we’re not even a third of the way to Braavos yet. But that makes no matter. We cannot ease up. Not until we are much closer than this.*

Only the Dothraki would find their current riding conditions agreeable, and none of them were Dothraki. *And the last thing we need is an encounter with the horselords. After what happened in Pentos, we may have every khalasar in Essos after us.*

That was one thought among many that kept Jon Connington awake and alert. His party may have escaped Pentos easily enough, but for all they knew, their adversary was in pursuit. For that reason, until they reached their destination, they could not afford to make any delays.

Be that as it may, at some point before then, they would have to stop for longer than an hour. *If our "guests" are to last, we’ll have to. Now that I think of it, I should check up on them.*

Jon Connington gazed over his shoulder to get a look at the prisoners. The three of them were mounted, same as everyone else. There were some obvious differences in their getup, though. For one thing, none of them were armed. Furthermore, the halters of their horses were connected to each other's horses and to a third horse by rope. That would ensure they did not wander off, intentionally or otherwise.

Additionally, two of them were sharing a horse. Young Duncan Lannister sat in the saddle in front of Greta.

Greta was Duncan's nurse, as well as handmaiden to his mother, Lady Ellyn. She was not even twenty, yet she had been a servant of House Lannister her entire life.

Originally, the plan had not included bringing Greta along. Greta was not even part of the plan. She simply had the misfortune of being present when they came for her charge. Apparently, Lady Ellyn had asked her to check up on Duncan a couple times whilst she and Lord Tyrion were at Magister Illyrio's manse. And one of those times had occurred in the midst of the ambush. *If we had gotten to the cabin just five minutes later, we could have avoided getting Greta involved in this.*

Although this had seemed a setback at first, bringing Greta along ultimately turned out to be an advantage. Despite his hand in raising Young Griff, Jon Connington was not qualified to handle a small child. His companions, even less so. That was one capacity in which Greta trumped them all.
While the young handmaiden had no children of her own, she was great with them. In fact, she alone was able to keep Duncan quiet and calm. Obviously, she was no replacement for his parents, but at least the small boy was comfortable with her.

Aside from that, Greta required both her hands to ride with her charge. She held her horse's reins in one and used the other to hold Duncan in place. As it happened, the only other person there whom Duncan would willingly ride with could not use either of her hands for much of anything. Nor was she in no position to share her saddle.

*To think, my best friend threw away his life and his family's dynasty for her.*

Nevertheless, Jon Connington could understand why Rhaegar Targaryen had been so enamored with Lyanna Stark. She was feisty, strong, resilient, and still a beauty past her thirtieth nameday. If she had been Rhaegar's first choice for a wife, she probably could have done what Elia Martell could not. She may have been able to give him the three children he had longed for. *That would have saved us an uprising and a civil war, and I would still be at Griffin's Roost.*

She may not have looked a wolf when Jon Connington and his men found her, but even before they first met at Vaes Dothrak, Lord Jon knew she was much more than a maid to Rhaegar's third child. She was a princess in hiding all along. A little intimidation and a lot more force had prompted the truth out of her.

Initially, Lyanna had refused to shed her disguise when she herself was threatened. When Lord Jon and his men threatened Alyver and Torrhen Clegane, however, she had grudgingly agreed to their demands. After holding an odd poultice over her head for three minutes, she had revealed her true facade. Once that was done, Jon and his men had "escorted" her, Greta, and Duncan Lannister off the *Zenith.*

Of course, Lyanna had not come along quietly. Additionally, Jon Targaryen's wildling lover, the direwolves, and Alyver Clegane had strongly protested. They managed to kill five of Jon Connington's men before the Golden Company men neutralized them as a threat. Humfrey Stone and Brendel Byrne had put down the mother direwolf, Old John Mudd had wounded Alyver, and Jon Connington himself had put his sword through Ygritte's belly. She and her babe were certainly dead by now.

The battle in the harbor lasted less than twenty minutes after that. Just when it seemed as though Jon Connington's side would beat the Targaryens and their allies, those thrice-damned reinforcements arrived on the scene. Jon Connington and the remnants of his forces had no choice but to retreat then. *We're fortunate the Targaryens were only a secondary target, and an optional one, at that.*

Once they were out of the harbor, Jon Connington and his party had wasted no time to flee Pentos. They had gone to the eastern end of the Free City, raided the stables, and stolen what horses they needed. They managed to take flight before the city guard could stop or catch them. *Even if the Targaryens have left Pentos, we'll never be going back there again.* By now, they were well beyond the outskirts of Pentos, so at least they could count on the other magisters not sending soldiers their way.

However, all three of the Targaryens had survived that battle. Additionally, each of them had lost loved ones in it. Even if they did not possess the madness of their ancestor Aerys II, they would undoubtedly be thirty for vengeance. *I sure as the Seven Hells would be.*

Still, Jon Connington did not fear the dragons. He had never feared them. He *had feared displeasing the Mad King, but he had never feared Aerys himself. That could be why I was sent*
Anyway, Aegon, Jon, and Daenerys Targaryen were not his concern. His concern was the wolf currently in his company.

A captive wolf was still a dangerous one. A restrained captive wolf could still pose a threat, but not nearly as great as she would otherwise. With that in mind, Jon Connington had ordered Lyanna Stark to be tied to her horse.

Her wrists were clapped in fetters, and the reins were attached to the links in the chain. Her ankles were securely bound to the stirrups. A length of white cloth had been pulled over her mouth and tied at the back of her neck to silence her.

Jon Connington had considered blindfolding Lyanna, as well, but he decided there was no need to. Even if she did not eavesdrop on him and his men when they mentioned their destination, she must have already figured it out. Thus, covering her eyes would have been pointless.

Of course, that meant every time Jon Connington looked over at her, he would see her look back. That in itself was not pleasant. Whenever he turned her way, Lyanna would glare back at him with an expression of uttermost loathing. He could not recall ever seeing such rage in a person's eyes before. Not even on the field of battle.

That was one of the reasons why Lyanna was restrained and the others were not. Greta was obviously afraid. Duncan was too young to remember this experience, but separation from his father and mother had made him somewhat restless and scared.

There was no fear in Lyanna Stark's eyes. Just anger and hatred. Given the opportunity, she would try to kill Jon Connington with her hands. She could definitely pull that off; she had done that very thing to one of Jon's men on the Zenith.

In spite of this, Lord Jon had declared that no one was to harm Lyanna, Duncan, or Greta. The men were under stern orders not to even touch or approach the women unless they stirred up trouble. As long as I am in command, there will be no rapes in this party.

When Great noticed Jon Connington was looking over his shoulder, she called out "Milord, we need to stop."

The exiled lord of Griffin's Roost shifted his gaze towards the maid and murmured flatly "Why?"

"It's Duncan," Greta pronounced, lifting the small boy a bit, "He's… well… he's not well. Please, come look at him."

Jon Connington sighed and shouted "Company, halt!"

Everyone swiftly brought their horses to a stop. Once they were all standing still, Connington brought his mount closer to Greta's. He made certain not to approach her from the side Lyanna Stark was on. If he did, the wolf woman would probably try to lunge at him. She'd do more damage to herself than to me, but I just as soon not put either of us in harm's way.

When Jon Connington was close enough, Greta held Duncan so that the exiled lord could see the boy clearly. Straightaway, he noticed Greta had not been lying. Indeed, the boy was sweating all over and whimpering softly. He looked quite weak.

Jon removed one of his gloves and lightly placed his hand against the boy's forehead. After holding it there a moment, his eyes widened in horror.
"I think he has a fever," Greta supposed.

"You're right," Jon Connington grimly affirmed, withdrawing his hand. *If anything happens to the boy, it'll be all our heads.* As Jon redonned his glove, he announced "Very well, we'll stop. But not here; we're too out-in-the-open. As soon as we find someplace with adequate shade and shelter, we'll make camp."

"Thank you, milord," Greta said gratefully.

"Don't thank me yet," Jon Connington mumbled.

Lyanna Stark tried to give a snappy retort. Her gag muffled her words, but it sounded like "I'll thank you to drop dead."

Jon Connington ignored her and yelled to the group at large "Press on!"

They continued onward for several more miles. In mid-afternoon, they came across a ruined stone stronghold. They found it empty, which came as no surprise. *This is probably one of the long-abandoned outposts of Old Valyria.* Although the building was deserted, there was a small brook and some overgrown fruit trees nearby. The roof was whole and stable. Not only did it provide protection from the elements, but it also made for an excellent observation platform. *No one would get within ten miles without being spotted.* All-in-all, the stronghold was an ideal place to lodge for the night.

But this night only. *Come first light, we must press on.*

Jon was accustomed to being on the march until sunset. By the time they finished setting up base in the stronghold, the day still had a few hours of sunlight left. It felt strange to halt so early. Even so, this stop provided a very welcome respite.

As everyone else got settled into their temporary refuge, Jon Connington took the time to go around and take a tally of who all was accounted for. They had left Pentos in such a hurry that he had been unable to make a note of who had survived the battle and who had not. He had tried to count his associates several times over the last five days, but with everyone constantly moving, he had been unsuccessful.

Now that everyone was on the ground and more or less stationary, Jon could determine who had escaped Pentos and who had been left behind.

Of the three groups that composed this ragtag company, the Br**ave Companions** had taken the heaviest losses. Even Vargo Hoat himself had not made it out of Pentos. Only three of Hoat's lieutenants were among the Companions who had emerged from that battle: Togg Joth, Shagwell the Fool, and Faithful Urswyck, the second-in-command. *Let us hope he can maintain order as well as that goat did.*

The pit fighters' numbers had suffered in large part, as well. Only half a dozen of the ones among their ranks were champions: Amaya, Senaera, Orlos, the Beast, Ithoke, and Camarron. Amaya and Senaera were the only women left in the party. Jon Connington had assigned the two of them to guard Lyanna and Greta. *Too bad we've no eunuchs in this crowd. They could have guarded the women, too.*

While the Golden Company had lost more people than either of the other groups, they had the largest ratio of survivors. Over half a hundred men had survived, including seven of Jon Connington's sergeants: Jon Lothston, Pykewood Peake, Brendel Byrne, Tristan Rivers, Humfrey
Stone, Old John Mudd, and Dick Cole. It's a shame Rolly didn't make it out of the harbor. He was a better fighter and more reliable than any of these others.

Then again, considering the circumstances of their departure from Pentos, Jon Connington supposed they were lucky that this many of them had lived beyond that battle. They may have killed more of the foe than the foe killed of them, but the foe still possessed far greater numbers. I pray those numbers don't find us.

It was nightfall by the time Jon Connington finished assessing the remaining members of their party. Supper was ready by then, too.

The meal was nothing glamorous; just a light rabbit stew and slightly stale bread. Still, it was more filling than anything they had eaten since Pentos. No one else here attended Illyrio's feast, Jon realized. One may think he was fortunate to have been able to gorge himself before this arduous trek. Nonetheless, after that grand feast, it had been harder for him to resort to simpler rations.

Jon Connington permitted fires to be built to cook the stew and keep warm. As a precaution, he ordered his people to monitor the size and brightness of the flames. It would do us no good to draw unwanted company our way.

Jon noticed the Golden Company men, the pit fighters, and the Brave Companions each made and ate around their own fires. None of them sat together. Truthfully, he had not expected them to. Although this clandestine alliance had been in existence for months, this was the first time all three groups had supped together. All three of them had unsavory reputations. As such, it was unlikely that they would be willing to dine together. Talk and ride together, they do just fine, but not dine together.

As his associates feasted, Jon Connington went to give dinner to their captives.

Greta, Duncan, and Princess Lyanna had been moved over to a darkened corner of the building. Amaya and Senaera were guarding them, as usual. The two female pit fighters stood at full attention.

Greta still had her hands free, and she was tending to Duncan. Lyanna Stark was still restrained, though her bonds had changed. After she was taken down from her horse, the irons binding her wrists together in front of her had been removed. Her arms were immediately pulled behind her back and her irons were put back on. Another pair of shackles had been clapped onto her feet to prevent her from running. Last of all, her gag had been tightened.

Jon Connington brought two servings of stew and bread over to the captives. Greta outstretched one of her hands and kept ahold of Duncan on her lap with the other. As he handed one of the bowls to Greta, Lord Jon gazed down at Duncan Lannister and queried "How is he?"

"Much better now, milord," the maid pronounced, "I got some water from the brook, and Ser Tristan gave me some herbs. They seem to have lowered his temperature. His fever should be gone, come the morrow."

"Excellent," stated the exiled lord. That's a damned relief. Gesturing to the bowl, he proposed "See if he'll eat something."

Greta nodded. She took up her spoon, picked up a bit of stew with it, and held it up to Duncan's mouth. She cooed softly "Open up, sweetling."

Duncan had seen his second nameday recently. With that in mind, it was reasonable to assume he
had been weaned off his mother's breast, and he had all his teeth. *If not, this could be a problem; we've no wet nurses here.* At first, Duncan looked as though he would reject the rabbit stew, but after a moment, he parted his lips and allowed his nurse to slowly insert the spoon. He chewed slowly yet thoroughly, and then he swallowed.

"Good lad," Greta cooed approvingly. *She's quite fond of the boy, it seems.*

"Make certain he stays healthy and fed," Jon Connington sternly told her, "We need Princess Lyanna and Lord Duncan alive and unharmed. You, however, are not essential to our plans. The only reason you are here is to tend to Duncan. If he dies, you won't outlive him long."

Jon expected that short speech to leave an impression on Greta. However, she seemed only slightly perturbed. She gazed up and muttered candidly "If you wish for me to protect Duncan with my own life, you needn't order me to do so. I would have done that in any case. I care not what happens to me, milord. As long as this precious little boy is safe, nothing else matters."

*She is rather bold for a handmaiden,* Jon noted. That was a good sign. It indicated that if Greta had to protect Duncan from physical harm, she would not recoil.

Jon Connington gave Greta a second spoon so she and her charge did not have to share one. *They can eat from the same bowl, but it's unwholesome to use the same spoon.* Then again, riding through a barren terrain almost nonstop for five days was not especially wholesome, either.

As the maid fed herself and her charge, she gazed up at Lord Jon and said, "May I ask you a question, milord?"

"Certainly," Jon Connington asserted.

"Why is Lady Lyanna bound whilst I am not?" Greta enquired. *Ah, so she cares what happens to the wolf woman, too. Up until last week, she merely thought of her as a fellow maid.*

The exiled lord folded his arms and answered with "Before I tell you, my lady, you should know her proper title is *Princess* Lyanna. She may have been born the daughter of a Great Lord, but she married a prince. Although her marriage was secret and did not last long, it was a legitimate union by all the laws of the Seven Kingdoms."

Greta nodded in acknowledgment of that point. Jon Connington then proceeded to answer her question. He began with "Firstly, you can hardly tend to Duncan if you're in fetters, and I feel I can trust you to behave. In addition to that, you are hardly a flight risk. You would last maybe three days in the wilderness on your own. Even less than that, actually, since I know you would not leave Duncan behind. If you took him along, you and he would perish within two days. Therefore, I know you will make no attempts to escape.

"*Princess Lyanna, on the other hand…*" Jon Connington bitterly went on, turning to the restrained wolf woman, "She has the ability, the drive, and the will to escape. If given the opportunity, I know she would try to run away from us. I do not intend to let that happen. Especially since the last time she ran away, thousands of people lost their lives. Including her father, her brother, and her husband."

Lyanna Stark made no effort to issue a verbal response to that shot. She just glared at Jon Connington with a deeply furrowed brow. *If she could, she'd spit venom at me.*

"Couldn't you at least remove her gag?" Greta suggested, "I mean, who is going to hear her all the way out here?"
"Us," Jon Connington debated, "Which is why she is gagged. I am not worried that she might call out for help. I simply do not wish to hear her curse my name all the live-long day."

Greta seemed to understand that point. "Be that as it may, she can hardly eat like that."

"Indeed," Jon Connington conceded. Of course, one cannot eat properly with one's hands tied behind the back. At that, he held the other bowl of stew out to Amaya and commanded her "Feed Her Grace, if you would."

The Summer Islander gave a brusque nod of her head. She approached Princess Lyanna and crouched down before her. She pulled down the wolf woman's gag. Although her mouth was now uncovered, she kept it closed.

"Would you like some supper?" Amaya inquired.

Lyanna Stark shrugged her shoulders and responded with "If I must."

The female pit fighter took up the spoon, and then she said "First, give me your word you will not spit it back into my face."

The wolf woman scoffed and remarked "You needn't fret. The only person here I would spit at happens to be out of range."

Although she was not looking in his direction, Jon Connington knew she was referring to him.

At any rate, Amaya proceeded to serve Princess Lyanna her own share of the rabbit stew and stale bread. The wolf woman never uttered a single word whilst the pit fighter fed her. She merely opened her mouth, allowed Amaya to give her a bit of stew or a morsel of bread, closed her mouth, chewed, swallowed, and repeated that whole process many times over.

It took about twenty minutes for Lyanna to eat her meal in this getup. Not very dignified, but at least it's practical. Once the bowl was empty, Amaya gave Lyanna a drink from her waterskin to wash her dinner down, and then she used a clean linen to wipe her face clean for her.

When Amaya prepared to gag Lyanna again, Jon Connington interceded and instructed her "Leave it off for now. See to your other duties."

"Aye, milord," Amaya acknowledged.

As the Summer Islander returned to her post, Jon Connington gazed down at Lyanna Stark. Her expression was virtually unreadable, but he was certain she was imagining all sorts of elaborate and vicious ways to end his life.

Jon Connington stoically stepped forward and sat down on a stone slab about five feet away from the bound woman. Once he was settled there, he murmured plainly "If you have something you'd like to say, go ahead and let it out now. Because this is the only chance I'll give you to speak until we reach Braavos."

As he expected, she was quick to accept that invitation. She uttered sardonically "Where to begin? Oh, yes; I know exactly where."

This should prove most intriguing.

"I can't believe I actually named my son after you," Lyanna Stark spat contemptuously.
"I always thought you named him after Lord Jon Arryn."

"He was named after both you and Lord Arryn," she disclosed, "But now, I sincerely wish the Lord of the Eyrie was my Jon's only namesake."

"I cannot say I blame you," the Stormlander thought aloud.

"You don't have the right to cast blame," Lyanna Stark sharply retorted, "You are going to die, Connington. You must realize that; there is no possibility that you will live to see the next winter. When it happens… when death comes to claim you… it will be slow, terrible, inexplicable. You'll know boundaries of pain you never knew existed."

"And who will be the one to 'educate' me?" Jon Connington cheekily commented.

"I don't particularly care who does it," Princess Lyanna snapped, "As long as it happens. I'm certain there are plenty of people who would be all too pleased to make it happen. You made a great many enemies back in Pentos, after all. I personally would love to end your miserable existence. But if your life must end at the hand of someone other than myself… I am hoping my son will be the one."

"I'd like to see him try," Jon Connington said in amusement.

"He will try," Lyanna proclaimed, "You murdered his fiancé and his unborn child. You murdered my future daughter-by-law and my future grandchild. If Jon ever finds out it was you who committed that monstrous deed, he will hunt you down relentlessly, and he will not stop until he sheaths his sword in your gut."

"Well, then I'll be ready to receive him at all times," Jon Connington wryly mumbled, "If he is that eager to be reunited with his wildling whore and his own little bastard, I'd be happy to oblige him."

For a moment, Princess Lyanna appeared as though she was going to pounce on him. Ultimately, she did not. After she eased down, she just stared at Jon Connington in what seemed to be disbelief. Then she said in a perplexed and unbelieving tone "Your actions make no sense to me at all, Connington. Help me to understand why. Why did you do this? Why did you turn your cloak? Why did you discard your old allegiance? Why did you betray your best friend's family?"

That last statement triggered something within Jon Connington. Up until this point, he had been absolutely calm and unresponsive. Here, he tightened his countenance and snapped in a hostile voice "Because what did my 'best friend's family' ever do for me?"

Lyanna now looked more puzzled than furious. "What are you saying? You resent the Targaryens?"

"Yes, I resent them," Jon Connington professed, "I dedicated my all to House Targaryen. Rhaegar was like a brother to me; more so than any of my kin. King Aerys and Queen Rhaella always had a place for me at King's Landing, just as I always had a place for them at Griffin's Roost. I was respected, admired, and loved by nobles and the smallfolk alike. I had my own title, my own lands, my own vassals, my own holdfast, and my own name. Then… I lost it all. Because of you."

Lyanna scowled and countered crossly "Because of me? Is it my fault you were incapable of finding a man as loud and boisterous as Robert Baratheon in a town as remote as the Stoney Sept? Perhaps if you had been a little quicker in your search, you would have found him before the Battle
of the Bells happened."

"It is more than that," Jon Connington angrily refuted, "I knew you were trouble even before you and he eloped. I advised Rhaegar not to pursue you. I all but begged him not to. He disregarded my counsel in favor of his lust. He just had to fulfill that godsdamned prophecy of his, and you just had to go along with it."

"This may be a moot point, but the prophecy is real," Lyanna Stark declared, "All Rhaegar wanted—all I wanted, too—was to save Westeros from an endless winter. It has been over a year since the Others were officially sighted north of the Wall. You've done nothing but make their chances of victory that much greater."

"The Others are of no concern to me," Jon Connington pronounced indifferently.

Princess Lyanna stared at him as though he had claimed to be Baelor the Blessed back from the dead. She stated in bewilderment "How could they not be?"

"Westeros survived the Long Night once," Lord Jon contended, "As you may recall from your history lessons, our ancestors got by without any assistance from the cultures across the Narrow Sea. It can do so again today. Just like back then, we do not need to rely on an army of foreigners to ensure the survival of our civilization."

"You best pray you're correct," said Lyanna, "Your betrayal may have cost the Seven Kingdoms its alliances with the Unsullied, the Dothraki, and Volantis."

"Acceptable losses," Jon Connington asserted, "The only thing that concerns me is whether the residents of the Seven Kingdoms remain united in facing off the Army of the Dead."

"Oh, they will be," Lyanna claimed, grinning wickedly "Just as they'll be united in bringing you and your thugs to justice."

"I disagree," Jon Connington rebutted, "I intend to regain all that I lost, including the respect of my fellow Westerosi."

"By becoming a turncloak and spitting on the memories of your best friend and his family?" Lyanna spat heatedly.

"There you go once more, speaking of my best friend and his family," Lord Jon said irately, "There was once I time when I would have given my life in service to Rhaegar and his father. But in the end, what did my loyalty to the dragons get me? Dispossessed of my ancestral home and all its incomes. Stripped of my status and my prestige. Banished from the Seven Kingdoms. Other treacherous lords and knights whose crimes were far worse than mine were pardoned. Robert forgave Mace Tyrell and Barristan Selmy their offenses. He even made amends with the Targaryens after having sworn to exterminate every last one of them. Never once did he even consider allowing me to return."

"And you feel that is ample justification for using an imposter to retake the things you lost?" Lyanna disputed.

"No, I was never going to help Young Griff invade the Seven Kingdoms," Jon Connington illuminated, "That was but a pretense to get myself back home. The boy was never anything more to me than a means to an end. Whenever we set sail for the shores of Westeros, I would have arranged for him to drown on the long voyage west. By default, the stipulations of the contract we made with the Golden Company would have transferred their loyalty from Young Griff to myself."
"Then when you landed in the Seven Kingdoms, you would have offered Robert the use of the Golden Company in hopes that he would welcome you back into the fold in turn," Lyanna conjectured.

"Just so," Jon affirmed. After a pause, he sighed and mumbled "Then the real Aegon showed up and spoiled that plan. Thankfully, another opportunity had already presented itself long before then. That's what led us to where we are now."

"So, you're convinced that exposing me will sway Robert's mind?" Lyanna presumed. She looked as though she would laugh at the absurdity of that concept.

"No," Jon Connington slyly countered, "If I expose you, someone else will sway his mind."

A devious grin abruptly appeared on the princess's face. "Ah… in other words, someone close to the king has been assisting you."

Lord Jon stiffened at that. He realized his error, and he made a desperate attempt to correct it. He hastily muttered "No, no, I didn't say that. I did not say that."

"You implied it," Lyanna drily pointed out, "And your reaction to my accusation confirms it. So… someone who works with or is related to Robert Baratheon helped you to carry out that massacre. Don't try to deny it."

Jon Connington was tempted to claim otherwise, but to do so would have been futile. At this point, Lyanna Stark would not buy any lie or half-truth he tried to feed her. Instead, he frowned and muttered "Fine, I admit it; you're correct. Even so, that information will be of no use to you."

"For now, maybe," she supposed, "But sooner or later, I will find out who this secret ally of yours is. Once I do… it shall be I who exposes you, not the other way around."

That threat may have had more credence if Princess Lyanna was not restrained, surrounded by enemies, and scores of miles away from her nearest ally. All the same, she succeeded in getting on Jon Connington's nerves. He grimaced and muttered "Senaera, gag her."

He could have done it himself, but he was no going any closer to Lyanna Stark than he already was. She'd probably try to sink her teeth into any part of me she can reach.

Lyanna did not resist when the female pit fighter came forward to carry out the task. She seemed queerly pleased with herself. She just sat totally still, continued staring at Jon Connington, and maintained that same smug grin right up until the moment Senaera pulled that length of cloth back over her mouth.

Grin now, Your Grace. We'll see which of us is smiling when all this is over.

Some people grew up accustomed to grief and hardship. To Daenerys Targaryen, they had always been her constant companions. Much like Viserys, they had gone with her everywhere she went. The sad part is they were more reliable than my brother.

Her father was slain months before her birth. Her mother died shortly after giving birth. She had no recollection of her parents. She and Viserys had been on the run for her whole life. Up until she was five and ten, she had thought her brother was the only member of her family who still lived.

If the rest of my relatives were anything like him, I would have been content never knowing any of
them. While that may have seemed cynical of her, the fault did not lie entirely with Daenerys. After all, Viserys may have claimed to love her, but only when he obeyed and listened to her. Whenever she displeased him, all he had shown her was brutality and abuse.

In spite of that, when she first learned her brother Rhaegar's children had survived, she had been delighted. When she learned that two of them were sailing to Essos, her rapture had only increased.

She had met Jon during her wedding outside of Pentos, and she had met Aegon shortly before the heart ceremony at Vaes Dothrak. To her relief, both her nephews took after their father much more than their grandfather.

When Khal Drogo "crowned" Viserys, Daenerys had been saddened by the loss of her brother. But she had not mourned him for long. She had had too many bad memories of him. Thankfully, Jon and Aegon were there for her. The two of them more than filled the void left by her brother.

*But I don't think anything will ever fill this horrible new void.*

Daenerys Targaryen had not loved her husband when she wed him. She had hardly even known him at the time. *I never really came to know him over the course of our marriage, either.* Be that as it may, she had come to love him. He may have been a barbarian as Viserys claimed, but he was tender and caring to her.

Now he was gone. He and Rhaego. When she thought of that, Dany press her hand against her abdomen. It was so odd to feel it flat again. *The stallion who mounts the world never even had a chance to be a colt.*

Dany felt a tear come to her eye. She had already shed plenty of tears over the last week. Yet even now, they threatened to spill again at any time. *How long will it be before I can dry my eyes?*

Before she could start weeping again, she felt a hand on her shoulder. The grip was strong yet gentle. She had become accustomed to that touch; it was very comforting and reassuring. *Much like the person it belongs to.*

Dany glimpsed over her shoulder and saw Jon Targaryen behind her. He looked as miserable as she felt, but more than that, he seemed concerned. Dany knew why. *Always thinking of others.*

Daenerys was grateful that Jon at least bothered to concern himself with her well-being. She did the same for him. The two of them had helped each other cope with their recent losses. After all, they perfectly understood and shared one another's pain. *No one else knows what he and I are going through right now.*

"How are you faring?" Jon asked rhetorically

"As well as can be expected," Daenerys replied. *In other words, not very well at all.*

It was then that she noticed that Jon had not come alone. His elder half-brother and the Volantene noblewoman were also present. Aegon and Talisa had been helping one another with their own recent losses, similarly to how Jon and Daenerys had been. Not in the exact same way, of course. *I don't feel about Jon like that, and I doubt he does for me, either."

"Would you mind if we joined you?" Talisa queried.

"Not at all," Dany responded. She had spent most of that morning on the bridge of the *Zenith*, staring off into the distance. She had been by herself for all that time. Aggo, Kovarro, Rakharo, and Irri were all close-by, but at her insistence, they had given her some space to be alone.
with her thoughts. *Some friendly company would be welcome about now.*

Ghost and Ser Arthur Dayne were currently on the bridge, as well, but like Daenerys's kos and handmaiden, the direwolf and the Kingsguard knight were giving Jon and Aegon some room.

Jon stepped up to Dany's left, and Aegon and Talisa stepped up to the right of her. The four young adults leaned against the port side of the *Zenith*. For a while, they stood in relative quietness and gazed out to the west. The countless leagues of the Narrow Sea lay before them. *How I long to see what is across these waters.*

Hopefully, soon enough, she would. *If the gods are good, we all will.* Of course, as of late, they had not so good at all. *That may change after tonight.*

Now that that was on her mind, she asked the others "Are you prepared for this evening?"

"I suppose so," Jon stated uncertainly. Aegon mumbled in tentative agreement.

"Do you think it will actually work?" Talisa wondered.

"If it doesn't, we'll look like fools," Aegon contended.

"I'm willing to risk that," Jon declared. After a short pause, he added in "Considering what we may get out of it."

"Let us hope the Red Woman is not misleading us," Talisa remarked, "More importantly, that she's not misleading you three."

"Don't forget it was Lady Melisandre who turned the tide of battle in our favor," Aegon recounted.

"True," Jon conceded. "Had she not summoned those reinforcements, we would all have been lost."

Daenerys nodded in agreement. *It's a shame she could not have sent them a little sooner, though. More of our allies might still be alive.* Even so, thanks to Lady Melisandre, Dany and her nephews had lived through that nightmarish ordeal.

"I do not suspect Melisandre is plotting against you," Talisa clarified, "I am simply wondering if her ideals may be misguided. I mean... she is literally asking you three to set yourselves on fire."

"Fire cannot harm a dragon, my love," Aegon told the Volantene girl, "You've seen that for yourself."

"Yes, I have," Talisa conceded, "But it's one thing to hold a lit brazier under your arm. It's quite another to immerse your entire body in roaring flames."

"I am confident we will be unharmed," Aegon said assuredly, "I am not worried about getting burned alive. However, I am worried that we will be the only things to emerge from the ashes."

"As am I," Jon commented, "If the Red Woman alone said the eggs were real, I would question her. However, Lord Gregor Clegane made the same claim, and Lord Gregor would never lie on something like this. So, the eggs must be real."

"The issue is not whether they're real," Daenerys pointed out, "We've known for months that the eggs are real. The true problem is whether this ritual will be enough to make them hatch."

"Well, the only way to find out is to go through with it," Talisa debated. *Oh, we shall go through*
with it. Make no mistake of that. Jon and Aegon appeared to be having similar thoughts. She was somewhat hesitant about this whole matter surrounding her eggs, just as they were. Even so, they opted to trust in the Red Woman's counsel. It is past time we acquired that 'advantage,' anyway.

"In any case, I'll be relieved to leave behind this terrible city," Aegon commented.

"That makes all of us," Jon uttered bluntly, "In fact, I wouldn't mind never returning to this bloody continent ever again."

*Neither would I.* Daenerys had lived in Essos all her life. Just like Viserys, she had far too many bad memories of it to associate the continent with anything worthwhile. She would be relieved when she finally saw its shores for the very last time.

"I may come back someday," Aegon thought aloud, "Never to here, of course. But I would like my children to know their roots."

Talisa smiled softly. "Do not get too ahead of yourself, my dear. Those children do not exist just yet."

"They will in time," Aegon asserted, smiling back at her. He wrapped his arm around her waist, pulled her closer, and kissed her gently on the lips. 

*How I envy them.* Apparently, so did Jon.

Neither of them said anything, though. They did not wish to spoil this moment for Aegon or his lover. *These moments are precious.* She had not realized just how precious until she lost Drogo. Jon undoubtedly came to the same realization after what happened to Ygritte.

That aside, all this talk of children was starting to upset Dany. Jon seemed just as upset, if not more so. *However great my pain may be, I cannot imagine his.*

Jon's own child had been only days away from being born when the mother was murdered. At his request, Maester Qyburn had cut open Ygritte's lower torso and extracted the babe. Jon had wanted to see his babe just once, even if what he saw was incomplete.

As it happened, Jon's babe was almost fully developed. They even determined its gender. *He would have had a girl.* When they removed what remained of Rhaego from me, no one could tell if it even would have been a boy.

Jon had actually hoped for a girl. Daenerys was surprised when he mentioned that. *I thought all men wanted their firstborn to be male.* While it may have been true that most men did, and Jon would have been content with a boy, he had been yearning for a girl.

He would have named her Visenya. When Dany asked him why, Jon explained to her that his half-sister Rhaenys told him that Rhaegar would have named him Visenya if he had been born a girl. Thus, he argued, if his father could not have a daughter with that name, Jon would could give him a granddaughter with it instead. *He nearly did, if not for that monster Connington.*

When Jon Connington stabbed her mother in the abdomen, his blade had pierced clean through Visenya's tiny lungs. She had died of suffocation in the womb. If Connington had stabbed Ygritte just three or four inches higher, his sword would have missed Visenya entirely, and she may have lasted in the womb long enough for Qyburn cut her out.

Merely thinking of Jon Connington infuriated Dany. *My brother's best friend is now our worst enemy.* When Jon learned it was Connington who murdered Ygritte and Visenya, he made a
solemn vow to hunt the exiled lord of Griffin's Roost down and end him personally. That declaration was hardly an empty one. It was a promise.

Jon intends to make good on that promise; I know it. Whenever we find Connington, I don't think anyone will dare to stand in his way.

"So, I know you will be coming back with us, Talisa," Jon remarked, "What about your brother?"

"He has decided he'll stay on, too," the Volantene girl disclosed, "Even though Vereld was the strong one and the one who protected us, Hollistor and I are not the least bit dissuaded from our wish to travel to the Seven Kingdoms."

"What will you do with Vereld's body?" Daenerys inquired curiously.

"We've arranged to have it transported back to Volantis," Talisa informed her, "Hollistor and I would have liked to have taken it back ourselves. Alas, it would take far too long to get there and back, and we couldn't ask the rest of you to wait on us."

"We appreciate you making that sacrifice," Aegon proclaimed thankfully.

"It's a small sacrifice," Talisa assured him.

Compared to some of the other sacrifices we've made of late, it certainly is.

Daenerys wondered how Triach Maegyr and his son would react when they received a box from two of the latter's children and found the body of a third inside. Doubtlessly, their father and mother will feel much like Jon and I do. It's horrid enough to lose a babe in the wound. To actually outlive one's child... no one should endure that torment.

As it happened, Vereld, Hollistor, and Talisa were not their grandfather's only grandchildren. Nor were they their father's only children. They had a younger brother and sister, both of whom still at the age when they hid behind their mother's skirts. Even if Hollistor and Talisa never return to Volantis, at least their parents will still find solace and happiness in their two youngest.

That made Daenerys think... will I ever have another child? Will Jon, for that matter? She saw no reason why not. She and her nephew were still young. Although he would be mourning Ygritte and Visenya and she Drogo and Rhaego, they would have to move on eventually. They still had their whole lives ahead of them. They had plenty of time to find love again and start a family again. Provided we live past the Long Night.

If neither of them ever found anyone, perhaps they could... help each other out somehow. That idea gave Daenerys pause. No, you cannot think like that, Dany, she chided herself. You're his aunt, for goodness' sake!

Before Daenerys could lament any more, they had another visitor. She and the others were aware that the leaders of their company – the ones remaining, at any rate – would be have a meeting that day to discuss the next step in their operations.

They had been expecting Lady Dacey Clegane to send someone to fetch them. What they had not expected was that Lady Dacey would come herself. Nonetheless, she did.

"Everyone's ready," the Bear Islander told the Targaryens and the Volantene noblewoman, "The only ones we're missing are you four."

"Sorry to make you look for us, my lady," Jon said apologetically.
"It's no trouble, Jon," Lady Dacey assured him, "But I need you to follow me. I would rather not put off this meeting any longer."

"Very well, my lady," Daenerys avowed. The others said nothing, but they came along just as complianly.

Five minutes later, they were in the galley one deck below. The galley was the biggest room on the *Zenith*, and the only one large enough to accommodate the leaders of the company. *At least there are that many left. If we ended up even less fortunate, there may have been few enough of us left that we'd all fit in one of the cabins.*

Hollistor Maegyr was sitting at an otherwise-empty table in the center of the room. Talisa sat down beside her brother, and Aegon sat down on the other side of her. Jon took the bench opposite theirs, and Daenerys elected to take the place next to him.

As she got settled, Daenerys took a moment to survey the room and make a note of everyone who was accounted for. Although it had been an entire week since the Pentoshi Bloodbath (that was what everyone was calling it now), Dany had needed that much time to determine who had survived that battle and who had not.

She was beyond relieved that Lady Dacey Clegane and Lady Ellyn Lannister had survived the battle. She had come to love and respect both women. They were like the mother she had never known and the sisters her true mother had miscarried.

Initially, they feared Ellyn's husband, Lord Tyrion, had perished in the fighting. Fortunately, he had not; they found him underneath an overturned pile of crates. He was shaken, but unharmed.

Some of their allies were not so lucky. Seven members of the secret council other than Lady Dacey had been involved in the Pentoshi Bloodbath. Of those, only three had survived. Lord Renly Baratheon, Ser Maron Greyjoy, Ser Lyn Corbray, and Ser Brynden Tully had fallen.

Daenerys was happy Allard Seaworth was one of the three who survived. He had been shot in the leg and knocked out during the fighting. His wound was in the process of mending, but he would need a walking stick for a time, and he would likely move with a limp for the rest of his life.

Ser Lothor Brune had been shot, as well, and he had nearly drowned. The only reason he still drew breath was because Brynden Tully had dived into the bay to rescue him. He had taken three arrows in the back while doing so. At the cost of his own life, the Blackfish had saved Ser Lothor's. While Ser Lothor's injuries were not fatal, his left arm would be in a sling for a few weeks.

Prince Oberyn Martell had emerged unscathed, but not unaffected. For the last seven days, he had been in a very fragile frame of mind. *Who could blame him?* His daughter and his sister – both named Elia – had been murdered right before his eyes. He was taking their deaths even harder than Ellaria Sand and Aegon.

Those were only six of the people they had lost. Also among the fallen Westerosi were Chiswyck, Tobbot, Lady Dacey's sister Lady Alysane Mormont, Ser Perwyn Frey, Ser Loras Tyrell, and Ser Bonifer Hasty. Thinking about Ser Bonifer made Dany sad. He had loved her mother, and he had loved her as a daughter. In the end, he had died to keep her safe. *He was the closest thing I had to a Kingsguard,* Dany reflected.

Meanwhile, Jon had lost his own Kingsguard, Ser Gerold Hightower, in the fighting. Worse yet, his mother was missing. Ghost's mother, Lyarra, was killed defending her mistress. She had died in the same room as Ygritte.
The Essosi had suffered, as well. Upon the deaths of Sallor the Bald and Prendahl na Ghezn, Daario Naharis had assumed sole command of the Stormcrows. With Mero gone, command of the Second Sons had passed on to Brown Ben Blumm, who had somehow survived his deadly encounter with Ithoke the pit fighter. The Tattered Prince was the founder of the Windblown and the only leader it had ever had, and he had died, as well. Now, his right and left hands Caggo and Denzo D'han shared joint command of the organization.

Homeless Harry Strickland and his squire Watkyn had been the first casualties of battle. They were dispatched by the traitors Jon Connington and Ser Rolly Duckfield. A great many of the Westerosi members of the Golden Company had turned their cloaks, as well. Be that as it may, the Essosi members were still loyal to the Targaryens, and they had been completely unaware of their former colleagues' betrayal. Their actions at the end of the Pentoshi Bloodbath were proof of that.

Since Harry Strickland was dead, the Golden Company was without its Captain-General. Until they appointed someone new to the position, Black Balaq, Lysono Maar, and Gorys Edoryen were sharing control of the Company. *As long as they continue to honor their contract with Aegon, I care not who heads their ranks.*

That was what remained of their leaders. There were some other individuals there who were not quite authority figures, but they were important, just the same. Those people included Ellaria Sand, Ser Arthur Dayne, Haldon Halfmaester, Maester Qyburn, and Lady Melisandre.

Alyver Clegane was there, too. Although he had not been present during the Bloodbath, he had sustained several injuries of his own when Connington and his men boarded the ship. At present, Alyver wore a bandage on his forehead and his right arm was in a sling. *He is only nine, yet he fought with the valor of a man grown.* For a while, it had seemed as though Alyver would either go blind in one of his eyes or lose at least part of his arm. Thankfully, Qyburn, Haldon, and Talisa managed to treat his injuries before infection set in. In fact, it was due in large part to Qyburn, Haldon, and Talisa that almost none of the survivors of the Bloodbath succumbed to their wounds. They did not even have to perform any amputations. *Most of these wounds will heal in time. Of course, there are some scars that will never fully heal.* She was not thinking of Allard Seaworth's limp when that thought past through her head.

Last but not least, there was the Tickler. Daenerys knew not what his real name was. *I don't think anyone does.* All anyone knew of the man was that he had been serving Gregor Clegane since before Robert's Rebellion. He was also the chief interrogator of the Legion without Banners.

These last several days, the Tickler had been doing his duty almost nonstop. He had spent almost all of that time with Ser Rolly Duckfield, Vargo Hoat, and Illyrio Mopatis. Quite often, he had made all three of the men squeal. In more than one way.

Neither Daenerys nor anyone else felt even an ounce of sympathy for the Tickler's latest victims. *They brought this on themselves. And they should count themselves lucky. Their treatment is nothing next to the fate that awaits Jon Connington.*

Usually, Lady Dacey would request that the Tickler exercise at least a little restraint when questioning his victims. In this situation, however, she had given him the liberty to go "all out." Based on the screams that frequently emanated from the brigs of the *Zenith*, the *Leviathan*, and the *Sea Serpent*, The Tickler had done just that. *Let us hope he has not killed them just yet. We'll still need them alive for tonight.* Lady Melisandre had emphasized the severity of that detail several times. Besides, it would be a fitting end for traitors. *My father would likely agree.* While Daenerys had no desire to resemble her father in any way, she was willing to make an exception in this case.
At any rate, once everyone was assembled, Lady Dacey Clegane went to the center of the room. She stood just a few feet away from Daenerys's table. Once everyone's attention was on her, she announced "We have already wasted a week by Lingering in Pentos. That's seven days more than we can afford to waste. As such, I aim to keep this meeting brief. It will be little more than an overview of everything we've learned since the Bloodbath that relates to it, and how we intend to follow up on this knowledge.

At that, she turned to the Tickler and bade him "Begin your summary report."

"Aye, milady," the chief interrogator said in acknowledgment. The man may have been a complete psychopath, but he presented himself with dignity, humility, and respect for his leaders. Daenerys noticed some bloodstains on his clothes and hands. A couple looked fresh. Evidently, he had just come from work. The Tickler rose from his bench, gazed around the galley, and professed "After applying extensive pressure to the prisoners, I have managed to produce the truth from all three of them. I know it is the truth because they're all telling me the same thing now. Whereas at the start of the week, their stories were radically different. That said, I have confirmed that Connington and the rest of his band are indeed headed for Braavos."

Then it looks as though that's where we'll be going. Some of them would be going there, at any rate.

"Have you determined why they are headed there?" Lady Dacey enquired.

"Yes," the Tickler continued, "Our prisoners claim that Connington and his men do in fact mean to board a ship in Braavos that will take them to King's Landing. That may sound dismal news, but luckily for us, this ship is not there at present."

"Why is that?" Allard Seaworth queried, resting on his walking stick.

"Because their contact in the Seven Kingdoms will not send it until he hears from them," the Tickler responded. He looked around the room again and stated "As you know, Magister Illyrio, Ser Rolly, and Lord Vargo have established that Lord Jon has an informant in the Seven Kingdoms. None of them have ever met this informant, but they have each corresponded with him at least once. From their testimony, we can confirm that this individual exists, and that he has been collaborating with Lord Jon for at least the last six months. Apparently, this informant was the true mastermind behind the Pentoshi Bloodbath."

But Connington was the one who carried them out. Jon seemed to be thinking the same as her.

Prince Oberyn Martell asked the question Dany and several others had on their mind: "Who exactly is this contact?"

"Alas, they do not know," the Tickler pronounced. That prompted a wave of frustrated groans.

"Can you be certain of that?" Daario Naharis asked dubiously

"Oh, believe me," Ser Lothor Brune cockily muttered, "If Mopatis, Duckfield, or Hoat knew the name of their informant, they would be screaming it by now."

The Tickler seemed pleased that at least one person there had absolute faith in his capability as an interrogator. After flashing an appreciate smile Ser Lothor's way, he went on with "Whoever the informant is, he is very determined to remain anonymous. You see, apparently, Connington is the only one who knows his identity. The prisoners had ideas as to who the informant might be, but since we are only dealing in absolutes and since this is not relevant to our most urgent problems, I
will not mention that now."

No one seemed dissatisfied with that proposal. *If need be, we can always revisit this topic sometime after we leave this city.*

"Next, let us discuss motives," the Tickler declared, "As you can imagine, money is the primary cause for the Pentoshi Bloodbath."

*Predictable, but disappointing, all the same.* There were some people who would do practically anything for the right amount of coin.

"The Brave Companions and the pit fighters participated in the Bloodbath solely for money," the Tickler revealed, "Mopatis did it for money and power. It seems that in exchange for his involvement in this plot, the informant would have helped the magister to become the richest and most powerful man in Pentos. Maybe even in all the Nine Free Cities."

Daenerys was disgusted. *So even Viserys and I could be sold for the right price. To think I actually thought the magister cared for us.*

At least she could derive a bit of comfort from knowing that Illyrio would never be compensated. *The informant won't be able to keep his promise in that regard.* The morning after the Pentoshi Bloodbath, Lady Dacey had ordered for Magister Illyrio's estate to be raided. The Unsullied had stormed it before noon, and they had taken everything that belonged to Illyrio. His treasures had been plundered, his riches had been appropriated, his soldiers had been put to the sword, and his servants had been released from service. Once everything of value was seized, Grey Worm and his officers had set the manse on fire.

Conveniently, no one tried to stop the Unsullied. Just before they raided the manse, the citizens of Pentos learned of what Magister Illyrio had done. Almost immediately after word of this got out, his friends, allies, colleagues, and fellow magisters severed all ties to him. Moreover, no one wanted Mopatis back in their city. As such, Lady Dacey could keep the magister in custody for as long as she wished, and she could do whatever she pleased to him. *Good news for the Tickler.*

"And the renegade Golden Company men?" Ellyn Lannister inquired.

At that, the Tickler proclaimed "While the Golden Company men were also looking to make a profit, money was not their sole objective. They wanted something more: the right to return to the Seven Kingdoms."

"Just how did they expect that to happen?" Tyrion Lannister murmured, as though he found that statement humorous.

*That* would have been the informant's doing," the Tickler elaborated, "The prisoners do not know the specific details of the deal Connington made, but he did mention that he seemed *extremely* confident in the informant's ability to fulfill his end of the bargain."

"In other words, the informant is either known to be a man of his word, or he has a reputation as a trustworthy individual," Lady Dacey perceived. The Tickler nodded in confirmation.

*Then the informant is either very influential or someone with prestigious connections.* That may not have been much to go on if they hoped to determine the identity of the informant, but at least they had a firmer basis for composing a list of suspects now.

"That brings us to the final and most important factor of all," the Tickler muttered. He looked at
Jon Targaryen for a few seconds, he looked at Lord and Lady Lannister for a few seconds more, and then he pronounced "The prisoners have told me of Connington's intentions concerning Lyanna Stark, Greta, and Duncan Lannister."

The majority of those in attendance had already been aware that the woman who accompanied Jon everywhere was not merely his maid. The only ones who had not known in advance were the Essosi. While nearly everyone currently outside the galley was still unaware, the Westerosi had no reservations about telling the sellsword captains and the Maegyrs the truth about "Myrna." After all, what would they care about the politics and history of the other side of the world? For that reason and others, they could be trusted to keep the matter secret for as long as need be.

The Tickler continued: "Lord Tyrion, Lady Ellyn, you can rest a little easier now. Although the prisoners could only guess what the informant's interest in young Lord Duncan might be, they all agree on one particular detail: Connington is under very strict orders that your son is not to harmed under any circumstances. The informant was adamant on that."

The dwarf and the Mountain's sister had hardly slept at all this past week. Ever since they learned of their son's abduction, they had been overcome with apprehension. The knowledge that he was not being mistreated or mishandled by his captors seemed to ease their minds slightly.

Obviously, they will not be fully at ease until they are reunited with Duncan. I pray that will not be too long.

"They don't know anything about Greta," the Tickler professed, "Thus, I can only conclude she was never meant to be taken, and it was simply gross misfortune on her part that she was."

"At least Duncan will have one friendly face nearby," Lady Ellyn thought aloud, trying to reassure herself as much as her husband.

"Two, actually," the Tickler disclosed, "Connington needs Princess Lyanna alive and unharmed, as well. However, I do not believe her safety is as imperative to the informant. She will be fine for as long as she remains in Braavos. But once Connington and his party return to the Seven Kingdoms and deliver her to the informant… the informant is going to have her brought before King Robert in her true, undisguised form."

The silence that fell upon the galley was almost haunting; it was so eerie. Half the people there looked horrified; the other half looked as though they were going to panic.

Jon was the one who broke this unpleasant silence. He gradually stood up and uttered quietly "What?"

The Tickler sighed, lightly nodded his head to confirm, and declared "The primary purpose of the Pentoshi Bloodbath was to eliminate most – if not all – of our group's leaders. The secondary purpose, however, was to capture Princess Lyanna and send her back to Westeros. The informant's motive for both objectives is still a mystery, likely even to Connington. Nonetheless, the informant seems quite determined to keep us out of the Seven Kingdoms and to present Lyanna Stark to the world."

"It matters not how determined he is," Lady Dacey Clegane proclaimed, "We will not allow him to succeed in either respect. I intend to stop Connington before he ruins everything we've worked for."

She spoke in a tone that would accept no argument. She sounded as though she was about to divulge how they would stop Jon Connington. Finally, we get to the countermeasures.
"Do you have a plan, Dacey?" Lady Ellyn asked her sister-by-law. She and her husband seemed very hopeful.

"I do," the Bear Islander said in response.

The rest of the meeting was spent discussing Lady Dacey's plan. Basically, they were going to divide their forces into three groups.

The first group, led by Prince Oberyn Martell, would sail for Sunspear with the Dothraki and the Golden Company.

The second group, led by Allard Seaworth, would sail for Moat Cailin with the other sellswords companies.

The third group, led by Lady Dacey Clegane, would sail for Braavos with the Unsullied.

The goal of the first and second groups were fairly simple and straightforward. They were to return to Westeros with the bulk of the armies acquired in Essos, and they would prepare those armies for the upcoming conflict with the Others.

The third group had the most critical and time-sensitive goal. Once they reached Braavos, they would either wait for Connington to arrive or seek him out if he was already there. Regardless of which, once they came across the exiled lord and his band of marauders, they would rescue Lyanna Stark and Duncan Lannister.

When they recovered their people, they would kill the remainder of Connington's forces, but they would capture Connington himself alive. The Tickler would then work his magic on Connington and get him to name his informant. After that, Connington would be given a slow and agonizing execution. By who, no one could say. There was no shortage of volunteers to carry out the job, though.

It went without saying that Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn would be in the third group. It was their son who had been kidnapped, after all. For that same reason, Jon would be in the third group, too. His mother needs him.

Daenerys requested to be in the third group, as well. She argued that they would need people who were familiar with Braavos. Although Lady Dacey and several other Legionnaires had visited Braavos at some point previously, Daenerys had actually lived there for over a year. That was perhaps the most relaxing year of my life. Aegon would be in the first group. After all, Dorne was his mother's homeland, and the Golden Company answered to him now.

Dany expected Lady Melisandre to protest when Lady Dacey assigned her to the second group. After all, she would not be with any of the Targaryens, and she'd be going to the coldest and darkest of the three destinations. However, she did not utter so much as a word of disagreement. Perhaps she has lost interest in us. Another thought occurred to Dany. Or... maybe something or someone else at Moat Cailin has caught the Red Woman's interest, too.

Talisa and her brother would be going to Dorne with Aegon and his uncle.

Daenerys did not think to concern herself with where everyone else would be going. Wherever they go, I trust they'll be of use. After Lady Dacey assigned the Maegyrs to the third group, Dany found her mind drifting back to her lost love and her dead child. Somehow, her thoughts always returned
to Drogo and Rhaego. She missed them dreadfully.

Before long, Lady Dacey finished distributing assignments. That was when she announced: "Alright, now that we all know where we are going and what we are going to do when we get there… there is only one thing still keeping us in Pentos."

Daenerys knew full well what the Northwoman was talking about. So did Jon and Aegon. *This is it. The moment we've been building up to.*

"Lady Melisandre, are you ready?" Dacey Clegane enquired.

"Yes, my lady," the red priestess replied.

"Tickler, are the prisoners ready?"

"They await your discretion, milady," the interrogated uttered with an evil smirk.

"Jon, Aegon, Dany… are you ready?"

Daenerys gradually looked to her nephews. Both of them gave a light nod. At that, Dany stood up and stated "We are, my lady."

Lady Dacey folded her arms and announced "Then I need you all to reconvene in the harbor in thirty minutes or less. The time has come for you to become more than dragons in name."

"As you command, my lady," Aegon acknowledged, rising to his feet with Dany and Jon.

The meeting ended there. Everyone proceeded to file out of the galley. Most of them seemed to be going up to the bridge. *I suspect they'll be there when we arrive.*

Before the Targaryens joined everyone else outside, there was one more thing they needed. *Three more things, to be precise.*

Daenerys swiftly made her way to her quarters. Jon and Aegon followed her close behind. When they got to her cabin, Dany reached underneath her bed and pulled out the cedar chest Magister Illyrio had gifted her at her wedding.

The magister will never atone for the wrongs he's done us, but I am glad he provided us with these.

With the chest in her arms, Daenerys and her nephews headed back up to the bridge of the *Zenith*. They crossed the gangplank, and they made their way down the docks.

Even now, the aftermath of the Pentoshi Bloodbath was still being cleaned up. Security had increased exponentially all along the harbor, and it was uncomfortably serene and quiet everywhere. The water of the bay was now a light red. *The term 'Bloodbath' seems totally appropriate.*

Soon, Daenerys, Jon, and Aegon reached the end of the harbor outside the walls of Pentos. Fifty feet away from the southern wall, a huge crowd of people had assembled.

Most of them were Dothraki. It was a wonder the horselords had stayed this long. Quite a few of them looked as though they were seriously contemplating the idea of going back to Vaes Dothrak. It was only out of respect for the fallen khals that they had not rode off. *We arrived just in time, it seems.*

The majority of the other people there, Dany had just seen in the galley of the *Zenith*. Everyone
else was either a Legionnaire or a Royal Army soldier. They want to see a show, she supposed. She scoffed at the thought. Well, we may as well give them one.

Daenerys, Jon, and Aegon made their way through the massive crowd until they reached the middle of it. There, a huge pyre had been erected.

Building the pyre had been a bit of a chore. There were no trees in or around Pentos, so it had to be built entirely from wooden furniture taken from Illyrio's manse. Good thing the magister was so fond of sitting. Some of that wood had come from the chairs Dany and her people had sat at during the magister's feast. Yet one more bit of irony.

Rolly Duckfield, Vargo Hoat, and Illyrio Mopatis were bound to base of the pyre. Straightaway, Dany could tell that the Tickler had indeed been busy. The three men had been subjected to so much torture that they were nearly unrecognizable. Illyrio's still the fat one, Dany remembered.

Lady Dacey Clegane, Allard Seaworth, Ser Lothor Brune, Prince Oberyn Martell, and Lady Melisandre were a few feet from the base of the pyre. Each of them was holding a torch.

No one spoke any words. We have already exchanged more than enough of those. This was a time for actions, not for dialogue.

Daenerys solemnly approached the pyre. Jon and Aegon stood on either side of her. Her nephews climbed atop the foundation first, and then they reached down and pulled her up onto it.

Now it was just the three of them... and the bodies. There were a lot of bodies. All the khals who had died during the Pentoshi Bloodbath were there, including Khal Drogo. The bodies of Princess Elia Martell and Ygritte were there, too. The mutilated remains of Visenya and Rhaego were wrapped up in blankets next to Ygritte and Drogo respectively. Last of all, Viserys's preserved corpse was accounted for. We were right to keep his body. Now he'll finally serve some good, and he'll be one with the dragons.

When Daenerys reached the very center of the pyre, she placed the chest down in front of her and opened it up. Inside were the three stone dragon eggs. Not eggs much longer, I pray.

She, Jon, and Aegon each picked up one egg. They felt solid, but somewhere within, life was stirring. Now, it is up to us to make that life come forth.

Dany carefully placed her egg right before her feet. Jon and Aegon did the same with theirs. The three of them stood close together so they were within reach and facing each other. Only one thing left to do now.

Daenerys took up the now-empty cedar chest and flung it off the pyre. She did not see where it landed, but she hoped no one on the ground was hit by it. Even if someone was, that was the least of her concerns now.

When she tossed the chest off the pyre, she had given the signal to commence. We are officially past the point of no return.

Out of the corner of her eye, Daenerys saw Lady Dacey, Allard, Ser Lothor, and Prince Oberyn each walk towards one of the four edges of the pyre. Simultaneously, Lady Melisandre began to chant in a tongue Daenerys had never heard before.

As the four secret council members got into position and the Red Woman spoke her hymn, Dany, Aegon, and Jon held hands with one another. We're in this together; all three of us. The dragon has three heads.
They stood like this for almost five whole minutes. Other than Lady Melisandre's chanting and the occasional moan from Rolly Duckfield, Illyrio Mopatis, and Vargo Hoat, there was total silence everywhere for that whole interval.

Finally, once those five minutes past, Lady Melisandre tossed her torch onto the pyre. At the same time, Lady Dacey, Allard, Ser Lothor, and Prince Oberyn set fire to each of the four edges. Within seconds, the pyre was burning. The flames started out as small and weak. They rapidly spread and grew hotter, brighter, and stronger.

In less than one minute, the whole pyre was encompassed in giant flames. The three bound men did not react favorably. Daenerys could tell as much from the noises they made. Vargo Hoat was shrieking, Rolly Duckfield was shouting, and Illyrio Mopatis was screeching.

Daenerys, Jon, and Aegon uttered not a sound. Even when it made contact with their skin, the fire did little more than warm them up. It became a little harder to breathe, but they had anticipated that. They each sucked in a mouthful of air and held it in as the fires intensified.

Dany shut her eyes to keep the smoke out of them. She assumed Jon and Aegon did the same. She felt their grips on her hands. Her own grip tightened on theirs in turn. You mustn't balk, Daenerys Stormborn. You mustn't.

Vargo Hoat was the first to stop screaming. Once his voice faded, there was a sharp crack. It sounded as though it came near Aegon's feet.

Soon after, Rolly Duckfield stopped screaming, too. A second crack came then. This one originated near Dany's feet.

She was amazed Illyrio Mopatis lasted as long as he did. After letting out one last very long, very shrill scream, he turned silent. That was when the third crack sounded near Jon's feet.

Daenerys did not know how long she and her nephews stood atop the pyre. Standing motionless in a pit of fire, it was difficult to keep track of time.

Before too long, the wood began to split. Not two minutes after that, it gave out beneath the Targaryens altogether. The three of them fell through the opening in the pyre, but they managed to land on their feed and keep ahold of each other's hands. A moment later, something else landed beside each of them. It could not have been the eggs; the sounds were too light to have been solid stone.

Daenerys was sorely tempted to open her eyes, but she willed herself to keep them shut. They remained shut for… she could not guess how long. An hour? Two hours? Thirty minutes? Fifteen minutes? Less? More? She could no longer tell.

Eventually, the fire ran out of wood to burn, and the flames extinguished themselves. That was when Daenerys finally deemed it safe to open her eyes again.

Right away, she noticed that she was naked. Jon and Aegon were naked, too. But she did not care. She was far more captivated by the creatures who had suddenly appeared in place of the eggs.

The green-and-bronze dragon was draped around Aegon's shoulders, the black-and-scarlet dragon was climbing up Jon's back, and the cream-and-gold dragon was clinging to Dany's chest.

Each dragon was nearly as big as its owner. Their size was absolutely incredible. How could creatures so large have fit in those much smaller eggs?
Daenerys ultimately decided she did not care, and it did not truly matter. What mattered is that for the first time in over a century… the dragons had finally returned.

As mesmerizing as the dragons were, Dany brought herself to look around at the people gathered. Every single one of them – Dothraki or otherwise – was on bent knee. Even Lady Melisandre herself.

Chapter End Notes

Note: Well, the dragons have arrived! And don't worry, none of them will end up being reanimated by the Night King. Not in MY story. If you ask me, what Benioff and Weiss did with Viscerion in the show could probably top Fonzie jumping the shark in "Happy Days" as the most ridiculous and idiotic thing EVER done in a TV show.

Anyway, you may have noticed that the dragons were born considerably larger here than they were in canon. Allow me to account for that. Since it will not be too long before the Long Night happens in this story, the dragons will need to accelerate their growth rate. Hence, the much larger blood sacrifice in the pyre. I took the liberty of assuming "the greater the blood sacrifice, the bigger the reward." Some of you may not agree with that observation, but I don't believe Martin's ever said anything that would conflict with it.

Now, you can expect my next update sometime before New Year's. Of course, with the holidays rapidly approaching, I'll be preoccupied with other matters. Naturally, Christmas is one. On a more somber note, my grandmother died last week, and I'll be flying out to California for her funeral the day after Christmas. It's a bit like last year, when I went to Rome the day after Christmas. I only wish my reason for flying out this time was not so disheartening.

One last thing. I'm trying to decide whether I should have the dragons' names remain the same as in canon, or if I should change at least one of them to something else. The latter seems more sensible, seeing as Dany is not the only one to name them in this version. The eggs may still have been hers, but only one of the dragons is hers now. While I am perfectly capable of coming up with dragon names all on my own, I don't suppose any of YOU have any ideas for a plausible dragon name? If you do, feel free to submit it. If I happen to particularly like an offered name, I might actually include it (And I'll be certain to credit the person who submits it).
A Fitting Response

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were many in the world who might assume that life in a land permanently blanketed in snow would be miserable and dreary. It often is. Still, it was possible for cultures to flourish in such an environment. Although they had no appointed or elected leaders, the Free Folk had managed to endure north of the Wall for eons.

Furthermore, the Free Folk much preferred autonomy in a harsh and unforgiving tundra to servitude in a temperate climate. Traditionally, they had simply paid no mind to the Seven Kingdoms. In fact, up until a couple generations prior, the Free Folk had only ventured south of the Wall on certain occasions, and even then, they had only done so for some thrills.

Not two decades ago, Mance Rayder had abandoned his post at the Night's Watch, and he had spoken of the Others returning. While most regarded it as petty gossip at first, he had gradually convinced more and more people that of the credibility in his words. There are things worse than freezing to death up there. Freezing to death and getting back up, mainly.

Before long, there was talk of relocating the Free Folk to the Seven Kingdoms. Back then, that would only have been possible through a mass exodus and invasion campaign. Thankfully, Lord Gregor Clegane and King Robert Baratheon had come to an agreement with Mance. So long as the Free Folk did not stir up any trouble or violate any laws of the Seven Kingdoms, they could pass through the Wall and settle south of it. With the natives of the Seven Kingdoms. We don't have to follow their laws; we just have to respect them.

This may have seemed an extremely hopeful, naïve, and unlikely proposal, but it was still the option that would save as many people as possible. So far, it seemed to be working quite fine. For the first time ever, the wildlings and the kneelers got along with one another.

It was incredible how one could become so invested in a place after only being a part of it or aware of it for a short amount of time. Ten years ago, Tormund Giantsbane was only interested in what happened north of the Wall. In those days, he would not have concerned himself with anything that took place throughout the Seven Kingdoms. Needless to say, he never would have thought the greatest shock of his life would come from events which occurred outside of Westeros altogether.

Alas, it had. When Tormund and his allies at Moat Cailin heard of what had befallen their comrades in the Free City of Pentos, words were insufficient in describing the utter horror they felt. Likewise, the aftermath of that catastrophe was just as astonishing, but in a less terrifying manner.

According to the Mountain, the latter event would turn out to be quite beneficial to them in the fight against the Night's King. Be that as it may, the former event had dealt them a severe blow. One they would probably never fully recover from.

It had been over a day since they first received the news of the Pentoshi Bloodbath, and they were no closer to coming to terms with the truth than they had been yesterday. They had already accepted that dragons were back in the world, but they were still trying to absorb the truth of the massacre which took place beforehand. Even Tormund could not readily accept, and he had already seen savageries beyond count in the region of his ancestors.

"I still cannot believe this," Gerion Lannister muttered softly, leaning his head against his hand,
"All our work of the last ten years… almost undone in a single day."

"It's not just the work, Ser Gerion," Samwell Tarly remarked, as though they needed reminding, "It is also the people who did that work. It saddens me to think that so many of them will not be coming home."

*Oh, they'll be coming home. Or their bones will, at least.*

"Just as you said they wouldn't," said Tormund, turning towards Gregor Clegane. *He just had to make that damn speech at Year's End.* Tormund Giantsbane did not honestly think the lord of Moat Cailin was to blame for this calamity. Nevertheless, his speech had left an impact, seeing as it had turned out to be quite accurate. *First Smalljon, now this.*

The Mountain neither said nor did anything in response at first. He just sat in his chair with his arms folded and stared at the surface of the council table before him. Eventually, he gradually turned to the Free Folk representative of the secret council and made eye contact with him. Then he sighed, lightly nodded, and mumbled "When I made that speech about how some of us would never return, I honestly meant and believed. But I never would have imagined that something like this would transpire."

"Well, as you know, my lord, nothing ever goes entirely as planned," Samwell Tarly pointed out.

"That is true, Sam," Gregor conceded, "Even so, this… Pentoshi Bloodbath… it could not have happened at a worse time."

"I agree," Gerion stated bitterly, "What in the Seven Hells is Jon Connington thinking? An army of frozen walking corpses is about to descend on the Seven Kingdoms, and he goes out of his way to hinder our efforts to counter them."

"I would say he's mad," Tormund thought aloud, "Then again, a person consumed by madness could not have organized an ambush like this Connington fellow did."

"Maybe Connington believes the people of Westeros will somehow manage to repel the Army of the Dead without any support from Essos," Samwell conjectured.

"According to this, that is precisely what he believes," Gregor declared, picking up the unbound roll of parchment in front of him. That missive that had arrived yesterday morn. Lady Dacey herself had sent it from Pentos. In this lengthy letter, she informed her husband and the others of everything that had taken place in the last week. *Last fortnight, actually, seeing as the raven must have taken another week to reach us.* She had also included everything she and her companions had learned in the aftermath of the Pentoshi Bloodbath.

"If the people of Westeros were completely united, perhaps we could get through the Long Night without involving any foreigners," Tormund debated. *Most of us would die, of course. All the same, there might be enough of us left to rebuild our societies afterward.*

"That may be," Ser Gerion supposed, "But if Connington aims to follow through with this insane plot of his, Westeros will be anything but united."

"Indeed," Samwell concurred, "If the king learns the truth of Lyanna Stark, the repercussions would be devastating. Especially for those of us in the Legion without Banners."

"Just so," Gregor stated, "For that reason alone, we cannot let Jon Connington accomplish his objective. By the Seven, we cannot allow him to ever again set foot in the Seven Kingdoms. Thus,
right now, our top priority is to silence him. For good."

"So, what are we going to do, my lord?" Ser Gerion wondered.

"Alas, there is not much we can do directly," the Mountain contended, "Even for this, I cannot disobey the king's command to stay in the Seven Kingdoms, and I cannot afford to send away any of you three at this time. Therefore, we must leave Connington to Dacey and whoever else is still with her. However… there is plenty we could do to aid them on this end."

"Such as?" asked Tormund.

Gregor Clegane picked up the roll of parchment and browsed through it. When he arrived at a certain passage, he pronounced "The whole reason Connington dared to pull off this stunt is because he aims to regain his position as lord of Griffin's Roost. Apparently, he is in contact with an individual who has promised to restore him and the other Westerosi exiles in the Golden Company to their citizenship of the Seven Kingdoms. Dacey simply refers to this individual as 'the Informant,' as the Tickler was unable to extract a name from his victims."

"This informant must be a very powerful person if he could fulfill such a promise," Samwell observed, peering at the missive over the Mountain's shoulder, "Particularly after what Connington and his men have already done. Several persons of high birth were murdered in the Pentoshi Bloodbath, and nobles account for many of the casualties. At least six of the nine great families lost a blood relative in the fighting. By the time word of this disaster spreads throughout all Westeros, half the realm will be calling for Connington's head."

"I'm certain Connington realized that long ago," Lord Gregor murmured, "Yet he went through with the Pentoshi Bloodbath anyway. So, either he is wholly unperturbed or he does not intend for the blame to fall on him. He and his informant have likely composed some crafty lie to tell King Robert. After all, he fooled our people into thinking he was loyal to the Targaryens. If he could do that, he could find a way to mislead King Robert and the small council, too."

"That would have to be a fucking giant of lie," Tormund muttered.

"Yes, it would," Gerion said grimly, "After all, Lord Renly Baratheon is listed among the dead. I cannot fathom how Connington would possibly be able to explain and justify the death of the king's own brother."

Tormund and Samwell mumbled in agreement. Gregor Clegane appeared to understand the point, but he did not seem to agree with it entirely. *He always finds a counterargument for everything.*

"Actually, there are two ways he might do so," the Mountain disputed, "One, Connington could claim that Renly was murdered by his allies. You see, although the Westerosi members of the Golden Company aim to return to the Seven Kingdoms, the Tickler determined that the pit fighters and the Brave Companions do not intend to accompany them across the Narrow Sea. With that in mind, the pit fighters and the Brave Companions may have agreed to take the fall for the Bloodbath. Since they would still have all the rest of the Known World to themselves, they would be able to remain at large indefinitely, even if the Seven Kingdoms sent a task force after them to bring them to justice.

*That would be an effective ploy,* Tormund admitted. *When arranged properly, decoys can sway attention from the true guilty party for a very long while.*

"That plan relies too heavily on chance," Samwell argued, "The only surefire way it would have worked was if the Pentoshi Bloodbath ended in total victory for Connington's side."
Gregor nodded and professed "The fact that this missive is written in Dacey's hand is evidence enough that it did not. Since a number of our people survived the Bloodbath, they'll be able to tell their side of the story, which will clash with Connington's. There is no reason whatsoever that King Robert would believe him over us. Even if the king is absolutely infuriated by the truth of Lyanna Stark, that would not be enough for him to let Renly's murder go unpunished.

"But..." the Mountain went on after a brief pause, "If Connington uses the second of the two excuses... Robert would be more than willing to overlook his brother's death."

"What are you talking about?" Tormund said inquisitively. *Even for us Free Folk, it would take a lot to make a man disregard his kin.*

"Connington might tell Robert that Renly was planning to betray him," Gregor hypothesized.

"That's absolutely absurd," Gerion snorted.

"Yes, it is, and the king may think so, as well," Gregor Clegane stated, "Initially, that is. But his mind could be changed. After all, brothers have plotted against each other before. Aside from that, Renly spent most of the last few years in the Legion without Banners. As things stand, the Legion's relationship with the crown is already in a very fragile state. In all likelihood, King Robert still harbors some mistrust in me for the role I played in protecting Jon and his half-siblings. If he so wished, Connington could make that work to his advantage."

"How so, Gregor?" Gerion enquired, a bit of anxiety in his voice.

"Connington could claim that the Targaryens were plotting to retake the Iron Throne, and that the Legion was knowingly assisting them all along," the Mountain proclaimed, "Already, the Baratheon-Targaryen rivalry is nowhere close to being resolved peaceably. If Connington told the crown that Dacey and the Martells were helping the Targaryens to amass an invasion force, Robert might actually believe them."

"How could he?" Tormund spat disbelievingly.

"It would not be as difficult as one might think," Samwell disputed, answering for the lord of Moat Cailin, "Every single ally we've acquired has voluntarily entered an alliance with Westeros, but in every case, the person they have pledged their allegiance to is either a Targaryen or a member of the secret council."

"Just the point I was about to make," Lord Gregor affirmed, "The Volantenes and the majority of the Golden Company were recruited by Aegon. The other sellsword companies and the Unsullied were recruited by Oberyn. The Dothraki were recruited by Jon and Daenerys. Everyone else was recruited by Dacey. Not even one of our new allies from Essos was inspired to join by an officer of the Royal Army or anyone who would be inclined to pick the stags over the dragons."

"With all that together, Connington could easily get the world to believe that the Targaryens are planning to overthrow King Robert," Ser Gerion muttered plainly.

*If I did not know better, I might believe that myself.*

"There is also the factor of the Targaryens' 'advantage,'" Gregor declared, "This might be the one scenario in which it can prove to be a detriment."

"Why is that?" Tormund inquired. *The dragons could be pivotal in pushing back the Army of the Dead. How could they possibly be used against us?*
The Mountain answered with a theoretical question: "If you see a stranger with a dragon, would you be more inclined to take a step forward or a step backward?"

"Backward," Samwell replied almost involuntarily.

"Same here," Gerion decided, "Simply because such an encounter warrants caution."

Tormund thought a minute before saying: "My hunter's instinct might urge me to engage, but my instinct to preserve my own life would likely hold me back anyway."

"All good answers," Gregor declared, "I myself would approach, albeit with extreme care. However, I have been aware that dragons would return for a long while now. Furthermore, I have prepared my closest allies and the royal family for their return. Even so, nearly everyone else in Westeros has yet to be told of the dragons. So, they have no way of knowing whether the beasts will be amiable or hostile."

"Then you suspect they'll merely believe whoever tells them one or the other first?" Tormund presumed.

"Exactly," Gregor confirmed, "If Connington tells the king that the dragons are aggressive by nature, Robert's view of the Targaryens will only be even further blemished. In that case, the dragons would never be allowed into the Seven Kingdoms. Neither would their masters."

*Fear would definitely have that effect on the southrons.*

"If Connington managed to pull all that off, King Robert would swiftly declare the Targaryens enemies of the crown," Samwell perceived, "Worse yet, he would do the same to us and every other Legionnaire. A civil war would be all but inevitable then."

*And even if all my people rushed to our aid, we'd be outmatched and outnumbered.* Tormund Giantsbane hoped their new Essosi comrades could be relied upon to reinforce the Targaryens and the Legion without Banners if a conflict between the living broke out. Otherwise, the Free Folk was the Legion's only ally left, and their relationship was still somewhat tentative.

"You are correct, Sam," the Mountain bluntly remarked, "As I said afore, we will not let Connington succeed. We shall stop him before he comes anywhere close to the shores of Westeros."

"I thought you said we'd have to leave Connington to Dacey," Gerion recalled.

"That is true, Gerion," Gregor Clegane stated, "I also said that while she is occupied with that, the four of us can still do much to delay Connington's progress. This brings us back to the informant."

"What about the informant?" said Tormund drily.

"Although Connington carried out the Pentoshi Bloodbath, the Tickler insists that the informant was the one who orchestrated it," Gregor disclosed, "Additionally, the informant is the one who will ensure that Connington holds Griffin's Roost once more. In other words, the informant is Connington's only protection against the king's wrath. Thus, if we can neutralize this informant, we will compromise Connington's security and agenda. We may even thwart his schemes altogether."

"That is a very sound argument, my lord," Samwell remarked.

"Indeed," Tormund observed, "Connington's entire future hinges on the actions of this informant. So, he *must* be the key to eliminating Connington as a threat."
Gerion nodded his agreement and uttered "Then we should work to discover his identity as soon as possible."

At that, Gregor momentarily smirked and murmured "Oh, you needn't worry on that. I already know who the informant is."

Tormund was surprised. Samwell and Ser Gerion seemed just as taken aback.

"You're only telling us now?" Tormund snapped irritably.

"I wasn't certain until a few minutes ago," Lord Gregor claimed, "In the time since this meeting began, I have reviewed everything we've learned thus far, and I have arrived at a definite conclusion. In hindsight, it seems so obvious."

"Then tell us, my lord," Samwell beseeched the tallest man there, "Who is it?"

Gregor Clegane did not respond straightaway. Tormund wondered if he was going to keep them in suspense. More often than not, he gives a long, comprehensive lecture before he makes a grand revelation. Tormund was aware that Gregor Clegane utilized that approach simply for the purpose of easing the conversation into a more difficult or sensitive subject. While Tormund could respect the need for discretion, there were certain occasions when being direct was far preferable. This would be one.

Fortunately, this was one time when Lord Gregor Clegane chose to be completely straightforward. He let out a deep sigh and announced: "Tywin Lannister."

Tormund did not know what he was expecting the Mountain to say, but he did not expect that. Samwell and Ser Gerion were far more astounded. That was not entirely surprising, though. The lordling from the Reach scared easily, and the Westerlander knight was the brother of the accused.

"Are you sure?" Gerion asked. Tormund noticed he was making no effort to contradict or question the Mountain. In fact, Ser Gerion sounded as though he had practically accepted the Mountain's declaration. All he's looking for is confirmation.

Gregor Clegane's response was candid and firm. He proclaimed, "In all my life, I have only been so sure of two other things: Greyjoy's Rebellion and the Long Night."

Then he must be correct. "How are you so confident? Was it your source?"

"No, in this situation, my source has nothing to do with it," Gregor Clegane pronounced, "Actually, that is not entirely true. From my source, I do know that Tywin Lannister is capable of atrocities just as terrible as the Pentoshi Bloodbath. Be that as it may, the Bloodbath itself was never in one of my visions. Even so, the whole affair just screams of Tywin's machinations."

"I hope that is not all you are basing your belief on, Gregor," Gerion stiffly murmured.

"Far from it, I assure you," the Mountain asserted. He gazed around at the other three men present, and he bade them "Allow me to explain how I arrived at this conclusion. By the time I am finished, there should be very little room left for doubt."

Tormund, Samwell, and Gerion decided to hear the Mountain out. If only to sate our curiosity. He must have some excellent reasons, regardless.

Gregor started with "As you all know, I was once Tywin Lannister's vassal. Then I went against a direct order of his during the Sack of King's Landing. Subsequently, he had me dispossessed of my
birthright to Clegane's Keep, and I was required to renounce my status as a Westerlander. That would have happened, even if a new life had not been awaiting me in the North afterwards. Nevertheless, that could be regarded as a rather light punishment when you consider the usual penalties Tywin Lannister dispenses for insubordination."

"Quite so," Ser Gerion said frankly, "Tywin always has and always will be a ruthless and unforgiving man. Our lord father may have been a toothless craven, but my eldest brother most certainly has teeth, and he'll bare them at even the slightest of slights."

"Indeed," the Mountain affirmed, "It is no secret that Tywin still views me as a danger to him. After all, even though he is the queen's father, only members of the royal family are exempt from the judgment of the Legion without Banners. Knowing that, Tywin took measures to protect himself from me and my fellow Legionnaires. He went so far to as to keep both my brother and my sister as hostages."

"That did not work out so well, now did it?" Tormund murmured sardonically.

"I should say not," Gregor remarked blankly, "In my mind, Tywin will only feel truly safe from me if I no longer possess the authority to bring him to justice. But I have held the office of Master of Order since it was founded, and King Robert has had no complaints about my performance to date. Thus, Tywin knows that the king would not dismiss me simply if he asks him to. At this point, nothing less than an outrageous scandal would convince Robert to remove me from power."

"Well, exposing Lyanna Stark and the role you played in helping her disappear would certainly qualify as such," Samwell thought aloud.

"That is just the point I am trying to make," Gregor Clegane declared, "Furthermore, Tywin currently meets every requirement necessary to be Jon Connington's informant. His family has the wealth to finance the Brave Companions, the pit fighters, and the Westerosi members of the Golden Company. His house's unofficial motto is 'a Lannister always pays his debts,' which explains why Connington is so certain his informant will fulfill his end of the bargain. His status as the Lord Paramount of the Westerlands and Warden of the West already makes him a very influential person. Now that he is Hand of the King, he speaks directly into the king's ear, and the queen may be advising her husband to heed her father's words."

"That sounds like Cersei," Gerion commented brazenly, folding his arms, "In all likelihood, King Robert listens to my brother's counsel, yet he does not follow up on all of Tywin's recommendations. However, as far as Princess Lyanna is concerned… I fear that the king will be so clouded with rage that he may take whatever course of action Tywin proposes."

"If he does, the true fury of the Baratheons would know no bounds then," Lord Gregor contended, "It could mean the end of the Legion without Banners. It could also mean the dissolution of my house and the exile of my family. I could see it as we speak: my banishment from Moat Cailin would coincide with Jon Connington's restoration to Griffin's Roost."

"As Hand of the King, Tywin Lannister could easily make both of those outcomes possible," Tormund noted.

"But Lord Tywin only became Hand of the King about three weeks ago," Samwell pointed out, "The Pentoshi Bloodbath took place a fortnight past. The entire operation could not have been organized in just one week."

"It wasn't," Gregor Clegane declared, "Tywin was planning it for a long time. Since before the start of the year, in fact."
"How do you know that?" Tormund queried.

"Because of this," the Mountain answered him, removing another sheet of parchment from his doublet and holding it up for the others to see, "This is the latest message we received from my brother Sandor, which we discussed at our most previous meeting. You may recall it included some very interesting tidbits of information."

"Interesting indeed," Tormund uttered wryly.

A few weeks prior, Lord Sandor Clegane and his wife Lady Obara had been summoned to Casterly Rock by Ser Jaime Lannister. Ser Jaime had been acting lord of the Rock in his father's absence, and while he hosted the lord and lady of Clegane's Keep, he had notified them of a very unsettling discovery he had made.

Ser Jaime had shown Lord Sandor and Lady Obara the Rock's ledgers, and apparently, four of House Lannister's most reliable and trustworthy vassals had been dispatched to Essos at various points over the last twelve months. Three of them had been sent out since the start of the year. One had gone to Meereen, one had gone to Braavos, and one had gone to the Disputed Lands. The fourth had also been to the Disputed Lands, albeit several months earlier than the other party. The purpose of these secret errands was never specified, but given the direction of this conversation, it was not difficult to imagine.

"Do you think Lord Tywin commissioned those men to hire the pit fighters, the Brave Companions, and the Westerosi members of the Golden Company?" Samwell conjectured.

"That is exactly what I think," Lord Gregor avowed, "The pit fighters of Meereen had their freedom bought when one of House Lannister's vassals was there. Yesterday, I confirmed that the Brave Companions were in Braavos when another of the Lannister vassals was sent there, and they were there for most of the last six months. Likewise, both of the Lannister men who were sent to the Disputed Lands went there when the Golden Company was also in the area."

"I can understand what the goals of the three most recent trips were," Tormund thought aloud. *Obviously, they were tasked with securing the loyalties of the pit fighters, the Brave Companions, and those of the Golden Company who are native to this land. But what of the one who was dispatched last year?"

"That's a good point," Samwell commented, "That particular vassal was sent out long before the truth of Jon and his half-siblings became public. In fact, he sought out the Golden Company even before Lady Dacey, Princess Elia, and Prince Oberyn started making arrangements to set sail for Essos. So, what was he hoping to accomplish?"

"He was organizing an assassination of a different sort," Gregor revealed, a sour expression across his countenance, "When Ser Jaime made the connection between the ledger and the Golden Company's whereabouts, he developed a theory that that vassal was the one who hired Connin to travel to Clegane's Keep. As stated previously, it was the three later transactions which incited Jaime to bring the matter to Sandor's attention. You see, when he stumbled upon those three entries, he conjectured that our troubles with the Golden Company were far from over."

*Turns out the Kingslayer was right about that much. But not in the way he may have expected.*

"That still does not explain why Lord Tywin would want Lord Sandor dead," Samwell pronounced.

"Oh, he could have wanted that for any one of a number of reasons, Samwell," Gerion told the young Reachman, "The most plausible one – to me, at least – is that he was aiming to catch Lord
Gregor's attention and dishearten him at the same time. He may have hoped to gradually bring down the Legion's morale by forcing its commander to endure tragic loss.

"It would have worked," the Mountain mumbled angrily. Thank the Gods it did not.

"Well, at the end of the day, men like Tywin Lannister have no qualms about ordering someone else's death without a justifiable reason," Tormund stated brusquely.

"You are absolutely right, Tormund," Ser Gerion muttered, "Tywin has ordered the deaths of many innocents over the years. While most were preventable, he has argued that those losses were necessary to ensure the survival of a much larger number of people. But if you ask me, it was simply Tywin being too fucking lazy to find a cleaner, more civilized alternative."

Samwell turned to Gregor Clegane and stated, "With everything we just discussed in mind, I can see what led you to believe that Lord Tywin orchestrated the Pentoshi Bloodbath, my lord. Right now, I'm finding it difficult to imagine the Bloodbath as the work of anyone else."

"There is even more to it than what we've covered so far, Sam," the Mountain disclosed, "Keep in mind, Jon Arryn was poisoned in the same manner that Conning tried on my brother Sandor. Furthermore, Lord Jon was incapacitated almost immediately after Aegon Targaryen secured the Golden Company. At that point in time, our people had already made alliances with the Dothraki and several other sellsword companies, too. Their return to the Seven Kingdoms was imminent then."

"That would have been the perfect opportunity for Tywin to have Lord Jon removed from his office," Gerion contended, "Some may say poison is a coward's weapon, but it would not be the first time Tywin forsook his honor."

"In any case, he must have planned to occupy the office of Hand of the King by the time Dacey and the Martells merged their groups," Gregor proclaimed, "With Tywin Lannister in that position now, Connington has the crown backing him privately."

"Without the king's knowledge," Tormund said slyly.

"Yes, King Robert is very much in the dark," Gregor affirmed, "Now, all these points could go a long way to validating my argument that Tywin Lannister is Connington's informant and – therefore – the true perpetrator of the Pentoshi Bloodbath. However, we have yet to mention the biggest giveaway."

"What might that be?" Samwell queried in interest.

"Not who Connington killed or tried to kill, but who he did not," the Mountain illuminated. He turned back to the missive from his wife, skimmed through it until he reached another passage, and then he declared "Right here, Dacey mentions that Lyanna Stark was not the only person Connington and his men took. They also kidnapped Duncan Lannister and his nurse."

We know. Didn't we already learn of that yesterday? Tormund assumed Gregor was going somewhere with this talk. If not, he was just being redundant. Generally, the Mountain was not one to waste words. He rarely spoke at such length without a point. Now would not be an ideal time for him to start.

Gregor Clegane continued with "Duncan was not taken only as a hostage; Dacey knew that much right away. She debated that if Connington wanted hostages, he could have taken our sons Alyver and Torrhen, as well. Yet our nephew was the only one he did take. So, the Tickler did some
investigating, and he made some interesting discoveries of his own."

"Yes, we already went over those," Gerion recounted, "Essentially, the Tickler determined that Connington has a directive to bring your nephew – who happens to be my great nephew – back to Westeros unharmed and well."

"That is the gist of the matter, yes," Gregor stated, "Now, does it not strike any of you as odd that Connington's informant would care so much about the whereabouts and fate of a two-year-old boy?"

"Well, the boy's standing is something to think about," Samwell argued, "After all, Duncan comes from a very strong and proud family. The Great House of the Westerlands, no less. In addition to that, his parents – Lord Tyrion Lannister and Lady Ellyn Clegane, Lord Gregor's sister – are regarded by many as two of the wisest people in the realm."

"Right again, Sam," the Mountain verified, "Moreover, Duncan is Tywin Lannister's grandson, and the one most likely to become his next heir, should his uncle Ser Jaime fail to produce a male heir."

"That is true," Gerion affirmed, "Even when Jaime was in the Kingsguard, Tywin made it quite clear that he would never have Tyrion succeed him as lord of the Rock. A son of Tyrion's, on the other hand..."

Gregor Clegane nodded and stated "If the informant was anyone other than Tywin, one might assume that Connington took Duncan as leverage against House Lannister. That in itself would be foolish, given how Tywin Lannister reacts to any attack made against his kin. However, add to that how many highborn families will be furious by the losses of the Pentoshi Bloodbath, and Connington's life would be forfeit already. Thus, the only rational explanation is that Tywin Lannister is the informant, and he wants Connington to bring Duncan back so that he can raise his grandson in his own fashion and model him into what he views as an ideal Lord Paramount of the Westerlands."

"That would certainly fit Tywin's profile," Gerion pronounced.

"But Lord Tyrion and Lady Ellyn were present in the Pentoshi Bloodbath," Samwell murmured, "I find it difficult to fathom that even Lord Tywin would sanction an attempt on his own son and daughter-by-law."

"It's not pleasant to think of, but it has been known to happen," Tormund countered.

"Sadly, it has," Gregor conceded, "Besides, we have already established that Tywin despises Tyrion, and he regards Ellyn as a hostage. He has likely washed his hands of both of them. I would not be surprised if he long ago decided to leave their fate in the hands of Connington and his men."

"He would do that," Gerion mumbled crossly. He gazed over at the wall and muttered "I've never liked my eldest brother. I love him, of course, but it is impossible to like someone such as him. As appalling as I find the idea that he caused the Pentoshi Bloodbath, every point you've made so far, Gregor, is utterly irrefutable."

"Then we're all in agreement?" the Mountain presumed, "Tywin Lannister is Jon Connington's informant?"

"It would seem so," Tormund Giantsbane commented drily. Samwell Tarly and Gerion Lannister nodded along.
"So, what are we going to do to stop him?" Samwell inquired.

"That could prove to be a challenge," Gregor glumly admitted, "Despite all the circumstantial evidence indicating Tywin's involvement with Jon Connington, this material would be inadequate to prove his guilt to most. That aside, we cannot openly tell the king about the informant. If we do, Tywin could retaliate by revealing Lyanna's existence to the world even before Connington can transport her across the Narrow Sea. Moreover, we might endanger our comrades in King's Landing, who are entirely at the king's mercy right now."

"So, removing Tywin as a threat will require grace and subtlety," Tormund perceived.

"Yes, and no small amount of either," Gregor professed, "Luckily, I know what we must do."

"We're listening, my lord," Samwell declared. *He speaks for all of us; himself, myself and Gerion.*

The Mountain held the long missive until he was near the bottom of it, and then he announced "Dacey claims that she has not sent news of the Pentoshi Bloodbath to anyone else in the Seven Kingdoms. She has not even informed the king or the small council. It would be reasonable to assume that Connington and his men did not have time to send out a raven before they fled Pentos, and they have not yet reached Braavos, either. Thus, as things stand currently, the four of us are the only people on this side of the Narrow Sea that know of the Pentoshi Bloodbath. We should change that."

"So, we'll inform the public?" Gerion assumed.

"Yes," Gregor said in response, "We will spread our version of the fiasco – the *real* version – throughout the realm. The very first people we'll write are those who lost family or friends in the Bloodbath. Before long, Connington's true nature will be known by all."

"Just how much would we tell the world, my lord?" Samwell queried.

"We will tell them what Connington has done, but we will say nothing of his ultimate goal or the informant," Gregor replied, "Needless to say, we will not implicate Tywin in this affair. We shall handle him in a more unobtrusive manner."

"What would you recommend?" Tormund said inquiringly.

Lord Gregor reached into his doublet again and removed yet another piece of parchment. He set it down on the council table and muttered "About a turn of the moon ago, Willas sent us this message. You may remember it."

"Was that the one that was originally written in Spanish?" Samwell asked rhetorically.

"It is," the Mountain validated, "Willas says he wrote it in Spanish as a precaution. He did so to ensure that the subject matter was not exposed if the raven was stopped or intercepted. Anyway, after I transcribed his letter back into the Common Tongue, we discovered the cause of his apprehension."

"You mean the hidden rookery in King's Landing?" Gerion inferred.

Gregor Clegane nodded and said "For the last few months, Willas and a small group of his peers have been occupied with an assignment given to them by King Robert. He was unable to tell us much of the assignment; only that they have been tasked with determining who is running an unauthorized message system in the lower levels of the Red Keep, and that the system extends all the way to Essos."
Willas and the others took a big risk just telling us of that job of theirs. I'd wager Robert meant for them to keep it a secret, even from us.

"Less than a week after Willas sent that missive, Polliver sent us this one," Gregor Clegane continued, pulling yet another letter out of his doublet. *I pray that's the last one. This is starting to become repetitive.* "In it, he informed us that my mother and niece are doing well in Braavos. More pressingly, he mentioned that Lady Brienne Tarth spotted a raven flying into the Free City over the waters of the Narrow Sea. Based on its trajectory, she believes it originated from somewhere in the Crownlands or the Stormlands."

Tormund smiled at the mention of Brienne of Tarth. She had enlisted in the Legion a few years in the past. Some had given her the mocking moniker of "the Beauty," when she was arguably anything but. That mattered not to Tormund Giantsbane. *She may be homely, but she makes up in other areas.* He thought Brienne was quite appealing both as a warrior and as a woman.

Tormund Giantsbane had four sons and a daughter, and Brienne was only slightly older than his eldest. His wife had died several years ago, yet Tormund was not against the concept of remarriage. As it happened, Brienne of Tarth was the sole heir to her family's ancestral home, so she would have to take a husband eventually. *When she sees who all is available, it should be no contest for her to decide.*

Tormund's only true rival for Brienne the Beauty was his late friend Smalljon Umber, the previous heir to the Last Hearth. For a long time, the two of them had had a friendly competition for the Stormlander woman's favor. It had ended when part of the ceiling of the fourth floor in the Knowledge Tower collapsed onto Smalljon's head. Tormund had been saddened by the loss for multiple reasons. *At least we've avenged him now.* When they heard what Greatjon Umber had done to Britt Warrick, Tormund had cringed and smirked simultaneously. *A truly gruesome way for a man to meet his end, but that bastard had it coming.*

The residents of Moat Cailin had just finished grieving for Smalljon Umber. *I am not looking forward to seeing how they'll react when they learn of the Pentoshi Bloodbath.* In any case, Tormund tried not to let his mind wander much more. He needed to remain focused on the meeting.

"So, it could be possible that the raven in Braavos was one of the ones sent from the hidden rookery in King's Landing?" Samwell theorized.

"That's the only logical explanation," the Mountain debated, "Furthermore, we've already established that the Brave Companions were in or near Braavos for most of the last six months. It would be reasonable to assume that Vargo Hoat was the one who was in contact with the user of the hidden rookery, and Hoat could have relayed other messages between the pit fighters and the Golden Company."

"If so, and if Tywin is indeed the informant, the hidden rookery's user could be one of my house's retainers," Gerion deduced.

"That's what I think, too," Gregor remarked, "Therefore, if we are to deprive Connington of his Tywin's protection, we should start by cutting off their primary form of communication."

"In other words, we should eliminate the rookery's user," Tormund supposed.

"Just so," Gregor Clegane confirmed, "We specifically could not accomplish that from here in the moat. Luckily, we are in contact with someone who has the perfect means and chance to do so in our stead."
"You refer to Lord Willas and the others, I presume?" Samwell remarked.

"I do, Sam," the Mountain murmured, "As such, I am going to compose another letter. To ensure that it would be useless if it fell into the wrong hands, I will draft it in Italian. That way, Rickard will be the only person in all of King's Landing who can read it. Once he's transcribed it back into the Common Tongue, he can share the letter's contents with Willas, Rhaenys, and Lady Ashara. The letter will include an account of everything we've learned of the Pentoshi Bloodbath, including Tywin's role as the informant and our belief that he is behind the hidden rookery. That should help the four of them locate the rookery or determine the identity of its user that much sooner."

And the sooner they succeed, the sooner we sever Connington's link to Tywin Lannister. Tormund found that he already liked this plan. While it did not involve very much action on the part of those in the moat, at least they would be beating the Old Lion at his own game. Imagine how foolish he'll feel once he's lost his precious hidden rookery. The thought made Tormund grin deviously.

"What about Prince Jasper?" Gerion interjected, "Isn't he assisting with the efforts to flush out the owner of the hidden rookery, as well?"

"Yes, but unlike Rickard and the others, he does not know the truth of Lyanna Stark," Samwell pointed out. For good reason, seeing as she was once his father's intended.

"Then you think it's for the best if the Crown Prince remains in the dark?" Tormund said enquiringly.

"It could be…" Gregor muttered plainly, "But this affair is not as simple as one might think. After all, Jasper lived here for two entire years. He came to develop an appreciation for the principles and practices of the Legion without Banners, and he is much less quick to anger than his father. In addition to that, he advised his parents to hear us out during the conference at Harrenhal. I convinced the king to establish a tentative peace with the Targaryens at that conference. If Robert Baratheon can be reasoned with in such a way, there is no reason to believe his son cannot."

"So… you will tell Jasper about Lyanna Stark?" Gerion assumed.

"No, I will leave it up to Rickard to decide that," the Mountain announced, "Jasper is his best friend, and Rickard has a rather analytical mind for his age. If he believes Jasper can be entrusted with this very delicate information, he can share it with him. But if my son feels the risk of fallout would be too great, he can continue to conceal certain details from the Crown Prince. He would have to come up with his own cover story, though."

"As of now, do you believe Rickard will or will not tell Jasper?" Tormund queried.

"At the moment, it would be hard to say," Gregor confessed, "If their friendship and the state of their political relationship is any indication, I am more inclined to believe he will. Of course, there are many factors that we cannot fully account for. Mainly, it would be somewhat unfair of us to ask Jasper to keep such a fantastic issue from his father."

"Oh, I would not worry too much on that, my lord," Samwell Tarly muttered cockily, "All children keep secrets from their parents. There are plenty of things I myself do not tell my own lord father."

Yes, and I'd wager I could fill this entire tower with all the things Toregg, Torwynd, Dryn, Dormund, and Munda do not tell me. Tormund wondered if Ser Gerion felt the same way about his daughter Joy. The Mountain must know what it's like to be on both ends of that spectrum. There was plenty Lord Gregor kept from Lady Daliah Clegane, and Rickard Clegane had not told his father of his fondness for Arya Stark. The only reason Tormund himself was aware of the latter
was because he had seen the tall boy fawn over the wolf girl once before they both went south. *That's an ideal match if ever I saw one.*

"Regardless of whether or not Rickard will tell Jasper the whole truth, we shall leave the handling of the hidden rookery to my son and his companions," Gregor declared, "Meanwhile, we will do whatever we can on our end to further complicate Connington's work."

"Like what?" Tormund queried.

"We could determine just how far this scheme of his goes," Lord Gregor proposed, "Although I am confident Tywin is the informant, that still does not account for how he knew Lyanna was alive in the first place. Since she has never been anywhere south of the Neck in the last fifteen years, there is no chance she and Tywin were ever in the same place. I believe someone tipped him off instead."

"Perhaps he has spies in the moat," Gerion Lannister supposed.

"That could be," Gregor Clegane contended, "But they would have had nothing worthwhile to report. The entire time she was masquerading as Jon's maid, Lyanna was very careful about how she presented herself. I allowed her to come here on the conditions that she never removed her disguise unless behind locked doors, that she kept to herself whenever she was not seeing to her duties, and that she did not become too affectionate with her son publicly or privately."

"Could one of our people have notified the Old Lion?" Tormund wondered aloud. *Not pleasing to think about, but it merits addressing.*

"I don't think so," the Mountain asserted, "Most of our allies who know of Lyanna were present at the Pentoshi Bloodbath. Polliver is the only other person across the Narrow Sea who knows, and he can be trusted to hold his tongue. The only other Legionnaires who know are either in King's Landing or here at Moat Cailin. Everyone else who knows is either with those Legionnaires, or in Winterfell, Sunspear, or at the Wall. All those parties have close ties with Targaryens. Thus, we can safely remove all of them from suspicion."

"Then who does that leave?" Gerion said inquisitorially.

"Yes, who else could have told Lord Tywin, if we were not betrayed by any ally?" Samwell queried.

After a short period of silence, Gregor revealed "This is still pure speculation, but at present, the individual I most suspect is Roose Bolton."

Tormund and the other two men were intrigued. "Why is that?"

"Firstly, as you know, when Lyanna eloped with Rhaegar, she dispatched riders to her father and brothers to inform them of her decision," Gregor reminisced, "Less than a year ago, we discovered that Bolton was the one who prevented the rider bound for Winterfell from reaching his destination. Furthermore, he kept the rider's letter after the body was unearthed."

"Meaning he knew all about Rhaegar and Lyanna's affair all along," Samwell perceived.

"Indeed," said Gregor, "If Bolton could find out that much, it would not be impractical to imagine that he was aware of Jon's heritage even before it became common knowledge. If so, Bolton could have also figured out that the woman who served Jon was much more than his maid. The fact that 'Myrna' never accompanied him to Winterfell may have been an even bigger giveaway."
"But what would Bolton hope to gain by sharing this information with Tywin Lannister?" asked Tormund.

"Everything he's ever wanted," Gregor murmured softly, "When Connington exposes Lyanna, he may implicate the Starks alongside the Legion. After all, Lord Eddard did know the truth from the start. In that case, Tywin could persuade King Robert to strip the Starks of their wardenship of the North and give it to the Boltons as a reward for their 'service.'"

"I could see that happening," Gerion admitted bluntly. So could I. Fucking Boltons... even Thenns avoid them whenever possible... I fucking hate Thenns.

"I would not put it past Lord Bolton to do something so deceptive and terrible," Samwell contended grimly, "That man reminds me of my own father, Lord Randyll. Except he is even more withdrawn from human emotion than my sire."

"That may be," Tormund agreed, "But tell us, Gregor. How certain are you that Bolton is the one who told Lannister of Lyanna Stark?"

"Not very," the Mountain sternly pronounced, "Be that as it may, the only other ones who could have notified Tywin are Lady Olenna Tyrell and Melisandre, and neither the Queen of Thorns nor the Red Woman would have anything to gain by breaking their silence. Additionally, the former lost a grandson in the Pentoshi Bloodbath, and the latter stopped the Bloodbath before we lost everyone. So, while I am not entirely confident that Bolton is to blame, he is still our most viable suspect at present."

"What would you suggest we do, then?" Ser Gerion enquired.

"For now, we'll merely keep a close eye on Roose Bolton," Lord Gregor stated, "We should regard him as the same type of threat as Jon Connington and Tywin Lannister. By that, I mean that while he poses a danger to our work, there is nothing we can directly do about that at present. If we confront him and it turns out we are correct, he could expose Lyanna all on his own. If it turns out we are wrong, we would just waste our time and quite possibly alert the actual mole that we are on to them. So, until we've found a way to deal with Bolton inconspicuously, we will do nothing more than monitor him."

"Sounds good to me," Tormund commented drily. Gerion nodded in agreement.

After a short round of silence, Samwell sat up in his chair and stated "While we're on this subject, there is something else I feel we should address, my lord. This business with Connington... you don't suppose it might in any way tie in to our business with the Conclave, do you?"

"As to that, I find it very unlikely that the two affairs are connected in any way," the Mountain said resolutely, "Nevertheless, now that you mention it, Sam, it would not hurt to ponder on this matter. After all, we have hardly followed up on it at all ever since Maester Kennick's betrayal. For all we know, they could be related somehow."

"That would explain where Tywin got the ravens for the hidden rookery," Gerion pointed out, "Also, my brother is one of those nobles who believes that the smallfolk should remain uneducated and uninformed. The Conclave has always been of a similar mindset."

"Then they'd have the same motives for wanting to destroy the printing press," Tormund contended.

"Just what I was thinking," Samwell affirmed, "I realize, of course, that there is a distinct
possibility that Lord Tywin and the Conclave are not collaborating with one another, but no matter how slight, we should not ignore the possibility that they are."

"You're absolutely right, Sam," Lord Gregor conceded, "And even if it turns out they are not, we should investigate the Conclave all the same. The incident with the printing press already gave us reason enough to be wary of them. Now that dragons are back in the world, we should be even more mindful of them. For all we know, they may be planning to stir up some more trouble."

"What makes you say that?" Tormund said inquisitively.

Gregor replied with "Although history tends to label Aegon III Targaryen as the one who caused the dragons to die out, there are some who attribute their extinction to the Citadel instead. I am more inclined to accept the latter belief. It is well-known, after all, that the majority of maesters view magic with ridicule and contempt. Dragons are a prime example of magic. Thus, we could expect them to take some form of action against Eliaxes, Draegar, and Vigrenyon."

Tormund raised an eyebrow in perplexity. "Who, who, and who?"

"Those are the respective names Aegon, Daenerys, and Jon gave their dragons," Gregor enlightened him, gazing back down at Lady Dacey's missive, "I thought I mentioned that."

"It must have slipped my mind," Tormund remarked dismissively.

"You'll have plenty of time to remember the names, Tormund," Gregor asserted, "I mean for those dragons to be around for a very long while."

"So, what can we do to protect them from the Conclave?" Sam queried.

"Naturally, we'll have to proceed with care," the Mountain pronounced, "Unfortunately, there is no one we can spare to investigate the Conclave. From our own ranks, that is. However, it may interest you to know that one of Oberyn's daughters, Sarella, managed to infiltrate the Citadel a couple years back. Her ambition is to become the world's first female maester. She has already gone this long without divulging her gender to her superiors or her fellow acolytes. As it happens, Oberyn told me how to contact her."

"Why?" Tormund asked.

"If ever something happened to him or an emergency came up, he wanted me to notify her," Gregor Clegane expounded, "This, of course, is a much different situation than that, but given the circumstances, it would be totally appropriate for us to make contact with Sarella."

"Then, you are going to write her?" Ser Gerion assumed.

"Yes, I am," the Mountain affirmed, "There is no guarantee that she actually will agree to spy for us, but if she does, Sarella will be our eyes and ears in Oldtown."

"She would be invaluable to us as a resource then," Samwell contended.

"Indeed," said Gregor Clegane, "As such, we'd need to be careful with how we employ her. We cannot and will not ask her to do anything that might compromise her cover or get her expelled from the Citadel. At this time, all we need her to do is observe the Archmaesters when they first hear the news that dragons have returned to the world. How they react will determine what subsequent action we must take."

"What about the possibility that they are involved with Jon Connington?" Samwell recounted.
"I'll see if she can find out anything about that, as well," Gregor reassured him, "I anticipate that she'll turn up with nothing, but let us not make any premature assumptions just yet."

"Very well, my lord," said the heir to Horn Hill.

There came a short interval of silence. Then Gregor Clegane unleashed a deep sigh and mumbled "It is a pity that these ordeals had to happen now, is it not? If Connington and the Conclave waited until after the Long Night to commit these heinous acts, I would have at least respected them for waiting until the world was safe from far greater threats. Yet they did not even have that much common decency. As a result, they've given us an armful of new crises that need to be resolved."

"Yes, and they've just made the Others that much stronger," Tormund perceived.

"We'll just have to move on and deal with everything in turn," Gerion Lannister advised, "In the long run, no good will come from just sitting here and lamenting on these latest hardships."

"Some will certainly come from eliminating those hardships," Samwell debated.

"Then we should get started right away," Gregor Clegane proposed, "In addition to all the difficulties presented by our foes, we must prepare to welcome back our allies. Oberyn and his party will soon land in Dorne, and Allard and the Red Woman will arrive here in a few weeks. With any luck, Dacey and her company will be back sometime in the next two or three months. We also have three or four secret council seats which are still vacant. We'll need to fill in those positions as soon as possible."

_We still have yet to appoint someone new to Smalljon's seat. Does the Mountain honestly expect to replace Brynden, Lyn, and Maron so soon?_

"How should we handle our new workload, my lord?" Samwell inquired.

"The way I see it, there are four main objectives that must be achieved," Gregor explicated, "We need to investigate the Conclave, ensure that our allies still in Essos catch up to Jon Connington, determine if Roose Bolton revealed Lyanna Stark's existence to Tywin Lannister, and remove the hidden rookery in King's Landing from the picture."

"Are those in any particular order?" Gerion stated inquiringly.

"No, each is just as crucial as the other three," Gregor announced, "Since we already have so much else going on, I personally believe our time would be best served if each of us devoted his attention to just one of those objectives."

"I suppose you have already decided which of us is best suited for what?" Tormund asked rhetorically.

"As it happens, I have," Gregor responded, "Samwell, after I establish contact with Sarella, I would like you to maintain correspondence with her. Gerion, since it is your own brother we suspect of foul play, you will take charge of the efforts to locate the hidden rookery. Tormund, I know anything south of the moat is of little interest to you, so I'll place Bolton in your hands. Meanwhile, I will do what I can to help Dacey and her companions stop Connington and his men. Does that seem fair to you all?"

"I have no reservations," Gerion Lannister claimed.

"Nor do I," Samwell Tarly muttered.
"Sounds fine and good to me," was all Tormund Giantsbane said in response.

"Excellent," Gregor Clegane commented, "Then let us get busy, gentlemen. We've a lot of work to do."

Tormund quite agreed. So much work. It seems as the world gets bigger, more and more work needs to be done. I feel as though life was so much simpler north of the Wall than it is down here.

In spite of that, Tormund did not regret his decision to settle in the Seven Kingdoms. He still believed that was what was best for himself, his children, and all the rest of the Free Folk. At any rate, regardless of how much work needed to be done, it would get done, one way or another.

Chapter End Notes

Note: Those of you who celebrate Christmas, I hope you enjoyed it. I certainly did, even though it was my first Christmas I've ever had without getting a phone call from my grandmother. But do not feel too sorry for me. While I admit I was in a bit of an emotional state last week, I've already come to terms with the loss. My grandma lived a very long and full life, and I'm certain she is at peace now. Just the other day, I got back from California after having her memorial service, and I'm doing alright now. Still, I'd like to thank all of you who expressed your condolences in the previous chapter.

I would also like to thank those of you who offered one or more names for the dragons. Although there were several appealing contenders, I ultimately chose to just use three names of my own making: Eliaxes (Aegon's; originally Rhaegal; named after Elia), Draegar (Daenerys's; originally Viserion; named after Drogo, Rhaegar, and Rhaego), and Vigrenyon (Jon's; originally Drogon; named after Ygritte and Visenya). I'm not too sure about that last one, though. If enough people decide they hate it, I may change it. Oh, well; I suppose Jon wouldn't be too creative with names, anyway.
King's Landing was normally a loud and tumultuous place, bustling with all manner of activity and conversation. Today was an exception. One would think the populace had collectively taken a vow of silence. In actuality, the city was in mourning. It had been for the past week, ever since word of the Pentos reached them. *I'd wager it was never this quiet and tame after my grandfather's passing.*

Princess Rhaenys Targaryen rode in the middle of the procession with her intended and her other friends. They were just as silent as everyone else around them. The only sounds to be heard were the ones made by the horses as they trotted through the streets.

As they neared the Great Sept, Rhaenys gazed up at Baelor the Blessed on his pedestal. Somehow, even the motionless statue seemed downtrodden today. The cold stone face looked the same as ever, but Rhaenys thought she saw a hint of sadness in its semblance. *Were he still alive now, perhaps he would find a way to relieve us of our grief.* If only it was that simple…

King Robert and his party reached the steps of the Great Sept first. The black-bearded man dismounted his huge destrier, and then he aided Queen Cersei as she got down from her elegant Jasper was close-by, climbing down from his sturdy garron. Once he was on his feet, he helped his brother and sisters off their ponies.

Jasper would have preferred to have ridden with Rhaenys and the others, but the Royal Family was expected to travel together. *At least we can all stand together in there.*

Willas was the first member of their group to arrive in front of the sept. Immediately after he was back on the ground, he extended his hand to Rhaenys. Although she could climb off on her own, she cordially accepted his offer. Rickard, Arya, Sansa, Lady Ashara, Ser Oswell, and all their guards soon followed.

Even before they got there, a large crowd had formed outside the Great Sept. *For all their other differences, nobles and smallfolk alike can both turn to the gods in these dark times.* Most of the common people would not be allowed inside today. After all, the service was only being held for those who had lost loved ones in the Pentoshi Bloodbath and other people of status or high birth who wished to pay homage to the fallen.

Shortly after everyone dismounted, the massive doors of the Great Sept opened up, and the High Septon appeared, along with a dozen young men in black robes. The younger men did not seem to be septons. For that matter, they did not even look very much like followers of the Seven. *I suppose the Faith Militant would be humble in appearance.*

The Faith Militant wore thin, black, roughspun robes in place of the conventional white silk garments normally worn by septons and septas. Moreover, they carried thin, wooden clubs in both hands. Their presence brought a bit of an ominous feeling to this already uneasy scenario. *Why must they be armed? Who would possibly be shallow enough to resort to violence on today of all days?*

The King, the Queen, and their children were the first ones to ascend the steps and enter the Great Sept of Baelor. They were ushered inside by the High Septon. The Kingsguard and the small
council entered next; Rhaenys and her friends came after. But not all of them got in straightaway.

Rhaenys, Willas, Lady Ashara, and Ser Oswell were allowed inside. However, the two black-robed men closest to the double doors moved in front of Rickard, Arya, Sansa, and everyone else when they tried to enter. Rhaenys halted when this happened. She quickly realized the Faith Militant men were blocking the Northmen's path. She stopped Willas before he went too far into the building, and she pointed that out to him. He seemed just as stunned as she. *What are they doing?*

"Excuse us, please," Sansa stated politely, "We'd like to go in."

"We cannot permit that, milady," said one of the guards. He sounded patient and kind, but he spoke in a very firm voice.

"That wasn't a request," Arya spat, "We're here to honor the dead."

"If that is your wish, you will have to go to the godswood in the Red Keep," the other guard stoically remarked.

Rickard calmly stepped forward and muttered "I'll have you know that my lord father has worshipped the New Gods all his life. To this day, he still does."

"Yet your lady mother worships the Old Gods," the first guard pointed out, "Which faith do you belong to?"

"I practice both, actually," Rickard disclosed.

The second guard grimaced. "That's worse than if you just believed in the Old Gods. If you said *that*, we would have at least praised you for your decisiveness."

"I honestly don't give a damn about your praise," Rickard mumbled tensely, "Do you have some issue with us?"

"This building is a center of worship for devout believers in the Seven," the first guard declared, "We've no place here for those who kneel in the dirt before a tree."

"Oh, I disagree," Rickard retorted scathingly, "There is a place for us in there. It will take much more than a couple of green boys with sticks to keep us out."

Both of these "green boys" were actually several years older than Rickard, but he was slightly taller and definitely stronger than either of them. Additionally, he was better armed. Even here, he wore his sword on his belt, and if need be, he would draw it. *I hope it will not resort to that.* Rickard was a better swordsman than another else of his generation, and neither of the Faith Militant guards looked to be much of a fighter. Nor did any of their ten associates who stood further down the steps of Baelor. *He could probably kill all twelve of them singlehandedly.*

In spite of that, the two Faith Militant men at the entrance held their ground. For the duration of this confrontation, Rhaenys had merely stood idle and observed the interaction. At this point, she was compelled to intervene. Just before she could, Willas did so, instead.

"Please, gentlemen, there is no need for hostilities," he calmly told the Faith Militant men, "We are here to grieve, not to add to our grievances."

"We understand that, milord," the first guard murmured, "Nonetheless, it is our duty to preserve the sanctity of the Seven. By letting in these Northerners, we would risk tainting this holy place."
"Do we look unclean to you?" Arya snapped crossly.

"Arya, please," Sansa whispered to her sister in caution, holding her arm out to stop her.

"No, Sansa," the younger Stark girl refuted, stepping around the elder. Like Rickard, she was armed, too. Her Needle hung from her belt, as it always did. She had yet to reach for her sword, but knowing her short temper, it would not be too long before she produced it. This needs to stop. It is bad enough to shed more blood so soon after what happened in Pentos. To shed some here of all places...

It was here that Rhaenys interceded. She approached the Faith Militant guards and softly told them "Good sers, I commend you for placing such value on your duty and beliefs. But please; let our friends in. While they may belong to different denominations, they have just as much of a right to mourn the dead as the rest of us. It would be wrong to deny them that."

"Aye, it would be, Your Grace," the second guard admitted, "Alas, doing otherwise would conflict with the oath we took to uphold the integrity of our order. That is far worse to us."

Rhaenys was beginning to lose her patience. Rickard seemed to be on the verge of losing his. Rafford, Eggon, and Shitmouth seemed ready to attack the guards at the slightest urging from their young lord. Nevertheless, Rickard gestured for his father's men to stay back. Then he folded his arms and pronounced "Alright, if you won't listen to reason, let us try something different. You've established that you know who I am. As such, you must know who my lord father is and what he does. Now, if I was a spoiled brat, I would come up with various threats about what Lord Gregor Clegane would do if you were foolish enough to aggravate his eldest son. Those threats would not be empty or petty in any way.

"I could do that," the heir to Moat Cailin drily continued, "But I will not, as it would be pathetic and disgraceful. My father is already a busy person; I would hate to add to his troubles needlessly. Aside from that, no self-respecting man hides behind his parents when confronted with problems of his own. So, instead of telling you what my father would do, I'll tell you what I will do."

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"If he did not have their attention before, he certainly does now. The two Faith Militant guards had not moved from their spots or changed their facial expressions, but their grips on their clubs had tightened.

Rickard casually went on with "Now, I could think of a number of possible ways to get you to change your mind. Of course, most would involve my changing it for you. For instance, I might take those clubs away and ask you where you'd want them. The options being your mouths or your arseholes. And that's one of the least unpleasant possibilities.

"But..." he resumed after a brief pause, "Unlike you, I have a sense of common decency and respect for my fellow man. Thus, I will not employ violence. Here is what I will do: I am simply going to pick both of you up with one hand apiece, move you out of the way, set you down beside the doors, and go inside without further delay. No one will get hurt, I promise you. I'll be gentle."

Although Rickard made that statement with a straight face, there was a condescending undertone in his voice. Still, he is being absolutely serious, Rhaenys noted.

"We do not wish to harm you, milord," the first guard claimed. He suddenly sounded quite nervous.

"Indeed not," the second guard conceded, holding his club closer to his chest, "But if you go through with that, we will be forced to take action."
"If I thought either of you as a danger to me, I might have taken that warning to heart," Rickard uttered bluntly, "But I don't regard you as any more of a threat than a litter of newborn kittens. Then again, at least kittens have claws."

At that, both of the Faith Militant men began to raise their clubs. At the same time, Rickard began to raise his arms, and Arya reached for Needle. Sansa looked as though she would scream. Rhaenys felt the desire to panic. I tried to stop this. Willas tried to stop this. If we can't, who can?

Luckily, before anything unfortunate happened, a firm voice from behind proclaimed "Enough!"

In response, the two Faith Militant guards turned around. Rhaenys did the same, and she came face-to-face with an elderly man. At a glance, he looked more a septon than a member of the Faith Militant. However, he was garbed in rather plain grey robes, and he was barefoot. His forehead was bald, and the rest of his hair was unkempt and messy. Could this be that High Sparrow I've heard so much about?

Both of the Faith Militant guards dipped their heads at this untidy individual. He gestured for them to stand up straight again, and then he bluntly commanded the guards "Let them through."

"I beseech your pardon, High Sparrow," the first guard uttered quietly. So, it is him. "If we did that, it would conflict with your earlier orders."

"Yes," the second guard agreed, "You explicitly told us to only allow loyal servants of the Seven or those willing to become loyal servants of the Seven into the Great Sept."

"So, I did," the High Sparrow recounted, "Under normal conditions, I would expect you to apply that directive. Be that as it may, this is a special circumstance, and an exception must be made."

"I thought there were no exceptions, High Sparrow," the second guard muttered.

"In this instance, there is," the High Sparrow asserted, "I realize it is highly irregular to bring Northmen into this building. Their beliefs are radically different from our own. Even so, I must insist that you stand down. There are but a dozen followers of the Old Gods before us, and none of them are here to spread their faith or convert others to it. Furthermore, they've a right to mourn the dead alongside the rest of us. Therefore, we can afford to tolerate their presence for an hour."

The two Faith Militant guards reflected on that a moment, and then they both nodded. The second of them observed "If it is just one lone hour, we would not risk angering the gods."

In your place, I'd be more concerned about angering the son of the Master of Order and his companions.

The High Sparrow turned to the three youngest members of Rhaenys's company, and he stated "Lord Rickard, Lady Sansa, Lady Arya, do I have your word that as soon as the service ends, you will leave the Great Sept without hindrance?"

"As long as we're allowed to stay until then, that is acceptable," Rickard pronounced.

"Yes, that works," Arya mumbled bitterly.

"We shall not linger any longer than that, Your High Holiness," Sansa promptly replied.

The High Sparrow was grateful for their cooperation. He looked to the elder Stark daughter and informed her "That title is reserve for the High Septon, my lady. I am the High Sparrow, and you need only address me as that."
Sansa Stark nodded in acknowledgment. Arya Stark looked as though she no longer cared to be there, but Rickard Clegane was pleased that the situation had worked out in their favor.

The two Faith Militant guards swiftly moved aside so that Rickard, Arya, Sansa, Rafford, Shitmouth, Eggon, Ethan, Theo, and Ser Mark could pass through. By now, just about everyone else who had been invited to the service was gathered inside the Great Sept. *It could take a while to get through this crowd.*

Thankfully, Willas was there. Since he was of higher birth than the majority of the attendees, none of them would dare impede him. As such, whenever he needed to walk somewhere, those in his path made way for him and his party. *At least they know basic courtesy.*

Soon, Rhaenys Targaryen, Willas Tyrell, Rickard Clegane, Sansa Stark, Arya Stark, Ashara Dayne, and their protectors reached the front of the Great Sept. That was where the small council and the Royal Family were assembled.

Jasper Baratheon was the first to notice them approaching. When they were close enough, he stated inquisitively "What took you so long? I thought you were right behind us."

"*We were,"* Rickard affirmed, slightly irate, "*We had an incident with the Faith Militant.*"

"What incident?" the Crown Prince asked.

"When we tried to come inside the Great Sept, they denied us admittance," Sansa revealed.

"Apparently, they're not so fond of Northerners," Arya wryly added in.

The King seemed outraged. He looked to Rhaenys, Willas, and Lady Ashara, and he stated "You should have come to me straightaway. I would have interceded on your part."

"With all due respect, Your Grace, I don't think it would have made much difference," Lady Ashara contended, "The Faith Militant do not seem to have much regard for any authority other than that which comes from within their own ranks."

"I can attest to that," Willas murmured, "When Rhaenys and I tried to reason with them, they still would not flex. Then the High Sparrow himself became involved. *That* was when they stood down."

"Still, such treatment of nobles is reprehensible," Queen Cersei muttered crossly.

Jasper gave a light scoff. "You may think so, Mother, but they care not. Highborn, lowborn, rich, poor, male, female… it's all the same to them. You know, I suspected this might happen."

"*What* might happen?" Sansa uttered curiously.

"That this business with the Faith Militant would somehow come back to bite us in the arse," Jasper blankly clarified, "Mobilizing a religious order as a fighting force was plenty questionable on its own. Allowing them to function independently of regular army, as well… to me, that was what Lord Gregor would call a recipe for disaster."

"Yeah, my father would call it something like that," Rickard slyly claimed.

King Robert Baratheon sighed and said "I discussed the Faith Militant at length with both the High Septon and the High Sparrow. For the longest time, I was averse to giving them my approval to revive the order. Even after they swayed my mind, I had some reservations."
After what just happened at the entrance, those reservations seem to be quite justified.

"Perhaps you did not think this matter all the way through, Father," Jasper conjectured.

"You shouldn't rush to that conclusion so soon, Jasper," Queen Cersei advised her son, "The Faith Militant can still prove valuable to us. They have only been in existence for a turn of the moon. They were bound to start out as disorderly and undisciplined. All military-based groups are like that at first. Given time, they will improve, and they will come to understand their proper place in the world."

"Well, I hope they will do so quickly, Mother," Jasper pronounced bitterly, "I will not have my best friend and the daughters of Father's best friend suffer such indignities a second time."

The only reason Rickard, Arya, and Sansa are here in the first place is because of the service. With that in mind, I'd be far more concerned if there was cause for them to come to the Great Sept a second time. Rhaenys and everyone else there still had other family and friends somewhere in the world. Some of whom had survived the Pentoshi Bloodbath. Of course, we're here for the ones who didn't.

Currently, Princess Rhaenys Targaryen had her hood drawn up over her head, as she usually did whenever she went out in public. This time, however, it was not merely to conceal her façade. It was also because she did not wish to display her red eyes and tear-stained cheeks for all the world to see.

When Rhaenys first heard that her mother was dead, she had not wept. Initially, that was due to shock and disbelief over the news itself. Even after overcoming those sensations, she still had not shed a tear. In the long run, she had barely known her mother. Rhaenys's memories of her from before they were separated were few, and the memories of her from after were not much greater in number.

Rhaenys had lived in hiding away from her family for almost her entire life. She had been raised by her stepmother and her true mother's best friend. In a way, Lyanna Stark and Ashara Dayne had both been more of a mother to her than Elia Martell ever had.

At least Lady Ashara is still here beside me. But Lyanna... now that I'm here in the Great Sept, anyway, maybe I should pray that Jon and his company can save her before it's too late.

Although Rhaenys had not cried upon learning of the Pentoshi Bloodbath, there were plenty of people in King's Landing who had. In fact, that same evening, Willas had come to her bedchamber and asked to spend the night with her. Her intended had spent most of that night sobbing into her shoulder. The loss of his younger brother Loras had clearly hit him hard. Rhaenys had comforted Willas as best she could.

The average woman would probably feel ashamed to have her future husband weep in front of her. Rhaenys did actually admired that in Willas; it showed that he had a sensitive side. It takes a truly strong man to confide his emotions in his betrothed. In addition to that, Willas had been careful about how he dealt with his grief. He had only wept for his younger brother in Rhaenys's company. Whereas in public, he always retained his composure and kept his eyes dry.

By the third day after learning of the Pentoshi Bloodbath, all of Willas's tears had been spent. He still had yet to come to terms with his brother's death, but he did not need to seek out Rhaenys for comfort any more. At that same time, Rhaenys herself still had not cried over the death of her mother. She felt terrible for not shedding any tears, but she could not force herself to cry.
The magnitude of her loss had not fully registered in her head until this morning. The night before, Rhaenys had had a nightmare. Not just any nightmare; the nightmare. The one with Amory Lorch. This nightmare had plagued her dreams for as long as she could remember. Even after nearly seventeen years, it still recurred at least once every few months.

This recurring nightmare was fairly similar to what had happened in reality. The only difference was that Lord Gregor Clegane was not present. When Ser Amory came for Rhaenys and her family, no one could stop him. She had to watch as her mother and brother were butchered by that repulsive pig of a man. After he was finished with them, he would run her through, as well.

The moment Ser Amory's blade pierced through her chest cavity, Rhaenys always woke up. Often, she would be panting and drenched in sweat, but otherwise, she would be unharmed. A brief inspection of her body would confirm that.

Every other time when roused from that dream, Rhaenys had reminded herself that it was not real. She could reassure herself of that by remembering that she, her brother, and her mother were all still alive and well.

However, when she woke up this morning, she could not give herself that reassurance. That was when she realized just what she had lost. I'm never going to see my mother again. She's gone. She's never coming back. She died… and I never even had a chance to say a proper good-bye.

Rhaenys had never cried so hard in her life than she did then. She did not know how long she wept, but it could not have been for less than two hours. Fortunately, she was not alone for that whole interval.

She and Willas had planned to break their fast together that day. When he came to her quarters to fetch her, she had been in the midst of her downpour. Once he saw her distress, he immediately went to her side to console her. This time, it was Willas's turn to provide a shoulder to cry on. I've never loved him more than at that moment.

To save Rhaenys the embarrassment of being seen in this unstable condition, Willas arranged for them to be served breakfast in her bedchamber. She was immensely grateful of her intended for that. By the time they finished the morning meal, Rhaenys's tears had finally subsided. Once she assured Willas that she would be alright on her own, he left her alone so that she could get ready for the memorial service.

That was less than an hour ago. It only took Rhaenys about ten minutes to dress and touch up her façade. She happened to gaze into a looking glass just before she left the Red Keep. Her face was still etched in indicative signs of her grief. Anyone could tell she had been weeping at a glance. While no one could really blame her or hold it against her, the dragon woman did not wish to broadcast it as a weakness. One thing I learned at Greywater that's stayed with me, it's never show weakness unless it cannot be helped. As such, she decided to wear her hood even whilst inside the Great Sept of Baelor.

Just then, Rhaenys felt someone touch her arm. She turned and saw that the hand belonged to Cersei Lannister. Interestingly, the Queen was looking at her with what appeared to be sympathy. She beckoned the younger woman "Come to me, my child."

I am not your child. Rhaenys was puzzled, but she did as Cersei said. She stepped closer to the blond woman and said inquisitively "Yes, Your Grace?"

The Queen then did something rather unexpected. She pulled Rhaenys closer and gently embraced her. Rhaenys tentatively accepted this kind gesture, though she was very surprised. It was not often
that Cersei Lannister would show such affection in a public place. *Unless it's her own family.*

After she released Rhaenys, Queen Cersei looked her in the eye and softly told her "I know what you are going through right now, my dear. My own mother was taken from me at a very young age. To this day, I think of her often. It is a terrible thing; to lose a parent. I cannot imagine how you must feel, now that you've lost both of yours."

*Yes. Your husband killed one; your father the other.* Even so, the Queen had nothing to do with either of her parents' deaths. *As far as I know, anyway.*

"No one should have to cope with such loss on their own," Cersei stated, "If you would like someone to talk to on your loss, you may come to me."

Rhaenys wondered what prompted this encounter. The Queen had not spoken a word to her all week. In fact, she had hardly exchanged any dialogue with her at all ever since she came to King's Landing near the start of the year. If anything, she had simply ignored the dragon princess.

It was possible Cersei was only speaking to her now as a matter of routine. It could have been nothing more than a false kindness. After all, most Lannisters were deceptive by nature. Be that as it may, the Queen sounded uncharacteristically sincere.

Ultimately, she nodded her head and muttered graciously "Thank you, Your Grace. That means a great deal to me."

The Queen smiled and lightly kissed Rhaenys on the cheek. Her tears had been flowing down that very same spot not two hours ago. The skin there was still a little dry. Cersei must have noticed that, as she gazed into Rhaenys's eyes again and remarked "Now, you must stay strong for your mother's sake. But remember: a woman's tears are a weapon. Do not be afraid to let them see yours."

She did not know what to say to that, so she said nothing. All she did was nod her head again. She also chose to remove her hood. *I've already hidden enough from the world,* she decided. As such, she would not be ashamed of her tears any longer.

A couple minutes later, the memorial service commenced. Everyone went silent as the High Septon assumed his usual place near the top of the main platform. Two other septons were with him. The one to his left was the High Sparrow. Rhaenys did not know who the one to his right was, but the King and Queen seemed to recognize him somehow.

When he had the crowd's full attention, the High Septon announced "As you all know, less than a turn of the moon past, a terrible tragedy occurred in the Free City of Pentos. Many in attendance lost people dear to them in that calamity. We have gathered today in honor of those recently departed."

He gestured for the man to his right to come forward. This septon was younger than both the High Septon or the High Sparrow, albeit only slightly. When he faced the congregation, he declared "Before I became a man of the cloth, I was Luceon Frey, fifthborn son of Lord Walder Frey. My late father sired many sons, most of whom did not have the same mother as I. One of my younger half-brothers is among the casualties of the Pentoshi Bloodbath. His name was Perwyn Frey. He was an anointed knight, a respected member of the Legion without Banners, a firm believer in the New Gods, and a loyal subject of the crown. Or so I heard. I never actually met Perwyn; he was born well after I left my house for the Seven. Nevertheless, he was family, and I grieve for him and his fallen comrades alongside all of you."
So, at least one of the Faith can understand our pain. That was actually somewhat touching.

Once the opening speech was concluded, Septon Luceon returned to his original position next to the High Septon. The High Septon himself then proceeded to give a sermon. For the most part, the sermon was a series of accounts of all the people from the Seven Kingdoms who had died in the Pentoshi Bloodbath and a brief description of their individual life and deeds. Some were longer than others.

Renly Baratheon's section was the longest. That was unsurprising. Naturally, the king's brother would get the most said about him. Of course, Renly was also the Crown Prince's uncle; that loss affected Jasper, too. Will and I weren't the only ones in our group to lose someone, she , Rickard had lost his aunt Alysane Mormont, and Sansa and Arya had lost their great uncle Brynden Tully.

Rhaenys was aware that only around half the victims of the Pentoshi Bloodbath were Westerosi in origin. The other half hailed from somewhere else in the Known World. However, very little was said about those individuals. They were simply listed by name at the very end of the sermon. Rhaenys felt that was grossly inadequate, but she was not in a position to protest. I suppose we should be glad they at least had the courtesy to acknowledge the Essosi who died fighting with our own people.

Once the list of fatalities was finished, the High Septon prayed for them all. This prayer took up a full ten minutes, and it involved all the blessings of the Seven at length. Clearly, he is determined for their souls to be at peace. Rhaenys found her mind drifting during the prayer. She thought about her mother and all the others who had died, and her mind kept going back to the man responsible for all their deaths.

As it happened, that man was not even nearby at present. Lord Tywin Lannister had not attended the service. He had chosen to remain at the Red Keep and hold court in the King's absence. Rhaenys was glad for that much. It would be an insult to the memories of the fallen if that monster showed up here.

At the very end of his prayer, the High Septon bade the gods to bring the guilty parties – wherever they might have been – to justice. Oh, it will not be the gods who avenge the Pentoshi Bloodbath. We'll do that all on our own. Technically, Rhaenys and her friends would not be operating all on their own. They would be working alongside Lord Gregor Clegane and the secret council covertly. Still, Lord Gregor is counting on us to do our part. Only we can sever Tywin Lannister's link to Jon Connington. Once they managed to do that, everything would theoretically fall apart for both Lannister and Connington.

The realization of that delighted Rhaenys. Soon enough, justice will be served. The thought almost made her grin. But she was careful not to. It would be uncouth to grin during a memorial service.

Once the prayer ended, the High Septon bestowed the usual blessing upon the congregation, and the service was concluded. Rhaenys and all the other attendees rapidly vacated the area after that.

When she left the Great Sept of Baelor, Rhaenys did not pull her hood back up over her head. Even when she climbed back onto her horse and began the ride back to the Red Keep, she did not cover her façade. This time around, she kept her face proudly exposed. Evidently, the Queen's advice had stayed with her. I've nothing to hide from them anymore. I'll let the world see me for who I am. If they've a problem with that, then fuck them.

Willas rode beside her, as usual. Every now and then, she glimpsed over at him and smiled his way. He returned each of those smiles thusly.
When they were almost upon Aegon's High Hill, Willas turned to Rhaenys and stated "Rhae, there's something I'd like to ask you. I've actually been meaning to address it all week, but I could not find the most opportune time to do so."

_Between the period of mourning and our redoubled efforts to flush out the hidden rookery, that comes as no surprise._ Rhaenys brushed a lock of hair out of her smooth face and commented "Alright, Will. Go ahead; I'm listening."

"Your brothers now have armies of their own," Willas pointed out, "They also have your family's swords and ancestral homes. They even have dragons."

"That's true," Rhaenys confirmed. _Aegon even named his after Mother. That was sweet of him. Where are you going with this, Will?"

He paused a moment, and then he continued with "Rhae, it seems as though your brothers have so much, and you have hardly anything. Does that not seem unfair to you?"

"No," Rhaenys responded straightaway, "I can see why you might think that, but I do not feel it is unfair. By now, Aegon and Jon have earned all those things. Were our places reversed, I could have had them, too, but I neither want nor need them. Besides… you are wrong to think that I have hardly anything."

"Well, what do you have?" Willas enquired.

"I have Highgarden," Rhaenys answered him, grinning once more, "And I have you."

The heir to the Reach was momentarily stunned. Then he smiled lightly and muttered "Yes… but is that enough for you?"

"More than enough," Rhaenys proclaimed, reaching out to take her betrothed's hand in her own, "It is everything I'll ever want or need."

Willas's smiled widened at that. He leaned over and planted a kiss on Rhaenys's cheeks, forehead, and lips. He prolonged that last one for as long as he could. Shortly before they came to the stables below Maegor's Holdfast, he pulled away. He whispered to her "We'll continue this later."

"I look forward to it," she commented giddily.

Rhaenys anticipated that Willas would be visiting her bedchamber once more that day. This time, however, he would be soothing her in a fashion very different than the one he used this morning. …

"How long has it been?" Arya inquired.

"Since you last asked that or since we got here?" Jasper muttered cheekily. _Better yet, how about since we headed down here?_ They would have to go back up eventually, even if they did not encounter anyone else before then. Unfortunately, there was no definite way to keep track of time down here. They could only approximate.

"The second one," the Stark girl mumbled blankly.

"I'd say an hour or so," Rickard supposed. Though it was pitch black, Jasper could faintly see his best friend turn towards the girl. He queried "Why do you ask?"
"All this waiting is beginning to bore me," Arya said flatly.

"Well, you can go back up if you'd like," Jasper uttered wryly.

"That may be for the best," Rickard commented. Jasper expected him to say something like that. After all, he had been against bringing Arya along from the start. But what else could we do? She's the only one who knew how to find this place, and I doubt written or oral directions would have sufficed.

"You aren't going to get rid of me that easily," Arya asserted firmly. "I know you only included me in this thing because you needed a guide, but even if you no longer require my help, that doesn't mean you can just send me away."

"We know that," Rickard claimed. You do. "Arya, I'm not advising you to return to the surface because we regard you as deadweight or anything of the sort. It's more for your safety."

Arya snorted in derision. "You think I can't defend myself?"

"Well, considering the number of times we've each bested you in the training yard..." Jasper remarked cockily. Indeed, Jasper had beaten her in half a dozen sessions of single combat. Rickard, a full dozen. Yet she continues to come back for more.

"No one is questioning that, Arya," Rickard claimed. True. While she's no match for Rick or me, she can definitely hold her own against most other opponents. "The greatest danger we're up against is the unpredictability of this situation."

"He has a point," Jasper concurred, "Even we don't know who or what is coming."

We have a fairly good idea, though. Assuming Lord Gregor's correct. Thankfully, the Mountain was seldom incorrect.

"All the more reason I should stay," Arya disputed, "If you two are up against unknown odds, I could still be useful. So could Nymeria."

The female direwolf had been lying on the floor all this time. She had barely moved or uttered a single sound. At the mention of her name, she lifted her head up and let out a soft growl. After that, she went silent again and settled back down.

"Why do you think I insisted that we bring her?" Rickard asked rhetorically.

Although the idea to use Arya to find the hidden rookery had been Jasper's, the idea to bring along Nymeria had been Rickard's. Neither the Crown Prince nor the Stark girl knew what the heir to Moat Cailin was aiming to do by involving a direwolf. He had simply claimed "We might require her."

As to what they might require her for, Rickard had not specified. Jasper could only speculate. It could not have been for protection; all three of them had swords. It could not have been for intimidation; they could be as menacing as their fathers. It could not have been for show; Rickard was not one to flaunt his strength.

He must have his reasons, Jasper thought. It could be that he only brought Nymeria as a precaution. Maybe he doesn't expect that we'll need her for anything in the end.

"I should remind you that Nymeria is only here while I am," Arya disclosed, "If I go, she goes. I assume you wouldn't want that."
"Indeed not," Rickard drily affirmed. He sighed and murmured "Alright, if you really want to stay, then stay. Just give me your word that when the time comes, you won't get in the way."

"In the way of what?" Arya enquired.

"Whatever happens," Rickard clarified. *Rather vague, but then again, so is all this.*

"Fine, I won't," the wolf girl grudgingly conceded. Arya Stark was the type of person that did not like to be excluded or singled out in anything. *She's a bit like Varys in that respect.* Jasper never thought he would compare those two individuals. In this case, it was somewhat ironic. *Even the Spider couldn't get us here.*

Once again, the vicinity was immersed in total quietness. Along with total blackness. *Absolutely nothing to hear and nothing to see.* Jasper sat up against the long stone wall of the corridor, just outside the entrance to the hidden rookery. He sat to Rickard's left, and Arya sat to Rickard's right. Nymeria lay at her mistress' feet.

*This may be tantamount to sitting in the Black Cells.* Of course, Jasper had not ever actually been inside the Black Cells. He had never even seen them. I'll be content if I never do. Even with company, just sitting in this dark, noiseless catacomb was already unpleasant enough.

After a couple minutes, Jasper was starting to share Arya's impatience. He murmured restlessly "What is taking them so long?"

"Perhaps they got lost," Rickard hypothesized.

"Knowing them, that could be possible," Jasper said cockily.

"We've yet to establish that it *is* them," Rickard pointed out. *Oh, I'm confident it is.*

"Are you ever going to tell me who 'they' are?" Arya asked in interest.

"Yes; when they go in there," Rickard answered her, gesturing over his shoulder at the hidden rookery.

"I'll hold you to that," Arya proclaimed. After a brief period of silence, she stated inquisitively "Remind me again; why do we have to sit out here? Why can't we wait in there instead?"

"Several reasons why," Rickard apprised her, "For one thing, Nymeria might spook the ravens. If they're squawking and flapping about when we have company, they'll give us away. Furthermore, the people who use this rookery might pay very close attention to detail. If we go in there and move something out of its proper place, they might notice before we're ready. Same bad outcome. Lastly, it'd be easier to block the entrance to the rookery from out here. Far smaller chance of the other party escaping or turning our own trap against us."

Arya scoffed, as though she was amused. "You've really thought of everything, huh?"

"Indeed," Rickard uttered proudly. *Yet one more way in which he takes after his lord father.*

"Then maybe you could *share* some of that knowledge," Arya wryly proposed, "At your behest, I have gone this long without asking any questions. But I really hate being kept in the dark. So, perhaps you could tell me a few things."

"Such as?" Jasper enquired.
"At the very least, why this is so important to you," Arya suggested.

Rickard seemed as though he was actually considering indulging her. *Maybe he just can't refuse her.* Rickard's father was a vassal of Arya's, but Jasper was well-aware that that was not why he would wish to please her.

"What do you think, Jazz?" Rickard inquired. That was a queer moniker. *Don't believe he's ever called me that before.*

"I think we can afford to give her an explanation, Rick," Jasper contended. *Perhaps then she would understand the seriousness of our situation.* "But let's keep it short, and we should omit anything we've sworn not to tell. Those things stay between you, me, and the others."

"That sounds fair to me," Rickard commented.

"Me, too," Arya agreed.

The heir to Moat Cailin then turned to the daughter of Winterfell and began with "So far, all we've told you is that King Robert tasked us with finding and flushing out a hidden rookery."

"That's correct," Arya affirmed, gesturing to the room behind them, "You also mentioned that Willas Tyrell, Rhaenys Targaryen, and Ashara Dayne have been assisting you. So was Lord Jon Arryn, before he had that 'stroke.'"

*Yes, his 'stroke.'* What happened to Lord Jon was still being passed off as a stroke to the public, but the Crown Prince and his three Northern friends were among the few who knew the truth. Jasper folded his hands together and muttered "We've spent months investigating this hidden rookery. Thanks to you, we've finally found it. Now comes the 'flushing out' part."

"My expedition into the bowels of the Red Keep was weeks and weeks ago," Arya recounted, "Why did you only ask me to bring you down here today?"

"We probably should have come down here sooner," Rickard debated, "Doing so would have been reckless, though. Until recently, we had no idea what we were up against."

"Aside from that, you may recall that after Lord Jon was poisoned, security in the Red Keep was tightened," Jasper stated. *Tightened rather heavily, at that.* "For a long while, even Varys' little birds had a hard time moving about without the gold cloaks noticing. Naturally, there was no way the Crown Prince and his highborn friends could sneak around undetected."

"The King must be very serious about keeping this affair a secret," Arya noted.

"He is," Rickard confirmed. *He was right to be. If enough people knew what we knew, it wouldn't take long for civil unrest to spread.*

"Still, if I remember rightly, security more or less returned to normal by the time Lord Tywin Lannister replaced Lord Jon as Hand of the King," Arya recounted, "That was well over a fortnight and a-half ago. I would've been happy to take you down here any time since then."

"We know you would've," Rickard asserted. *He'd let her take him anyplace,* Jasper thought in amusement.

"So, why the sudden urgency?" Arya enquired.

"Not too long ago, we acquired some new information from Lord Gregor Clegane," Jasper
revealed, "As it happens, we received it on the same day we learned of the Pentoshi Bloodbath. Not two hours earlier, in fact."

"Really?" Arya murmured, intrigued.

"Yes," Rickard validated, "That was not a coincidence. You see, a while back, we told my father of the hidden rookery. Now, he believes this rookery may be somehow connected to the Pentoshi Bloodbath."

Although he could not see Arya's face, Jasper was certain her eyelids had just dilated fully. She whispered in shock "What?"

Jasper elaborated with "According to Lord Gregor, someone in the Red Keep has been collaborating with Lord Jon Connington since the start of the year. Someone who is capable of restoring Connington to his former status in the Seven Kingdoms."

*I'd like to see them manage that, now that half the nobles in the realm are calling for Connington's head.*

"Whom does he suspect?" Arya mumbled, almost demandingly.

"We'll tell you later," Rickard stated hastily, "For now, all you should know is that my father emphasized the overall importance of the hidden rookery in Connington's schemes. He argues that if we cut off Connington from his informant, they'd both be all on their own. Once that happens, my mother and her forces will be able to stop Connington and his party before they can cross the Narrow Sea, and *we* will be able to stop the informant before he realizes we're on to him."

"Clever," Arya commented, scoffing a bit, "You still haven't told me why you waited until today to come down here, though."

"We found it reasonable to assume that the people using the rookery only go to it when a missive arrives," Jasper explicated, "Our goal is to catch them in the act. As such, we decided not to visit the rookery until we saw a raven fly in from the east."

"Then one flew in today?" Arya assumed.

"That's correct," Rickard recounted, "Lately, I've always had a couple of my retainers standing lookout for any ravens that fly across the Narrow Sea. The one that appeared this morning was the first one we've seen since we learned of the Pentoshi Bloodbath. Shitmouth spotted it."

Arya chuckled a bit. "Is that right?"

"Yes, and he came to us right after," Jasper humorously recalled, "I believe his exact words were 'I jus' saw one o' them flappin' buggers come in with the mornin' light, milord.'"

Arya chuckled again. "That *does* sound like something he'd say."

"Anyway…" Rickard resumed, "Immediately after Shitmouth told us about this morning's raven, we went to find you. The three of us spent the following hour or so descending the lower levels of the Red Keep, and that brings us to where we currently are."

"So, the next step is to ambush the informant?" Arya supposed.

"No, we do not expect the informant himself to come," Jasper illuminated, "In all likelihood, he'll send some underlings in his stead."
"That could actually work to our advantage," Rickard remarked.

"How?" Arya said inquiringly.

"Well, you see, there's a chance we won't have to destroy the rookery," Jasper notified her, "If all goes well, we might actually get some use of our own out of it."

Arya was probably curious as to what he meant, but she did not ask for any clarity on that point. Instead, after about a minute of silence, she stated "Tell me something. If Lord Willas, Princess Rhaenys, and Lady Ashara have been working with both of you on this matter from the very beginning, why didn't any of them join us?"

"We didn't know how long we'd be down here," Rickard expounded, "If all five of us disappeared from the Red Keep for too long, it would have raised too many questions."

Jasper nodded in agreement and muttered "With that in mind, we decided it would be more prudent if only one or two of us accompanied you."

"Why you two?" Arya queried.

"Due to certain… factors, we seemed the most logical choices," Jasper claimed, "For one thing, of the five of us, Rickard's the closest to you, and I am the closest to your sister. Furthermore, both our fathers are determined to remove the threat posed by the rookery, and they are counting on us to succeed."

There's also the fact that the informant is likely a relative of mine.

"Those are good reasons, I guess," Arya commented, "Still, even if the two of you are the only ones gone, some people are bound to notice. Take the Kingsguard, for instance. Isn't it their duty to know the whereabouts of the Royal Family at all times?"

"It is, but we already got around that," Jasper disclosed, "Ser Boros was the one guarding me today. Luckily, he is easy to evade. Simply leave a jug of wine near him, and he's under the table for the next several hours."

"That's true," Rickard concurred, smirking. "How much longer do you suppose we have before he sobers up?"

"I think we'll be safe for at least two or three more hours," Jasper conjectured. "You did assign Rafford and Eggon to watch over him, right?"

"Yes, I did," Rickard confirmed, "If need be, they should be able to stall him for up to another hour. By then, I expect we'll be back on the upper levels of the Keep."

Let's hope so. I'd rather not have to make up an excuse for where we've been all day.

"Is there anyone else who might look for either of you?" said Arya.

"I don't think so," Rickard pronounced.

"What about the King and Queen?" she disputed.

"You needn't worry on them," Jasper assured her, "My father is out hunting today, and my mother is spending the day in the city with her entourage."

"Oh, right," Arya remarked, "Now that you mention it, when Sansa and I broke our fast together
this morning, she did say something about how she was looking forward to visiting the Street of Silk with Queen Cersei today."

"Just as I said," Jasper drily stated, grinning a bit. *Lovely girl; Sansa Stark. So, how is it she and Arya are such polar opposites?*

"If anyone else tries to find us, we can count on Willas, Rhaenys, and Lady Ashara to cover for us," Rickard contended. *Yes, they would do that. After all, we'd do the same for them. "At any rate, that's not really our main concern right now. We need to stay focused. It may have been just the three of us and Nymeria for the last few hours, but we could have company at any moment."

"Good point," Jasper admitted. He looked over at the daughter of Winterfell and asked her "Is your curiosity appeased, Arya?"

"For now," she replied, "I expect some fuller answers later, though."

"You'll get them," Rickard swore. *Eventually.*

Silence returned. A full ten minutes elapsed. Maybe it was ten. It could have been fifteen. There was no accurate way to tell time down here. By now, it was probably getting close to the lunch hour *Too bad we didn't bring anything to eat. Oh, well. At least we have something to drink.*

Jasper reached into his cloak and pulled out his waterskin. He did not wish to risk running out, so he only allowed himself a small sip. *Who would have thought sitting and waiting could make a man so thirsty?*

As he tucked his waterskin back into his cloak, Jasper thought he heard one of his friends whisper. He turned towards them and asked "Did you say something?"

"No," they answered him in unison.

Jasper rubbed his chin and muttered "I thought I heard a voice."

"Well, it wasn't me," Rickard told him.

"Wasn't me either," Arya claimed.

*I know it wasn't me, and Nymeria hasn't uttered a sound in over a half-hour. Maybe I imagined it.* Just to be safe, Jasper listened to his surroundings closely. He quickly discovered it was *not* his imagination. It was indeed a voice he heard. It appeared to originate from a distance, but it sounded as though it was getting closer.

"Someone's coming," he told the others softly, "Get up; quick."

He, Rickard, and Arya swiftly rose to their feet. As if by reflex, Nymeria stood up alongside her mistress. The four of them moved to the side of the rookery's entrance opposite the direction of the approaching voices. There they stood and waited.

Arya reached for Needle, but Rickard stopped her from drawing it. He whispered "No, not yet. If they're carrying a torch, the light could shine off the steel."

*Good call. Even so, Jasper kept one hand on the hilt of his sword. We cannot take any chances.*

A few seconds later, the soft voices from above sounded as though they were now on the same level. Soon after that, they reached the long, dark corridor. That was when a torch appeared from
around the corner. The torch rapidly came closer, and the voice followed the flame. Not voice, he realized. Voices.

There were definitely at least two people coming. Probably more. It was hard to say for certain; they were too far away. They were talking too quietly for their speech to be understood. Even when he squinted and concentrated, Jasper could not make out their faces. He could, however, see the color of the hair. One of them was a blonde.

Jasper smirked when he saw this. Well, how about that?

Another minute later, the torch was at the entrance of the hidden rookery. Its bearer and his companions entered one-by-one. There appeared to be four of them altogether. Nothing we cannot handle.

"Now?" Arya whispered.

"Not just yet," Jasper responded quietly, "But let's get a little closer."

"Right," Rickard acknowledged, "And we should go ahead and arm ourselves."

That'd be a good idea. The three of them simultaneously drew their swords. They did it slowly and carefully, so that the singing of the steel was hardly even a faint whistle. Nymeria bared her teeth, but she did not growl.

Jasper Baratheon, Rickard Clegane, Arya Stark, and Nymeria gradually approached the entrance of the hidden rookery. The Crown Prince was the first to reach it. He cautiously peered inside.

The torch had been placed in a sconce on the far wall. There were four men in there. Two of them had short, dark hair, and they were clad in loose, grey robes. The other two were blondes, and their apparel was primarily the color of crimson.

Jasper managed to identify all four of the men. The two in robes were acolytes to Grand Maester Marwyn. Their names were Jullem and Desmor. The blond men were his second cousins, Lancel and Tyrek Lannister. At that, Jasper's smirk returned. I knew it.

Actually, Rickard had been the one to first suspect Lancel and Tyrek of running the hidden rookery. Nonetheless, Jasper and the others had been quick to go along with his notion. It certainly made the most sense.

If Grandfather Tywin really is Jon Connington's informant, it would follow that he'd only entrust his own kin to maintain correspondence between them.

In addition to that, Jasper and his friends had noticed that whenever a raven flew to or from King's Landing across the Narrow Sea, Lancel, Tyrek, or both were always unaccounted for. It also explained why the two of them had seemed so restless and agitated lately. That was not them being spineless cravens. They were just worried about getting caught.

The only thing that made Jasper doubt the possibility of his cousins' involvement was their timid nature. He felt someone would have to be particularly bold to operate a hidden rookery right under the king's nose, and Lancel and Tyrek were not bold in the slightest. Perhaps Grandfather Tywin intimidated them into cooperating.

At any rate, Jasper Baratheon no longer had any lingering doubt about his cousins' guilt. It really was them all along.

The presence of Jullen and Desmor was not very surprising, either. They too were on the list of people Jasper and his friends suspected of running the hidden rookery. They must be the ones who...
actually run the rookery. There is no way Lancel and Tyrek could manage one all by themselves.

Currently, Desmor was in the corner, feeding the ravens in the cages. Lancel and Jullen were seated at the table in the center of the room, assembling some writing materials. Tyrek was standing against the wall, handling a lone raven. Could that be the same one that flew in today?

Just then, Tyrek removed a rolled-up piece of parchment from the talons of the raven in his hands. It would seem as though it is.

"How does it look?" Jullen queried.

Tyrek briefly looked over the parchment, and then he declared "The message is intact."

"Good," Lancel commented, "Now, what does it say?"

Tyrek did not answer him right away. First, he walked over to Desmor and handed over his raven. As the acolyte secured it in one of the cages with the other ravens, Tyrek went over to the table and took a seat next to Lancel. The three of them waited for Desmor to finish tending to the birds. That would take a while; there were a lot of them.

"I still don't understand why all four of us had to come this time," Jullen mumbled, "Before, we always went down here in pairs. Why the change?"

"The Hand's orders," Lancel disclosed, "Since Lord Jon failed to kill the Targaryens at the Pentoshi Bloodbath, our uncle is not taking any more risks. Hence, our safety in numbers."

Oh, I don't think that'll work so well in your favor. And… it seems Lord Gregor was correct.

"Well, we cannot linger for long," Desmor pronounced, "The Grand Maester will not be pleased if Jullen and I are both missing for too long."

"So, come up with an excuse," Tyrek recommended.

"Surely you jest," Jullen sharply retorted, "It is impossible to lie to Marwyn the Mage."

"Well, you can't tell him about this," Lancel said flatly.

"Of course, we won't," Desmor uttered plainly, "If he knew what we were up to, he would dismiss us faster than we could blink."

Well, at least Grand Maester Marwyn is not part of this hidden rookery business. Jasper was comforted by that knowledge. It assured him that Marwyn the Mage could still be trusted.

Once Desmor was finished feeding the ravens, he sat down in the remaining chair between Tyrek and Jullen. When they were all settled, Tyrek unrolled the parchment and smoothed it down on the surface of the table. He and the other three men leaned forward so they could all make out its contents.

They read in silence for a couple minutes. Ultimately, Jullen grinned and remarked "Ah, so Lord Jon's party is well on its way to Braavos."

"Yes, it is," Tyrek confirmed, "According to this, he will get there within a fortnight."

"Alright," said Desmor, clapping his hands together, "How should we reply?"

"Uncle Tywin gave very specific instructions," Lancel professed, "If it appeared as though Lord
Jon would need longer than another full month to reach Braavos, we would simply send his mediator a short note that we've received and acknowledged this progress report. Less than a turn of the moon, and we would inform the mediator that a ship will be dispatched to Braavos in the near future."

"Very well," Jullen remarked, "Shouldn't we already have a ship prepared before we send the message?"

"Don't worry about that," Tyrek bade the acolyte, "We'll leave the ship to Lord Rodrik. He could easily spare a single vessel large enough for Lord Jon and his men."

"Won't he ask what we need it for?" Desmor conjectured.

"We'll just tell him the Hand of the King requires it," Lancel proposed, "That'll suffice. On that note, since Lord Rodrik and Janos Slynt are closely affiliated with each other, we should be able to rely on the City Watch to keep the harbormasters from inquiring after the missing ship, too."

"Good," Jullen commented, "The last thing we need is other people poking around in our business."

*Oh, it's too late to prevent that.* Jasper grinned wickedly. He was just about ready to move in. He was certain the others were ready. *They've probably been ready for a while now.*

Desmor picked up a quill pen and opened an ink well. He looked to Lancel and Tyrek, and he queried "Now, what exactly would you like this missive to say?"

Before his cousins could respond, Jasper stepped into the doorframe, pointed his sword inward, and proclaimed "You can leave that to us."

Desmor, Lancel, and Tyrek all jumped in alarm. Jullen held his place, but he seemed no less surprised. The four of them collectively turned towards the entrance.

Jasper heard movement from behind. Rickard and Arya stood on either side of him, pointing their own swords at the seated men. Nymeria padded over to her mistress and growled threateningly.

"Jasper…" Tyrek muttered in feigned delight.

"That's 'Your Grace' to you," the Crown Prince snapped through gritted teeth.

Desmor began to rise from his chair, and Lancel started to reach into his doublet. Jasper hastily stepped forward with his sword still raised, and he spat "Stay where you are. Keep your hands where we can see them. Any sudden moves, and you're dead."

The four men prudently chose to heed his warning. They gradually raised their hands over their head to show the prince they were empty.

"I'll check them for weapons," Rickard declared as he walked over to the table.

"We've got your back," Jasper assured his best friend.

Jasper and Arya kept an eye on Lancel, Tyrek, Jullen, and Desmor as Rickard frisked them all over. Ultimately, he announced "They've got nothing on them."

*They must wish they did. Not that it would have made much of a difference.*

Although Arya was shorter, younger, and female, she could appear just as menacing as Rickard or
Jasper. At this time, she honestly looked as though she would kill someone.

When she made eye contact with Jullen, her facial expression changed for a brief moment. In that moment, Jasper thought he saw horror in her façade.

"Arya, is something wrong?" Jasper queried worriedly.

She did not answer him. She just kept her gaze on Jullen, and she donned a countenance of utter loathing.

By now, Rickard had noticed her unrest, as well. He gazed over at Jullen, and then he asked the daughter of Winterfell "Do you know him?"

This time, she slowly nodded her head. Concerned, Rickard went over to her and asked "How?"

She would not say aloud. Instead, she leaned up and whispered into his ear. Jasper was on the other side of the room, so he could not hear what she said. Maybe I don't want to know.

When she finished speaking, Rickard's face contorted in rage. It held such malice, such passion, such anger…. Jasper was almost afraid himself.

Rickard slowly turned towards the table, marched over to Jullen, and punched him in the face. The blow was so powerful the acolyte nearly fell out of his chair. He did not, but he still coughed up a bit of blood.

"You son of a bitch," Rickard snapped, his voice laden with rage.

Jasper was genuinely bewildered. What the fuck is going on? "Rick… what did she tell you?"

"Don't answer him," Arya promptly interjected, before the heir to Moat Cailin could open his mouth, "Not here. Not now."

"Fine," Rickard conceded. He glared down at the bleeding Jullen and added in "But this is not over."

I should say not. While Jasper was intrigued and bothered by his best friend's behavior, he had to set that matter aside for the present. We still have a job to do. That comes first.

After turning back towards the table and the men seated there, Jasper calmly sauntered toward them. He stated bluntly "Now, do not try to invent any lies about what you are doing down here. We already know what you're doing down here. You're being an accessory to conspiracy, mass murder, and treason. Any one of those could earn you a meeting with Ser Ilyn Payne and his block. As much as I would love to arrange that for you, I'm not going to. I have other plans."

"What other plans?" Lancel queried nervously.

"I'll tell you in a minute," Jasper remarked, "But first, I need to ensure that I have your full attention. So, Rick, if you would…?"

By now, Rickard had calmed down. He grinned deviously and nodded. He walked over to where Tyrek was seated, and he stopped there. Then he took the blond man's arms and forced them behind his back. He only needed one of his hands to accomplish that. He kept his sword brandished in his other hand.

Once Tyrek was restrained, Jasper looked around at the men and told them "Take note of this. I
don't want to have to repeat myself."

_Though I certainly wouldn't mind._ Without any reservations, Jasper then took his sword and sank the tip of it into Tyrek's upper chest. The blond man yelled in pain and convulsed violently. Rickard's grip on him was quite firm, so his attempts to break free were futile.

"What in the Seven Hells are you doing?!" Lancel screeched.

Jasper scoffed, withdrew his blade, and said mockingly "Oh, relax. I didn't cut through any of his ribs, and I intentionally missed all his vital organs. That wound can easily be patched up later."

_Provided he does not bleed out first._ Rickard released Tyrek, and the blond man held his hands against the opening in his chest, groaning in anguish. Lancel looked as though he wanted to aid his cousin, but he did not. Apparently, he was much more concerned for his own well-being. _He doesn't want to risk the same thing happening to him._

Jasper paid no mind to Tyrek's agony. He simply wiped the tip of his sword on a piece of cloth, and he uttered sardonically "Now, do I have your full attention?"

"Yes, you do," Lancel pronounced. He undoubtedly spoke for all of them. _They'll definitely listen now._

Jasper did not lift his sword again, but he did keep it on display. He started to pace around the table. As he did this, he gazed down at the men and declared "Now, here is what's going to happen. You are not going to tell Jon Connington's mediator that you'll be sending a ship his way. Nor are you going to tell my grandfather that Connington's company will soon be in Braavos. I'll tell you what you will do.

"To begin," he continued after a short pause, "You will send Connington a missive informing him that King's Landing is unable to spare any ships at present. You can make up the reasons why, so long as he understands that no one is coming to fetch him anytime soon. Then, when you go back upstairs, you will find my grandfather and tell him that Connington's forces have been unexpectedly hindered in Essos. As such, they will not be ready for pickup for a good, long while."

"You want us to _lie_ to Lord Tywin?" Lancel assumed, aghast. _He makes it sound as though the concept itself is a death sentence. Then again, one could argue that it is. Still, that is not my problem._

"The alternative is to confess to my father that you've been lying to him," Jasper proposed, "Which would you prefer?"

"Neither," Lancel said frankly, "But since we apparently have no other choice, I suppose we'll do as you say."

"Excellent," Rickard commented in approval. _I think he's enjoying this even more than I am._

"Furthermore…" Jasper continued, "You will no longer report solely to my grandfather. From now on, every time you meet with him, you will report to me both before and after. I will tell you what words to say to him, and you will tell me what he does or plans to do in response to those words. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Desmor avowed. The other three men murmured agreement.

"Good; very good," Jasper murmured. He then glanced down at the blank parchment and quill pen set atop the table, and he cockily remarked "Now, let's get to work on that next missive for
Connington's mediator."

The next twenty minutes were spent composing a reply to the last letter the four men had received. It should have taken much less time than that, but Jasper was displeased with how the first five drafts turned out. Two were worded poorly, two were insufficient in getting Jasper's point across, and one included an encoded message that it was being written under duress.

The sixth draft was just fine, though. After looking it over thoroughly, Jasper deemed it to be satisfactory in every way.

After giving the missive his approval, he gazed around at his cousins and the acolytes, and he told them "Now, if you lot cooperate with us and give us your loyalty, I will make sure that no harm befalls you. The crown will protect you, even from the Hand of the King. But do not mistake my leniency for weakness. Because I promise you that if you even think about betraying me or my father ever again, I will personally drag you all the way back to this room, eviscerate you, and leave you down here to rot. Do you understand that?"

Lancel, Jullen, and Desmor firmly nodded their heads. Despite being in a weakened state, Tyrek managed to nod his head, too.

"Then it appears we've arrived at a compromise," Jasper observed. "Alright, you can ease down now. We'll let you go in a moment. But before we do, there is one other thing I need to know. Was this plot the work of just my grandfather, or did my mother play a role, as well?"

"The Queen is completely unaware of all this," Desmor enlightened him, "This scheme was her father's design entirely."

"Yes, Uncle Tywin was very insistent that no one in the Royal Family ever learn of our activities," Lancel claimed.

"His daughter least of all," Jullen added in.

That assurance brought Jasper far more relief than he expected it to. So, Mother really is innocent of this heinous plot. I'm not at all surprised that Grandfather is behind it, but I'm so glad she had nothing to do with it. I don't know what I would have done if she had been implicated, as well.

"Is there… anything more we can do for you, Your Grace?" Lancel offered anxiously.

"For the moment, I do not," Jasper proclaimed, "Just remember everything we've discussed here, and remember to check in with me periodically. Do that, and we should have no further trouble. Alright, that is all. You have my leave to go."

Lancel and Desmor hastily rose to their feet. Tyrek could not stand without doubling over in pain, so they helped him up. When Jullen tried to get up from his chair, Rickard stopped him.

"Actually, you do not have leave," the heir to Moat Cailin snapped. After forcing Jullen to sit back down, he turned to his best friend and said "Jasper, these men knowingly played a crucial role in the Pentoshi Bloodbath. It hardly seems fair that they should be allowed to go about their own lives without incurring some form of harsh punishment. Wouldn't you agree?"

The prince thought on that, and then he shrugged and remarked "I suppose I would, Rickard."

"What do you call this?" Tyrek spat angrily, gesturing to his stab wound. By now, his doublet and tunic were likely soaked in his blood. Their natural crimson hue made such a thing difficult to tell.
"A rather light punishment," Rickard perceived. "A more fitting punishment would be something like… this."

In one fluid motion, Rickard lifted his sword up to Jullen's throat and sliced it open. The acolyte had a sharp intake of breath, and his hands shot up to his neck. He struggled to stop the bleeding, but his efforts were in vain. Rickard had cut too deep.

Rickard said nothing; he just stood behind Jullen and held him down with his left hand. Lancel, Tyrek, and Desmor could only watch in terror as their associate choked on his own blood.

Jasper was not certain how to react. Then he remembered the memorial service from the other day, and he quickly decided he had no issue with Rickard's deed. This is justice, he told himself.

As Jullen began to go limp, Jasper happened to look over at Arya. She was… smiling. Just what did happen between her and Jullen?

Jasper once heard a rumor that Jullen had a fondness for young girls. And, on occasion, young boys. No one had ever found any concrete evidence to confirm that allegation, but now that Jasper knew what else Jullen was capable of, it would not have surprised him if it turned out to be true after all.

No, Arya would have told us if someone had taken her virtue. At least, Jasper assumed she would. It must have been something else. I hope it is.

Once Jullen's body stopped twitching, Rickard released him. Then he turned to the other three men and declared "Now you may go."

They did not need any more goading than that. Lancel retrieved the torch from the wall sconce, and Desmor got another raven from one of the cages. After that, they each pulled one of Tyrek's arms over their shoulders, and they led him out of the hidden rookery.

As their footsteps faded down the corridor, the darkness and quietness returned. That was when Jasper, Rickard, and Arya sheathed their swords.

"I'd say that went well," Rickard drily observed.

"Quite well," Arya conceded.

"I suppose it did," Jasper muttered blankly. He gradually looked over at the dead man in the room, and he thought aloud "I'm a little concerned about how they'll explain Jullen's disappearance to the Grand Maester, though."

"Oh, knowing them, they'll come up with some elaborate story to cover that up," Rickard debated, "I expect that's also how they'll explain Tyrek's injury."

"Fair point," Jasper commented. He let out a small sigh and mumbled "In the meantime, we better find a way to dispose of this corpse."

Rickard chuckled a bit. "Now you know why I wanted to bring Nymeria."

"What?" Jasper was confused at first, but he quickly realized what his best friend was implying. He really did think of everything.

It only took Nymeria five minutes to almost completely devour Jullen's remains. I am so glad I cannot see anything right now. The sounds of bones crunching, intestines bursting, flesh tearing,
and muscles ripping were unpleasant enough, and the smell was downright nauseating. As Rickard predicted, Nymeria's presence alone was enough to disturb the ravens. Her carnage sent them into a panic-induced frenzy. *Let's hope those cages will hold them.*

Before very long, the only things left of Jullen were his mangled, bloodstained robes. Jasper picked up those and draped them over his arm. *I'll find a place to dump these on our way back up.*

"Shall we go?" Jasper proposed.

"Yes, let's," Rickard responded, "It should be lunchtime by now, and I'm starving."

"So am I," said Arya.

*A moment ago, I was famished, too. Now... I seem to have lost my appetite.*

At any rate, Jasper professed "Well, we no longer have a legitimate reason to spend any more time in this godsforsaken pit. So, I say we get the *fuck* out of here."

"Aye," Rickard and Arya murmured in unison.

Without another word spoken, the three young nobles and the direwolf summarily began the long ascent back to the upper levels of the Red Keep.

Chapter End Notes

Note: My own recent experience with grief really came in handy when writing Rhaenys's section. How she coped with her mother's death is somewhat similar to how I coped with my grandmother's.

Also, while Jasper is now aware of Jon Connington and Tywin Lannister's schemes, you may have noticed that I never explicitly mentioned if he knows the full truth about Lyanna yet. Maybe he does; maybe he does not. That will remain a mystery for a while. For now, all you really need to know is that he sees his grandfather for what he truly is: an emotionless monster without the capacity to love or care for anything.

Oh, and regarding what happened between Jullen and Arya... I'll go ahead and tell you now: she was NOT raped. What actually happened to her will not be revealed for a while. It may seem like a trivial, unimportant detail right now, but it will ultimately be pivotal in strengthening Rickard and Arya's relationship.
A year ago, the world had been at peace. The world of the living, at any rate. This is around the time when news of the Others' return spread throughout the Seven Kingdoms. Would that they were our only problem.

While the Army of the Dead was by far the most ominous threat to the people of Westeros, at least back then it had been their sole noteworthy problem. Over the course of the past year, however, a string of new troubles had appeared for them. Ironically, the one that first came to mind had not even occurred on Westerosi soil.

Alyver gazed down at his arm. He slowly rolled up his sleeve to expose his scar. It ran all the way from his shoulder to well past his elbow. It had hurt and bled greatly when the wound was first inflicted. Nonetheless, he counted himself fortunate that he could see his whole arm instead of a stump. Moreover, he felt fortunate that he could see it with both his eyes.

Alyver had been absent for most of the Pentoshi Bloodbath, but when Jon Connington came for his cousin Duncan and Princess Lyanna Stark, he had joined into the fray. That had been his first true taste of battle.

Alyver had managed to kill one of the Golden Company serjeants singlehandedly, but another had overpowered him. By the end of that scuffle, Alyver had been left with most of his left arm cut open and a huge gash just above his right eye. Those injuries had not been fatal, but they had been serious. They could have been much worse, though.

For a time, it had seemed as though Alyver would lost his forearm, his eye, or both. It was only due to the diligence and competence of Haldon Halfmaester that he had not lost either. One Golden Company man nearly crippled me; another prevented that from happening. Another bit of irony.

Alyver spent a minute flexing his left arm. While it still stung a bit when he rolled his shoulder back, the range of his motion was not impeded. Likewise, other than another scar above his right eye, his vision was as pristine as ever. He would probably carry these scars for the rest of his life, but he was content with that. Scars did not bother him. I have something to show for my time on this continent.

Apart from that, his injuries were far from the worst ones inflicted on his company. At least mine have healed. A number of his friends and allies had suffered injuries that were either temporarily or permanently debilitating in some way. And some had suffered injuries that would probably never heal at all.

Father's squire, Prince Jon Targaryen, had emerged unscathed from the Pentoshi Bloodbath, yet he had suffered perhaps the worst injury of them all. His fiancée and unborn daughter were murdered. Alyver was there when it happened; he was the only one who could confirm that Jon Connington himself had done the deed. Even now, the memory of Connington plunging his sword into her abdomen kept repeating in Alyver's head.

Alyver had already been neutralized by then, so there was nothing he could have done to stop Connington. That was what Mother, Uncle Tyrion, Aunt Ellyn, and Jon Targaryen insisted, anyway. Alyver himself was not so certain. He still believed he could have done something to save
Ygritte and her babe. *I suppose we'll never know.*

In any case, Alyver was determined not to fail his cousin or Jon's mother a second time.*I couldn't protect them during the Bloodbath, but if I can, I'll help rescue them from their abductors.*

Although he was still a child by most accounts, Alyver was not going to let his youth be a detriment to his ability. He felt he had as much of a right as anyone else in Mother's company to be involved in this fiasco. *I already am involved,* he realized. *I was involved from the moment we set sail from Moat Cailin.*

Thinking about the moat saddened him. Almost everyone he knew was there, including Vallory, Larys, and Father. If not for the Pentoshi Bloodbath, he, Torrhen, and Mother would already be back there by now. Once Rickard got back from King's Landing, their family would be whole again. *It needs to be whole again. Cleganes are strong, but we're strongest when we're all together.*

Alyver had been in Essos for close to eight months. For the most part, he had enjoyed that time. It had been quite an adventure for him. Now, he was ready for the adventure to end. He had been ready since the day of the Pentoshi Bloodbath. Even before the Bloodbath took place, he had been prepared to leave the Free Cities. Then Jon Connington and his band of turncloaks ruined everything. *Yet one more reason to call for Connington's head.*

Gods willing, it would not be too long before they actually had Connington's head. The Tickler had used his capacity as an interrogator and torturer to track the exiled lord to Braavos. For all Mother and the others knew, Connington and his party had not even reached the Free City yet. But soon enough, they would.

*Once we find them... may the gods have mercy on Jon Connington.* Jon Targaryen certainly would not have any. Although part of Alyver would have liked to be there when Jon got his revenge, he was inclined to believe he would ultimately come to regret that scenario if it were to transpire. Even so, he could not help but be a little curious as to how the prince would end his late father's former best friend.

Alyver turned his gaze from his arm to the two mythical creatures in the room. He mumbled "Perhaps he'll feed Connington to you two. Alive."

Other than a brief puff of smoke from their nostrils, the dragons did nothing to respond to that remark. *Likely, the only word they understood was 'feed.'*

When Alyver first saw the Targaryens emerge from the pyre with three newly-hatched dragons, he had been amazed. He still was, but not as much as before. Although dragons were fierce, intimidating, and powerful beings, young ones were at least somewhat manageable. So long as they were routinely fed and no one did anything to aggravate them, they were actually quite docile.

All the same, Alyver was careful with how he behaved around the dragons. He knew they could be provoked very easily. One single wrong gesture could mean the forfeit of one's life. Despite that, Alyver was not afraid. Ever since his near-death experience during the Pentoshi Bloodbath, nothing seemed to scare him anymore. Even the knowledge that the Others would soon descend upon the Seven Kingdoms did not perturb him.

He was not entirely certain why that was. Maybe it was because the dragons would play a part in repelling the Night's King and his undead horde. *According to Father, that is. I just hope they grow up fast. Right now, they're barely large enough to burn a few dozen wights. They've a long way to go before they can face an entire army.*
In the meantime, Alyver's company had more immediate difficulties than the size of these mythical creatures. Mother had sent most of her closest allies back to Moat Cailin with the Red Woman. Right now, she was in a meeting with the few who had remained with her.

Alyver had not been invited to that meeting. *Because I'm 'too young,' most like.* Not that he was complaining. He was used to being excluded from his parents' business. Aside from that, he was confident that his mother, aunt, and uncle would later tell him everything that had been discussed at the meeting which he actually needed to know. Recently, that had been their process as far as Alyver was concerned. While he was not part of Mother's inner circle, he was still kept in the know on most crucial matters.

At any rate, the meeting would be concluded soon enough. Once it was over, that was when they would really get to work. *If Connington's already here, we must make haste to find him. If he's not... we need to prepare for his arrival. It could be imminent.*

Right now, it was the middle of the afternoon. The fleet had been in Braavos since before daybreak, specifically near the Drowned Town. However, only a few of their vessels were docked, and the majority of the passengers and crew still had yet to disembark.

Alyver had spent most of the day with Draegar and Ygrenyon. They had accompanied Princess Daenerys and Prince Jon to Braavos. Having gone to Dorne with Aegon, Eliaxes was the only one of the dragons not aboard the *Zenith* at this time.

Draegar and Ygrenyon clearly missed their sibling, but they did not appear worried that they would never see her again. Or him. Alyver was not certain how to refer to the dragons individually. Some historians said they were sexless, while others said they could be both sexes at once. *I wonder how they mate.* After attempting to visualize that in his head, Alyver decided he would just as soon not find out.

Although Draegar had been named after men and Ygrenyon had been named after women, the former seemed more feminine whilst the latter seemed more masculine. That was what Alyver had deduced by observing their behavior, at any rate. *With dragons, it's hard to tell what is seen as masculine or feminine.* He had not spent enough time with Eliaxes to make a firm ruling on gender, but if he were to guess, Aegon's dragon was probably a female, as well.

The dragons had been given lodgings on board the *Zenith*. They currently shared the captain's cabin with Jon, Daenerys, Irri, and Ghost. Mother had relinquished those accommodations for them.

Jon's old cabin might have been large enough for the six of them. But after what happened to Ygritte in there, he was unwilling to go anywhere near that room. Alyver could not blame him. He too had gone out of his way to avoid it.

Still, some may have thought it strange for a young man and his direwolf to share a chamber with a young woman and her handmaid. However, Jon and Daenerys did not seem to mind. They were family, after all. Irri was the only one who had been somewhat averse at first, and that was solely because the idea of sleeping with Ghost did not appeal to her. Luckily, the Dothraki girl and the direwolf had quickly warmed up to each other.

Interestingly, Ghost got along famously with Draegar and Ygrenyon. The white wolf had lost his mother Lyarra during the Pentoshi Bloodbath. For a while, that loss had rendered him as downtrodden as his master. He desperately needed something to lift his spirits, and he had done so by finding companionship with the dragons.
Alyver had come to enjoy spending time with Draegar and Ygrenyon, as well. He had no friends who were his own age on board the *Zenith*. Daenerys was the person closest to him in age, and she was six and ten. Other than his brother Torrhen, he was the youngest human in this division of the fleet. Of course, even Torrhen was older than Ghost and the dragons, but he was far too young to mingle or interact with them. Alyver, however, could appreciate their company.

He had watched Draegar and Ygrenyon grow and evolve over the first month of their life. They had gotten larger each day. When they were born, they were already about the same size as Alyver. In just a few days, they were as big as Ghost. Now they were even bigger than Mother. *They're still not quite as big as Father, though.*

Their wings had gotten stronger, as well. Within a week after they hatched, they could hover in the air. At the end of their first fortnight, they could glide alongside the *Zenith*. By now, they could fly over open water and even catch fish. *How fortunate they can feed themselves.*

As the legends claimed, dragons were carnivorous by nature. It seemed as though they were *always* hungry. *We only have so much meat in our stores. If we ran out of beef, pork, chicken, and horse, they may give human a chance.* Thankfully, there was no shortage of fish in the Narrow Sea. As long as they were over water, Draegar and Ygrenyon had a virtually inexhaustible food supply.

*I wonder when we'll let them out.* The dragons' existence was hardly a secret. The people of Pentos were aware of them. By now, word of their return had likely spread throughout the rest of the Free Cities. Nonetheless, Jon and Daenerys were keeping them hidden for the present. *The Braavosi might be more willing to cooperate if we bring them out, though.*

Alyver might not have known much about dragons firsthand, but he did know that they were not fond of enclosed spaces. Like him, they much preferred the outdoors. It was said that dragons would always continue to grow so long as they were fed and had ample space to expand. *They've hardly any space at all in here. And even if they do still grow, it would soon be impossible for them to fit through the door.*

He just hoped they would be big enough to make a difference with the Long Night finally occurred. He also hoped the Targaryens would get them to aid in the war against the Army of the Dead. After all, it was said no one could really control a dragon. *With the possible exception of wargs. Alas, I don't know any wargs who are that powerful.*

Alyver sighed. A year ago, the Night’s King had been his only worry. Now, there were so many other issues plaguing the world. Dragons, murders, massacres, betrayals… it was all a little overwhelming. *Life used to be so simple.*

Still, young as he was, Alyver knew there was no use brooding over all this. No matter how much disarray the world was in, it would never repair itself. Nature always had its own agenda. *In times like these, only men can set it to right.*

Men and women, to be precise. Only a certain kind of men and women could really make a difference. His parents were that kind of people.

Alas, since Father was still obligated to remain in the Seven Kingdoms, there was little he could do to help the situation in Braavos. As such, it was up to Mother to save Princess Lyanna and Duncan, apprehend Jon Connington, and take Prince Jon and Princess Daenerys back to the Seven Kingdoms.

Alyver never doubted or questioned his mother's ability. Even so… he worried for her. She was
often overworked. Most of the time, voluntarily. Even when she succumbed to heat exhaustion in the Dothraki Sea, she had refused to allow herself a rest. Regardless of the circumstances she faced, she would always push herself forward.

Nevertheless, Alyver knew that even the greatest leaders and warriors needed a respite every now and then. Mother had not had one since the start of the year. *Eight turns of the moon ago.* At a glance, she appeared fine and healthy. Still, Alyver believed that if she continued on like she had, it would not be long before she collapsed again; this time from stress.

He hoped she would at least take it easy today. Any other day, he would not mind if she worked as hard as ever, but today was special. Alyver had been keeping tracking of the days that elapsed since they left Moat Cailin, and he knew for a fact that today was Lady Dacey Clegane's nameday.

Alyver had seen his own nameday when they were still in Vaes Dothrak. Mother, Aunt Ellyn, Uncle Tyrion, Aunt Alysane, and a number of Legionnaires had celebrated it with him. It would have been a quiet party, but the Dothraki had taken a liking to Alyver and his mother, and they were not known for doing things quietly.

Through no fault of his own, his nameday celebration ended up being livelier than the typical grand feast in the Seven Kingdoms. *I can't say I dreaded that party. It was probably the most fun I've had since we left Westeros.* His favorite part was when some random Dothraki girl had attempted to give Alyver his first kiss, and she had been dissuaded after Mother backhanded her.

Alyver was aware that Elia Martell had given Rickard his first kiss. Once the Dothraki girl went away, she had playfully offered to give him his. While he knew she was simply jesting, he had declined as politely as possible. Princess Elia was certainly a beautiful woman, but she was much older than either of his parents. Oddly enough, she had given both of them at least one kiss, as well. *She'll definitely be missed.*

That was Alyver's tenth nameday. Rickard would have his thirteenth in a few weeks. Today would be their mother's thirtieth. Alyver knew they had a mission to complete, but he still wanted to celebrate it with her somehow. While they did not have time or resources to organize any festivities, he figured the least he could do was get her a gift. As luck would have it, Braavos was the richest of the Nine Free Cities. *I'm bound to find something she'd like here.*

Although Alyver came from a very wealthy family, most of their affluence belonged to Father and Mother. Alyver did not like the idea of buying his mother a present with her own money. Fortunately, he had a bit of coin that he had been saving up for personal use. Theon Greyjoy had suggested that he use it to buy his first whore when he came of age. *As 'tempting' as that sounds, my coin would be better spent on someone else.* He would probably be a man wed sometime in the future, but currently, his mother was the most important woman in his life.

Alyver looked over at Draegar and Ygrenyon. *I wonder what their mother was she like? How long ago did she live?* Even Magister Illyrio Mopatis had been unable to determine when the eggs were laid. With that in mind, any she-dragon could have produced them. Jon and Dany had a theory that they may have been the last eggs laid by Meraxes or Vhagar in Essos. Either way, their father could only have been Balerion if that was the case. It was possible they were laid mere days before Aegon the Conqueror and his sister-wives flew to Westeros.

*Now Eliaxes, Draegar, and Ygrenyon are doing the very same thing as their ancestors.* The chief differences were that these dragons would not be large enough to ride for a while, and they would not be invading the Seven Kingdoms this time. Instead, they would be fending off invaders.

Right then, the door to the captain's cabin opened. Alyver glimpsed over his shoulder just in time to
see Prince Jon and Princess Daenerys stepped inside. Ghost and Irri entered right after them. The handmaid was carrying two buckets of fish. They smelt fresh-caught. Alyver noticed the ones on top were still wriggling a bit. Very fresh-caught. Still, the dragons preferred their food dead. Actually, that was not true; they preferred it cooked. If something burning was still alive, they would eat it. That might explain why Vargo Hoat, Rolly Duckfield, and Illyrio Mopatis left no remains behind at the pyre.

Daenerys smiled at the second son of the Mountain and stated "Good afternoon, Alyver."

"Hello, Jon, Dany," he rejoined cordially. They had insisted that he not address them as "Your Grace." He folded his arms and asked, "Is the meeting over?"

"Yes," Jon affirmed, "Your lady mother and everyone else are gathered on the bridge. As soon as we're done here, we'll be joining them."

"Does that mean…?" Alyver assumed hopefully.

Jon nodded his head and pronounced "We're finally going ashore."

"Good," Alyver commented drily, "I've grown weary of this stuffy ship."

"So have I," Jon said plainly, "After all, what's the point of being docked in a harbor if we're just going to remain on board anyway?"

My thoughts exactly. "Where do you suppose we'll be going?"

"Well, the Legion has a house in the city," Jon thought aloud, "We may head there first. But before we get too settled, Lady Dacey wants to scout around the city. If Connington and his group are already here, she means to find out."

"Even if they're not, there is much we can do to prepare for their arrival," Daenerys contended.

"Perhaps we can set up an ambush of our own," Alyver wryly proposed.

At that, both the Targaryens smirked. Indeed, an ambush would be quite fitting. Father would call it 'poetic justice.'

Irri then placed the two buckets of fish before Draegar and Ygrenyon. Time for their second lunch, Alyver thought. Although the fish were raw at present, they would be charred soon enough. The dragons could use their own fire to heat their food. Oftentimes, they tended to overcook their meat, but the odor was not unpleasant. Next time we roast a boar, we should have them light the spit.

"They can handle it from here," Daenerys remarked, "We should leave before they get to feasting."

"Aren't you worried that they'll scorch the cabin?" said Alyver.

"They haven't so far," Jon pointed out, "Besides, there's nothing in here that's especially flammable."

Alyver glared at Jon incredulously. "I'll remind you that this ship is made of wood."

"Yes, ironwood," Jon professed, "That type of wood doesn't burn easily."

"True," Alyver murmured in agreement, "Alright, but if this room is reduced to cinders by the time we get back…"
"We'll remember that you warned us," Daenerys uttered humorously. *I'll hold you to that.*

Alyver then exited the cabin alongside Jon, Daenerys, Irri, and Ghost. Four Unsullied stood vigil outside the entrance. The dragons were always kept under very close watch, especially whenever the Targaryens were away. They were not going to risk what happened aboard the *Zenith* during the Pentoshi Bloodbath to transpire again. Only a select few were allowed to visit the dragons without Jon or Dany's prior authorization. *Luckily, I am among that few.*

Once the door to the captain's cabin was shut, a flash of light appeared from the bottom crack, and the temperature in the vicinity felt slightly hotter. Evidently, the dragons were wasting no time to cook their fish.

"Aren't you going to feed Ghost?" Alyver queried, gesturing to the direwolf.

"I already did," Jon informed him, "I've decided it's best if he didn't eat at the same time or in the same place as Ygrenyon and Draegar. All three of them are very stingy with their food."

"Indeed," Daenerys commented, "That aside, while they may get along well with him, I would hate to risk one or both of them mistaking him for food."

"Or the other way around," Jon mumbled. That made Alyver chuckle. *Direwolves may have sharper claws and fangs than any other predator, but I doubt even those could piece dragon scales.*

"So, shall we head up to the bridge?" Alyver proposed.

"Yes, let's," said Daenerys. No more words were exchanged then.

The second son of Gregor Clegane, the Targaryen prince, the Targaryen princess, the Dothraki handmaid, and the albino direwolf made their way up to the top deck together. When they arrived on the bridge, they encountered a large group. Mother was at the head of the group. Alyver noticed she was holding Torrhen in her arms. *She must not be expecting a confrontation. Otherwise, she would not bring him along.*

Uncle Tyrion, Aunt Ellyn, Ser Lothor Brune, and the Tickler were there, too. They were the only other people left in the company whom Mother counted as a trusted ally. Apart from her, Ser Lothor was the only other member of the secret council who was present. He had accompanied them to Braavos because he was better-acquainted with the Free Cities than any other member, including Mother and Father.

Everyone else currently on the bridge was Essosi. Those included the mercenary Beshka, the eunuch Strong Belwas, the ex-maester Qyburn, Daenerys's kos Aggo, Jhaqo, and Rhakaro, the translator Missandei, and a score of Unsullied officers led by Grey Worm. *I cannot decide if it is a good or bad omen that most of our allies belong to this land whilst we of the Seven Kingdoms do not.*

Alyver walked over to Mother. She smiled at him as he approached, and he smiled back. She used one of her hands to hold onto Torrhen, and she gently placed the other on Alyver's shoulder. He bade her "Good day, Mother."

She nodded in acknowledgment of that statement. "Happy nameday" was what he truly wished to say to her. He was fairly certain she had forgotten. *She's been so busy lately, I would not be surprised.* Even so, if that was the case, he could make it work to his advantage. *My gift will be even more of a surprise when I give it to her.*

Of course, he would need to actually find a suitable gift for her and buy it first. He would also have
to do that when she was not around. Alyver placed his right hand on the pocket in his cloak. That was where he contained his coin purse. He expected it to be a little lighter by the end of the day. The expression of delight on Mother's face when he presented his gift to her would be totally worth it.

Once Alyver and the Targaryens were assembled with everyone else, Ser Lothor Brune clapped his hands together and said inquisitively "Where to first, Dacey? The house?"

"No, we'll visit the house later," Mother proclaimed, "For now, we should go about the city. We should keep an eye out for Connington and his men. Even if they aren't yet here, perhaps the locals have heard some word of them."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Ser Lothor remarked approvingly, "As I recall, the best places to look for information in this city are the Sealord's Palace, the Iron Bank, and the Ragman's Harbor."

"Alright," Mother acknowledged, "Then here is how we will proceed. We will divide into three groups, and each group will investigate one of those areas."

We seem to make a habit of breaking up into three groups, Alyver noted. He said nothing against his mother's plan, though.

Mother continued with "Lothor, you will lead the group that goes to the Sealord's Palace. Maester Qyburn, the Tickler, and six of the Unsullied will accompany you. Ellyn, Tyrion, I'd like you two to take charge of the group that goes to the Iron Bank. Strong Belwas, Beshka, and another six Unsullied will follow you. Lastly, I will head to the Ragman's Harbor. Everyone who is left will come with me."

That would be myself, Jon, Dany, Ghost, Irri, Aggo, Jhaqo, Rakharo, Missandei, and the last eight Unsullied. Oh, and Torrhen.

Everyone on board the Zenith came down from the mighty vessel. They walked as a whole towards the Gate, but once they reached the Drowned Town, they parted ways. A third of them went northeast towards the Sealord's Palace, another third went due east towards the Iron Bank, and the last third went southeast towards the Ragman's Harbor. Alyver was in the last group.

Braavos was now the third Free City he had been to. Someday, I'll visit the other six, as well. He certainly had the drive and means to do so. He was a second son of a wealthy, highborn family, and while second sons did not stand to gain much, they were spared the obligations and responsibilities of first sons. Rick will inherit the moat and the title of lord, but I'll have freedom to do as I please. Long as it doesn't displease Mother, Father, or Rick.

Alyver had always been an adventurous one. That may have been why his mother included him on this quest to Essos. Perhaps she wanted to expose him to more of the world. Or maybe she just wanted to have more than one of her children nearby on her journey. I'm just happy she chose to bring me.

On the whole, the experiences of the last year had been quite enthralling and rewarding. Up until they returned to Pentos. The Bloodbath had dealt a devastating blow to all parties involved. Then again, without that episode, we wouldn't have acquired the dragons.

As Alyver and his companions made their way to the Ragman's Harbor, he gazed around at his surroundings. Already, he was more impressed than he had ever been in Pentos or Norvos, and he only set foot in Braavos about five minutes ago. That's a good sign. We may be here a while.
They smelt the Ragman's Harbor before they saw it. It was a rather filthy, noisy, and meager place. But unlike the better-maintained Purple Harbor, it was open to vessels of all origins. As such, it made for a much broader and more reliable center of information. Furthermore, most of the best markets were located in, around, or near the Ragman's Harbor. Alyver placed his hand against the pocket where his money bag was concealed. *Just what I was hoping for.*

"What's the plan, Mother?" Alyver inquired.

"We should start by talking to the vendors," Lady Dacey Clegane proposed, "Since they interact with all manner of people every day, some of them are bound to know something. Even if they do not prove helpful, their customers might."

"Not all these merchants speak the Common Tongue, my lady," Princess Daenerys disclosed.

"True," Mother remarked, "Luckily for us, we have Missandei."

The young translator flushed at the mention of her name and the implication behind it. She was fluent in many languages, but she did not like to boast of it. In fact, she was surprisingly modest. As well as a little insecure. *At least she has confidence in her ability.*

They spent most of the next two hours going around the wharves and stopping at all the various stalls and booths. Most of the vendors knew enough of the Common Tongue to have a short conversation in it. Missandei managed to help Mother to communicate with the ones who did not.

None of the vendors provided anything particularly useful, but many of them were at least courteous and accommodating. Not all, though. Several of them became irate when they realized Mother and her party had no intention of making any purchases. A few impatiently demanded that she leave and stop holding up their lines. *They think rather highly of themselves; I don't see any lines.*

At the end of the second hour, they had exchanged words with more than half of the vendors. They had little to show for it. Other than an occasional bit of gossip or a rumor, they had barely learned anything new about the pit fighters, the Brave Companions, or the Golden Company. Worse yet, they had heard *nothing* about Jon Connington.

*I thought word got around in Braavos. Apparently, that process took longer than Alyver thought.*

Ultimately, Mother gave an exasperated sigh and mumbled "This is getting us nowhere."

"Well, at least now we can be fairly certain that Connington is not here yet," Daenerys commented.

"That may be," Jon admitted, "But I was hoping we might at least get an idea of when his party will arrive."

"Perhaps we should try some other place," Mother contended.

"Or perhaps we're simply not consulting the right people," Missandei conjectured.

Mother was perplexed. "How do you mean?"

The Naathi girl elaborated with "Think on this, my lady. In Astapor, the marketplace was only occupied by slaves, masters, and traders during the day. At night, only the guards remained outdoors, and the Great Masters always alternated those on guard duty between day and night. The Free Cities likely follow a similar routine."
Mother thought on that point for a minute, and then she realized what the translator was implying. She thought aloud "If so, those who come here by day and those who come here by night only see, hear, and know so much."

"Precisely," Missandei confirmed, smiling, "The vendors and merchants are only around when it's light out, the guards rotate frequently, and the captains and their crews are unpredictable at best. There is only so much each of them can learn by being here for part of the day. What we need is someone who can be found here at all hours."

"Like who?" Mother said inquiringly. *Yes, who would be in this smelly place all day?*

Daenerys was the first to offer a suggestion. "What about the beggars?"

"The beggars?" Jon repeated, as though he was astonished.

"They're outside all the time, and they encounter people from every walk of life," Daenereys pointed out, "Take it from me; Viserys and I lived on the streets from time-to-time while we were on the run. We overheard many an interesting conversation. On a couple occasions, some of the knowledge we gained eventually got us back indoors. Once, it even led us to Magister Illyrio's manse."

Mother stood scratching her temple for a few seconds, and then she murmured "That idea may have some merit, Dany. After all, we've plenty of coin, and beggars need no other incentive to talk."

"Then what say we put it to the test?" Daenerys proposed.

"Very well," said Mother. She looked around at everyone else and told them "Keep your eyes open for people in tattered clothing, slumped against walls, and who look as though they've been abused or underfed. Also, see if they are carrying bowls, dishes, plates, or anything else that could be used to collect money."

Everyone made a note of those criteria, and then they went to searching for beggars. *I don't expect we'll be searching for too long.*

Sure enough, they spotted one in under a minute. What *looked* like one, at any rate. A young girl was seated outside the Black Bargeman. Her clothing was little more than rags, and she appeared as though she had not bathed in over a fortnight. Her face and hands were covered in dirt. A wooden staff and a copper bowl lay at her feet. Most all... her eyes were completely white. *She's blind.*

Alyver pointed the girl out to the others. Mother tentatively shook her head and observed "If we went to her, we would probably just waste more time."

"You may be right, my lady," Jon concurred, "After all, how much could a little blind girl know?"

*More than you, as Ygritte would say.* Alyver was not so insensitive that he would give voice to that thought. Still, Ygritte *did* have a tendency to remind Jon that his knowledge of the world was severely lacking. *Even if he does know nothing, he's lasted this long.*

Just then, a tall man with a thin sword fastened to his belt passed by. Alyver recognized him as a bravo, one of the master swordsmen of the Free City. He watched as the fencer approached the blind girl, knelt before her, and stated "How much would you like for a night in a bed?"

"Depends on the bed," the girl proclaimed.
"That would be my bed," the bravo uttered suggestively.

Alyver cringed in disgust. *She's a little young for that.*

"I am not performing a service here," the girl spat heatedly.

"Well, maybe you should," the bravo countered, leaning a little closer, "Begging will only get you so much. No one ever prospered without working for a living."

"Do I *look* as though I wish to prosper?" the girl sharply rejoined, "Either put a coin in the tray or leave me alone."

"I don't think I'll do either," the swordsman cockily remarked. He then lifted his hands, as though he meant to grab the blind beggar.

Alyver reached for his own sword. *This may not concern me, but it'll be a cold day in the Seven Hells before I stand by and do nothing while a defenseless girl is assaulted.*

However, before Alyver could get involved, the blind girl reacted first. In the blink of an eye, she took up her staff and thrust it upward. She roughly struck the bravo upside his chin. He recoiled in shock and pain, and he stumbled backward.

Before he could recover, the blind girl was on her feet. She gripped her staff in both hands, and she rammed it into the bravo's stomach. As he collapsed onto his knees, she swung her staff through the air and slammed it against his head.

Now the bravo was on his back. When he tried to get up, the girl placed one foot on his chest and gestured for him to stay still. He prudently chose to heed her warning. She stood over him for a moment, and then she removed her foot from the bravo's torso.

After that, she turned her attention from his upper body to his lower body. She raised her staff high over her head and brought it down. She stopped the blow just inches above his groin. He shuddered, but he did not dare make any other move.

The blind girl held her staff in place, and then she snapped "Now move along. Or I'll deny you the pleasure you seek for good."

Alyver resisted the desire to cover his groin. *No man wants to get hit there.*

At any rate, the bravo pulled himself off the ground and hastily exited the Ragman's Harbor. Even after he left, the girl remained on her feet, clutching her staff firmly in both hands.

Alyver smirked, turned to his mother, and said "If she knows how to do *that*, Mother…"

Lady Dacey Clegane scoffed and declared "She might be worth approaching after all."

"Then let's talk to her!" Alyver proposed, preparing to walk over to the blind girl.

"Not so fast, Al," Mother interjected, "If we all approach her at once, we may startle or overwhelm her."

"That's a good point," Alyver admitted, "So, what would you suggest we do?"

Mother contemplated their options, and then she pronounced "You and I will go talk to her first, Al. Everyone else, wait here for now."
No one had any issue with those orders. Especially not Alyver. He was rather looking forward to speaking with this blind girl who had the apparent making of a warrior.

The lady of Moat Cailin and her secondborn son cautiously walked over to the blind girl. By now, she had lowered her staff, but she was still on her feet and fully alert.

When Alyver and his mother were just out of range of her staff’s reach, they halted. Mother called out softly "Excuse us."

The blind girl promptly turned in the direction of the voice. She pointed her staff in a threatening manner, and she sneered tensely.

"No need for that, my dear," Mother calmly asserted, "We have no quarrel with you."

"Then what do you want?" the blind girl demanded, keeping her staff and guard up.

"Only to have a word with you," Mother answered.

The blind girl seemed slightly bewildered. She raised an eyebrow and asked "Why?"

"My son and I are seeking information," Lady Dacey Clegane disclosed, "Certain information, that is. You might be able to help us."

The blind girl chuckled. "What led you to think that?"

"Well, you could not have done what you just did without knowing some special things," Alyver contended. "I mean, that was absolutely incredible."

"I know," the girl stated flatly, "Bravos may be deadly with a blade, but unarmed is a different matter."

"Who taught you to fight like that?" Mother stated curiously.

"Several people," the blind girl replied, "My father, my mother, our master-at-arms, my mentor…"

Alyver was close enough to the girl that he could examine her in profile. She spoke with a somewhat exotic accent, but it did not sound Essosi. On that note, her skin was a shade of tan.

"Your family has a master-at-arms?" Mother commented. As the young beggar nodded, the Bear Islander said enquiringly "Are you from Westeros?"

"That’s right," the girl confirmed, "I assume you are, as well?"

"Yes," Alyver revealed, "We’re from the North."

"I have family in the North," the girl pronounced.

"You mean in the Legion without Banners?" Alyver assumed.

The girl hesitated a moment before she answered with "Yes."

I wonder why she paused? Mother did not seem interested in that detail. Instead, she remarked "Where do you hail from? You look a bit Dornish."

"Well, my mother is from Dorne," the blind girl murmured, "But my father is not. That’s where I live."
I don't think she's going to say where. I guess she's unwilling to give away that much. Not that Alyver could blame her. Only fools put their trust in people they just met. Blind beggars did not last long if they handed over personal information to just anyone.

Nevertheless, he asked her "What is your name?"

"A girl has no name," she retorted immediately.

Alyver was stunned by the firmness with which she made that declaration. She must be harboring a secret.

Mother decided to humor the girl. She smiled and muttered "Alright, if you'd rather we did not share names, we won't."

"Good," the girl commented approvingly. She finally eased down here, but she did not loosen her grip on her staff. As she leaned against it, she remarked "I did not expect to encounter any more Westerosi while I was here."

"Neither did we," Mother claimed. Until Connington and the rogue Golden Company serjeants get here, she means. "Until recently, we did not even plan on coming here."

"So, why did you?" the blind girl queried.

"We're looking for someone," Mother apprised her.

"A friend?" said the blind girl.

"No, an enemy," Lady Dacey Clegane professed, "A month ago, our company was attacked. The attackers took something from us. We aim to get it back from them."

"And you followed them here?" the blind girl presumed.

"We tracked their movements to Braavos, yes," the lady of Moat Cailin illuminated, "By all accounts, however, we've arrived ahead of them."

"That would put you at an advantage," the girl perceived, grinning a bit.

"It would," Alyver supposed, "Except we've no way of knowing when our foe will get here. That's why we're consulting the locals."

The blind girl raised another eyebrow. "You think I'd know something about that?"

"You might," Mother debated. She reached into her cloak and extracted her own purse. She shook it lightly to make the gold coins within jingle, and she declared "We'd pay handsomely for a lead."

"Keep it," the girl advised her, "I don't need your money. I come from a rich family."

She did not sound as though she even attempting to lie or exaggerate. She sounded quite sincere. Alyver looked her over and observed "Your appearance suggests otherwise."

The girl giggled at that. "I know, but I'll let you in on a secret. I'm not really a beggar."

Now Alyver was downright baffled. So was Mother. She inquired "Then why are you out here?"

"To learn a valuable lesson," the girl professed, "You see, this guise is merely a farce. My mentor insists that I can acquire far more information like this than I would as a noble."
"If so, it looks as though Missandei was right about beggars."

"So, none of what we see is real?" Mother assumed in interest.

"This is," the girl claimed, pointing to her eyes, "I actually am blind. But only for the present. Soon enough, my mentor will restore my sight."

"'Restore?'" said Alyver, "You mean he took it away?"

"Yes," the girl verified, "But you needn't pity me; that's part of the lesson. He says I shouldn't rely as much on what I can see as I should on what I can observe. Those are two very different things."

"I can respect the importance of such a lesson," Alyver remarked, "Even so, you should not take your vision for granted. When we were attacked, I almost lost one of my own eyes. It was only by sheer luck that I didn't. If I had, I would never have gotten my sight back."

Now it was the girl's turn to be astounded. She enquired "Just how were you attacked, anyway?"

Alyver left it to Mother to answer this question. She muttered "You may have heard of a grave misfortune which took place in Pentos last month."

"You mean the Pentoshi Bloodbath?" the blind girl presumed.

Mother nodded, even though the girl could not see that gesture. "We were there.

Well, I wasn't for most of it. I suppose I should be glad for that, though. At any rate, they seemed to have the girl's full attention. She seemed genuinely willing to cooperate with them now.

"Maybe I can help you," she thought aloud, "The Pentoshi Bloodbath has been the subject of many a conversation for the last couple weeks. From what I've heard, the Brave Companions, the Golden Company, and the pit fighters of Meereen were involved in that battle."

"Yes, they were on the opposing side," Alyver apprised her.

"Indeed," the blind girl acknowledged, "No one seems to agree on the outcome of the battle, though. Tell me; who actually won it?"

"We did," Mother declared, "But our losses were greater, and most of our enemies who survived managed to escape."

"So, now you're out for vengeance?" the girl assumed.

"That is one of our motives," Mother expounded, "But more importantly, we must recover what our adversary took from us."

"Yes, you mentioned that once before," the girl recounted, "I don't suppose you'll tell me what they took from you?"

"I cannot say," Mother insisted, "Nevertheless, it is imperative that we get it back."

Get them back, Alyver wanted to say. They were out to rescue people, not objects. Of course, the blind girl did not need to know that.

"How do you even know they are headed to Braavos?" the blind girl inquired.

"We managed to capture three of the foe alive," Mother revealed, "We 'convinced' them to discuss
the future whereabouts of their comrades with us, and they directed us here."

"Fair enough," the girl commented. "But why would their final destination be here of all places?"

"Because this city is not their final destination," Alyver illuminated.

The blind girl was intrigued. "It's not?"

"No, but it is where they'll find the means to take them to their final destination," Mother explicated, "According to our prisoners, our enemies have an informant in the Seven Kingdoms. We know not who, but this individual has been supplying them with intelligence over the last several months. Apparently, Braavos is where they correspond with one another."

"Correspond in what way?" the girl inquired.

"Through use of ravens," Alyver responded.

At that, the blind false beggar stiffened. The eyelids of her pale irises expanded in what appeared to be shock. She whispered hauntingly "What?"

"They're using ravens," Mother reiterated, not failing to miss the girl's odd reaction, "Is something the matter?"

The blind girl did not reply right away. After a long pause, she tilted her head up towards Mother's and disclosed "You should know that… I've seen those ravens."

For a moment, Mother froze in her stance. Then she brightened up, as though she had finally obtained some much-needed good news. She stated merrily "You have?"

The blind girl gave a curt nod. Alyver then asked the question on his mother's mind: "Where?"

"The first time we saw them was almost two months ago, near the House of Black and White," the girl recalled. 'We?' While he would have liked some clarity, he did not interrupt her. Instead, he allowed her to continue with "However, that was not where they landed. Nowhere near it, in fact. Out of both curiosity and concern, we decided to look into the matter. Thus, I tasked my bodyguard to watch out for more ravens and to pursue whenever she spotted one. She's managed to track them all the way to the eastern edge of the Purple Harbor, just outside the Sealord's Palace."

"Did she find anything?" Mother queried hopefully.

"Just that the ravens always disappear into a small, windowless hovel," the blind girl expounded, "Alas, there isn't much to say about the hovel itself. We did some investigating of our own, and we came up with nothing. It's privately owned, and the entrance is boarded up. The ravens only get in or out through a very small hole in the roof."

"Yet you've never seen the door to the hovel open?" Alyver presumed.

"Well, for the last fortnight, I haven't seen anything," the girl pointed out. Alyver stifled the desire to chuckle. "But with regards to the hovel, neither has my bodyguard. I've had her check up on it every day for the past week. So far, each day has yielded the same poor results. She has never once seen the door open, and neither has anyone who lives or works in the areas around the hovel. The only things that have ever been seen going in or out of it are those ravens."

"Curious," Mother uttered, rubbing her chin. After standing in silence for a time, she looked down at the false beggar and stated "You said this hovel is just outside the Sealord's Palace, correct?"
"Yes, on the west side," the blind girl affirmed, "It's quite easy to spot; it's the only rundown building amongst all those elegant inns, taverns, and brothels. My bodyguard should be watching over it as we speak. If you like, my lady, I could take you there."

"While I am grateful for the offer, that won't be necessary," Mother proclaimed. "I should be able to find it on my own."

Alyver gazed up at her in bewilderment. "What do you mean, Mother?"

Rather than answer, she beckoned him "Please wait here a moment."

"Alright," Alyver avowed. He watched as his mother went back over to Jon, Daenerys, and the rest of their group, leaving him alone with their new blind ally. Who would have thought it'd take a person who couldn't see to give us the guidance we sought?

As the Lady of Moat Cailin conversed with their companions, Alyver stood in relative silence. Ultimately, the blind girl turned towards him and commented "Your mother's a lovely woman."

"Yes, she is," Alyver concurred, "Today's her nameday, you know."

"Really?" the blind girl said in interest.

"Yes, but she's been so busy lately that I'm certain she's forgotten," Alyver pronounced, "As much as I wish she'd just spend the day relaxing and celebrating, she is unwilling to do anything of the sort until our work here is done. Nonetheless, I still want to get her a present. Maybe that'll provide some small amount of relief from all the pressure she's been under."

"That's very sweet of you," the blind girl observed, smiling kindly.

Alyver flushed at the praise. "Yes… I suppose it is. Anyway, since you've been here a while, I assume you would know of some good places to get gifts for women?"

"As it happens, I do," the blind girl disclosed, "Most of them are right here in the Ragman's Harbor. I'd be happy to show you them a bit later."

"Thank you," Alyver said appreciatively.

"It's no trouble at all," she assured him, smiling. He smiled back at her, even though it was somewhat pointless to do so. I hope I'll be here long enough for her mentor to return her sight.

A couple minutes later, Alyver saw his mother hand Torrhen over to Daenerys. After that, she soon exited the harbor with Missandei, Grey Worm, and three other Unsullied.

Everyone else in their party – meaning Jon Targaryen, Daenerys Targaryen, Torrhen Clegane, Irri, Ghost, Daenerys's kos, and the other four Unsullied – stayed behind.

Jon and Daenerys went over to where Alyver and the blind girl were standing. When they were within earshot, he asked them "What's going on?"

"Your lady mother said something about a hovel," Jon drily pronounced, "She's going to look into it."

"So, why aren't we going with her?" the Clegane son enquired.

"She wants us to stay here and continue to gather information," Daenerys enlightened him. Ah, so that's why she entrusted us with Torrhen.
"Do we really have to?" Alyver disputed. He gestured to the blind fake beggar and stated "This girl has already given us more knowledge than everyone else we've so far encountered put together."

"Well, I'm glad to be of service," she slyly remarked, smirking.

"Be that as it may," Jon interceded, "It would not hurt to be thorough in our search."

_He has a point._ Alyver shrugged and stated "Well, if you two wish to go back to asking around for leads, I won't stop you. As for me, I'm going to stay here and keep our new friend company."

"Suit yourself, Al," Jon bade him, "If you need us for anything, just call out our names."

"Right," was all the Clegane boy said in response.

The Targaryen prince and princess proceeded to make their way around the Ragman's Harbor once more. Two of the remaining four Unsullied stayed near Alyver in case he needed protection. Everyone else in the group went where Jon and Dany went. They visited any booths or stalls they had not yet been to, and they revisited a few of the more receptive vendors whom they had already spoken with.

While they did that, Alyver resumed his conversation with the blind girl.

"Your name is Al?" she noted.

"Part of it," he clarified. He then folded his arms and cockily added in "Until you change your mind about having no name, I won't tell you the rest."

"I think that's fair," she muttered, giggling a little. After a moderate pause, he proposed "Would you like to see those shops I mentioned earlier?"

"Shops?" he repeated in confusion. Then he remembered. "Oh, you mean the ones that sell goods that appeal to women?"

"Yes, those shops," the blind girl verified.

_Now probably would be the best time to get Mother her present._ After all, Mother herself was not around, and everyone who might have spoilt the surprise was preoccupied at this time. As such, Alyver solemnly declared "Alright, let's shop."

The blind girl nodded in acknowledgment. She then reached down, picked up her copper bowl, and stood back up with it in hand. She had already amassed a couple handfuls of coins. She poured the contents of the bowl into one of the pockets of her torn tunic. After that, she tucked the bowl under her arm and held her staff in both hands once more.

She turned to Alyver and said inquiringly "Now, before we start browsing, I'd like to know what type of woman your mother is. Is she a dresses woman? A jewelry woman? A flowers woman? A sweets woman?"

Alyver tried his hardest not to laugh. _As if she would be partial to any of those material things._ In any case, he revealed "Actually, she's more of a swords and maces woman."

Initially, the blind girl appeared astonished. Then she murmured "Oh, right; you're from the North. Believe it or not, my mother's the same type of woman, though she favors the spear."

_That would explain the staff,_ Alyver supposed.
The blind girl led Alyver over to a cluster of stands that mainly dealt in armaments. While he could not deny that they had an impressive assortment of knives, daggers, swords, shields, axes, and a variety of other weapons, there was nothing which Alyver felt would be good enough for his mother.

Dacey Clegane was by no means particular when it came to her belongings, but Alyver wanted her present to be very meaningful. She already has a longsword of Valyrian steel. Getting her a lesser blade would be shallow and empty.

Ultimately, Alyver found nothing in the armaments stands that he deemed adequate for his mother. Therefore, he decided to move on. The blind girl next brought him over to the stands that dealt in armor and cloaks next.

At first, he thought about getting his mother a new shirt of chainmail. The one she currently wore had gotten dented in the Pentoshi Bloodbath. Still, it had saved her life. She might not still be here if not for that shirt. When that thought crossed his mind, Alyver chose to bypass the chainmail on display.

Mother was not in need of a new cloak, so he did not even consider those. All the same, Alyver came across something very peculiar when he got to the cloaks. On the surface of the stand, in the very center, there was a large, gilded brooch which bore the likeness of a bear. It was not a crudely designed bear, either. It looked as though it had been intricately and exhaustively carved to resemble the real animal exactly. He grinned when he saw that. Perfect.

The brooch cost Alyver three golden dragons. Even with such fine craftsmanship, some might have called that a little too expensive. Be that as it may, it was much less than he was expecting to spend. Furthermore, price did not really matter to him in the long run. All that truly mattered was whether this brooch would please Mother. I'm confident it will.

After Alyver made his purchase, he and the blind girl started to walk back over to the Black Bargeman. On the way there, he noticed two people were standing where they had been standing less than twenty minutes earlier.

"It appears your spot's been taken," Alyver told the blind girl.

She stopped walking and queried "By who?"

"A man and a woman," he notified her, "She seems to be in her middle years. He does not seem quite there yet. She looks highborn; he does not. At a glance, I can tell they're both of the Seven Kingdoms."

The blind girl leaned closer to him and said inquiringly "What are they doing?"

"Nothing, really," Alyver observed, "But I think they're looking for something. Or perhaps someone."

A grin crept across the blind girl's countenance. "They are."

"Who?" he asked.

"Just come with me," she advised him.

Alyver walked alongside the blind girl as they returned to the Black Bargeman. She walked in a smooth, straight line, yet she did not use her staff to check her path for obstacles. She seemed to manage just fine with her other senses. For someone who cannot see, she gets around rather well.
Alyver noted that the woman looked somewhat uneasy. However, when he and the blind girl reached her, her unease seemed to go away. Breathing a sigh of relief, the woman muttered "You shouldn't be wandering off in your condition, sweetling."

"I've been doing that for much of the past couple weeks," the blind girl pointed out, "But if I worried you, I am truly sorry, Grandmother."

That caught Alyver's interest. This is her grandmother?

"It's alright; you did not," the woman reassured her, "However, next time we decide to meet someplace in the city, please be there at the time we agree upon."

"I'll try," the girl proclaimed, "But it is difficult to keep track of time when I cannot see the Sun."

"That may be, but it is not so hard to stand still," the man uttered cockily.

The blind girl chuckled. "That's a good argument, ser."

Alyver stood off to the side as this strange blind false beggar interacted with her grandmother and her… who was this man? It could not have been the girl's bodyguard; her bodyguard was female. Could this be the master-at-arms she mentioned earlier? He wore a sword at his side, and his callused hands suggested it had seen plenty of use.

The girl's grandmother turned her attention towards Alyver. She said curiously "Who is this?"

"A boy I just befriended today," the girl answered simply, "He's visiting the city with his mother."

I suppose we can go with that story for now. Alyver dipped his head respectfully, and the adults returned the gesture.

"I see," the woman acknowledged.

The man smiled and remarked "Nice to see you've made a new friend, Lady Ty-"

"Ser!" the girl hastily interrupted. The man was alarmed by her sudden outburst, but he closed his mouth. The blind girl then repeated her sentence from earlier: "A girl has no name."

"Very well," he stated cheekily, "Thank you for the reminder."

"Do you hate your name or something?" Alyver said jokily. He smirked and added in "Ty?"

The girl rolled her lifeless eyes and pronounced "No, I'm actually quite fond of it."

"Anonymity is just another part of her training," the woman disclosed. Ah, that makes sense.

"It's best to just humor her," the man, "She's very serious about her training."

"What training is that, anyway?" Alyver enquired.

"I cannot say," the girl professed, "It's very secretive."

"That doesn't surprise me," Alyver contended, "You're posing as a beggar, you're learning to get around without your eyes, you can fight a grown swordsman with only a staff, and you aren't giving away your name… if I did not know better, I'd think you were planning to kill someone."

He meant that as a jest, but the girl, the man, and the woman did not so much as giggle. That
statement actually seemed to make them uncomfortable. *How queer. Why are they suddenly so restless?* Their silence soon provided all the clarity he needed. Alyver mumbled tensely "Hold on. Are you…?"

"So what if I am?" the girl snapped, "For your information, I've already killed a man."

She sounded proud of that declaration, whereas her grandmother seemed horrified by its candidness and the man seemed astonished by its boldness.

Alyver was not certain how to react. In the end, he nonchalantly shrugged and disclosed "So have I."

Once more, the man and the woman were flabbergasted. The girl, however, seemed indifferent. She presumed "Pentos?"

"Correct," he confirmed.

"What does that mean?" asked the woman.

"He was in the Pentoshi Bloodbath, Grandmother," the blind girl elaborated. The woman was absolutely stunned now. *Must she always be so blunt?*

"You were?" the man stated, turning towards Alyver.

"Indeed, I was," the Clegane son declared. He gestured to the gash above his right eye and revealed "That's how I got this."

When she saw his wound, the woman gazed at it in shock. He muttered chivalrously "I apologize if it repulses you, my lady."

"It doesn't," the woman claimed, "It just reminded me of my second son. He once received a similar injury in battle. His was far worse than yours."

*Then I'll count myself fortunate.* Coincidentally, Alyver was a second son, as well.

"That didn't stop my mother from marrying him, though," the blind girl remarked. Alyver raised an eyebrow. *Her mother is beginning to sound quite a lot like mine.* Then again, Northwomen and Dornishwomen were said to have many attributes in common with one another. The only notable difference was the climate of their homelands.

"Are your mother or father in Braavos, too?" Alyver enquired.

"No, it's just myself, my grandmother, and some of our vassals," the blind girl disclosed.

"What about you, my dear?" the woman asked Alyver, "Are you here with anyone other than your mother?"

"Oh, yes, my lady," the Clegane boy disclosed, "We came with a whole fleet of ships. In fact, several of our companions are in this very area. Speaking of which, I believe a couple of them are coming this way right now."

Indeed, Jon and Daenerys were walking directly towards the Black Bargeman. Evidently, they had just made a complete circuit of the Ragman's Harbor. Enough time had elapsed since he last spoke to them that they could have conversed with all the vendors and merchants in the harbor for at least five minutes apiece. *They're probably just checking in on me now.*
When Jon and Daenerys were within spitting distance, he asked them "Did you find out anything new?"

"Nothing we didn't already know," Jon grimly disclosed, "Even so, there's no question of it now. We've definitely arrived well ahead of Connington's group."

"Well, that's some good news," Alyver commented. "Add that to the matter of the hovel, and we have everything we'd need to set a trap for Jon Connington and his men."

Daenerys was still cradling Torrhen in her arms. He abruptly began to squirm a little. Thankfully, the Targaryens were able to calm him. Dany held him closer and rocked him gently whilst Jon whispered soothing words into his ear. Within seconds, Torrhen settled down.

"I'll hold him a while," Jon offered his aunt, extending his arms.

"Alright," Dany conceded, carefully giving the small boy over to her nephew.

Once Torrhen was in Jon's arms, he began to giggle softly. Jon smiled at that and cooed at the little boy. In turn, Dany chuckled in delight. They're really getting used to this, aren't they?

Jon and Daenerys Targaryen had spent much of the last month with Torrhen. Whenever Mother needed someone to look after her youngest, the two of them had always been the first to volunteer. Alyver suspected that they may have seen his little brother as a temporary substitute for what they had lost in the Bloodbath. If their own babes had lived, they would've been good parents, Alyver supposed.

"You're quite good with him," the blind girl's grandmother told Jon and Daenerys. They seemed to appreciate the compliment. After a bit of silence, the woman stated "I must say, though, you both seem quite young. How old were you when you had him?"

Alyver had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. However, when he saw the subsequent expressions on Jon and Daenerys's faces, he could not stop himself. He started chortling with no restraint.

Now the blind girl, the grandmother, and the armed man were baffled. Intrigued, the grandmother said inquiringly "Is there something that amuses you, my boy?"

When Alyver finally caught his breath, he stood up straight and revealed "My lady, he's not theirs."

"He's not?" the woman asked, more than slightly stunned.

"No, he's my younger brother," Alyver apprised her, "They're simply watching over him until my lady mother gets back."

The woman went furiously red in embarrassment. She slowly turned to the Targaryens and murmured "I am deeply sorry for the misunderstanding."

"Oh, it's quite alright, my lady," Jon assured her.

Daenerys nodded in agreement. "In any case, thank you for your earlier praise. I think I speak for both of us when say it's comforting to think that even a stranger believes we'd be good at parenting."

"Why?" the woman queried. "Are you two expecting?"
Jon and Daenerys seemed reluctant to answer that question. Alyver answered it for them with "They were. With different people."

Once more, the blind girl, her grandmother, and the armed man were bewildered.

"Allow me to explain," Jon requested, "Up until a month ago, she was married, I was engaged, and both of us had a child on the way with our respective partners."

"What happened?" the armed man queried.

"His intended, my husband, and both our unborn babes perished in the Pentoshi Bloodbath," Daenerys illuminated. She tried to mask the pain in her voice when she said that, but it was all too detectable.

The woman was absolutely horrified by that revelation. The blind girl and the armed man were similarly astounded, but they were better at containing their shock.

After a whole minute of extremely unpleasant quietness, the woman stepped forward and tenderly placed her hands on Jon and Dany's shoulders. She stated softly "I feel for you, my dears. Your pain is one I am all too familiar with. My own husband has been dead these last five years, and my own first pregnancy resulted in a miscarriage. Nevertheless, I had nearly thirty years of happiness with my lord, and I managed to give him three wonderful children. They all have children of their own now. So, I encourage you not to despair. You must be strong and support each other, because you will overcome this hardship. I cannot claim to know how, but I've every confidence you will. You are still young. You have time to start anew and find your own happiness again."

For the past turn of the moon, Jon and Daenerys had looked perpetually depressed. Even when they smiled, they gave every indication that they were devastated by their recent losses, and that their period of mourning would be indefinite. Now, for the first time since the Pentoshi Bloodbath, the two of them seemed almost joyful. Evidently, the woman's counsel had had a very positive impact on them.

All of a sudden, Daenerys stepped forward and embraced the woman, much to the latter's surprise. She whispered gratefully "Thank you, my lady."

The blind girl's grandmother grinned, patted the blond woman on the back, and proclaimed "It is the least I could do to comfort a grieving parent."

About twenty seconds later, Daenerys released the older woman and returned to Jon's side. As the prince and princess stood together with Torrhen, the woman looked them over and professed "I know I've no right to meddle in your lives or your relationships, and this may sound greatly out of line, but I must mention that you two look as though you'd make a very attractive couple."

Now Jon and Daenerys were the ones who blushed. For a couple minutes, they could not even bring themselves to look each other in the eye. Apparently, that proposal did not sit well with them. *I wonder if that's because they're nephew and aunt, or for some other reason?* In any case, they could not be faulted for their embarrassment. After all, the woman's observation came right out of nowhere. *Why do older women feel the need to play matchmaker with the younger generations?*

In spite of that, Alyver noted that Jon and Daenerys were not even bothering to protest or counter the woman. In fact, they did not look opposed to it, either. They clearly enjoyed each other's company, and not just as nephew and aunt. *I wonder if...*
Before he could finish that thought, Mother finally returned. Alyver spotted her when she reentered the Ragman's Harbor with Missandei, Grey Worm, and the other four Unsullied, and he went to meet her. The bear-shaped brooch was in the pocket of his doublet, but he would not give it to her just yet. He wanted to wait until they were alone again.

Mother smiled as he approached. When he reached her, he asked in interest "Did you find the hovel?"

"Yes," she notified him, "But we can discuss that later. For now, we should focus on regrouping with the others."

"Well, I'm ready to go," Alyver muttered approvingly, "Jon and Dany are about ready to go, too. They're just talking with the blind girl and her grandmother."

"Her grandmother?" Mother repeated, intrigued.

Alyver nodded and stated "You should meet her, Mother. She's very nice."

"Alright," said the Bear Islander.

Alyver then led his mother over to where the Targaryens, the blind girl, her grandmother, and the armed man were gathered. When Mother saw the middle-aged woman, she stared at her in what could only have been disbelief. Likewise, when the older woman saw Mother, she stared back in utter amazement. Alyver thought that quaint. *Do they know each other?*

When they were close enough, the middle-aged woman said softly "Dacey?"

In response, Mother smiled lightly, and she greeted the other woman with "Hello, Mother."

What? Alyver gazed up at the Lady of Moat Cailin and remarked "Not to be rude, Mother, but that's not Grandmother Maege."

"Yes, I know," she stated bluntly, "I don't mean *my* mother, sweetling. I mean my husband's."

*What?!* Alyver was rendered speechless.

Mother proceeded to give a proper introduction: "Al, this is your father's mother, Lady Daliah Clegane. Mother, this is my second son, Alyver."

Alyver could physically feel his jaw drop. The blind girl and her grandmother – *my* grandmother, too – were similarly stunned.

Mother looked to the blind girl and commented "You must be my niece, Tyta."

Initially, the blind girl looked as though she would hold her tongue. But after fifteen seconds of awkward quietness, she solemnly nodded her head and admitted "I do go by that name, my lady."

*She's my cousin?! This is absurd.* Indeed, this whole situation felt implausible. Then again, Alyver had never ventured outside the North. He had never visited his father's family in the Westerlands. In fact, the only member of his father's family he had ever seen before today was his aunt Ellyn. As such, he had no way of recognizing his uncle Sandor, his aunt Obara, his cousins Tyta, Mors, and Dermot, or his grandmother Lady Daliah.

"You needn't address me that way," Mother assured Tyta, "Just call me 'Aunt Dacey.'"
Tyta gave a beaming smile and murmured "As you wish."

Lady Daliah Clegane then gestured to the small boy in Jon's arms, and she asked her gooddaughter "Is that Torrhen?"

"Yes," Mother confirmed, "The young man holding him is Gregor's squire and ward, Prince Jon Targaryen. The young woman beside him is his aunt, Princess Daenerys Targaryen."

Lady Daliah seemed more fascinated than awed to learn that she was standing in the presence of Targaryen royalty. She did not bow her head, but that was not a problem. If she did bow, Jon and Dany would probably insist that she not.

Lady Daliah Clegane then pointed out the armed man who had accompanied her to the Ragman's Harbor, and she muttered "I do not believe any of you have met the master-at-arms of Clegane's Keep. So, permit me to introduce him now. This is my loyal vassal, Ser Bronn."

"Good day," the lowborn knight said plainly.

Mother, Jon, and Daenerys each gave a nod of acknowledgement.

Alyver smiled and remarked "Uncle Tyrion and Aunt Ellyn have told me a great deal about you, Ser Bronn. They'll be thrilled to see you again when we regroup."

The former sellsword seemed perplexed. "How do you mean, lad?"

"Oh, I forgot to mention," Alyver wryly thought aloud, "They're here in Braavos with us."

That revelation caused Lady Daliah Clegane to smile very widely. She stated eagerly "My daughter and her husband are here, as well?"

"Yes, they should be at the Iron Bank right now," Mother informed her, "We're just about to rendezvous with them. You can accompany us there, if you'd like."

"Of course, I would," Lady Daliah declared. That was to be expected; Lady Daliah had not seen her daughter in over a year.

Just then, an unnerving thought crossed Alyver's mind. When she sees Uncle Tyrion and Aunt Ellyn, she'll expect to see Duncan, too. His grandmother did not know about what happened to Duncan yet. Alyver was not looking forward to that conversation. I imagine Mother is absolutely dreading it.

Nevertheless, she hastily gathered everyone in the harbor together, and they went to meet up with the other two groups.

"This is a small fucking world we live in, is it not?" Ser Bronn commented. I guess it is.

Several hours and almost as many lengthy explanations later, Alyver was on the top floor of the house his father had bought for the Legion without Banners. It turned out Grandmother Daliah and her retainers had been residing there for the last two months. Tyta's bodyguard turned out to be Brienne of Tarth, a warrior woman from the Stormlands. While Brienne slept in the house with the rest of the House Clegane retainers, Tyta had been sleeping elsewhere. She would not specify where; just that it was someplace safe and secure. Yet another secret. Alyver ultimately decided he did not care. What his cousin did in her own time was her business. Our own business is already taking up enough of our time, anyway.
Grandmother Daliah was delighted to reunite with Aunt Ellyn and Uncle Tyrion, and they were happy to see her again, too. However, as Alyver predicted, Lady Daliah did not take the news of Duncan's abduction well at all. Even the fact that Connington and his men were under strict orders not to harm her daughter's son did little to reassure her.

_She won't be able to rest easy until Duncan is safely returned to us,_ Alyver realized. Fortunately, Aunt Ellyn, Uncle Tyrion, and Mother were very determined to get him back. Alyver had little doubt that they _would_ get his cousin back. _We'll get Greta and Princess Lyanna back, too. And Jon Connington's head with them._

That would not happen for a while, though. Until Connington and his men arrived in Braavos, all they could do was plan. _We can worry about plans tomorrow. Right now, I have something more pressing to attend to._

Even with Grandmother Daliah and her retainers residing under the same roof, there were more than enough rooms for Alyver, Mother, and their closest allies to take up lodgings in the Legionnaire house, too. However, in effort to conserve space, a number of them would bunk together. For instance, Alyver would be sharing a chamber with his mother and brother.

That did not bother him in the slightest. For the last several months, the three of them had been sharing a cabin whenever they slept on board the _Zenith_ and a tent whenever they camped. They had fallen asleep and woken up in the same place almost every day since the start of the year. Needless to say, Alyver was used to that arrangement by now.

After Mother put Torrhen to bed, she changed into her nightgown. Alyver kept his back turned to her as she undressed and redressed. He himself had already donned his sleepwear. He was sitting on his bed with his legs over the side. On his lap, he had a small parcel which he had wrapped himself.

Once Mother was in her nightgown, Alyver looked over his shoulder at her and said "Mother, could you come here a moment?"

Without hesitation, the Lady of Moat Cailin went over to her second son. When she was before his bed, he patted the spot next to him and bade her "Sit down, please."

Mother nodded and set herself down next to him. Once she was seated beside him, she turned to Alyver and asked in concern "Is everything alright, Al?"

"Oh, most definitely," he proclaimed. He then placed the parcel on her lap.

She looked down at the parcel, picked it up in both hands, and muttered in interest "What's this?"

"My way of wishing you a happy nameday," he responded straightforwardly.

Mother's eyes expanded in surprise. She murmured quietly "That was today?"

"Yes," Alyver affirmed. _Then she did forget._ "But even if you forgot, I didn't. So, I bought you a present when you went to investigate the hovel. Go on, open it."

Mother slowly and carefully untied the string the parcel had been bound in. Once all the string was removed, she pulled away the cloth that had been used to wrap the parcel. After that, she came across the gilded bear-shaped brooch.

For a few seconds, Mother just stared at the brooch. Then she took it up in her hands and slowly brought it closer to her face. She turned it over a few times to get a look at it from every angle.
"Do you… like it?" Alyver asked hopefully.

Mother gradually turned to face him. There was a tear in her eye. She told him in a tone laden with emotion "Alyver… I love it."

She then reached out, wrapped her arms around her second son, and pulled him into a tight yet loving hug. As the tear rolled down her cheek, she whispered "Thank you."

Alyver smiled softly, embraced his mother affectionately, and told her "You're quite welcome."

While Alyver did not doubt that his mother truly appreciated the brooch, he knew it was not the brooch itself that was making her so sentimental. It was the time, thought, effort, and care he had put into the gift. That was what made it special to her and to him. Moments like these were when Alyver was most grateful to belong to a family like House Clegane.

Chapter End Notes

Note: Would you believe me if I told you that originally, I was going to kill Alyver off in the Pentoshi Bloodbath? I planned on doing that a long time ago, as far back as Chapter 49 or even earlier. Up until Chapter 60, I was prepared to actually go through with it. But somewhere around then, I changed my mind, and I decided to let Alyver live. However, I also considered having him maimed. Hence, the part where he reflected on how he almost lost his forearm or his eye. For a while, I meant to have him lose one or both. But I ultimately decided against THAT, as well.

Right now, I am quite glad I kept Alyver alive and unharmed. This chapter was quite amusing to write, even though it took much longer than usual to update. By the way, the next chapter will be a VERY unusual one. I won't say how it'll be unusual, but when I post it, you'll see what I mean.
No Further Secrets

Chapter Notes

Note: So, the first third or so of this chapter will follow the same format as most of the previous chapters. In other words, it will be the typical encounters and exchange of dialogue between various characters. After that... I'll be doing something unprecedented in this story. For a while, you might feel more like you're reading an excerpt of a conversation between two hardcore fans of the Ice and Fire series instead. Just thought you should know that so you can prepare yourselves for a dramatic change of pace.

When the fleet reached the end of the Cut, they came to a massive iron gate that bordered the edge of the Neck. Allard Seaworth identified himself to the guards on the wall, and the portcullis was swiftly drawn up.

As the *Leviathan* led the other ships into the harbor, Melisandre gazed at her surroundings. She felt a twinge in glee, knowing that she was about to finally set foot on Westerosi soil. *After years and years and years of planning and waiting, I'm here at last.*

The first thing she noticed was the abrupt decrease in temperature. Unsurprisingly, the North was extremely cold. However, it was not quite as cold as she expected it to be. Up until now, all she had known in this world were hot and dry environments, but she was by no means unacquainted with snowy climates. *I honestly think Fargo was chillier than this.* Of course, she would probably have to reevaluate that assessment once the Long Night came around. *That's when the weather will get really rough.*

Once the *Leviathan* pulled into the port and dropped anchor, the gangplank was extended to the docks below. As commander of the fleet, Allard would be the first to disembark. He gripped his walking stick in his left hand, and he solemnly approached the starboard side of the vessel. Despite his limp, he was as strong, capable, and independent as ever. Even so, Melisandre worried that he might lose his footing during his descent.

"Here," she offered, stepping up next to Allard and holding out her arm. *I hope his pride won't incite him to refuse.*

Luckily, it did not. After a moment's contemplation, he smiled and said gratefully "Thank you, my lady."

As Allard gently wrapped his right hand around her bicep, Melisandre grinned inwardly. *A year ago, he was reluctant to even be in the same room as me. Now he seems to welcome my touch.* She certainly welcomed his. In the time she had known him, the Red Woman had come to care for the second son of the Onion Knight. She had not felt this way about a man for a very long time. *Not since my death.*

Walking arm-in-arm, Allard Seaworth and Lady Melisandre crossed over the gangplank. He threatened to stumble once or twice, but she was able to support him. When they got to the docks below, Allard released her arm and shifted his weight back onto his walking stick.
Eddison Tollett, Malcolm Branfield, Daario Naharis, Caggo, Denzo D'han, Brown Ben Plumm, and everyone else proceeded to join them on the ground. Like Allard, Dolorous Edd and Ser Malcolm appeared glad to be back in the moat. The sellsword captains seemed just as awed to be there as Melisandre herself was.

"What do you think?" Ser Malcolm asked them.

"Impressive," Denzo D'han observed.

"Quite so," Caggo conceded.

"I don't see any mountains, though," Daario Naharis commented slyly. True. The terrain surrounding the moat looked relatively flat. More importantly, none of the people in the immediate area were taller than six feet. The man we came to see is much bigger than that.

"Lord Gregor had no way of knowing what day we'd arrive on," Allard pointed out, "We couldn't expect him to be ready to receive us straightaway."

"Indeed," Dolorous Edd mumbled drily, "He's got more important things to worry about than us."

"Well, it would hardly be appropriate for us to enter a castle without its lord's blessing," Brown Ben Plumm debated. "Isn't that a practice in these lands?"

"Yes, it is," Allard affirmed. They're always serious about their protocol in the Seven Kingdoms. Guest right, especially. Allard leaned on his walking stick with both hands and pronounced "Let us wait here for now. Lord Gregor will be informed of our arrival soon enough. Once he has, he'll come to greet us."

Melisandre and the sellsword captains were fine with that proposal. I've waited this long already.

Fortunately, she only had to wait for around another twenty minutes. After that, a small group of people entered the harbor from the adjoining tower. At the head of the group was the tallest man Melisandre had ever seen. In this life or the previous one.

She suddenly felt very anxious. Granted, most people who heard of the Mountain That Rides were bound to feel more than a little anxious. However, Melisandre was a special case, as she knew what type of person this Gregor Clegane really was. She was the same as him. It's been so long since I've encountered someone from the real world.

Melisandre had mixed feelings about this meeting. While she had been looking forward to it for the longest time, she was still uncertain if she should label Gregor Clegane as a threat or an ally. There was a chance he might have been both. Even if he means well, he might still be doing more harm to the world than he realizes. She had been convinced of that before the Pentoshi Bloodbath, and the Bloodbath itself had only strengthened her conviction.

All the same, Gregor Clegane was perhaps the one person she could be totally and absolutely forward with, personal beliefs and ideologies aside. Who knows how long it might be before another such individual turns up? With that in mind, Melisandre would not condemn Gregor Clegane before she even spoke to him. She could not afford to.

Before she knew it, the Mountain and his party reached Melisandre and hers. He looked to his fellow Westerosi first, and he stated amiably "Allard, Edd, Malcolm, it is good to see you again."

"Likewise, my lord," Malcolm Branfield proclaimed.
Dolorous Edd Tollett nodded and murmured bluntly "I never thought I'd be so glad to be in this frigid country, but after two years in the aridity of Essos, it's a relief to be back here."

"Before too long, you may find yourself wanting to return to that aridity, Edd," Allard theorized.

"I highly doubt that," the Valeman sternly countered, "After what happened in Pentos, I never want to see any of the Free Cities ever again."

"Nor do I," Ser Malcolm agreed, "Even if our last days in Essos really were our last days of warmth, this is our home. We should spend our true last days here."

"You can do so if that is your desire, ser," Daario Naharis cheekily remarked, "But not all of us are so ready to die here. I aim to live past the coming ordeals, and I mean to decide when and where I die."

"That is your prerogative," Gregor Clegane muttered, "Even so, whatever your agenda, I hope you do not plan to leave this continent whilst our true enemy remains."

"You needn't worry on that," the Tyroshi asserted, "As long as the Army of the Dead poses a threat, the units of the Stormcrows are at your disposal, my lord."

"As are the men of the Second Sons," Brown Ben Plumm added in.

"And the Windblown," Caggo and Denzo D'han stated at the same time. As long as they're paid, that is. That thought must have occurred to Gregor Clegane, too. Nevertheless, he beamed slightly, folded his arms, and proclaimed "You have my gratitude for allying with us, good commanders. Songs and stories of your heroic deeds will be written in the years to come."

"Provided there will be someone left to write them," Melisandre thought aloud. Allard scoffed. "No need to assume the worst, my lady."

"Perhaps not," she supposed, "But do so, and you'll never be disappointed."

"I believe the annihilation of all humanity would be quite the disappointment, my lady," Gregor Clegane uttered plainly.

"Then we should strive to avoid that disappointment, my lord," the Red Woman advised.

"Yes, we should," the Mountain concurred. He turned to face Melisandre, and he gazed at her closely. His gaze on her body was unnerving. It was as though he was scrutinizing her with one single glance. Maybe he is just as anxious as I am. After a minute of silence, Gregor Clegane extended his hand to her. She tentatively reached out and shook it. He then shook hands with the four sellsword captains, and then he announced to all five Essosi "On behalf of the Legion without Banners and the people of Seven Kingdoms, I officially welcome you and yours to Moat Cailin and – by extension – to Westeros."

Melisandre, Daario, Brown Ben, Caggo, and Denzo all murmured their thanks. Once formalities were out of the way, the Mountain pronounced "I know you've all had a long and arduous journey. After everything you've been through, you deserve a respite. Quarters have already been set aside for you. If you wish for a tour of Moat Cailin, I will arrange one later. Today, however, I would recommend that you get settled. For tomorrow, the real work begins."
"The real work begins?" How cliché. In spite of that, Melisandre did not protest. This version of Gregor Clegane struck her as someone who would not put off something if he believed the delay would ultimately produce disastrous consequences. Maybe he was not expecting us for a few more days. If so, we can spare just one single day to recuperate.

Allard Seaworth did not seem of a like mind. He stated inquisitively "Are you certain you would rather not begin now, Gregor? We have very much to discuss."

"Yes, we do," the Mountain admitted, "But that can wait until the morrow. Your company should get some rest, Allard. You in particular. How is your leg?"

"It's healing," the Stormlander disclosed, attempting to stand up straight, "In a couple more days, I won't need this walking stick anymore. I'll probably have a limp until the day I die, but I don't intend to die for a long time."

*It's my hope that you do not. If you live past the Long Night, you could have a bright future.* Melisandre liked to imagine herself being a component of that future. Limp or no limp, Allard Seaworth was a fine young man in just about every way. He was loyal, compassionate, intelligent, strong, reliable, and courageous. *He reminds me of Keith.*

"I'm glad you're on the mend, Allard," Gregor commented. After a pause, he sighed and mumbled "I only wish some of our colleagues could have been as fortunate as you. On that note, before we do anything else, I would like to see their remains."

"I thought you would," Allard remarked. Indeed, he had expected the Mountain to make that request, and he had prepared for it in advance. *A good leader does not postpone paying respects to his fallen soldiers.* Currently, a dozen men were standing atop the Leviathan. Allard turned around, gazed up at them, and made a gesture. Subsequently, the twelve men came down the gangplank, carrying six large chests in as many pairs. Inside those chests were several large bags of bones. As the twelve bearers formed up on the docks, Allard announced "Here they are. Lady Alysane, Ser Bonifer, Ser Perwyn, Ser Maron, Ser Brynden, Lord Renly, Ser Lyn, Tobbot, Chiswyck… and all the guards and retainers who perished alongside them."

"Is this all of them?" Gregor inquired.

"No, not even half," Ser Malcolm revealed, "All of these bones belonged to the Westerosi casualties. We arranged to have the remains of the Essosi ones returned to their city or country of origin."

"Furthermore, Prince Oberyn took the casualties from the Reach or Dorne with him to Sunspear," said Dolorous Edd, "That includes Ser Gerold Hightower, Ser Loras Tyrell, and his daughter Elia Sand."

"There were also a few bodies which were burned in the pyre," Allard recounted, "Specifically, Lyarra, Princess Elia Martell, Ygritte, and all the others who were intimately involved with the Targaryens."

"So, everyone who does not fall into one of those three groups is within these chests," Melisandre professed.

Gregor Clegane nodded in acknowledgment, folded his arms, and stated "I'll probably hold a service for them in the Worship Tower sometime over the next week. After that, I'll have their bones delivered to their families at their respective ancestral homes."
"That is most wise, my lord," Melisandre muttered approvingly. *Not to mention compassionate and respectful.* She turned to Allard and told him "You shouldn't find it so urgent to get back to work now. This is one less thing you'll have to worry about tomorrow."

"Yes, but only one of many," Allard observed grimly, "We have much grander problems than *that* to contend with."

"For instance?" Melisandre requested, if only to humor him.

"Well, to begin, there's the secret council itself," Allard pointed out, "At present, it is still incomplete. There are three vacancies on the council that need to be filled."

"Four, actually," Lord Gregor corrected him.

"Four?" Allard was perplexed. He thought on who his commander might have meant apart from Ser Brynden, Ser Lyn, and Ser Maron, and he uttered "I thought Renly was only temporarily occupying the Stormlands spot in my absence whilst I was across the Narrow Sea."

"He was," Gregor Clegane confirmed, "I wasn't referring to him. You wouldn't know this, but Smalljon is dead."

Dolorous Edd and Ser Malcolm were stunned. Allard was downright flabbergasted. He queried "When did this happen?"

"Shortly before Dacey and her company rendezvoused with you in Pentos," the Mountain replied. *That was seven whole months ago. And he's only telling them of this now?* "You can rest assured; we apprehended the one who did it, and he's been executed. Even so, the crisis is not yet over."

"What are you talking about?" Dolorous Edd asked apprehensively.

"As it happens, Smalljon's death was only a miniscule part of a much larger plot," Lord Gregor elaborated, "However, this topic is not fit for a discussion here and now. We shall cover it in greater detail at tomorrow's meeting."

"That is fair," said Allard, "But is everyone else alright?"

"Thankfully, yes," Gregor Clegane responded, "None of the moat's other residents have died since before Dacey and the others sailed for Essos."

"I suppose we should count that as some small comfort," Allard stated. *Yes, we should. So many people have already died, and the Others are not even marching south yet.*

There came a short round of silence. Once it passed, Lord Gregor looked around at the five Essosi and told them "Now, without further ado, I would invite you into my home. Follow me, if you would."

*I most certainly would.* The Mountain and his party swiftly led Melisandre and the others up to the fortress's inner wall. That was the first time she saw Moat Cailin in person.

While the moat may have been nothing more than a formidable ruin in canon, it could hardly be viewed as such in this universe. *Formidable, yes, but definitely not a ruin.* The three surviving towers had been refurbished and reinforced, and the other seventeen had been fully rebuilt. Each and every one of them served a different function.
Gregor Clegane first brought Melisandre and the other Essosi to the Flour Tower. There he distributed bread, wine, and salt, which they all partook in. Melisandre felt quite reassured once that was out of the way. *Now that I'm protected under guest right, the Mountain would not dare harm me. He clearly has too much regard for the principles of this universe to violate them.*

When they exited the Flour Tower, Lord Gregor announced "As I said before, accommodations have already been prepared for you. They await you in the Captains' Tower. Normally, only the officers of the Legion and their families reside in that building. In your case, however, I find I must make an exception."

"Very good, my lord," Brown Ben Plumm proclaimed, "But what of our men?"

"Yes, where shall they stay?" said Daario Naharis.

"Alas, there is not adequate space in the moat to provide lodgings for the entirety of your three companies," Gregor Clegane confessed. *That is hardly a surprise. Altogether, they bring about three thousand men. That’s more than half the Legion's full strength. "Thus, they will have to camp out on the flatlands immediately north of the moat. They'll be outside the wall, but they should be just as safe out there as they'd be in here."

"That will suffice," Denzo D'han declared. The other sellswords mumbled their agreement.

Gregor Clegane gestured to some of the men who had accompanied him to the harbor, and he stated "These guards will serve as your personal escorts whilst you are here. If you have any questions or needs to be satisfied, they will oblige you to the best of their ability. However, there are certain orders they will not fulfill, as well as certain pieces of information they cannot divulge. I would caution you not to press them, should either circumstance transpire."

"Do you not trust us, my lord?" Caggo presumed.

"There are very few I do trust," the Mountain disclosed, "But trust is not the issue here. These escorts are merely standard procedure. It is my policy that all who come to the moat for an indefinite period of time – regardless of who or what they are – be closely watched. Even when my lady mother visited a while back, I insisted that some Legionnaires accompany her at all times."

"That is rather prudent of you," Brown Ben Plumm perceived. *Yes, it is. Evidently, the Mountain does not stint on security.*

Allard hobbled over to Melisandre and told her "Since I am headed for the Captains' Tower already, I could help you get settled, my lady."

"I would appreciate that, Allard," she stated gratefully, flashing a smile. *Just how will he help me get settled?* The two of them had yet to progress *that* far in their relationship, but at this point, Melisandre felt such an outcome was practically inevitable.

Melisandre, Allard Seaworth, Dolorous Edd Tollett, Malcolm Branfield, Denzo D'han, Caggo, Brown Ben Plumm, Daario Naharis, and the guards assigned to them prepared to make their way to the aforementioned Captains' Tower. However, before the Red Woman could take three steps, the Mountain stepped in front of her.

"Just a moment, my lady," he pronounced, "Before you retire, I must ask that you accompany me to the Lord's Tower. I wish to have a private audience with you in my solar at once."

*I saw this coming a mile away.* Indeed, she had predicted Lord Gregor would ask to talk to her
alone soon after she arrived in Moat Cailin. While she could imagine what the subject of their conversation would be, no one else could know that. **Allard may be an exception, but even he cannot know the full truth.** Therefore, Melisandre decided to feign ignorance of the Mountain's true intentions at first. With a very straight face, she remarked "That would hardly be appropriate, my lord. You are a married man, after all. By the way Lady Dacey spoke of you, your marriage is a happy one. You do not require me."

Apparently, Gregor Clegane saw through her false naivety. Nonetheless, he grimaced and mumbled bitterly "You know as well as I that I have no such impure aim in mind. I would advise you to take this matter more seriously. Although I said I *wished* to speak with you, do not mistake my meaning. It was *not* a request. So, either walk with me to the Lord's Tower, or I will carry you there."

*He could do that,* Melisandre noted. *He could do it easily.* She did not doubt that Lord Gregor meant what he said. He did not strike her as one to give empty threats. Although this version of the Mountain was civilized and reasonable, he could be just as intimidating as the original savage version. **Makes me glad I'll never have to meet the real one.** Whatever the case, she would avoid provoking him at all cost. **We may not be friends, but there's no reason for us to be enemies.**

The Red Woman tucked her arms into the flowing sleeves of her vibrant red robes, and she stoically declared "I'd prefer to walk."

"Good choice," was all Gregor Clegane said in response.

It was there that Melisandre parted from Allard Seaworth and everyone else who had been on board the *Leviathan.* While half of Gregor Clegane's guards went with Allard and the others, the other half stayed with their commander.

Melisandre wordlessly followed the Mountain as they made their way across the catwalks from the Flour Tower to the Gatehouse Tower. Then they went from the Gatehouse Tower to the Armament Tower. They never once paused or stopped walking, but every now and then, she allowed herself a few seconds to admire the view and her surroundings.

After they left the Armament Tower, they arrived at the tallest of the twenty towers in the very center of the moat. **This must be the Lord's Tower,** she assumed. Turned out it was.

"My solar is on the third topmost floor," Gregor informed her when they entered the building.

The catwalk which connected the Armament Tower to the Lord's Tower only went halfway up the latter's full height. As such, they had to go up quite a few stairs. While Melisandre was in decent physical condition, the climb was a bit of a chore to her. Naturally, someone as strong and tough as Gregor Clegane was able to make the ascent without any difficulty. **This hike will probably be quite a nuisance to him by the time he's seventy, though.**

Eventually, they reached the third highest floor in the Lord's Tower. Two more guards were already posted outside the solar. The guards who had accompanied their lord thus far stayed outside with the others. Melisandre was the only one who was permitted entry to the room.

Once she was inside, the Mountain shut the door, locked it, and covered up the keyhole and the cracks. Then he barricaded the entrance with some chairs. After that, he went over to the windows, closed them, and barricaded them, too. Then he thoroughly went around the walls, covering up anything that could have been a hole or other opening.

Melisandre stood by and observed him as he did all this. When he was finished, she uttered sardonically "Do you do this every time you speak with someone in private?"
"No," he answered her, "Just the times when I want to ensure that absolutely no one will overhear the conversation."

*Given what we're about to discuss, I can see why this would be one of those times.*

Gregor Clegane gestured to one of the chairs in front of his desk and beckoned her "Sit, if you please."

*At least he's being courteous. For now, at any rate.* Melisandre calmly approached the chair and planted herself there. Once she was seated, Gregor went to the other side of his desk and sat down in another chair.

Initially, no words were exchanged. The two of them simply sat still, facing each other in total silence. *Well, this is awkward. Granted, I was expecting it to be. How do we even begin a discussion such as this one?*

Ultimately, Gregor opened up the conversation. He asked her "What do you think of my home?"

*Smalltalk. Really?* Still, it was a start. The Red Woman folded her arms and declared "I have to admit; it's impressive. If I had not known I was coming here, I would never have guessed we were in Moat Cailin. While I have heard much of it across the Narrow Sea, I could only visualize a ruin whenever I heard of it."

"I can't blame you," Gregor claimed, "But you'll get used to it. After fifteen years, I have a hard time remembering that the moat used to be a ruin."

"I can imagine," Melisandre commented, "Still, while the reestablished moat is truly remarkable, it is just one of the many changes you've inflicted upon this world."

"Yes, it is," Gregor observed, "Of course, only you would know the full extent of those changes."

"What do you mean?" said Melisandre, feigning ignorance again.

Gregor lightly rolled his eyes and stated "You know full well what I'm talking about. So, what say we go ahead and drop this mummer's face?"

Melisandre smirked and slyly murmured "If we do, you should stop saying things like 'mummer's farce.' You can say 'drop the act' instead."

"Fine," Gregor mumbled bluntly, "Let's drop the act."

"Gladly," said Melisandre. *I've been putting on this damn act for decades. It's about time I got a break from it. Even if that break is only the duration of this conversation.* The Red Woman sat up in her chair and muttered "I guess proper introductions are in order."

"I agree," the Mountain conceded. He leaned forward, held out his hand, and told her "Gregory Welch."

*So, he ended up with a familiar name, too.* She reached out, grasped his hand, shook it firmly, and disclosed "Melanie Hamilton."

*It's been a while since I introduced myself like that.* She actually got a small thrill from the opportunity to give her real name. It had been years since she used it last.

After she released Gregory's hand, she muttered "Now that that's out of the way… I'm not really
certain where to go from here. So… where are you from?"

"Seattle, Washington," he revealed, "But I travelled all over the United States and Canada. During the five or six last years of my first life, I lived primarily in Virginia. What about you?"

"Originally, I'm from Cheyenne," Melanie replied.

He raised an eyebrow in fascination and murmured "Peculiar. I've never met anyone from Wyoming."

_I bet you never suspected you'd meet one in this world._ Melanie illuminated "Actually, I only lived there until I was seven. Then my parents and I moved to Omaha. I lived there for most of my childhood and teenage years. After college, I got married and moved to Fargo with my husband. There I raised a family of my own and lived until the day I died."

"Wyoming… Nebraska… North Dakota…" Gregory thought aloud. He smirked and perceived "You sound like a typical country girl. Did you ever go anywhere east of the Mississippi River?"

"Not that I recall," Melanie confessed, "One time, I was supposed to go to Chicago with my husband for a business trip, but the conference was called off."

"Was the trip for his job or yours?" Gregory enquired. _Why would he care about that detail?_

"Both," she notified him, "He and I were programmers for Microsoft. Often we worked on the same projects."

"I thought couples who earned a living together were generally miserable," Gregory debated.

"There are some exceptions," Melanie countered, "We faced our fair share or trials and tribulations both at work and at home, but our marriage was – on the whole – a happy one. It managed to last for nearly two full decades."

"Two decades?" Gregory noted. She nodded to confirm, and he questioned "So, how old were you when you died?"

"Forty-six," she elucidated, "And you?"

"Twenty-eight," he disclosed, "I've been alive in this world longer than in the real one. By almost eight whole years."

_Fascinating._ "It'll be a long while before I can make that same claim."

At that, Gregory glared at her, as though he did not believe her. She asked him "Something wrong?"

"With your logic, yes," the tall man proclaimed, "As I recall from the season six premiere, Melisandre is supposed to be around a hundred years old. Perhaps even older."

"That is correct," "Melanie confirmed, smirking "But here's a twist: I'm not the real Melisandre."

"Nor am I the real Gregor Clegane," he drily retorted.

"That's not what I mean," she mumbled frankly, "What I mean is this: I am Melisandre in appearance only. What you see is an illusion."

That captured his interest. He said probingly "What are you talking about?"
Rather than answering him verbally, Melanie chose to show him directly. She brought her hand up to the pendant around her throat and pressed down on the ruby. In response, her hair became slightly shorter and darker, the wrinkles on her face disappeared, and she grew a little taller. Her apparel became a little tighter on her body, but not uncomfortably so.

Gregory was clearly astonished, but he was not downright flabbergasted. He looked her over, and he observed "I recognize you. Your character was exclusive to the show. Kinvara, I believe her name was."

"Right again," Melanie affirmed, "As you can see, I'm still a red priestess, but I'm not Melisandre."

"Then why have you been masquerading as her?" Gregory said curiously.

She answered his question with a question: "Would anyone of lesser prominence in the franchise have gotten your attention?"

"Good point," he admitted, "But if you're posing as Melisandre, where is the real Melisandre?"

"In the ground," Melanie uttered candidly, "I saw to that myself."

Initially, Gregory was astounded. Then he rubbed his chin and commented "I'd very much like to know how you pulled that off. How did you succeed where Maester Cressen, Davos Seaworth, Alester Florent, and so many others failed?"

"None of them were servants of R'hllor," Melanie explained, "While red priests and priestesses can see when just about anyone means to harm them, it turns out their fires reveal nothing about other red priests and priestesses. When I discovered that, I thought to use it to my advantage."

"Alright," he acknowledged, "So, tell me; how'd you do it?"

"Poison," she answered simply.

"And she never suspected a thing?" Gregory presumed skeptically.

"Oh, she was always suspicious," Melanie claimed, "Even so, she was awfully complacent. Because of that, I was able to kill her and bury her without almost no complications. And no one – not even my fellow servants of the Lord of Light – ever found out."

"From Microsoft employee to religious mastermind," Gregory commented wittily. Quite a leap, isn't it? "Normally, I would arrest someone for committing such a deed. However, my jurisdiction is restricted to Westeros, and my only evidence is your word. Aside from that, I am hardly in a position to judge you. I've killed a few people and covered up their deaths, as well. But whenever I did, it was always for the greater good."

"I can assure you that Melisandre's death was for the greater good, too," Melanie insisted, "Like her, I was born in Asshai, and I grew up as a student of her faith. I was even her apprentice for a while. I saw a side of her that even the characters in the books and show did not see. It was not a pleasant side; not at all. For such an avid devotee of the Lord of Light, she has a very dark history."

"How ironic," Gregory remarked. He scratched his temple and said inquiringly "So, you can pass yourself off as Melisandre, but do you possess any of her powers?"

"A few," Melanie notified him, "But only the ones all other red priests have. I can see vague glimpses of the future in fires, I can tell when someone is a danger to me, and I can heal most injuries, including infected ones. I'd like to think I could revive a corpse, too, but so far, I haven't
been successful."

"That's a pity," Gregory muttered. A pity indeed. If I figured out how to bring people back, I might've been able to save at least a couple of the victims of the Pentoshi Bloodbath.

Melanie leaned back in her chair and continued with "There's about the extent of what I can do. I cannot give birth to a shadow assassin. I cannot do a sacrificial blood ritual with leeches. I cannot will men to kill themselves or suffer other mysterious deaths. Only Melisandre could do those things. Still, I do not consider that my loss. Those abilities seemed more like a curse than a blessing."

"That's the impression I got, as well," Gregory commented, "Besides, there is no telling how long it took Melisandre to master those wicked practices. For all we know, it could have taken her over a century to study and perfect them."

"That occurred to me, too," Melanie confessed, "Since I was only born twenty-five years ago, I could not have learned how to do those things in time for the Long Night, even if I wanted to."

"I should say not," Gregory muttered plainly, "Tell me; is the ability to change your appearance something you picked up from Melisandre?"

"No, but it's thanks to her that I have that ability," Melanie explicated, bringing her hand up to her pendant, "I took this off her body before I buried her. Learning how to use it was simple enough. As it happens, only a follower in the Lord of Light can get it to work. As long as I have it on, I can continue to be Melisandre. Or at least, I can wear the same disguise as the one she wore."

"Just be sure you don't take it off in public," Gregor bluntly advised her.

"I'm not careless," she rejoined sharply, "Other than you, no one else has seen my true form."

"Including Allard?" he presumed.

*Where did that come from?* Nevertheless, she answered with "No, but I am planning to show him soon."

"Just how much will you show him?" he cockily murmured.

Melanie blushed a deeper red than her robes. She furrowed her brow and snapped "Are you mocking me?"

"I am not," he assured her, "However, it is obvious that you and Allard have a relationship that is not wholly professional. I could tell that much simply from observing the way you and he behaved around each other in the harbor and the Flour Tower."

"Well, we were not exactly trying to hide our affection," said Melanie, "Anyway, in case you were wondering, I was not hoping to turn Allard against you. I can tell he is far too committed to you and the Legion to do such a thing."

"That wasn't my concern," Gregory pronounced, "But tell me; are you actually starting to fall in love with Allard?"

"Oh, I'm well past 'starting,'" Melanie admitted.

"You know he was a ladies' man in the books, right?" Gregory recounted.
"Yes, he had at least three different lovers," Melanie recalled, "Be that as it may, he strikes me as the type who can be content with one woman. Provided she's the right one, of course."

"Of course," said Gregor, scoffing a bit.

Melisandre smirked and added in "Besides, you've kept him so busy lately that he's hardly had any time for… leisurely activities."

"And you're thinking of 'indulging' him?" Gregory asked rhetorically.

"As a matter of fact, I am," Melanie professed, "I haven't felt this way about a man since my first life."

"Well, as long as you do not distract him from his duties or manipulate him for some foul purpose, I have no reservations about how you associate with Allard," Gregory proclaimed.

"I thank you for that," Melanie muttered gratefully "Allard isn't Keith, but he's the next best thing."

"Was Keith your husband's name?" he assumed.

"Yes," she responded, "It's been twenty-five years since I last saw him and my children, and I still miss them dearly. The pain is easier to tolerate when I'm with Allard, though."

"I know the feeling," Gregory disclosed, "I miss my family, too. When I first came into this world, I could not get them out of my head. Now, I sometimes go whole weeks without even thinking about my first life. All because I've found solace with Dacey and our children."

"Having a family of your own will do that," Melanie debated. That's why I'm hoping to have another one in this world. "Were you ever married in your first life?"

"No," Gregory informed her, "I had a few flings and a few girlfriends, but never any commitments. I was always too busy with my job for any serious relationships."

"I see," Melanie acknowledged. After a short pause, she asked "So, what did you do for a living?"

"I was a field operative for the Central Intelligence Agency," he told her straightforwardly. Now it was her turn to be stunned. "Seriously? You worked for the C.I.A.?"

"Yes, I did," he validated, "Of course, I could not have told you that when I actually worked for the Agency, but since my vow to uphold the secrecy and integrity of the Agency ended with my death, I see no harm in telling you the truth now."

"Does that mean you could share the contents of top secret government files with me?" Melanie japed.

"I could," Gregory supposed, "But since that government doesn't exist in this universe, doing so would be rather pointless. Besides, the only things that would really interest you are conspiracies involving the government, and I can't think of any that you'd likely consider worthwhile."

"So, you don't know the full truth about JFK or Watergate?" Melanie assumed. Not that I care that much about either. Still, it couldn't hurt to ask.

"No one at the Agency gave a hairy rat's ass about JFK or Watergate," Gregor muttered sharply, "To us, those cases are as dead as the people who were implicated in them."
"Good," Melanie uttered, "It's about time the world moved on from those affairs. They've been the center of attention for far too long. I would know. Believe it or not, one of my first memories was Nixon's resignation."

"Lovely," Gregory stated sarcastically, "Oddly enough, one of my first memories was the beginning of the Persian Gulf War."

"Is that right?" she said in interest. He nodded, and she inquired "Then, if you don't mind my asking, when did you die? Do you know the exact date?"

"I could never forget it," Gregory pronounced, "It was the eighth of September 2016."

She thought back, and she realized how long ago that was before her own death. "You didn't even live to see Season 7?"

"Unfortunately, no," he glumly admitted. He missed a lot more than I did.

"Then, if you don't mind my asking, when did you die? Do you know the exact date?"

"The twenty-third of January 2018," Melanie reminisced, "I was driving home from dinner with my husband and children when it happened. While I'm certain winters in the North are horrible, they can't be much worse than winters in Fargo. The night I died, there was a huge blizzard. We were stuck in traffic for over an hour before we finally got off the highway. Just moments after we did… our car was rammed by a sixteen-wheeler at full speed."

Gregory looked thunderstruck. "I… I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry."

"Thank you," she stated sincerely. **Even if I didn't die, it was the worst night of my first life.**

He frowned and muttered "What kind of crazy driver goes at full speed during a blizzard?"

"The kind that's lost control of his vehicle, maybe," Melanie conjectured, "Happens more often than you think. Especially on icy roads."

"Makes sense to me," Gregory conceded, "Do you remember anything else about the accident?"

"No," she replied, "And truthfully, I don't want to. All I do know is that I was killed instantly. I can be sure of that because the very next thing I knew, I was coming out of the womb of a peasant woman in Asshai, and then I was given to the nearby temple of R'hllor almost immediately after. However, I have no way of knowing what happened to my son, my daughters, or Keith."

"With a collision of that magnitude, chances of survival are slim," Gregory informed her, not unkindly "But who knows? People have been known to live through even worse crashes. One of my fellow agents was in one such wreck. He was paralyzed for the waist down for a couple weeks, but he made a fully recovery. In fact, he was soon back to running a mile in just a little more than five minutes."

"Good for him," Melanie commented. **Do I dare hope that Keith and the kids were that lucky?** "So, you know how I died. How did you? Was it in the line of duty?"

"Actually, yes," Gregory disclosed, "The night I died, I was in D.C. on assignment. My partner and I had tracked a pair of terrorist suspects to the capital. We managed to corner one of them in an alley, but the other snuck up on us and shot me in the back."

Melanie gasped in alarm. **He was murdered?**

"Don't feel too sorry for me," he urged her, "Even as I faded away, I was conscious enough to note
that my partner killed the guy who shot me, and he managed to secure the other guy before he tended to my wound. Needless to say, his efforts to save me were unsuccessful, but at least he avenged me, and I didn't die for nothing."

"I'm glad you have some peace of mind," Melanie remarked. "But I must ask; have you ever wondered if perhaps we didn't really die after all? Maybe we're still alive in the real world, albeit we're lying comatose in the intensive care ward of a hospital. If so, while it may seem like we're living a full lifetime in this universe, in actuality, only a few days or weeks may have gone by since we were admitted."

"You mean like Tim Robbins in Jacob's Ladder?" Gregory hypothesized.

"Yes, that's a fitting example," Melanie conceded. *Didn't care much for that movie, but it works.*

"Funnily enough, the possibility occurred to me, too," Gregory disclosed. "While it would certainly explain how and why we arrived in this world, I've come to the conclusion that this is all totally real. I feel this experience is far too vivid and descriptive to be a dream, a vision, a hallucination, or anything else of the sort. Your presence here is the final proof I need to confirm that notion. I mean, how often do two people enter each other's subconscious minds?"

"You make a very compelling argument," Melanie stated, "Truthfully, I've been convinced that this is real for the longest time, too. I was just wondering what you thought."

"Believe me; this is not a mere fantasy," Gregory asserted. "I can say with absolute certainty that we are not going to wake up in our old bodies. Not ever."

"Indeed," Melanie said in agreement. *If it turns out Keith and the kids didn't survive the crash, I may as well stay dead in the real world.* "Oh, well. I've always hated the 'it was all a dream' trope, anyway."

"So have I," Gregory murmured, "To me, that's perhaps the epitome of anticlimactic developments and laziness in storytelling."

"I would have to agree," Melanie claimed. *That's why I skipped the entire ninth season of Dallas.* "Be that as it may, I still cannot help but wonder how we got to this universe in the first place."

"Oh, I gave up trying to figure that out long ago," Gregory drily pronounced, "At the end of the day, all we can do is speculate. For instance, maybe some divine being is to blame. As to what this divine being's reason or aim might be, I haven't a clue. But it's the most rational explanation I can think up."

"What about reincarnation?" Melanie theorized.

"Unlikely," Gregory refuted, "Why would we be reborn into a fictional world?"

"It's not that far-fetched," she disputed, "Some have conjectured that the ideas for most – if not all – great literary works could have come from places that already existed in different universes. For all we know, the World of Ice and Fire has always existed, and the essence of it could have ventured out and ended up in George R.R. Martin's mind."

He snorted in amusement. "Where did you get that theory?"

"My son, actually," she confessed, "You see, he was a fan of a comic book series known as Fables."
"Oh, I'm familiar with those comics," he claimed, "Martin himself once gave them his praise. I will admit they could be as thought-provoking as they were entertaining. Even so, I've never found the concept of parallel universes very plausible."

"That's how I've been explaining my 'gift' to Allard," Melanie told the tall man, "I've told him I can glimpse into an alternate existence of this world whenever I wish to. He seems to find it as believable as your claim of 'visions of the future.'"

"It takes more than belief to make something true," Gregory contended.

"Does it really?" Melanie argued, "If every person in the world believes in a myth, is it still a myth?"

"I don't know; maybe," he muttered disinterestedly, "Quite frankly, I don't care. Anyway, we're getting off-topic."

"What was our original topic?" she wondered aloud.

"How we got here," Gregory reminded her, "Rather than going back to that topic, what say we change it instead? We've wasted enough time on it already."

"Alright," Melanie uttered, "But before we move on, I have one more theory I'd like to share."

"Okay, if you insist," he declared.

Melanie took a minute to contemplate his words, and then she professed "Contrary to one of my earlier theories, maybe the World of Ice and Fire really didn't exist until Martin came up with it. His inspiration may have been enough to make it real. With that in mind, maybe this actually is an alternate world."

"You mean an alternative to the real world?" Gregory assumed.

"No, an alternative to the original World of Ice and Fire," Melanie assumed, "This place still has the same characters, settings, and history as George R.R. Martin's epic saga, but as far as the more recent events are concerned, someone else could be pulling the strings."

"I presume you mean someone else besides David Benioff and D.B. Weiss?" Gregory asked rhetorically.

"Of course," Melanie affirmed. "If that is what is going on, I don't know who this other party might be, but most likely, it'd be a fan."

"A fan?" Gregory sounded astounded, bewildered, and exasperated in equal measures. "Hold on; are you honestly implying that we have been living in some lousy, half-assed fanfic this entire time? Is that what you think this is?"

"It's only a theory of mine," she reminded him, "But in my mind, it makes more sense than anything else we've suggested so far. I mean, it would explain a great many things, such as how you were able to rise to power so easily."

"'Easily?'" Gregory spat heatedly. "I rose to power on a gamble. There was no luck involved; I'm simply an expert gambler. That's often something you have to excel in when you work for the C.I.A."

"That's another sign," Melanie debated, "Of all the people who could have been reborn into this
world, why was an employee of the Central Intelligence Agency one of them? As the strongest and tallest man in Westeros, no less."

"I admit that is remarkably convenient," Gregory thought aloud, "But on the other hand, what use would a Microsoft programmer be in a world that hasn't even discovered electricity yet?"

"You got me there," said Melanie. *There're no computers in this world, so my degree is completely useless here.* "However, while computer science was my major, I minored in psychology. That enabled me to cope with my arrival in this world and every tragedy I've encountered so far. It also helped me comfort the survivors of the Pentoshi Bloodbath."

"That would be beneficial," Gregory uttered, "But it still doesn't mean a fan is behind all this."

"Again, just a theory," Melanie repeated, "In spite of all we've said, at the end of the day, it doesn't really matter who or what brought us to this world. Even if it turns out there's no reason whatsoever why we're here, we are still in total control of our fate. The other characters may be self-aware, but none of them can say the same."

"That's… that's all very true," Gregory haphazardly admitted. There was a brief period of quietness, and then he leaned forward, placed his hands on his desk, and commented "Since we both have that advantage, perhaps we should try to cooperate with one another."

"I've no objections if you've none," Melanie proclaimed, "But before we get into that, I feel we have much more to discuss."

"Indeed, we do," he remarked, "So far, we've hardly even scratched the surface of the list of things I wish to talk about. You can expect to be in this room for quite a while longer."

"Fine by me," she stated, "I'm in no rush to get anywhere."

The two of them spent the next few hours conversing on a variety of subjects. They started with how they first got into the Ice and Fire fandom. Melanie's husband had been the one to introduce the books to her. At first, they had been a little too graphic for her taste, but overtime, they grew on her. Meanwhile, Gregory picked up the books shortly after he started college. A friend had recommended them to him, and it did not take long for him to get deeply invested in the World of Ice and Fire. Interestingly, both of them had been in the fandom for years before the show was greenlighted.

When the show came around, they had both made an effort to see every episode when it first aired. Of course, sometimes they had other obligations that prevented them from doing so. In Melanie's case, it was usually plans with family. Whereas Gregory was usually out of town, or even out of the country. His job required him to do a lot of traveling, often at a moment's notice.

They also discussed how closely they had followed the source material. Melanie had reread the books several times, almost memorizing them. She had often watched reruns of the episodes with her husband and children. The franchise was more than a hobby to her; it was almost a fixation.

However, Gregory proved to be just as big a fan of the series as her. One year, his vacation coincided with the San Diego Comic Con, which he was able to attend. He spent most of the convention at the Game of Thrones panels. He claimed that was perhaps the most excitement he ever had after college. *That must be saying a lot. I doubt a C.I.A. field operative would lead a quiet life.*

Additionally, to keep track of the many, many characters in the franchise, Gregory had composed
two spreadsheets for fun. He updated the first one whenever new names were mentioned in the books, and the second one whenever new names were mentioned in the show. He also recorded each character's status as "Alive," "Dead," or "Unknown." He frequently had to move multiple characters from the first category to the second one. That's not surprising at all.

They spent a while talking about the families they had left behind. Melanie's husband Keith was four years older than her. He was an only child, but she had an older brother and a younger sister. Their oldest daughter was twenty-two, their son was twenty, and their younger daughter was eighteen. Her mother had died ten years before her, and her father had never remarried. Melanie had tried to get him to move up to Fargo where she was, but he refused to leave Omaha. He was determined to live in the house his wife had died in until the day he himself died. I can't imagine how hard losing me must have been on him.

Meanwhile, Gregory still had his mother and father. He also had four younger siblings, both pairs of grandparents, and aunts, uncles, and cousins on both sides. He had family all throughout the United States, but most of his father's family lived in Michigan, and most of his mother's family lived in New York. He also had an aunt and uncle who lived in Canada. All of his immediate family was still in Seattle. The last time he saw any of them was Christmas of 2015, more than eight months before he died.

Once they were finished reminiscing on their personal lives, Melanie proceeded to bring Gregory up to date on Season 7 of the show. That composed perhaps the longest section of their conversation.

There were parts that thrilled him. Chief among those were the opening scene in the premiere, where Arya eliminated the entirety of House Frey with a single toast, and Littlefinger's trial in Winterfell. He wished he could have seen those with his own eyes. But since he had already removed Walder Frey from power and assassinated Petyr Baelish in this universe, he was already plenty satisfied. He had claimed "Taking them out myself is just as good as watching them die onscreen."

I'm certain it is. It must have been a rewarding feeling. She almost envied him.

There were parts that bewildered him. For example, there was the anticlimactic resolution concerning the Sand Snakes' subplot. He already thought it outrageous enough that Ellaria Sand and her paramour's bastards had betrayed House Martell in the show just so they could go to war with the Lannisters. But to have them be so easily defeated by Euron Greyjoy almost immediately after... their betrayal was effectively rendered entirely pointless. There was also the matter of Theon, and the very uninteresting subplot around his foolhardy goal to save his sister Asha. Gregory had wondered aloud "Why the hell is Theon even still alive? Didn't he outlive his usefulness about two or three seasons ago?"

Melanie had nothing to say to that. He has a point, though. With the Army of the Dead marching on the Seven Kingdoms, who's going to care about an Ironborn eunuch going after his kin?

There were parts that delighted him. Namely, the surviving Stark siblings' reunion in Winterfell, the return of Gendry, and the budding relationship between Jon and Daenerys Targaryen. Gregory debated that it was past time that the wolves were brought back together after being separated for most of the series. He was also relieved to know that Sansa and Arya were starting to tolerate and respect each other. As for Gendry, he claimed that Crown Prince Jasper Baratheon reminded him of strongly of the bastard smith. He was a far better heir to the Iron Throne than Joffrey, and a legitimate one, at that. Thank goodness Joffrey doesn't exist here. However, Gregory gave his widest grin when Melanie told him of the love scene between the two Targaryens in the cabin on
that boat. At that, he commented "Normally, I don't ship characters; I just wait to see how they end up in canon. Nonetheless, I had a feeling almost from the start that Jon and Dany would end up together."

"There's a chance they might in this world, too," Melanie contended, "After all, they've both lost their significant others and their babies. They are the ones who know best what the other is going through. They'll be able to comfort and understand each other perfectly."

"You may have a point there," Gregory observed, "Of course, I am not going to force them. No one can force them. The decision of who they'll spend the rest of their lives with should be theirs alone."

_I can respect that sentiment._ Truthfully, Melanie did not really care who Jon and Daenerys found new love with. Her daughters had always rooted for the Jon/Dany pairing, though.

There were even parts that downright frustrated him. Almost all of those came from the two most recent episodes. That was unsurprising; they had frustrated her, too.

"Let me get this straight," Gregory mumbled irately after Melanie finished recounting the very last scene of the finale, "Jon, Jorah, Sandor, Tormund, Gendry, Beric, Thoros, and some obligatory redshirts all went north of the Wall in effort to retrieve one single wight for Cersei? ONE. SINGLE. WIGHT?"

"That is correct," she bleakly confirmed.

"Wow," he commented snappily, "That definitely has my vote for the bad idea of the century. Right off the top of my head, I can think of a much simpler and saner way they could have acquired a wight."

"What might that be?" Melanie queried in interest.

"Well, you said that most of the Free Folk were still camped along the Wall before Jon and his companions went north of it, right?" Gregory recounted.

"Yes, they were," Melanie confirmed.

"So, here's what I'm thinking," Gregor professed, "Tormund could have passed around straws to all his people, and whoever drew the shortest one could have committed suicide. Then once that wildling’s body came back, they could have delivered it to King's Landing."

Melanie reflected on that proposal. Ultimately, she shrugged and stated "You know, that actually sounds feasible. After all, the Free Folk are always ready to die, and everyone who went north on that mission was already prepared to die, too. No reason one of them could not have given his life for the greater good."

"If an alliance with Cersei and Jaime can really be called 'the greater good,'" Gregory slyly muttered. _Normally, it wouldn't be. But I'd still take incestuous power-hungry twins over a horde of frozen zombies._

Gregory sat in silence for about thirty seconds. Then he gazed over at the wall and muttered "That reckless endeavor to acquire that wight is not even what I'm angriest with. What I'm angriest with is the cost of that errand. I mean, killing Viserion and having the Night's King use him to break down the Wall? What the hell were Benioff and Weiss even thinking? All this time, they've been building up the dragons as the primary weapons to be used against the Army of the Dead. And now
one of them is being used by the Army of the Dead instead? That has to be the single dumbest thing they've ever done on the show."

*With the possible exception of Ed Sheeran's totally unnecessary cameo,* Melanie thought. That was only her opinion, though. Her daughters had squealed in ecstasy when Ed Sheeran appeared in the premiere.

At any rate, she folded her arms and stated "You're not the only one who feels that way. They upset a whole lot of people. Even so, I'd wager that the vast majority of them will still stick around for the eighth and final season."

"I'd be surprised if they didn't," Gregory pronounced, "Despite my reservations about how Viserion became undead in the show, I wouldn't have stop watching just because of that. At least we know not to take the dragons for granted now, and that we should keep them out of range from the Night's King whenever we use them in battle. Still, it's too bad we will never know how the series ends."

"Oh, don't be too sure about that," Melanie advised him.

He was intrigued by that statement. Gregory pointed out "Season 8 didn't air on HBO until around a year and a-half after you died. There is no telling when the next book was finally published, either."

"That is true," Melanie conceded, "However…"

Here she paused. After a few moments, he bade her to continue with "Well? However?"

She let out a slow, steady sigh and revealed "You and I are not the only ones."

The look Gregory gave her then was one of profound incredulity. He seemed flabbergasted and fascinated at the same time. When he managed to compose himself, he murmured softly "You mean… there are others from the real world?"

"Yes," she candidly affirmed.

"How many?" he asked straightaway.

"That I know of… two," Melanie revealed, "There could be more, but I've only encountered two others."

"Well, tell me more," Gregory insisted, "Who are they? Where are they?"

Melanie drearily looked him in the eye and expounded "As much as I'd hate to disappoint you, it would be best if I told you this now: they're both dead. But not by my hand, I promise you."

As she suspected, Gregory was not at all pleased with that piece of information. Nevertheless, his curiosity was not yet sated. He folded his arms and said, "Dead or not, if there are others like us, I want to know all about them. So, please; tell me everything you can about those two."

"I shall," Melanie assured him. Before she said another word, she went over to the small table beside Gregory's desk, where a pitcher of water and some goblets were resting. She poured herself a tall glass of water and took a dip sip. *All this talking is thirsty business.* After that, she returned to her chair and sat back down. Once she was settled again, she began her recollection. She disclosed "One of them was reborn as Hizdahr zo Loraq. The other was reborn as Yezzan zo Qaggaz."
"The thin Yezzen from the show or the morbidly obese Yezzen from the books?" Gregory queried, smirking a little.

"The thin Yezzen, thankfully," Melanie apprised him. *Otherwise, I would have had to go to him, not the other way around.* "He and Hizdahr were together for several years before I ever saw either of them. I'm still not entirely certain how they managed to learn each other's secret, but what matters is that they did. Apparently, once they discovered they were not the only ones from the real world, they decided to journey around the World of Ice and Fire together, looking for other people like them. Since both their characters were unfathomably rich, they had the means to travel the world indefinitely. All the same, their search proved fruitless until they went to Asshai. That's when they met me."

"What led them to Asshai?" Gregory said enquiringly, "Where they just being methodical in their search? Say, they wanted to leave no corner of the World of Ice and Fire unchecked?"

"They had two reasons for going to Asshai, and that is one of them," Melanie answered, "The other was more practical. You see, they had this strange notion that a red priest or priestess might have been able to help them locate others like them. That inspired them to seek out Melisandre, as they already knew how resourceful she was. Alas, their notion was flawed. To me and other followers of R'hllor, people from the real world look just the same in a fire as everyone else."

"So, how did they find you?" Gregory queried.

"To be precise, I'm the one who found them," Melanie notified him, "I was with Melisandre when Hizdahr and Yezzan first came to visit her. Since I was raised in Asshai, I could speak High Valyrian. As highborn Essosi, the two of them could, as well. However, their dialect was very… unique. They worded sentences in a manner I had never heard before in Asshai, and Asshai is one of the most diverse cities in the Known World. By the way they spoke, it almost felt as though High Valyrian was not really their native tongue."

"And that gave them away?" Gregory assumed.

"No, but what happened next did," Melanie recalled, "By the end of their visit, I was almost certain they were from the real world, but I needed to test them before I rushed to any conclusions. Of course, asking them directly was out of the question; I needed a subtler approach. Ultimately, I simply waited until I was alone with them, and then I casually remarked in the Common Tongue 'I wonder what Martin would think if he saw us now.'"

Gregory chuckled at that. "Rather bold of you."

"Not really," Melanie disputed, "If it turned out they were still the original characters, they would have merely been confused, and I could have passed off my comment as a riddle or plain nonsense. However, when they recognized that name, they quickly revealed their true identities."

"So, who were they in the real world?" Gregory queried.

Melanie enlightened him with "Hizdahr was a Canadian real estate agent named Herman Lewis. He lived in Ottawa for the entirety of his first life. He died of a heart attack on the twentieth of March 2016, over a month before even Season 6 began. Yezzan was a banker named Eugene Quinn. Originally, he was from Wales, but he immigrated to Florida when he was twenty. He died of an accidental overdose on the sixteenth of June 2016, which was five or six weeks before Season 7 debuted."

"Peculiar," Gregory thought aloud, "So, what happened after you were properly introduced to
"Well, naturally, they wanted to take me with them," Melanie pronounced, "At first, Melisandre refused to part with me. Once I took care of her, they 'bought' me from the temple of R'hllor. We left soon after. That was the last time I saw Asshai."

"How long ago was this?" Gregory inquired.

"A little less than seven years ago," Melanie informed him, "Hizdahr, Yezzan, and I spent most of the next three years travelling all throughout Ulthos and Sothoryos. We constantly remained on the lookout for others who may have been from the real world. Alas, we never had any luck. So, we went back to Meereen or Yunkai, where Hizdahr or Yezzan respectively provided shelter for the three of us."

"Why didn't you ever go to Westeros?" Gregory stated inquiringly.

"Oh, we wanted to," Melanie claimed, "When we heard of the many noble deeds performed by Gregor Clegane, we immediately knew that you were one of us. I mean, the Mountain That Rides founding his own organization and giving it a name that is only partly original? Even fans who only knew the fundamentals of the franchise could recognize how far those events deviate from canon."

"You are quite right," Gregory admitted, "But if you've known who I really am for so long, how come you never came to see me?"

"Doing so would have been impossible," Melanie explained, "Due to the circumstances, we could not have sailed to the Seven Kingdoms without drawing attention. Back then, the Legion without Banners never conducted any business with Slaver's Bay."

"To this day, we still don't," Gregory commented, "In fact, no one in the Seven Kingdoms does. Still, you could have tried sending me a message or something."

"We considered that," Melanie disclosed, "But none of us had any friends who ever ventured this far west. On occasion, some of our allies came in contact with other parties who came in contact with the Legion, but even those instances were rare. For the longest time, we patiently waited for the right opportunity to present ourselves to you. Alas, before such an opportunity could become available, Hizdahr and Yezzan both met an untimely demise."

"How'd that happen?" Gregory stated curiously.

"Yezzan was the first to go," Melanie elaborated, "You may recall that in canon, he contracted a disease which slowly worsened over the last ten years of his life. Even in this world, he was not spared from that disease. It finally killed him about thirty months past. Less than half a year after he passed away, Hizdahr was assassinated by an enemy of the House of Loraq. I was on my own after that. Neither of their families wanted anything to do with me."

"Then it appears even we from the real world aren't safe," Gregory noted grimly.

"Just so," Melanie dismally concurred. "Even though we all died once already, there's no reason we can't do it again. We're still just as mortal as everyone else in this world."

"What'd you do then?" Gregory said inquisitively.

"Well, fortunately for me, this was around the time when the Legion and the Royal Army started watching over Viserys and Daenerys at Illyrio Mopatis' manse," Melanie professed, "I saw this as
the opportunity I had been waiting for. Thus, I set out on another journey. It took me a whole year to get to Pentos, but I never once considered giving up. Once I finally got there, I wasted no time in associating myself with the Targaryens. Everything that happened after that, you already know either from Allard or from your wife."

Gregory sat in utter silence for a full minute, as though he was contemplating all he had just been told. Ultimately, he folded his arms and muttered bluntly "That's quite a story."

*Does he doubt me?* Melanie frowned and declared "I assure you it is entirely true. There really are others like us."

"You mean there were," Gregory countered.

She shrugged and stated casually "Alright, as of now, you and I may very well be the only ones left. But there's no reason to think there aren't others still."

"You searched all of Essos, Ulthos, and Sothoryos, and you turned up emptyhanded," he pointed out

"True," she admitted, "But Westeros remains unsearched. Since most of the chapters and episodes occurred on this continent, the likelihood of finding another person like us should be far greater."

"How can you be so certain there are others?" Gregory inquired.

"I'm not certain at all," Melanie confessed, "This is still pure conjecture. However, I am convinced that if there are other people who were reborn into this world, the only characters they could have been reborn as are the ones who were actually named in canon."

"That's actually a pretty feasible theory," Gregory uttered favorably, "If it turns out to be accurate, that means none of my children could have been someone from the real world. Or my niece or nephews."

"Or your sister Ellyn," Melanie added in, "While Gregor Clegane did have a sister, her name was never actually revealed in the books or show. I am quite certain of that."

"That's right," "Gregory affirmed, smiling slightly, "Then I guess she really is just a genius after all."

*Yeah, she's definitely the most intelligent women I've met in this world. Melanie took another drink of water, and then she remarked "You said you created a spreadsheet of all the named canonical characters in your first life, right?"

"Yes, I did," he confirmed, a note of pride in his voice, "It was totally and completely comprehensive. It included all the characters from the books, the show, the video games, the graphic novels, and every other canonical medium."

"About how many were there altogether?" she asked in interest.

He rubbed his chin and thought on that for a few seconds, and then he pronounced "Altogether… approximately three thousand, give or take a few dozen. And at least a third of that number have been dead for over a century. Another five hundred or so have been for a lesser amount of time. Furthermore, only around half of the remainder are native to Westeros."

"Then there are only about seven or eight hundred other characters that people in the real world could have been reborn as," Melanie contended.
"I suppose so," Gregory mumbled in agreement, "I don't really see why that would matter, though."

"Oh, it matters," Melanie asserted, "How well do you remember that spreadsheet?"

"Not very," he informed her, "After all, the last time I looked at it was three and a-half decades ago. If I put my mind to it, I might be able to reconstruct it at least partially. But there's no way I could ever fully reconstruct it."

"Fair enough," she commented, "Do you suppose you could try to reconstruct it?"

"I could," he murmured, eying her dubiously, "Why?"

"I think we should check up on each of those people," Melanie suggested, "See if any of them are like us."

"Easier said than done," Gregory claimed, "I cannot just go around the Seven Kingdoms, demanding an audience with seven or eight hundred people. Even my authority has its limits."

"We don't have to visit them directly," Melanie argued, "We just have to do a bit of research. You can leave that to me; I already know what to look for."

Gregory seemed bewildered. "Why are you so determined to find others like us? Just because they're from the real world, that doesn't automatically mean they'd be of much help to us."

"I never said I expected them to be helpful," Melanie pronounced, "Quite the opposite, actually. I'm concerned that one of them might be a threat."

Now he was disturbed. "Why do you say that?"

"Like any action-based franchise, the World of Ice and Fire has a delicate balance of good and evil," Melanie pointed out, "In canon, Gregor Clegane was a huge proponent of the latter. Now, because of you, he leans heavily toward the side of good. That may seem fine at a glance, but I believe some otherworldly force is trying to restore the aforementioned balance. As this point, the only way it could do so is if someone from the real world with sinister intentions was reborn, as well."

Gregory was stunned at first. Then he looked as though he was going to break down laughing. "That is a positively outlandish theory."

"I don't blame you for thinking so," Melanie stated, "But please, don't be so quick to dismiss it. Because in the unlikely yet still possible event that it turns out I am correct, then somewhere on this continent, there is a threat almost as big as Jon Connington or the Night's King. He or she may not be as powerful as those two, but he or she has something far more dangerous than any weapon in this universe."

"What?" Gregory asked, now genuinely concerned.

"The same thing as us," Melanie responded, "Knowledge of the real world. In the wrong hands, just think of how much damage that could do in a medieval society such as this one."

Gregory thought on that concept, and by his expression, it did not please him at all. He looked her in the eye and told her "I'll see if I can find time to reconstruct my spreadsheet. I'll keep you posted on its progress."

Melanie nodded in approval and drained her goblet of water. I still hope that I'm just being
paranoid. But as much as she wished and prayed that that was the case, there was still a chance it was not. So, as long as there was even the slightest possibility that someone from the real world was out there plotting against them, she could not and would not turn a blind eye to that possibility.
Fairness was something the majority of people, if not all of them, desired. Alas, most of the time, fairness was merely a concept or a theory. A truly fair world could never come to be. There would always be some individuals who would discriminate against and remain above those lesser fortunate than them. So long as these parties had means and grounds to stay ahead of others, this mentality would exist forevermore. Even in modern Westeros, the tendency to point out one another's differences is strong.

The manner of prejudice could vary, depending on one's ideologies. Throughout the Seven Kingdoms, it was not uncommon to discriminate on basis of birth, status, age, experience, background, or ethnicity. However, the most commonplace, traditional, and prevalent form of bias was still the one imparted by gender.

Since the days of the First Men – that's another thing; no one ever wonders about the First Women – males had always dominated their female counterparts. Men had always been the warriors, the guardians, the scholars, the sailors, and the leaders. Any time a woman attempted to gain such a position, she would be fortunate to gain the respect and recognition of even a few men. Alas, even if she managed that much, she would usually been ridiculed or overlooked by most other men.

Certainly, one could always point out how gender never mattered in Dorne. For that alone, I'm glad to be from there. However, while that was undeniably true, Dorne was still just one place. Everywhere else in Westeros, men came before women in just about everything.

For over eight thousand years, it had been the law of both nature and civilization that men would have the power. One would think this policy would never change. Fortunately, everything in nature and civilization changes overtime. Including nature and civilization themselves.

While it may have seemed impossible for women to ever be more powerful than men, it was certainly possible for the two sexes to be equally powerful. Especially in modern times. In fact, in recent years, women had become more prominent than in any other time in history. That was primarily due to Lord Gregor Clegane and the formation of the Legion without Banners. In that prestigious organization, bias in any form was practically nonexistent. If ever a woman joined, no one batted an eyelid.

Although Lord Gregor was still the supreme commander of the Legion without Banners, the Legion's second-in-command was his wife, Dacey of House Mormont. Over two-thirds of all Legionnaires were male, but every one of them acknowledged Lady Dacey's authority. It doesn't hurt that she stands taller than most of them, as well.

Lady Dacey Clegane was the foremost example of how far women could rise in power. She was adored and respected by almost every member of her gender. Only the sternest and stuffiest ladies – In other words, the ones who think that women should wear only dresses and raise her voice only in the bedroom – frowned upon her lifestyle. Thankfully, the number who still believed in those outdated social norms were few in number.

Of course, Lady Dacey was not the only woman who currently occupied a position of power and authority. There were several others all throughout Westeros. One of them was the Mountain's younger sister, Ellyn Clegane. She was married to Tyrion Lannister, and the two of them were
widely recognized for their wits, prudence, and intellect. Those attributes had made them quite popular with other nobles and smallfolk alike. Furthermore, their son Duncan was in the running to become the next Lord of Casterly Rock. \textit{Who would have thought a dwarf and a giantess could have such a happy marriage?}\n
There was also Lady Asha Greyjoy. Gender roles were usually even stricter in the Iron Islands. Nevertheless, the Ironborn woman had managed to become captain of her own ship. Even after she wed Ser Edmure Tully, the heir to the Riverlands, she had retained command of her vessel. Whenever she stepped on board that ship, even her lord husband did not question her word.

The list of influential women in the modern world only went on from there. Lady Brienne Tarth, Lady Olenna Tyrell, Princess Daenerys Targaryen, Princess Elia Martell, and Queen Cersei Baratheon. And, of course, Obara Martell and Nymeria Martell. \textit{How could I ever forget my own sisters?} They were actually half-sisters, but that was a minor detail.

Despite how powerful the fairer sex had become in modern times, there were still some things women could not do that men could. Most notably, they could not enlist in the Night's Watch or join the Conclave. However, women were not banned from the Wall altogether. With how much the Watch had grown in the last decade, women now had the option to assist the Watch by serving as cooks and laundresses. A number of the wildling spearwives even helped occupy and guard some of the castles along the Wall.

All the same, women were absolutely forbidden from setting foot in the Citadel. \textit{But that did not stop me.}\n
As far back as she could remember, Sarella Sand had yearned to become a maester. She used to dress in maester's robes when she was younger, much like her sister Tyene would dress in the attire of a septa. To this day, they were both still partial to those respective forms of clothing.

However, Tyene only dressed up like a septa, but she had no intention to actually become one. That was the exact opposite of Sarella's position. Whenever she dressed as a maester, it was not just for fashion. Yet every time she did so, she put her own life at risk. Nonetheless, she was determined to forge her own chain.

It had been two years since Sarella first infiltrated the Citadel. Every day since then, she had lied about her identity. Her true gender was unknown to every person in Oldtown. She had had more than a few close calls, but so far, she had never been discovered. As far as her colleagues knew, she was Alleras, the son of a trader from Dorne with no ties to nobility whatsoever. That was all they would ever know. \textit{I'll keep this secret with my life. I have to.} If ever her secret was exposed, it would mean her life.

Naturally, concealing her gender had not been easy. Every morning when she rose, she had to wrap her breasts tightly to her chest. Every night before she turned in, she undid her bindings. She never once forgot to remove them. \textit{I want my own chain, but I'm not going to sacrifice my bust to get it.}\n
In addition to that, Sarella could never bathe or dress in the presence of the other acolytes and novices. \textit{Thank the gods I have my own bedchamber.} She only went to the privy when it was empty. When she had her moon's blood, she would immediately tend to it and clean up the mess. Whenever she fell ill or required an examination, she never sought out the other maesters. In instances such as those, she always consulted Maester Caleotte. \textit{He alone can be trusted with this matter. After all, Papa, Aunt Elia, and Uncle Doran entrusted him with the truth of Uncle Rhaegar's children.}\n
Although Caleotte was the only maester in the land who knew of Sarella's presence at the Citadel,
he was not the only person who knew that. Papa, Tyene, and a few others in Sunspear were aware. Sarella had told them herself before she travelled to the other side of the continent.

There was nothing preventing the people Sarella had confided in from sharing her secret with other parties. As long as those parties could be trusted, she did not mind. As it happened, Papa had told Lord Gregor Clegane of this matter. Sarella was certain of this because three weeks beforehand, she had received a letter from Samwell Tarly, the Mountain's notary.

The letter was addressed to Alleras, but the contents mentioned the recipient's connection to Prince Oberyn Martell. Sarella had continuously insisted to her fellow acolytes that her father was not a noble. As such, the only way Samwell or Lord Gregor could have known about her background was if someone had told them. Only Papa could have done that.

There was nothing in the letter that gave away Sallera's identity or anything else that could have incriminated her. That by itself was a blessing. There is no telling who could have snuck a peek at the letter in the time between when it arrived at Oldtown and when I got it from the rookery. The wax on the missive's seal may have looked unbroken when she first received the letter, but Sallera knew better than to be fooled by appearances. Which is more than I can say for every man at the Citadel.

In any case, the letter had fascinated her. Sallera was aware that Gregor Clegane had constructed a contraption known as a printing press earlier that year. She was also aware that someone had attempted to destroy the press not long after its completion. Everyone in the realm probably knew of that by now. Everyone in the Citadel already knows, at least.

Normally, she would have assumed that was just because the Citadel was very resourceful. However, according to Samwell Tarly's letter, Lord Gregor Clegane had acquired some evidence that the Conclave itself was behind the attempt.

Apparently, Moat Cailin's maester, Kennick, had stolen some black powder from the moat's stores in effort to demolish the printing press. First, he had paid some northern thug to do the deed. When that failed, Maester Kennick had tried to do it himself. That also failed. Moreover, it resulted in him getting caught in the act. At swordpoint, he had confessed to being under orders from his superiors to destroy the printing press.

Since then, Maester Kennick had been confined to his quarters and kept under constant guard. The populace of Moat Cailin had been told that a threat had been made against the maester's life. Lord Gregor had invented that excuse to cover up the maester's betrayal. It was possible that not everyone bought that lie, but it was sufficient to avoid arousing suspicion. More importantly, it did not give the Conclave any reason to wonder if Lord Gregor knew of their plot. It will only be a matter of time before they catch on, though. Thankfully, that had already occurred to Lord Gregor, too.

Although Maester Kennick had been removed as a threat, the Mountain was convinced that the Conclave still posed an even greater threat. He was concerned that they might make another attempt to destroy the printing press. Worse yet, he was under the impression that the issue of the printing press was not the only ploy the Conclave was involved in. Apparently, it may have been just one of many.

As such, Lord Gregor was determined to find out what else the Conclave had planned. That was why he had written Sarella. It seemed she was the only person at the Citadel he was willing to reach out to. Of course, he did not really know her, nor she him. We've never even met. All the same, they were both close enough to her father that Lord Gregor felt he could place his faith in her. His letter had claimed as much.
Most of the letter had been a summary report of recent events which the Citadel had or might have had a hand in. The rest of it was essentially a request for aid. Quite plainly, Lord Gregor Clegane wanted Sarella to be the Legion's eyes and ears within the Citadel.

Since Sarella was in the unique position of being both an acolyte and the Red Viper's daughter, she was already obligated to investigate the Conclave on the Mountain's behalf. Of course, she could not reveal to anyone that she was assisting the Legion; this was a strictly covert operation. Furthermore, she would not give her aid unconditionally.

Fortunately, Lord Gregor had assured her that he did not expect her to do anything that might get her thrown out of the Citadel or compromise her secret. All he needed was for her to do a little digging into the Conclave's innerworkings. Even doing that much would involve a considerable risk, but it was a risk Sarella was willing to shoulder. *Papa always spoke fondly of the Mountain That Rides. So long as he counts Lord Gregor as an ally of his, he is an ally of mine, too.*

She only wished she could be as useful to Lord Gregor as he hoped she could be. Thus far, she had not even confirmed that the Conclave was behind the attempt to destroy the printing press. Lately, no one at the Citadel had talked about the printing press. Most of them did not even seem to care about it.

However, that in itself might have been a promising clue. It implied that most of the Conclave was not involved in the plot to destroy the printing press. In fact, Sallera was reasonably sure that the novices, the acolytes, and the regular maesters were innocent of that scheme. The Archmaesters, on the other hand… she had more reasons to suspect them of foul play than not. They always preached about serving the realm for the greater good. Perhaps they did, but *whose* greater good? That was the real question.

*Most likely, the Archmaesters are the only ones who mean to destroy the press. That at least narrows down the number of people I should investigate. But I'm still no closer to the heart of this matter than I was before.*

The Archmaesters were even more secretive about their private affairs than Sarella was about her sex. Obviously, eavesdropping or spying on them in any way would be extremely dangerous. But it could be done. *I know it can be done, and I'll do it.* So far, this was her only lead. Her only choice was to pursue it. She would have to choose her approach carefully, though. Otherwise all her achievements so far would be for nothing.

*So, how do I find out what they're up to? There must be a way.*

"Alleras?" a voice interrupted her broodings. "Alleras? Sphinx, are you still here?"

Sallera hastily emerged from her reverie and turned in the direction of the speaker. It sounded like Armen. It turned out it *was* Armen.

"What?" Sallera responded in her soft Dornish drawl. After two years, she had perfected that masculine undertone. It was deceptive enough to fool even the sharpest master of accents.

"You were spacing out again," Armen remarked.

Sallera raised an eyebrow, looked around at the others, and asked rhetorically "Was I spacing out?"

"You certainly were," Pate confirmed, taking a swallow from his tankard.

"Well then, my apologies," she stated bluntly.
At that, Mollander raised an eyebrow. He leaned forward and asked in concern "Alleras, is there something on your mind?"

"Something's always on my mind," Sallera answered him flatly.

"You know what I meant," Mollander mumbled drily, folding his arms, "Something's bothering you."

"I never said that," she countered.

"You didn't have to," Mollander asserted, "I surmised it all on my own. Perhaps we should talk about it."

*Where did this come from?* Sallera sipped her ale and remarked "That is quite unnecessary. Just because you are a little perturbed-"

"It is not just me, Alleras," Mollander cut in, "It's all of us."

That piqued Sallera's interest. She inquired "What do you mean?"

Mollander apprised her with "The others did not want to say anything, but I cannot hold my tongue any longer. Listen… we are worried about you."

That took Sallera by surprise. *He cannot be serious.* Then she looked around the table at Armen, Roone, and Pate. They said nothing; they just lightly nodded their heads. *He is.* Now, Sallera was perplexed. "Why are you worried?"

"You've been rather withdrawn these past few weeks," Pate pointed out, "Even more so than you usually are. It is almost as though you've been avoiding everyone at the Citadel whenever possible. Including us."

"It is?" Sallera uttered in genuine surprise.

"Indeed," Armen affirmed, "We know you're not cross with us; you would have told us if you were. But it could be something even worse than that. Roone is starting to think that you might have plans to leave the Citadel."

The youngest of their group flushed and mumbled irately "You didn't have to tell him that."

"It's the truth, is it not?" Pate said sardonically, smirking.

Roone said nothing in response. He just frowned and gazed off to the side. *Then it is true.* Sallera did not wish to cause her friends such needless unrest. She informed them "If I have upset you, then I truly am sorry. I assure you I have no intention of leaving the Citadel anytime soon. There is a reason why I've been so withdrawn, but the reason is not as grand as that."

"Then what is the reason, Sphinx?" Mollander asked in interest.

"I have simply been preoccupied with a task for most of the last turn of the moon," Sallera disclosed. *I cannot tell them everything, but if I just lie to them, I know I'll come to regret it later.*

"What sort of task?" Roone queried.

"That, I cannot tell you," the Sand Snake proclaimed, "But it is imperative that I complete it. It was given to me by someone I cannot afford to let down."
"One of the Archmaesters?" Armen conjectured.

*Be careful how you answer here,* she cautioned herself. She revealed "No, none of them gave it to me. On the contrary; part of the assignment involves investigating the Archmaesters."

"Which ones?" Mollander enquired.

"All of them, really," Sarella claimed.

"Even Archmaester Walgrave and those like him?" Pate presumed in disgust. Sallera could not blame him. *Just being near Walgrave makes me want to retch. Every time I approach his bed, nature calls him.*

"No, the ones who've taken leave of their wits can be excluded," Sallera slyly pronounced, "But until I can prove otherwise, none of the other Archmaesters can be. I intend to observe and report on their activities."

"Can we at least know why you're so invested in this task?" Armen requested.

*I would rather not share that information, but I suppose it wouldn't harm you, me, Lord Gregor, or anyone else.* Sarella shrugged and murmured "I guess I can tell you that much. But I will not repeat myself, so if you truly wish to know, listen closely."

She waited until she had the men's attention, and then she informed them "The person who assigned me this task is a close friend of my father. A very close and personal friend, as well as powerful and influential. He has connections to Oldtown, and – for reasons I cannot divulge – he has discovered that someone in the Conclave is working against him. As a favor to him, I have agreed to look into the matter, and I have come to the conclusion that his rival must be one or more of the Archmaesters."

"How do you know that?" Roone asked.

"I cannot say," she muttered candidly.

"Aren't you concerned that by helping this friend of your father, you'll ultimately get yourself in trouble with the Archmaesters?" Mollander contended.

"Yes, I realize the possibility of that," Sallera proclaimed, "But that will only happen if I get caught, and I've no intention of letting that happen."

"Then I salute you for your boldness," Armen commented, raising his tankard, "But I pray you do not come to regret what you are doing."

"I won't," the Dornishwoman declared. She allowed herself another swig of ale, and then she added in "Long as the lot of you do not rat on me."

"Of course, we won't," Roone asserted. The other three men mumbled their agreement. "I myself would welcome the chance to learn something more about the Archmaesters. Doing so might even help us get ahead in our studies."

"Now there's a thought," Pate uttered in approval.

"Well, if that is what you believe, then feel free to do some investigation of your own," Sallera bade her friends, "But do not ask me to do any for you. My only goal is to accomplish the task I was given."
"Fair enough," Armen said blankly.

Silence reigned for about a minute. At their table, at least. Some of the other tables were being rather noisy. But that was hardly abnormal for the Quill and Tankard at this time of the day.

Mollander ordered another round, and Rosey the serving wench promptly brought them one. As she placed down five new tankards, she flashed a sultry smile Sallera's way. The Dornishwoman smiled back politely, but not in a suggestive way. You're beautiful, dear, but alas, I cannot indulge you. Through no fault of her own, Sallera – as Alleras, naturally – was quite popular with the serving wenches in this tavern, much to the envy of Pate.

Once Rosey was gone, Sallera and her companions helped themselves to the next round. Mollander took a sip from his fresh tankard, and then he turned to Sallera and told her "If you've no objections, I would like to know a little more about this friend of your father. How well do you know the man?"

"To be honest, only by reputation," Sarella admitted, "But my father speaks highly of him. He regards the man as one of the few truly good men in this world."

"That manner of man is rare," Armen thought aloud. Quite so.

"You must have a great deal of respect for this man if you're willingly jeopardizing your position in the Conclave for him," Mollander noted.

"Oh, I do," Sarella claimed, "But you needn't fret. He gave me explicit orders not to go out of my way for his sake. He told me himself that he does not want me to do anything that would ruin or effect my standing at the Citadel."

"He sounds a reasonable person," Roone observed, taking a long sip from his tankard.

"He's quite reasonable," Sarella validated, "More than that, he is fair. In my mind, he is perhaps the fairest man in the Seven Kingdoms."

Armen, Pate, and Roone seemed impressed by that statement. She wanted to think Mollander was likewise impressed, but at the present, it was hard to read his countenance.

Just then, Mollander picked up his tankard and drained its contents in one long, steady gulp. Once it was empty, he slammed it down, belched into his shoulder, and rose to his feet. He announced "I've some business of my own I must attend to before I turn in, so I am going to head back to the Citadel now. You lot, stay here as long as you like."

Oh, I plan to be here for at least another hour or two. This is the first time I've gotten out since I received Lord Gregor's letter. Until I make some more progress in my search, I won't be leaving the Conclave again. So, I'm going to savor this respite and make it a long one. Who knows? Maybe I'll get so drunk that I'll give answer to Rosey's flirting.

Of course, Sarella was more responsible than that. She knew better than to get drunk whilst living a mummer's farce. Still, the thought was tempting. Pate was always very keen to point out that Rosey was an attractive girl, and Sarella found herself agreeing with him. That's my Dornish heritage at work, she thought in amusement. She was the Red Viper's daughter, after all.

An hour and a-half and two more rounds later, Sarella and the others decided to call it a night. By now, Roone was so inebriated that he could hardly even stand straight. As Armen handled the bill, Sarella and Pate pulled Roone to his feet, and they helped him to the door. The four of them exited the Quill and Tankard together, and they staggered all the way back to the Citadel.
Pate and Armen were not quite as tipsy as Roone, but they both seemed more than a little lightheaded. Luckily, Sarella had not as much to drink, and she was an expert at stomaching her alcohol. As such, she was still mostly sober.

Twenty minutes later, they were back in the dormitories in the Citadel. Roone managed to avoid passing out until they delivered him to his bedchamber. After dropping him off, Sarella, Pate, and Armen retreated to their own chambers.

When Sarella was safely within the confines of her room, she locked the door. Then she pushed a chair in front of it. That was a precaution in case someone ever picked the lock or came by with a skeleton key. The chair would not be guaranteed to keep such individuals out, but it would buy her enough time to wake up and hide away her feminine characteristics. *I can always explain why I barricaded the door. There's no way I could ever explain why my chest is not flat.*

Once the door was secure, Sarella walked over to her bed. She began to undress. First, she removed her chain. It was a small chain; it only had three links. *Still, that is not too bad for an acolyte.* The most recent link she had forged was copper for history.

After setting her chain on the nightstand, she slipped out of her acolyte robes. Beneath those she wore a tunic and breeches. She started to pull her tunic over her head, but when it was halfway over her head, she stopped.

She stopped because she thought she heard something. She listened closely, and it sounded like… humming.

At first, it was just humming. Then actual words replaced it. A voice quietly chanted "As he came into the window… it was the sound of… a crescendo."

At that, Sarella lowered her tunic and turned her gaze to the window. For as long as she had lived in this bedchamber, she had kept the window shut and sealed. At this moment, it still was. So, the voice could not have come from the outside. It was coming from within her bedroom.

The voice muttered softly "He came into her apartment… He left the bloodstains… on the carpet."

*What does that mean?* The floor of her room was hard, and she would have noticed if there was blood on it. *But if I am not careful, there might be some soon.*

The voice appeared to come from behind her. She glimpsed out the corner of her eye, and she saw a figure standing in the shadows. She could not make out the figure's face, but he appeared to be smirking. He added in "She ran underneath the table… He could see she… was unable."

That much was true. At this moment, she was unable to flee or fight back. But that did not mean she was defenseless. She was prepared to deal with intruders, and she had taken precautions for incidents such as this one.

Sarella calmly knelt before her bed and slipped her hand underneath the mattress. As she did this, the figure murmured "So, she ran into the bedroom… She was struck down… it was her doom."

That last line was the most ominous one so far. Still, Sarella did not panic. She just kept feeling around under her mattress. To her horror, she soon discovered there was nothing there. *Where the hells is it?*

Right then, she was grabbed from behind. She raised both her arms in attempt to fend off her assailant, but before she could fight back, a knife was held at her throat. A very familiar knife. The figure stated wryly "Looking for this?"
It only took Sarella a moment to confirm that it was her knife. The very same knife she had concealed under her bed for protection. She lowered her hands in angry defeat.

"Good choice," the figure commentedapprovingly, "That's the smart thing to do."

This time, she recognized the voice. She peered over her shoulder and whispered "Mollander?"

"Hello, Alleras," he rejoined, easing his grip on her, "Or should I say… Sarella?"

The Sand Snake was flabbergasted. Initially, she was inclined to feign ignorance or deny the accusation. However, there would have been no point. He had seen her chest wrappings, and that strange song of his implied that he at least had an inkling of the truth. If he already knew her name… he must have been certain of himself.

Sarella was more curious than anxious now. She sighed and uttered inquisitively "How long have you known?"

"Since the day we met," Mollander disclosed, "Before then, actually. I knew you would be coming to the Citadel long before you even got the idea to."

Now Sarella was downright confused. She thought aloud "That makes no sense whatsoever."

"I cannot fault you for thinking so," he stated, "I shall explain my meaning. I will also explain why I am here, and if you have questions, I will answer them to the best of my ability. I'm certain you've many."

To say the least. At that, Mollander lowered the knife and helped Sarella back up to her feet. She was considered trying to seize her knife from him, but her instincts told her not to fight him. Unlike a moment ago, he was treating her gently. As she turned to face him, he told her sincerely "I'm sorry if I scared you or hurt you. I assure you I have no intention of harming you in any way. I just needed to get your attention, and I needed you to take me seriously."

"You could have just asked to speak to me," she wryly stated.

"Yes, but that wouldn't have been as effective," Mollander contended. Perhaps not. "Besides, under normal circumstances, if I confronted you on your sex, I'm certain you would have denied it. If possible, you might have threatened me in order to keep my mouth shut."

"That's… fairly accurate," Sarella confessed. She could be very persuasive, and it was normally easy for her to get people to cooperate. While she was determined to keep her identity hidden at the Citadel, she had been prepared to deal with the fallback if ever it was discovered. If anyone ever learned the truth, she had been confident that she could intimidate that person into staying silent. After this encounter with Mollander, she was inclined to believe otherwise. Trying to intimidate him would have been a lost cause. "If someone was to expose my sex here, my life would be forfeit."

"Well, you needn't worry about me," Mollander proclaimed, "Your secret is safe with me."

That was a little reassuring. Despite how he had just held a knife to her throat, Sallera felt she could trust Mollander. He's kept quiet about my identity for this long, after all. Still, one particular question on her mind was left unanswered. Sarella stated "If you're not here to harm me, extort me, or toy with me, then why are you here?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Mollander drily remarked, giving a light smile. Not especially. When she did not supply an answer, his smile dropped slightly. He let out a slow breath, and he revealed "I'm here to
help you."

Sarella raised an eyebrow in interest. She asked, "Help me how?"

"I'll tell you in a moment," he pronounced, "But before we get into that, I would recommend that we sit down first. I could be here a long time. Maybe all night."

*He could always sleep here, if need be.* Sarella grinned wickedly at that thought. *We both know how that might turn out.* In actuality, that thought was not meant to be a lewd one, but it could still be viewed as somewhat suggestive, all the same.

Sarella amused herself. *Just a few minutes ago, he was holding a knife to my throat. Now, I'm already willing to let him poke me with another object that can pierce.* Sarella was not really expecting that to happen. Nor did she wish it to at this time. If she and Mollander did *that*, they would end up having much less time to talk. Right now, this conversation was at the top of her list of priorities.

"Alright, let's have a seat," Sarella ultimately conceded, gesturing to the table against the wall opposite the bed. She and Mollander swiftly walked over to the table. The table had come with three chairs. One of those chairs was still bracing the door, but the other two were in their usual spots on either side of the table. The acolyte and the novice sat down in them, and Mollander placed the knife in the center of the table's surface. Now neither of them was armed. *I hope we won't have to be.* Once they were settled, Sarella resumed the discussion with "So, what do you aim to help me with?"

"With your task," he clarified, "The one given to you by Lord Gregor Clegane."

Now Sarella was astounded. "How could you possibly know that?"

"It was simple, actually," Mollander pronounced, "Since I knew you who were all along, I also knew that your father is Prince Oberyn Martell. Earlier at the Quill and Tankard, you said you were helping a friend of your father's. I know the Red Viper has no shortage of friends, as popular as he is. But you described this particular friend as 'one of the few truly good men in this world' and 'the fairest man in the Seven Kingdoms.' That narrowed the list down to just one single person."

*He has a point. Lord Gregor is known far and wide for his benevolent nature and his firm system of justice.* Sarella muttered "I understand your logic. But that does not explain why you are suddenly so interested in my task."

"Indeed, it doesn't," Mollander commented, "Allow me to elaborate. While I *do* want to help you succeed in your task, I am not helping you solely out of the goodness of my heart. Truthfully, I am looking out for my own interests, as well. You see, I am endeavoring to make contact with the Mountain That Rides."

That provided some clarity. Sarella assumed "And you mean to get to him through me?"

"That is the idea, yes," Mollander confirmed, "I've been looking for a way to correspond with him for a very long time."

"Then why are you only talking to me about this now?" Sarella enquired.

"Because while I'm certain Gregor Clegane already knew your secret, I had no way of knowing if you knew that he knew," Mollander professed. "Until tonight, of course. But if I approached you before tonight and it turned out you were unaware of that, it would not have ended well for either
of us. If worse came to worst, both our secrets would have been needlessly exposed."

Sarella was intrigued. "What do you mean 'both our secrets'?"

"Your gender and my background," he replied.

"Your background?" she mumbled enquiringly. When he nodded, she said "I mean no offense, but what's so special about that? You're from the Stormlands, your father was a knight, and the reason you did not become a knight yourself is because of your clubfoot. That's all you've ever said about your background."

"That is only part of my background," Mollander explicated, "There's another part that no one knows about. Due to the unusual circumstances surrounding it, no one – including you – can ever know about it, either. Except Gregor Clegane."

"Why only him?" Sarella queried.

He hesitated a moment. At first, it seemed as though he would not answer her. After that, he looked her in the eye and pronounced "Because that part of my background is very similar to a part of his."

Sarella did not know what she was expecting Mollander to tell her. But she was taken aback by his answer. It was quite blunt and quite vague at the same time. She muttered in a flat tone of voice "What in the Seven are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about that 'source' Lord Gregor is known for," he illuminated straightforwardly, "I have the very same source."

Sarella did not know what to say to that. Ultimately, she remarked "I thought you said you've never met the Mountain."

"I haven't," he validated.

"Then how do you know that you and he have the same knowledge of the world?" she inquired.

"Because I know what the world would be like if he hadn't used his knowledge," Mollander enlightened her, "It would be very different from what it is now. It would be in complete disarray. The Seven Kingdoms would be torn apart by power struggles and war. Westerosi politics would be overrun with scandals and corruption. All nine Lords Paramount would have died in the span of five years. The Free Folk would have laid siege to the Wall. And even after all that, the Others would still have yet to march south."

Again, Sarella was speechless. I do not know if I can accept this. Or if I should accept it. All this ominous information was almost too much for her to process. A thought occurred to her. How do I even know he is being honest? For all she knew, he was just making all this up on the spot. Then again... he doesn't have any reason to mislead me. He came here to help me, after all.

"If all that startles you, it shouldn't," Mollander debated, "As of now, that is merely what could have happened. Thankfully, most of those crises have been averted. For the present, there are only two widescale issues we should be concerned about. The first and foremost being the return of the Others, of course."

That goes without saying. The entire realm was aware of that impending threat. Every living person in Westeros had been preparing to face the Army of the Dead for the last six years. In fact, the only people on the continent who seemed wholly unfazed by the return of the Others were a number of the Citadel's Archmaesters. Sarella stated curiously "And the second one?"
"Something a little closer to home," Mollander responded. Whatever that means. A few seconds later, he specified his meaning. He told her straightforwardly "The Conclave."

Somehow, Sarella was not as surprised as he may have expected her to be. Lord Gregor Clegane did suspect that the Archmaesters were plotting against him. Still, if Mollander regarded them as the same type and level of risk as the Long Night… Could they really be that big a danger?

She murmured softly "You mean to tell me the Conclave is a hazard to us?"

He nodded lightly, and he declared "The Others may be the greater menace, but the Conclave has done enough damage over the last eight thousand years to match the Long Night a dozen times over."

An uncomfortable silence followed that revelation. Once it passed, Sarella whispered disbelievingly "Surely you jest."

"I do not," Mollander proclaimed. Then he smirked and wittily added in "And don't call me 'surely.'"

That just baffled her. "I beg your pardon?"

"That was a jape," he claimed, "It's more humorous when you know the context of it. But never mind that; it's unimportant. Let's get back to the topic at hand."

"Gladly," Sarella commented. Albeit more than a little reluctantly. I don't think I'm going to particularly like what I'm about to hear. Be that as it may, if this information would somehow help her accomplish the task Lord Gregor had given her, she would not overlook it. In any case, she gazed up at Mollander and queried "Now, tell me; why do you believe the Conclave is almost as great a threat as the Others?"

"Where to begin?" he said sardonically. After a brief pause, he proclaimed "I know; let's start with technology. From an industrial standpoint, how much progress do you suppose the Seven Kingdoms has ever made?"

Sarella thought for a moment, and then she professed "In the last two decades, it has made plenty."

"Yes, it has," Mollander admitted, "But that was after Gregor Clegane rose to power in the North. For now, I'm focusing solely on the events which preceded Robert's Robbellion. How much technological progress would you say Westeros achieved before the Targaryens fell from power?"

Sarella thought again; this time for a few minutes. She knew the history of Westeros extremely well. I did just get my copper link. She tried hard to think of just one occasion when Westeros experienced a huge breakthrough in its culture. But no matter how hard she tried, she could not think of even one noteworthy example. Soon, she realized what exactly Mollander was insinuating. She answered him with "Honestly… hardly any."

"In other words, none," he argued, "That is just it. The people of Westeros are still using the same tools, equipment, and practices their ancestors used eight millennia ago. They live in a society with a culture that has always remained the same. That type of society is unnatural. Cultures are meant to grow, evolve, develop, and flourish. Other than going from seven actual kingdoms to seven kingdoms in name only, Westeros hasn't changed at all."

"Do you believe the Conclave is to blame?" Sarella presumed. If not, I have no idea where this is
"The Conclave is to blame," Mollander insisted. He folded his arms and continued with "I've been at the Citadel for more than twice as long as you have. To the Archmaesters, I am just another struggling novice. They do not see me as gifted or exceptional. Some of them even regard me as incompetent, incapable, or unqualified to be a maester. However, that is simply an act meant to deceive them. Their lack of interest has given me plenty of opportunities to sneak around the Citadel. If I am cautious, I can go almost anywhere unnoticed. You may have been investigating the Archmaesters for the last three weeks, but I've been doing my own investigating for the last five years. That's long enough for me to learn of every misdeed the Conclave has committed over the course of all of Westeros's history. Perpetually suppressing the technological development of the Seven Kingdoms is merely one of them."

Sarella was totally captivated by this point. *Things are really beginning to get interesting.* "What all else have they done?"

"Well, the full list is so long that you would literally need a whole library to store it," Mollander disclosed, "As such, I have neither the time nor the drive to go over everything. I'll just supply you with some specific examples."

"You have my undivided attention," Sarella declared.

Mollander folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. Once he was comfortable, he told her "Firstly, the Archmaesters were responsible for the extinction of the dragons. Ever since the days of Aegon the Conqueror, the Conclave has viewed dragons as a grave disruption of the natural order. For a while, they managed to tolerate the beasts. Then Aegon II fed Grand Maester Gerardys to Sunfyre. That was when the Conclave conspired to rid the realm of dragons. Over the course of the following century, they secretly fed the dragons vast amounts of a poison that slowly killed them off. By the end of Aegon III's reign, they were all but exterminated."

Sarella was stunned. *So, it turns out Aegon the Unlucky is not the one deserving of the moniker 'Dragonbane.'* She commented "Now that dragons have returned to the world, we should take steps to ensure that they will be protected from the Conclave."

"I concur," Mollander uttered, "But we do not have to worry about that just yet. The Targaryens understand how rare and important those three are. So does Gregor Clegane. We can count on them to keep the dragons safe. For now, at least."

"That's fortunate," said Sallera. *We'll need the dragons when the Others march on the Seven Kingdoms.*

"The Conclave is also culpable for the downfall of the Targaryen dynasty," Mollander notified her, "It is widely believed that pregnancies generated from incest produce madness in the resulting children. I've discovered there's no truth to that theory; it is complete and utter bullshit. A lie fabricated by the Conclave to cover up what was really going on."

"What was going on?" Sarella queried, even though she felt she would dread the answer.

"Poisoning again," he professed, "For two and a-half centuries, every Grand Maester who served on the small council slipped the Targaryens a drug that whittles away at the consumer's sanity. Thankfully, that particular drug is only effective about fifty percent of the time. That is why only about half of all Targaryens were mad. Even then, the majority of the victims only had slightly fewer wits than the average person. But there were some more extreme cases. Most notably Maegor the Cruel, Aegon the Unworthy, Aerion Brightflame, and, of course, Mad King Aerys."
"But there have been some cases outside the Targaryen lineage when incestuous relations yielded a child of unsound mind," Sarella notified him.

"That does not indicate a cause-and-effect relationship," Mollander countered, "Their poor mental health could be attributed to any one of a number of other factors. Poor upbringing, careless guidance, inadequate nurturing… or maybe the child was simply damaged to begin with."

*That would explain the reports on Viserys Targaryen.* She assumed "And all the Grand Maesters were an accessory to this plot?"

"Actually, there were a few who refused," Mollander pronounced, "Grand Maester Marwyn is one of those few. He is perhaps the only living Archmaester we can count as a good man. He has always opposed the Citadel's campaigns to control the Seven Kingdoms. That is why he was sent to King's Landing in the first place. You see, the Conclave doubted the Baratheon dynasty would last this long, so they did not deem it necessary to drug King Robert or his family. They appointed Marwyn to the small council just so he would not be at the Citadel to interfere with the Conclave's agenda."

*It would seem the Archmaesters do not have impeccable foresight. That could mean good news for us and our allies.* "So, Grand Maester Marwyn can be trusted?"

"Yes, he can," he affirmed, "But I cannot say the same for his acolytes. They may serve under him, but some of them still take orders from the Conclave. In fact, several months ago, a couple of them requested some ravens and other supplies to build their own rookery. Archmaester Norren was the one who provided them those materials."

"What would they need their own rookery for?" she inquired.

"Apparently, it's part of the Conclave's efforts to regain their standing in King's Landing," he revealed, "The acolytes appear to be working independently of the Archmaesters, but they are not working on their own. Somehow, House Lannister is involved in this affair, too."

*That is hardly surprising. The lions' notoriety knows no bounds.* Just then, a random thought entered Sarella's mind. Could the acolytes' rookery be somehow connected to the Pentoshi Bloodbath?

Before she could put that questions into words, Mollander went on with "Most recently, the Conclave launched a plot against Lord Gregor Clegane. I can confirm that they were indeed the ones who tried to destroy the Mountain's printing press. The Seneschal himself gave the order."

Although she had never doubted the Archmaesters' complicity in the printing press fiasco, Sarella Sand was astounded all the same. She stared down at her hands and mumbled "So, the Conclave truly is determined to obliterate the printing press."

"Not just the press," Mollander pronounced, "They've also targeted the man who patented it."

Sarella looked up in shock. She uttered softly "They're after Lord Gregor?"

Mollander nodded and expounded "The Archmaesters view the Mountain as the current biggest threat to their hold on the Seven Kingdoms. He is the first person who ever managed to revolutionize Westeros in every cultural aspect. Politics, economy, social order, the arts… even geography. While the rest of the realm has thrived due to his actions, the Conclave sees his deeds as an affront to their machinations. They are unwilling to allow these changes to go on for much longer. Therefore, sometime in the near future, they are going to try to kill him."
For a very brief moment, Sarella was horrified. Then her horror was expediently replaced with outrage. She spat through gritted teeth "Why would they dare to do that? Lord Gregor Clegane has done more for this country than all maesters have since their order was founded."

"You just answered your own question," Mollander drily stated, "I understand your fury. I'm furious myself. But the Archmaesters of the Citadel are an unscrupulous lot. We may have a king, eight Lords Paramount, and scores of lesser lords ruling over us, but at the end of the day, the true power comes from the Conclave. They will do anything and everything to stay in control of the Seven Kingdoms. They will even undo all the good Lord Gregor has instilled in the realm just to reassert their influence."

Sarella clenched her fists. Those bastard sons of pox-ridden harlots. She felt an almost overwhelming desire to stomp out of the room, march down the hallways, and strangle the first Archmaester she came across. Thankfully, she managed calm herself down and keep her anger under control, but her thirst for the Archmaesters' blood still lingered. She sternly muttered "Well, we cannot just sit idle and let them assassinate the Mountain."

"Oh, we won't," Mollander avowed, "I plan to stop them."

"How?" Sarella inquired.

Mollander was silent at first. Then a wicked grin gradually spread across his face, and he boldly announced, "By wiping them out."

Once more, Sarella was taken aback. She murmured quietly "Are… are you serious?"

"Completely," he proclaimed, "The Conclave is corrupt. It always has been, and unless we do something, it always will be. Therefore, I say we remove all the active Archmaesters from their stations. Permanently."

"How do you propose to do that?" Sarella uttered inquisitively, "There are scores of them. You are just one man. Even if I agreed to help you, there is no way we could eliminate them all. And even if we succeeded somehow, what would happen then? We would be labeled by everyone else as murderers."

"Unless the killings were to be interpreted as justice," Mollander countered. "That is why I want to get in touch with Gregor Clegane. If I bring my findings to his attention, I could persuade him to give me the Legion's support. That is critical. I will need the Legion's support in order to cleanse the Citadel."

"Cleanse it?" Sarella noted his queer choice of words, "Right now, I hate the Archmaesters every bit as much as you do. Yet even so, they are men, not vermin."

"Be that as it may, they are still pests," Mollander wittily disputed. I cannot really argue that point. "Once they're gone, their places will be taken by other men. Honorable, respectable men."

"I assume you have some idea of who these men might be?" Sarella asked rhetorically.

"More than an idea," Mollander informed her, "I have evaluated every maester currently stationed in the Citadel, and I have constructed a profile on each of them. I've already singled out all the ones who are more interested in the realm's prosperity than the Conclave's. Those are the men whom I imagine would occupy the heads of the branches."

"Impressive," Sarella commented. After a short pause, she asked "Once you've reformed the Conclave, who would you envision to be the next Seneschal?"
Mollander smiled widely, sat up in his chair, and declared "Me."

"You?" Sarella retorted, chuckling, "With all due respect, Mollander, you're still just a novice. Hells, even I am higher ranked than you."

"That may be," Mollander admitted, "But I have something no other maester has."

"What?" she queried.

"A gift," he told her, "The same gift as Gregor Clegane. Using that gift, he went from the impoverished son of a landed knight to one of the richest, most powerful lords in the Seven Kingdoms. That took him less than a year to accomplish. Every year since then, it has only made him stronger. Just think of all the ways that gift could benefit the Conclave."

"You make a fine argument," Sarella contended, "However, the Seneschal is reappointed annually. Your tenure would only last a year."

"Then we'll revise the system," Mollander proposed, "Maybe we could arrange it so that the office of the Seneschal could be held by anyone indefinitely, as long as the incumbent is of a sound mind."

"While that process does have its own appeal, the other maesters might not be so quick to accept it," Sarella supposed.

"You're right," Mollander conceded, "I expect most of them would be averse at first. If so, I would probably have to turn to Gregor Clegane once more. He could help me to sway our colleagues' minds."

"Through what means?" Sarella inquired skeptically.

"Reasoning, not intimidation, if that's what you're asking," Mollander illuminated. It was indeed what Sarella was really asking, and that answer helped to reassure her. The Mountain does resolve conflicts through diplomacy far more often than force. "Unlike the Archmaesters presently occupying the Conclave, the maesters I have in mind are all good men. I would not wish to coerce them into cooperation. I simply want them to hear me out and give me a chance to prove to them that I am the best possible candidate to lead them."

"Then convince me," Sarella suggested, "Go on, tell me why you would deserve to be Seneschal for life. If you acquired that authority, what would you do with it?"

"I would better the country," Mollander apprised her, "Just as Gregor Clegane has."

"Tell me more," she bade him.

He continued with "The Conclave would look out for everyone's interests; not just its own. It will give the power back to the crown, where it belongs. The Iron Throne and the Citadel would be kept separate. The Grand Maester would be the only liaison between the two. Likewise, every maester assigned to the noble houses would serve the families first, not the Archmaesters. Additionally, we would no longer hinder any efforts made to advance or reform Westeros. In fact, it will aid in those endeavors."

"How so?" Sarella enquired.

"Gregor Clegane has already introduced a number of practical innovations," Mollander explicated, "Cement, concrete, black powder, the printing press… all of them are invaluable. That's another
advantage of the gift: the ability to invent."

"What sort of things would you invent?" the Sand Snake said inquisitively.

"Things that would propel Westeros into a new age," he claimed, "An age of learning and discovery. If I told you of the things I plan to give this world, I am certain you would doubt me. In your position, I would be just as dubious. However, given time, I will bring these inventions into existence. Once I have, you will see for yourself what wonders they are capable of."

Sarella had mixed feelings to that revelation. She scratched the side of her neck and wondered aloud "Can the world even handle the sudden appearance of such inventions?"

"Some, but not all," Mollander contended, "Most of the inventions I have in mind are so forward-thinking that we will probably need to wait hundreds and hundreds of years before they can be introduced to the world."

Sarella snorted in amusement. "Just how long do you expect to live?"

"As long as I possibly can," he wittily rejoined, "Alas, I am not immortal. I know I will be long dead before the best of my inventions can be created. As such, I will have to leave behind detailed instruction manuals for the current generation's descendants to find. Writing the manuals will be simple. All I need to do is hide them somewhere and arrange for them to remain hidden until the time is right."

"My family might be able to help," she proposed, "The Martells are superb at guarding all manner of secrets. Granted, we've never kept one for centuries. That I know of, anyway."

"I appreciate the offer," Mollander professed, "I will keep it in mind, though I may ultimately choose not to utilize it. Somehow, I'll find a way to pass on my knowledge to the people of the Seven Kingdoms. But I will not do it rapidly or hastily. In my experience, progress is best made when it is steady and gradual."

"Some might disagree," Sarella debated, "But I suppose you would know best. It's your knowledge, after all. It's yours to share as you see fit."

"That we agree on," he stated frankly. There came a bit of quietness, and then he pronounced "I have many more ideas on how I would positively effect change as the Seneschal. There is one in particular which I'm certain you would approve of."

"What's that?" she queried.

He leaned forward and declared "When recruiting its members, the Citadel will no longer discriminate on basis of sex. Anyone will be allowed to join."

Sarella was surprised again. Pleasantly, this time. She asked hopefully "Do you honestly mean that?"

"Of course, I do," Mollander confirmed. He extended his hand and brushed it lightly against the front of her tunic. Normally, she would have slapped his hand away. For some reason, she did not. Strangely, she enjoyed it. It's been so long since a man last caressed my bosom. As he caressed her, he declared "Think on that. You would no longer have to bind your chest every morning before you leave this room. You would not have to continue living a lie just to bring your dream to fruition. You could take pride in your true identity and forge your own chain at the same time."

That's everything I've ever wanted. It almost sounded too good to be true. As Mollander pulled
back his hand, Sarella stated "I would be most grateful, but you'd be going to a lot of trouble to do
that just for me."

"It wouldn't be just for you," he confessed, "It would be for your entire sex. This policy of only
allowing males into the Citadel is outdated, impractical, wasteful, and – above all – unfair. This
world has always been unfair. It is past time we started thinking about how we could correct that. I
say we should begin by opening the Citadel's doors to all."

*Once more, we can agree on something. The world will never be fair, but there is much we could
do to make it less unfair.* By now, she only had one remaining reservation that needed to be
lessened. She pointed out "We would be taking a tremendous risk."

"I realize that," Mollander asserted, "But no one ever accomplished anything without
risks. You can attest to that."

"That is true," she admitted, gazing down at her bound chest. *How I'd love to walk the corridors of
this building without these bindings.* That was her greatest desire.

When she looked back up at Mollander, he remarked "So, with all that has been said and done, I
must know where we go from here. Will you work with me? Will you help me remake the
Conclave into an association we can be proud of?"

Sarella needed a few minutes to contemplate her response. Ultimately, she told him "Alright,
you've won me over. I'll write to Lord Gregor Clegane and tell him of your proposal. I cannot
guarantee he will readily accept it, but he will at least give it some serious consideration."

"That is all I'm asking for," Mollander pronounced, a small, satisfied smile crossing his face.

Chapter End Notes

Note: There will be a total of seven characters who are originally from our world in
this story (I chose that number mostly because I figured I may as well indulge this
franchise's constant overuse of it). By now, five of the Self-Inserts have been revealed:
Gregor Clegane, Kinvara (moonlighting as Melisandre), Hizdahr zo Loraq (dead),
Yezzan zo Qaggaz (dead), and Mollander.

If you are wondering, Kinvara's notion about a malignant Self-Insert is not just filler;
she is quite correct. But Mollander is not the one. While he will not necessarily be
Gregor's enemy, he is not quite an ally, either. In regards to the story, he is more an
anti-hero than a villain. However, the last two SIs… they will be antagonists, no
question.

I don't intend for them to remain in the shadows for much longer. Both of them have
already appeared in this story at some point, but I have kept their identities concealed.
You won't find any clues as to who they are in any previous chapter. Unless you
reread VERY closely.

I'll tell you this much: Other than Gregor/Gregory and Kinvara/Melanie, none of the
characters who have had POV sections so far are SIs. With that in mind, you can rule
out the following: Eddard, Elia, Lyanna, Tywin, Dacey, Oberyn, Tarrence, Gerion,
Stannis, Jorah, Obara, Victarion, Ellaria, Ellyn, Sandor, Willas, Daliah, Nymeria,
Tyrion, Robert, Whalen Frey, Jon, Daenerys, Aegon, Allard, Olenna, Jasper, Catelyn, Jeor, Rickard, Mira, Bonifer, Samwell, Ashara, Velix, Rodrik Greyjoy, Bran, Tyta, Ygritte, Brynden Tully, Cersei, Jon Arryn, Aemon, Polliver, Maron, Benjen, Bronn, Jon Connington, Tormund, Alyver, and Sarella. Of course, seven of those people are already dead. Plus, as stated in the previous chapter, none of my OCs are from our world, and eight of the people in that list are mine. Only one (Tarrence) is both an OC and dead.

That's all I have to tell you for now. You can try to figure out who the last two Sis are if you'd like, but I don't want you to waste too much of your own time on that. In any case, you'll hear from me again when I post the next update in another fortnight or so. Until then, take care of yourselves!
Imminent Challenges

Chapter Notes

Note: This will be the last chapter to take place in Essos. Everything that comes after will occur somewhere in Westeros. Also, updates may be spread a little further apart from now on. I currently have a lot going on in my private and personal life. Mainly, I am trying to find a new job (my last one was a contract position, and the contract expired a while back). I expect to be busy with that pursuit for a while longer, but not too much longer. I've already gotten some excellent leads.

By the way, this chapter marks the end of the fourth act. The fifth act (which will also be the final act) should cover between ten and fifteen chapters, all of them around this length (i.e. between 9,000 and 13,000 words). At that rate, this story should be concluded sometime in mid- to late summer. I hope you all will stay with me until then, and that you all continue to enjoy this story.

That is all. Proceed.

The strongest bonds between people were the ones between family. They should be, at any rate. The magnitude of one's faith in that belief largely depended on one's background.

Most of the Great Houses put family before everything else. The Starks were known to say, "the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives." The Martells answered every slight inflicted upon a loved one with force. The Tullys' words were "Family, Duty, Honor," and always in that exact order. Even the Greyjoys, who were notoriously mistrustful, regarded kin as one of their most valuable assets.

The Targaryens… they went without saying. They shared much more than just blood with one another. They also shared their beds. Of course, it had been a long time since the dragons had lain together. Daenerys Targaryen was the last child born of King Aerys Targaryen and his sister-wife Rhaella. Hopefully, their line would never witness another pair of siblings producing children. Even if that was the case, there was a chance the Targaryens might not do away with incest altogether.

Jon Targaryen and Daenerys Targaryen were both young, currently unwed, and had experienced great personal loss. Additionally, their greatest source of comfort and assurance from the pain of those losses had been each other. There was potential for their relationship to grow into something more. Perhaps it had already begun to grow into something more. Some of their most recent interactions suggested as much. So far, no one had said anything. Probably because there was essentially nothing wrong with what they were doing, or what could ultimately come from it. The joining of nephew and aunt is not nearly as bad as the joining of brother and sister. Tyrion Lannister would know, if no one else did.

Tyrion's elder twin siblings had once been inseparable. Their only true difference was their gender. Of course, one's gender usually determined how they were raised. That was no exception for Jaime and Cersei. He had been groomed to be a knight; she had been trained to be a lady. Even so, growing up, they had done everything else together. Tyrion suspected they may have even been each other's… first. He had never been able to confirm his suspicions, and he decided he would
rather not know if it was the truth. In any case, Jaime and Cersei still cared greatly for each other. They may have been married to others now, but they continued to correspond with each other.

Nevertheless, while some Lannisters were very close, not all the lions were treated as equals in the pride. That was another thing Tyrion knew for a certainty. In my house, deeds are often a much greater determinant of how one is treated than blood is.

Tyrion's uncles and brother had always treated him with kindness. Yet all his life, his father and sister had shown him nothing but cold disdain and spiteful disinterest. Both of them still blamed him for the death of his mother, Lady Joanna. Although that was the main reason they were so distant with him, it was not the only one. His stunted figure and bodily desires were just two of the many other reasons Father and Cersei had always despised him.

In spite of this, there was once a time when Tyrion would have done most anything to gain their acceptance, their approval, and even their love. No longer. Those days are long past, he decided. Tyrion wanted nothing and expected nothing from Cersei any more. There was, however, one thing he wanted and expected from Tywin Lannister: his father's head. I hope to claim it myself, even if I become a kinslayer in the process.

While Tyrion and his lord father had never gotten along, he had only harbored this wish to kill his father for about a fortnight. Around that time, his party had received a raven from Moat Cailin. The missive it brought was the first correspondence he and most of his company had had with the Seven Kingdoms since the start of the year. Yet it contained the grimmest news we've received in a long while.

Unsurprisingly, the missive had been sent by Lord Gregor Clegane. It had been written in Italian, which only the Cleganes of Moat Cailin and their household understood. As such, Lady Dacey, Alyver, and Prince Jon were the only ones there who could read the missive. Luckily, the three of them were able to translate it into the Common Tongue for everyone else.

Even before they finished the translation, Tyrion predicted the missive would yield some unsettling information. If the news was anything good or anything unremarkable, the Mountain would not have bothered to write it in such a way that only a select few could make sense of it. The only reason he would do that was if he did not want just anyone to know what information he was divulging.

Sure enough, the missive's contents were astonishing to say the least. The best part was that Lord Gregor had already uncovered the identity of Jon Connington's informant. The worst part was the informant's actual identity.

It turned out Father was the mastermind of the Pentoshi Bloodbath. That meant he was responsible for the deaths of so many good men and women, as well as the abduction of a couple more. Even though Tyrion did not want to believe that, he could find no reason not to. After all, Tywin Lannister had no qualms about casting aside his honor if it increased his odds of victory. Apart from that, few men had the cunning, the manpower, the resources, and the audacity to orchestrate such an ambush, especially when it involved the murders and attempted murders of dozens of Westerosi.

Tywin Lannister had been the cause of many of his younger son's grievances. Tyrion had been able to look past most of his father's transgressions towards him. But not this one. This one, he could never forgive or forget. That was because this time, Tyrion was not the only one Father had wronged. He's wronged countless others, among them Ellyn. No one wrongs Ellyn and lives to tell of it.
Despite coming from one of the richest and most powerful houses in Westeros, Tyrion's existence had not always been very fulfilling. In fact, it had been a rather lonely one up until eleven years ago. Then shortly after Gryejoy's Rebellion, a tourney was held at Lannisport, and Tyrion had attended the melee.

That was where he first encountered Ellyn Clegane. He was never the same after that. She had changed his life for the better, and he hers. To this day, their union still amazed a great many people. Sometimes, they themselves were a little amazed by how well their relationship worked. A dwarf and a giantess… who would have thought?

The day Tyrion met Ellyn was the third best day of his entire life. She had played a major part in the two best, as well. The second being the day I married her; the first being the day she gave birth to Duncan.

The worst day of Tyrion Lannister's had been the day of the Pentoshi Bloodbath. That was likely the worst day of a number of other people's lives, too. Including Ellyn's. Indeed, following the Bloodbath, Ellyn had been quite saddened. Not even the death of her father had dismayed her so.

Everyone who was fortunate enough to survive the Bloodbath still had to cope with the loss of friends, allies, and family in the aftermath. Everyone who perished… at least their suffering is over. Ours goes on. Some argued that other than the Targaryens, Tyrion and Ellyn had suffered the worst loss.

The two of them certainly felt so. After all, their son had been taken away from them. He was not dead, but he was still missing. Sometimes, that's even worse than dead. At least death brings closure. Be that as it may, Tyrion and Ellyn refused to entertain the idea that they would never see their little boy again. They prayed to the gods daily for his safe return to them. If the gods are good, we will be reunited with him very soon.

Although Duncan's kidnappers were supposedly under orders not to harm him, that did not stop his parents from fretting about his well-being. It had been almost two months since they last saw him. Before the Bloodbath, the longest either of them had ever gone without seeing him was two or three days. This prolonged separation was beginning to become unbearable for both of them.

The typical highborn woman would have started sobbing in despair long ago. Ellyn had yet to shed a tear over this fiasco. Not because she was dispassionate, but because she was trying to stay strong. Tears do not fit her, anyway. As far as Tyrion knew, Ellyn had only sobbed once in her life: when Duncan came into the world. But that had been more a reflexive action due to the pain of childbirth than an emotional outburst. All the same, even when Duncan was abducted, she had never actually broken down in hysterics. Even so, she could not fool Tyrion. He could tell she was every bit as worried about their son as he was.

Thankfully, their anxiety would not have to last too much longer. If all went well tomorrow, he would almost certainly be back in their arms by the end of the day. Almost certainly… Tyrion thought it best not to dwell on the possibility of otherwise. Still, he knew better than to be overly optimistic. All he could do at this point was hope for the best and play his part in the operation. I must focus on the operation.

Ever since they arrived in Braavos, Tyrion and his companions had been waiting impatiently for Jon Connington and his colleagues to arrive. That had given them plenty of time to prepare. A lot of those preparations had involved some investigating. Some very extensive investigating.

One of the first things they had learned was that a clandestine communications network had been established in Braavos. Ravens were being sent back and forth across the Narrow Sea from
somewhere within the Free City. Lady Brienne Tarth had been the first one to notice the ravens, and she had tracked them to a hovel just outside the Sealord's Palace.

The ravens' destination was obvious; Westeros was the only landmass on the other side of the Narrow Sea from Braavos. Furthermore, only the people of the Seven Kingdoms used ravens as a means of communications. However, there were no registered rookeries in Essos. *The only reason someone would go to the trouble of building a private one was if they did not want their activities to be uncovered.*

As such, Tyrion suspected the ravens in the hovel may have been directly related to the business with Connington. Some of his allies had come to develop that very same hypothesis. Lord Gregor's missive had conclusively verified that hypothesis, but before the Mountain's raven came, Tyrion and his associates were solely responsible for gathering all their own intelligence. That was what prompted them to delve deeper into the matter of the hovel.

The hovel was barely larger than a farmer's storage shed, and it looked on the verge of collapsing. At a glance, it was hardly remarkable. Yet its entrance was sealed shut. The only way in or out was through a hole in the roof, which the ravens passed through.

Ever since Lady Brienne discovered the hovel, it had been under constant observation by at least two Legionnaires. So far, ravens were the only things that had been seen entering or exiting it. Whichever way they went, each and every one of them always had a missive attached to its talons. In Tyrion's mind, there were only two plausible explanations that could account for that. Either all those ravens with all those missives were really just *one* raven with *one* missive, or the hovel was actually bigger than it appeared. *Of course, it had to be the latter. No raven is clever enough to go in a circle that many times.*

Ellyn had speculated that the hovel may have been built atop a secret entrance to the underground. The theory certainly had merit, so they chose to follow up on it. For this, they had to venture beneath the streets of Braavos. Thus, Tyrion, Ellyn, Dacey, Ser Lothor Brune, Lady Brienne, Ser Bronn, and a handful of House Clegane retainers had gone to investigate.

Thankfully, they did not have to enter the sewers. The furthest they had to go was the level immediately below the ground and immediately above the sewers. In any case, it turned out Ellyn was correct. *As she usually is.*

It was not too hard to find and get to the subterranean area beneath the Sealord's Palace. After wandering around the vicinity for a while, they came across a spiral staircase. By monitoring the logistics of their movements, they determined that the staircase could only lead up to the hovel. As a precaution, they had decided against going up the staircase just yet. Instead, they had elected to wait around for someone else to ascend or descend it. *No need to risk revealing ourselves prematurely. At least not before our foes have revealed themselves first.*

They only had to linger for a couple hours. After that, a hidden door at the top of the staircase was opened. The sound of ravens cooing could be heard from above.

Three men had emerged from the door, and they had descended the staircase together. Rather than intercepting them or ensnaring them, Tyrion and the others had simply hidden in the shadows and allowed them to pass by.

Nonetheless, they were careful not to let the men slip through their fingers. Before the men could disappear from their sight, Tyrion, Ellyn, Dacey, Lothor, Brienne, Bronn, and the Clegane retainers had gone after them. Using the darkness and quietness as cover, they had stealthily followed the
men up to the surface. When they were back above ground, they continued to pursue them. All the while, they made certain to keep a safe distance to avoid detection.

The three men ultimately led them to a large building in the Drowned Town. The building appeared to be an inn of sorts, yet there was so sign it had received any guests in a very long time. They later found out that the building had indeed been an inn once, but it had closed down several years ago due to a lack of adequate customers.

In spite of that, the building was still in use. All property deeds in Braavos were handled by the Iron Bank. They had checked with the Bank, and they had discovered that near the end of the last year, Urswyck of the Brave Companions had taken out the deed to the rundown inn on an indefinite loan.

That was all the proof they needed to confirm that Connington and the ravens in the hovel were connected. The men we followed were likely lesser members of the Companions. They did not have the look of Westerosi or Ghiscari, so they could not have been from the treacherous faction of the Golden Company or the pits of Slaver's Bay.

In light of this development, Lady Dacey had decided to assign three Legionnaires to observe the three Companions and their base. They would principally serve as sentries. One of the sentries would stay outside the base at all times. Another would constantly monitor the Companions' movements if they went anywhere else. The third would assist the first two with their duties, and he would also hasten back to the Legionnaires' house in the event of an unexpected incident.

Up until today, no such incidents had transpired. This morning, however, was an exception. Shortly after daybreak, the third sentry had come dashing back to the house. When he caught his breath, he had reported seeing a large group of men approach the Companions' base. The three Companions had allowed every one of them entrance to the base.

According to the sentry, the group had been a very diverse one. He had spotted people of many different ethnicities among their ranks. While most of them appeared to be from the Free Cities or Slaver's Bay, he claimed some of them were Westerosi.

It appears Jon Connington has finally made it to Braavos. That meant everyone in Connington's party – including the ones he had taken prisoner – was now there, as well. Duncan is here at last.

Tyrion and Ellyn's first impulse was to storm the Brave Companions' base and rescue the hostages straightaway. In actuality, they did no such thing. As much as they yearned to get their son back, they knew better than to rush into this situation without thinking. We cannot afford to be reckless. We could endanger ourselves, our allies, or, worse yet, Duncan.

Fortunately, Dacey had assured Tyrion and his wife that she was going to get her nephew back soon. Very soon, she had emphasized.

The Legionnaires had spent the rest of the morning and the entirety of the afternoon devising a plan to raid the Companions' base. In doing so, they would kill or arrest all of Connington's men, take Connington himself into custody, and free his hostages. Not in that exact order, I hope. Needless to say, the Lannisters' first priority was recovering Duncan.

The rescue operation had been Dacey's idea originally, but Tyrion and Ellyn had been heavily involved in its design and organization. Although the Northwoman was quite intelligent, it was well-known that the Imp and the Imp's Bitch possessed sharper wits and more strategic minds than most others. This was one instance when those gifts would serve them well. We'll do anything to get our boy back.
At present, Tyrion Lannister was in the Legionnaire house. Specifically, he was in the study. That house had been his place of residence for nearly a whole turn of the moon. But tonight may be last night we have to sleep in here. That, of course, would depend on how tomorrow went.

Tyrion was not alone in the study. Ellyn, Dacey, Ser Lothor, Lady Daliah Clegane, Bronn, Polliver, the Tickler, Prince Jon, Princess Daenerys, Lady Brienne, Grey Worm, Missandei, and his nephew Alyver were assembled there. In other words, every member of their party who knew the truth of Lyanna Stark was accounted for. All but one, that is.

Tyrion's niece, Tyta, was also aware that Lyanna Stark was alive, posing as Jon Targaryen's maid, and a captive of Jon Connington. However, she was not present at this time. Tyrion did not know where Tyta was exactly, but he was certain she was somewhere out in the city. After all, she had been away from the Legionnaire house for most of the last month. She did not even sleep or eat there. In fact, according to Lady Daliah and Ser Bronn, ever since they first came to Braavos, Tyta had only visited the house about once a week. If even that often.

Whenever Tyta did visit, she was usually rather quiet and withdrawn. She was also very reticent about her day-to-day activities in Braavos. She simply referred to it as her "training." The only people she ever discussed that with were Bronn, Polliver, Brienne, and her grandmother. The four of them seemed to be the only ones who knew what the girl was really up to, and they refused to share that information with anyone else.

Nonetheless, despite all the secrecy surrounding Tyta's whereabouts, Tyrion had a faint idea of what his niece was doing during the day and where she went at the end of it. He had gotten that idea simply by observing her behavior and mannerisms. She went blind for a while and regained her sight almost as quickly as she lost it, she has vastly improved her aptitude for melee combat, her speech has become more cryptic, she can slip in or out of a room without anyone noticing, and every time she leaves this place, she always goes off in the direction of a certain edifice. The one with the monochromatic door.

With all those facts in mind, Tyrion could find only one possible explanation. When he shared this conclusion with his wife, she had initially been skeptical. When Ellyn could find no way to refute his argument, she had thought it over again, and she had gradually come to share his conviction.

Ellyn had been tempted to confront her mother on this issue, but she decided not to. After all, Lady Daliah was already under enough stress. Every time Tyta returned to the house, she seemed immensely relieved. Whereas every time her granddaughter left, she seemed distraught. I'd wager that she does not truly accept Tyta's 'training.' She likely opposes it. Yet she was doing nothing to stop Tyta. If I were to guess, Lord Gregor may have convinced his lady mother to go along with this matter.

Normally, Lady Brienne would be guarding Tyta. However, the heiress to Evenfall Hall was helping to prepare for the rescue operation. After all, other than Dacey and Ellyn, she was the best swordswoman in Westeros. Her skills with a blade would be of great use in the raid. So, in her stead, some retainers of House Clegane of Clegane's Keep were protecting the young lady for now.

At any rate, Tyrion and his companions had been gathered in the study for the last six or seven hours. They had spent a quarter of that interval composing the plan to raid the Companions' base, and they had spent the remaining three-quarters revising it. By now, the details of the plan were all but finalized. That is good; I am beginning to tire of all this discussion. Some of the others were, as well.

Nevertheless, Lady Dacey insisted on going over everything one last time to ensure that everyone fully understood what the raid would involve and what was expected of them. Just like when Lord
Gregor spoke to us all before we parted ways at Moat Cailin.

Lady Dacey was seated on a cushioned bench in the center of the study. Alyver was seated beside her. Tyrion, Ellyn, and Lady Daliah were seated together on an adjoining bench. Everyone else was standing in various places around them. There was a table in-between the benches.

"Are we all clear when the raid will happen?" Lady Dacey asked rhetorically.

"The very early morning, just before the Sun appears over the horizon," Ellyn responded. "The reason being that that's when most of Connington's men should still be asleep, and thus, it'd the best opportunity for us to catch them off their guard."

"Correct," Dacey affirmed. She then directed everyone's attention to a large sheet of parchment on the table. An elaborate top-down drawing of the Brave Companions' base was on the parchment. Dacey was using it as a point of reference. We are damn lucky the Iron Bank was willing to give us these blueprints. For a 'small' fee, of course. "Before we stage the raid, it is critical that we cut off all means of escape for the adversary. As such, we must surround the inn on all four sides. We will divide our forces into two groups, and the first group will further divide into four teams. Each team will block off one side of the base. Now, tell me; who will take which side?"

"My team will cover the southern block," Polliver pronounced.

"Mine shall handle the east," Brienne declared.

"Mine will take the west," Bronn remarked.

"And mine will come from the north," Tyrion professed.

Tyrion wondered why he had been selected as a team leader. The other three, he could understand. Polliver, Brienne, and Bronn had not been present at the Pentoshi Bloodbath. Therefore, if one of Connington's men happened to look out a window whilst they were moving into position, no one would recognize any of them.

By contrast, Tyrion's chances of being recognized were much higher. Connington's men could identify him easily, even if he had not been at the Bloodbath. There are not many highborn dwarfs in the world, and no one would ever forget my ugly face.

Lady Dacey must have had a reason for assigning him to the advance team. Maybe it was because if someone looked out a window, they would not see him anyway. Maybe it was because there were no windows on the northern side of the Companions' base. Or maybe she simply trusted him.

"Once we've surrounded the building, we'll have to act fast," Dacey professed, "After all, it could be mere minutes before Connington's men notice something is out of place. So, the moment we've established a secure perimeter, the second half of our forces will move in. This half will only have two teams. I will lead one."

"And I the other one," Ellyn commented plainly.

Dacey nodded, and then she stated "Now, there are only two ways in or out of the building: the main entrance on the east side, and the back exit on the north side. My team will use the main entrance. Ellyn's will use the back exit. Once we are inside, we must neutralize Connington's forces as quickly as possible."

After a short pause, the Northwoman resumed with "Given the time of this operation, we can infer that most of Connington's men will be on the higher levels, where the beds are. Everyone up there
will likely be asleep. But there will almost certainly be at least a few guards on the ground floor. If so, we must eliminate them quietly. Then we can slip upstairs and deal with the others before they awake."

_Some might call it a craven's tactic to kill an enemy while he sleeps. But an exception can be made for the likes of Connington. Why fight honorably against those who have no honor?_

"Now, Connington is the only one we need alive," Dacey stated, "But if any of his subordinates choose to surrender, I want them taken into custody, too. Not that I intend to show them clemency. They simply might know some valuable information, and I do not appreciate the waste of potential resources."

_Fair point. Once Connington's underlings have outlived their usefulness, however, I expect they will be relieved of their heads._ Tyrion was not the only one who felt so. Every other person in that room had no intention of sparing their enemies.

"That brings us to the most important part: the hostages," said Dacey Clegane. _Ellyn and I would agree there. So would Prince Jon, for that matter._ Lady Dacey gestured to a certain room in the southwestern corner of the drawing of the Companions' base, and she proclaimed "While the best we can do is conjecture, I personally believe the hostages are being held here, in what used to be the innkeeper's quarters."

"From a tactical standpoint, it is the most fortifiable room in the base," Tyrion perceived, "None of its walls connect to the building's exterior, it can only be opened with a certain key, and there is no way to approach the door without being seen."

"Just so," the Northwoman affirmed, "That said, we can be certain that Connington will have guards posted within the room, without the room, or both within and without. Since they have orders to keep Duncan and Lyanna alive and healthy, we do not have to worry about jeopardizing their safety. As for Greta… they may see her as expendable. They could threaten to kill her if we do not back away."

"We will not allow that," Ellyn asserted. _Indeed not. Greta may not be highborn or especially valuable as a hostage, but she is still a fine handmaiden and a decent person. She has as much of a right to live as any of us._ Aside from that, Greta was only eight and ten; she had only just begun to live.

"If need be, you can leave Greta to me, milady," Bronn avowed. Tyrion smirked at that. _When a fair maiden's involved, one can always count on him to come to the rescue._ In all likelihood, someone other than Bronn would end up saving Greta if she needed saving.

There came a brief bout of silence, and then Lady Dacey stated "That concludes the raid itself. Now I would like to go over the countermeasures we've established in the event that something goes awry. This should not take long."

_Well, we've already been here for close to eight hours. We may as well finish what we started._

Dacey Clegane gazed around the room and pronounced "If any of Connington's units somehow get past our barricade, it is imperative that we stop them. So, we must ensure that all our soldiers have orders to pursue and destroy the adversary. Even if Connington's men manage to evade ours, you can rest assured they will not get very far. Why?"

"Because Unsullied will be standing guard at every gate and harbor in Braavos," Grey Worm declared.
"Correct," Lady Dacey said approvingly. *We can rely on the Unsullied to do their duty.* Earlier, they had considered using the Unsullied to surround the Companions' base in place of their own units, but they had decided the eunuch warriors would have been too conspicuous. Besides, many of the local bravos might have been tempted to challenge the always-armed Unsullied to a skirmish. "I would remind you all that we do not have to worry about intervention on the part of townsfolk. Is that right, Ser Lothor?"

"It is, my lady," the Crownlander knight murmured, gazing around the room, "Shortly after we arrived in this city, I went to the Sealord of Braavos and told him of our conflict with Jon Connington. The Sealord himself has given his blessing for us to take violent action against Connington. Furthermore, the First Sword will see to it that every bystander within fifty feet of the Companions' base will be evacuated from the area at least fifteen minutes before we launch our raid. Fifteen minutes may seem insufficient, but any sooner than that, and we'd risk tipping off the enemy."

*We'll make it work. We have to; what other choice have we?*

Lady Daliah Clegane had been silent for most of the last eight hours. She would play no direct role in the raid; she was just an observer. Even so, she spoke up here: "Your plan is a very good one, Dacey. I do not doubt the likelihood of its success, and I want to rescue Duncan and the others as much as anyone here. All the same… are you certain tomorrow is not soon to stage this raid?"

"No, I do not," Dacey told her mother-by-law, "Even if it was, tomorrow would still be our most viable option. We know from Gregor that Connington and his men are expecting to find a ship in Braavos that will take them to the Seven Kingdoms. Thanks in large part to my son Rickard, no such ship awaits them here."

*We're damn lucky Rick was able to intimidate my idiot cousins into cooperating with him. Now, he has control of my father's hidden rookery, and he's cut off Connington's passage into Westeros.* Tyrion felt quite proud of his nephew. Rickard Clegane could be just as efficient and reliable as his lord father.

"Since Connington's forces have been on horseback for most of the last two months, we can be fairly certain they will want to spend at least one night indoors," Dacey contended. *Well, I certainly would. Especially if I was expected to follow such a long ride with an almost-as-long voyage at sea.* "As such, we do not have to worry about them going anywhere today. But they might go to the harbor as soon as tomorrow. Once they notice their escort is absent, they could catch on. Even if they don't, they might recognize some of our vessels docked in the ports."

*That would definitely give us away.* Tyrion then sat up and remarked "Any time after tomorrow would be too late. Today would be far too soon. Tomorrow morning might be too soon, as well, but as of now, it would be the best and shrewdest time for us to raid the Brave Companions' base."

"I agree," said Dacey Clegane. After a short pause, she looked around at the other people and presumed "Are all of you absolutely clear on the roles you will play in this operation?"

All around the study, there was a great deal of nodding heads and muttering words of confirmation. Evidently, every person there understood completely.

That was not to say everyone was totally content with it. Alyver turned to his lady mother and stated hopefully "You are certain I cannot help in the raid, Mother?"

"I'm afraid not, Al," the Northwoman uttered firmly, "But not because I doubt your ability, or because I mean to shelter you from the horrors of war. I already know you can handle yourself in
battle. Instead, it is because you and Lady Daliah will be the only nobles left in this house when we execute the raid. As such, I can only entrust you with your grandmother's safety."

Dacey Clegane was not one to mollycoddle her children, and she only spoke condescendingly to people she despised. Tyrion knew full well she was talking to Alyver as a man, not as a boy. Other than Lady Daliah, he will be of higher birth than anyone else in this house tomorrow morning. He'll be the lord of the house, if only for a morning. He should savor any opportunity to play the lord. Like his nephew, Tyrion was a second son, and he knew such opportunities were rare for second sons.

At any rate, Alyver no longer seemed dismayed about being left behind. Even though he had never even met his paternal grandmother until a month ago, he had come to love her as much as his maternal grandmother. He looked over at Lady Daliah, smiled softly, and told his mother "I promise you I will not fail to protect her."

Lady Daliah smiled back at her grandson and stated merrily "I feel safer already, Alyver."

Lady Dacey grinned at this tender exchange between her son and her mother-by-law. After that, she donned a more serious expression, and she announced "If there is nothing else, I believe we are done here. All we can do now is prepare for tomorrow morning. The best way to do that is to get some rest and conserve our strength."

"Dacey, are you ordering us to 'take it easy?'" Ellyn japed. Tyrion scoffed. There she goes; using her brother's quaint expressions again.

"I suppose I am, Ellyn," the older woman uttered plainly, "And I expect that order to be obeyed. I do not want anyone doing anything strenuous for the rest of the day. So, all of you, try to relax while staying focused on tomorrow morning. I mean for us to rise well before the Sun."

*Then Ellyn and I may see our son before the Sun.*

The rest of the day was rather dull. When Lady Dacey instructed everyone to 'take it easy,' she essentially meant for them to do as little physical activity as possible. So, going outdoors was out of the question. Normally, Tyrion would have been fine with staying inside. Unfortunately, there was not much to do at the Legionnaire house. As a result, the afternoon seemed to drag on endlessly.

In the early evening, Tyta came by. She seemed rather giddy. It turned out she had some good news.

"My training is almost complete," she proudly announced to everyone, "Tomorrow is my final test."

*She is a remarkably fast learner.* As some of the others congratulated Tyta on her rapid progress, Tyrion murmured blankly "I assume you cannot tell us anything about this particular test?"

"Indeed not, Uncle Tyrion," the girl confirmed, "But I can say that it will take place out in the city. So, if you leave the house tomorrow, there's chance I might run into you."

"That is not very likely," Dacey told her, "Unless you happen to pass through the Drowned Town in the early morning."

"No, I won't be going there," Tyta revealed, "But I will be going somewhere nearby."

"Where?" Ellyn enquired.
"The Gate," Tyta illuminated.

Lothor Brune raised an eyebrow and remarked "Is your 'master' treating you to tomorrow's play?"

"Not quite, Ser Lothor," the Clegane daughter stated, "I'm not going to see the play. I'm going to see one of the mummers performing in the play. I can't say more than that."

"Very well, sweetling," Lady Daliah acknowledged.

This particular visit of Tyta's was longer than any of her prior visits. She was even able to stay for supper this time. But a couple hours after sunset, she had to return to her master.

Shortly after Tyta left, Dacey ordered everyone to turn in for the night. She shared a room with her sons, but Tyrion and Ellyn had their own private chamber. The only other married couple there was Polliver and his wife Ros. The two of them had their own room, as well. However, they shared theirs with their son and daughter.

Tyrion and Ellyn were looking forward to doing the same with their own son tomorrow night. *Duncan will likely be sleeping in our bed for a long time after tomorrow.* At present, that was the only way they could be certainty of his safety.

As Tyrion climbed into bed that night, he caught a glimpse of Ellyn's face. She looked apprehensive. Of course, she had been apprehensive ever since the Pentoshi Bloodbath. Tonight, however, she looked a different sort of apprehensive. Before tonight, she had seemed worried. Tonight, she seemed uncertain.

"Ellyn, are you alright?" the dwarf asked his wife in concern.

At first, she said nothing. Then she gradually turned to face her husband, and she mumbled inquisitively "Tyrion, do you think I should stay here during tomorrow's raid?"

Tyrion Lannister was surprised by that question. He frowned and sternly responded with "Of course not. You have an important role to play in the plan, and aside from that, you've every right to be there. How could you even ask me that?"

"Because there is something I must tell you," she disclosed, "Once you know of it, you might change your answer."

"And I might not," Tyrion countered. He leaned closer and bade her "First, tell me."

Ellyn tentatively folded her hands together and stared at the wall in front of her, as though she was contemplating her words. After that, she looked Tyrion in the eye and said "I believe I am with child."

Tyrion did not know what he was expecting to hear. *I certainly was not expecting to hear that.* He was not quite certain how to react to it, either.

The first time Ellyn told him that, he had been delighted. Under different circumstances, he probably would have been delighted this time, as well. Alas, he could not claim to be pleased. Even so, he was by no means displeased.

Before the Pentoshi Bloodbath, Tyrion and Ellyn had actually talked about having another child. For the last two months, however, they had been too preoccupied with recovering Duncan to give the concept any further thought.
Tyrion was still more than happy to welcome another addition to the family someday. He did not doubt that Ellyn felt the same. He only wished she had given him this news at a more favorable time. *Now of all times?* He was somewhat irritated by his wife's timing.

Still, he did not lose his composure. There was no need to get angry to Ellyn. *I'm not going to get angry at her.* After all, she could have waited until after the raid to tell him this. The fact that she chose to tell him before then said something of how deeply she cared about his feelings.

Tyrion sat up in bed and queried "How long?"

"About three months," she disclosed, "Maybe four."

Tyrion thought back a little. *That was around the time we crossed the Dothraki Sea.* While he and Ellyn had a very active sex life, they had not done a lot of fucking between Pentos and Vaes Dothrak. For most of that interval, they had been too exhausted from all the horseback riding for any other physical activity. *Except for that one time.* Specifically, the night they slept outside their pavilion.

That had been a very pleasant and amusing night. Their passionate exchange had been on display for the entire camp to see. Yet even now, neither of them felt the least bit ashamed. *That was a memorable night. If our next child is the product of that night, then we have another reason to remember it.*

"Why are you only telling me now?" Tyrion inquired.

"Several reasons," Ellyn informed him, "Firstly, I did not start experiencing any symptoms until after we left Vaes Dothrak. I was often disoriented, I frequently felt nauseous in the morning, and I distinctly recall missing my moon's blood. For a while, I simply wrote all that off as side effects from the riding. I did not begin to suspect it was something else until we left Pentos. That was when I began to exhibit some of the more advanced symptoms."

"I don't recall seeing anything of the sort happen to you," Tyrion pointed out.

"Because I kept it hidden from everyone," Ellyn confessed, "Including you."

"Why did you do that?" Tyrion mumbled demandingly, trying not to sound hurt or aggravated.

"Back then, I was still not wholly certain that I was pregnant," she elucidated, "It could have been seasickness or something else. Until I could confirm what was happening to me, I did not want to make anyone worry. Especially not you, as you already had enough to worry about with Duncan's abduction."

"So did you," Tyrion argued.

"Yes, but my health is my business," Ellyn disputed, "There was no need to add more weight to your burden."

"I am touched by your concern," Tyrion commented, "Even so, it was extremely foolish to keep this to yourself for so long. I would gladly share your burden. It may be your body, but the babe is mine, too. Aside from that… Ellyn, do you know how many miscarriages result from excess stress? Almost as many as the number that result from falling over."

Ellyn gazed down at her hands, and she mumbled sincerely "I'm sorry, Tyrion. I'm so sorry."

"I don't want an apology," Tyrion told her. He lifted her chin with his small hand and kissed her
softly on the lips, and then he said "I want you to have faith in me. You must know by now that nothing you do could ever make me hate you. Nothing."

Even if you were to take a lover in secret, I would not hate you. Tyrion did not say that aloud, because he did not want to sound as though he was challenging his wife's fidelity. She had never given him any reason to question it, anyway. She had been a maid on the night of their wedding, after all.

A soft smile crossed Ellyn's face, and she pulled her husband into a firm embrace. She was much larger and stronger than he was, but she was always careful not to crush him.

When she released him from her grasp, Tyrion looked his wife in the eye and told her "Now, getting back to what we were talking about earlier, I maintain my original answer to your question. I still believe you should not be excluded from the raid. In light of your… condition, however, I would like to ask that you only engage the enemy in combat if it cannot be avoided, or if our allies are in dire need of reinforcements."

"I think that is a reasonable request," Ellyn pronounced, placing a hand on her abdomen, "I have taken good care of this little one so far. I intend to keep it safe."

"Please do," Tyrion murmured slyly, "There is no cause for worry. I don't know if Duncan has had his first memory yet. I pray he has not; I do not want him to remember anything of the ordeal he's been through. Even so, just imagine how happy he is going to be when he finds out he'll soon be an older brother."

"I'd rather imagine him safely in our arms," Ellyn commented candidly.

"I'd much prefer that, too," Tyrion admitted, "But worry not. Just half a day more, and we will not have to imagine that."

The thought of that seemed to set Ellyn's mind at ease. Tyrion knew it would; it had set his at ease, too. If there are gods in this world, I pray they will at least be good enough to grant us this one boon. The boon was nothing selfish or outrageously demanded. All they wanted was their most precious treasure returned to them safely. As long as our family is whole, nothing else matters.

Less than ten minutes after this conversation ended, the dwarf and the giantess fell into a blissful slumber. One of Tyrion's hands rested protectively over Ellyn's abdomen as they slept.

Eight hours later, Tyrion found himself roaming the streets of Braavos. He was leading a preassigned team of Legionnaires through the Drowned Town. They were rapidly closing in on the Companions' base from the north. Most of his men were armed with swords and spears. Tyrion carried his axe. This is all the steel I need. He was itching to bury it in the skull of some pit fighter, Brave Companion, or Golden Company mercenary.

Soon enough, they reached the northern side of the Brave Companions' base. They approached the building's exterior with caution. Other than the sentries and their fellow Legionnaires, there was no one in the area. Connington had not posted any lookouts in the streets or at the windows.

There was a lone guard on the roof of the building, but he was quickly and quietly taken out by an arrow from Ser Lothor Brune's bow. After the guard was neutralized, Tyrion and the other three teams finished surrounding the base.

Once the first group secured a perimeter around the Companions' base, the second group moved in. That was when the actual raid commenced. Ellyn easily forced the back exit open, and she
managed to do it without making much noise. She was the first to enter, but Tyrion followed her
close behind.

The Lannisters and their colleagues stealthily made their way through the first floor of the
building. They did not encounter anyone until they reached what used to be the common room.
There were about a dozen of Connington's men gathered there, but only four of them appeared to
be armed.

As Tyrion recalled from the building's blueprints, there were only two ways into the common
room. He and Ellyn were coming through one of them; Dacey and her units would be coming
through the other. They would cut off all means of escape for Connington's men. *This might have
been a nice inn in its day. Now, all it's going to be is a battleground.*

As Tyrion and Ellyn stood idle near the end of the hallway, she lightly tapped the hilt of her
dagger against the wall. That was the signal that they were in position. A few seconds later, they
heard a similar noise from the other side of the common room. That was the sound of Dacey
tapping the hilt of her longsword against the wall of the common room's other adjoining hallway.
She was in position, as well. *We have them trapped now.*

Tyrion, Ellyn, Dacey, and their soldiers simultaneously stormed into the common room. They
cought Connington's men completely off their guard. Dacey shoved *Bearswrath* through the face
of the nearest one. Four more were killed before they even had time to react. Even then, the other
seven did not put up much of a fight.

Tyrion recognized one of them as Camarron of the Count, one of the most celebrated pit fighters of
Meereen. He may have been a legend in the ring, but he did not amount to much in close quarters.
Ellyn managed to singlehandedly fend off the blows of his greatsword and stab him in the
midsection through an opening in his heavy armor with her dagger.

Tyrion, meanwhile, was dealing with an opponent of his own. He faced off against Ser Jon
Lothston of the Golden Company. The man may have been adept with a sword, but he could not
reach low enough to parry Tyrion's underhand blows. The dwarf maneuvered around the Westerosi
exile and swung at the back of his legs. The man groaned and stumbled onto his knees. While he
was down, Tyrion raised his axe again and sank it into Jon Lothston's skull.

Four of the five remaining enemies were quickly dispatched. Only one of them had the sense to
yield. Tyrion recognized him as Faithful Urswyck, the second-in-command of the Brave
Companions. *Since we burned Vargo Hoat, I suppose he's first-in-command now.* Not that
Urswyck would have much time to relish in that "promotion."

As the Tickler bound Urswyck's hands behind his back, scores of Legionnaires piled into the
common room. When Jon Targaryen entered, he happened to walk right past Urswyck. Tyrion
noted the prince seemed somewhat intrigued to see the Brave Companion there.

Once Urswyck was restrained, Lady Dacey held *Bearswrath* up to his throat and demanded
"Where are the rest of your affiliates?"

"Upstairs," Urswyck answered straightforwardly, "We were just about to go wake them."

"And the hostages?" Dacey queried.

"They're in there," Urswyck apprised her, gesturing to a door behind the bar. *Just as Dacey
suspected.*
"How many guards?" the Northwoman said inquiringly.

"Three," the Brave Companion stated. Not so brave now, is he? Dacev looked as though she did not believe him. She held her longsword closer to his throat, and he nervously stated "Only three, I swear! Two within; one without."

Lady Dacey Clegane was satisfied by that. She lowered her sword, gazed around at her allies, and proceeded to issue some orders. She pronounced "Lothor, head back outside and maintain our blockade of the building. Oh, and tell Dany it is now safe for her to come inside. Bronn, Polliver, go upstairs and find Jon Connington. Arrest him, and cut the throats of the rest of his men. Spare none of them. Tyrion, Ellyn, Jon, come with me. We're getting our people back."

Finally. As Tyrion and his wife walked over to the bar, Lady Brienne approached Dacey Clegane and said curiously "What would you have me do, my lady?"

That was so typical of Brienne of Tarth; she always asked for instruction before acting. She does nothing without orders. I do not know if I should admire her or pity her. In any case, it was not Dacev, but Prince Jon who supplied a suggestion. He told the heiress to Evenfall Hall "I think you should help the Tickler guard Urswyck, my lady."

"Might I ask why, Your Grace?" Brienne inquired.

The young prince looked over at the bound Brave Companion, and then he turned back to the tall blond woman and informed her "He is the one who killed Lord Renly."

Tyrion was aware that Brienne Tarth was very close to the late Renly Baratheon. She had enlisted in the Legion without Banners shortly after he did. She may have joined because of him. Her interest in him was not romantic; she had been well-aware of the late Stormlord's... preferences. Tyrion still did not know why Brienne had been so fond of him. In any case, she had loved him dearly, and she had sworn vengeance upon the hand that slew him. Now, it appears she shall have it.

Tyrion's memory of the Pentoshi Bloodbath was vivid in some parts and hazy in other parts. At one point, someone had pushed a pile of crates onto him, and he had been trapped underneath those crates until after the fighting stopped. Because of that, he had missed the whole final twenty minutes of the Bloodbath. So, he could remember nothing about how it ended.

Out of all the people who survived the Pentoshi Bloodbath, Jon Targaryen had perhaps the best memory of the fiasco. He could still recall the entire episode almost flawlessly. He knew the order in which the most noteworthy casualties had fallen, as well as who had killed them and how. If he says Urswyck killed Renly... then the Faithful's fate is sealed.

Brienne Tarth's face darkened, and she slowly turned towards the Brave Companion. She muttered softly "I will not let this man out of my sight."

Just then, Princess Daenerys Targaryen entered the common room. She was not trained to fight with any weapon and, therefore, unable to directly participate in the raid. Nevertheless, she had insisted on accompanying the Legionnaires and their allies to the Brave Companions' base. She had claimed that she simply wished to be present when justice was delivered. Even Lady Dacey could not deny her that. Considering what Connington and his men took from her, she has every right to watch them die.

Daenerys did not enter the common room by herself. A familiar white direwolf padded in alongside her. Both of them approached Prince Jon, who flashed them a warm smile.
Unlike the princess, Ghost actually would be involved in the raid. Jon planned to let him loose on Connington, but not with the intent to kill him. He had instructed his beast to only go for Connington's legs. As savage as Ghost could be, he was capable of maiming a man without killing him.

Since the first part of the raid involved stealth, Ghost had been required to linger outside. Now that the building's common room had been seized, he was allowed to come inside. Up until now, Daenerys had been watching over him.

That was one matter where she proved to be useful. There were few people who were willing to go near Ghost, let alone take charge of him. Daenerys was one of those few. Ever since Jon and Daenerys became acquainted with one another, the white direwolf had grown rather fond of his master's aunt. Especially over the last turn of the moon.

After Daenerys turned Ghost over to his master, Lady Dacey and Prince Jon joined Tyrion and Ellyn on the other side of the bar. The five of them gradually approached the door to the back room. A dozen Legionnaires stood by, ready to back them up.

The door leading to the back room was unlocked. Even so, Dacey was very careful when she opened it. The corridor on the other side was empty, but if Urswyck told them true, they would find two adversaries in the adjacent corridor. Tyrion peeked around the corner, and he saw Ser Tristan Rivers and Togg Joth standing outside the back room.

Tyrion waited for a window of opportunity. It came when Ser Tristan yawned; the Westerosi exile closed his eyes and covered his mouth. Right then, Tyrion jumped around the corner and flung his axe across the hallway. It embedded itself in Togg Joth's forehead.

As the Brave Companion fell to the ground, Ser Tristan moved to draw his sword. Before he could even pull it from his sheath, Jon Targaryen was upon him. The dragon prince swiftly plunged Dark Sister into the Golden Company man's chest.

By the time Tyrion recovered his axe, Lady Dacey had forced the door to the back room open. Senaera She-Snake was on the other side. She waved her sword at the intruders, but Ghost was too quick for her. He dodged the blow, bared his fangs, and slammed his body weight against the female pit fighter. Once she was on her back, he climbed onto her and tore into her throat. Senaera shrieked and struggled to repel the direwolf, but her efforts were futile. In less than twenty seconds, she was done for.

Once Senaera stopped twitching, Tyrion, Ellyn, Dacey, and Jon turned their full attention to the rest of the back room. Straightaway, they noticed a woman slumped in a chair. Her hands were tied behind her back, and a sack was pulled over her head. They could tell it was a woman based on her apparel. In fact… her apparel stood out to Tyrion. That's what Greta was wearing when we last saw her.

They approached the woman and removed the sack. It turned out she was Greta. In addition to the sack and her wrist restraints, she was gagged with a piece of black cloth over her lips. She had bruises on her arms and face. A couple of them were bloody. She looked terrible. At least she's still alive.

Jon pulled off her gag, and Ellyn used her dagger to cut the ropes binding Greta's hands. She threatened to fall out of her chair, but Dacey caught her before she hit the ground. As the Northwoman helped the handmaiden sit up, Tyrion approached the chair and stated quietly "Greta? Greta, are you with us?"
The young handmaiden was barely conscious, but by all accounts, she was fully coherent. She slowly lifted her head up. When she saw her master and mistress, she managed to smile. She mumbled weakly "Milord… milady… thank the gods you're here."

I was thinking just the same. Tyrion stepped forward and asked patiently "Is Duncan here?"

Greta lightly nodded her head. With great difficulty, she raised her arm and pointed to a cupboard on the other side of the room. She whispered "He's in there."

Ellyn was the first to reach the cupboard. If Tyrion's legs were longer, he might have reached it as quickly as she. By the time the dwarf was at his wife's side, she had pulled both of the cupboard's doors open.

They found Duncan within. He was lying atop a pile of clothes, and his eyes were shut tight. He was sleeping soundly, as though he had not a care in the world. Furthermore, he was completely unharmed.

That was just what Tyrion and Ellyn were hoping for. The gods can be good.

Ellyn immediately extended her arms, picked their son up, and pulled him into an embrace. She cradled him close to her chest. It almost looked as though she would never let him go.

I would not fault her.

Eventually, she did let go of Duncan, but only to give her husband a chance to hold him. Tyrion happily took his son into his arms and hugged him tightly. He has grown, he noted. Evidently, Connington's men had not neglected to give him proper nourishment. Thankfully, Duncan was not yet so large that his dwarf father could not hold him comfortably.

A few seconds later, Duncan started to stir, and he slowly woke up. When he opened his eyes, the very first things he saw were the jubilant faces of his mother and father. He smiled and cooed softly "Mama… Papa…"

Tyrion could practically feel his heart melt. He held Duncan closer to him, and Ellyn enveloped both of them in a firm embrace.

While the Lannisters had their tearful reunion, Dacey and Jon tended to Greta. As the Northwoman gave the handmaiden a drink from her waterskin, Jon knelt before her and said enquiringly "What about… 'Myrna?' Is my maid here?"

After swallowing a mouthful of water, Greta told the young prince "You need not call her by that name, Your Grace. I know who she really is."

We can trust her to keep a secret. That's partly why we took her into our service. Jon leaned closer and asked "So, where is she?"

Greta hesitated for a moment. Then she looked up at Jon and grimly informed him "She's not here."

"Not in this room?" Jon assumed. Tyrion tried not to roll his eyes. That much is obvious.

"Not anywhere in this building," Greta elaborated dismally, "Worse yet, you will not find her
anywhere in this city."

That statement was enough to snap Tyrion and Ellyn out of their bliss. They turned back to the handmaiden. Prince Jon was shocked. He uttered quietly "What?"

"You won't find Jon Connington here, either," Greta disclosed.

"What are you talking about?" said Dacey. She sounded dubious.

Greta enlightened them with "Two days before we got here, Lord Connington broke his party up into two halves. He gave me and Duncan over to one half, and he ordered Urswyck to take command of it and ride for Braavos. He and the other half of his men rode west. They took Princess Lyanna with them."

"What is south of us?" Jon asked no one in particular.

"Between here and Pentos?" Ellyn thought aloud, "Along the coast, nothing."

"Where could they have gone?" Jon wondered.

"I do not know," Dacey confessed, "But Connington must have had a plan. Otherwise, he would have come straight here."

"He could be in any one of a number of places by now," Ellyn commented bitterly.

"Then how are we supposed to catch up to him?" Jon murmured irately.

Just then, Tyrion got an idea. He smirked and declared "Well, fortunately for us, we have someone who very likely knows where Connington went."

Within another half-hour, the raid on the Brave Companions' base was completed. Somehow, they had managed to pull off the raid without losing even one of their own units. *That is rare, even for the Legion without Banners*. It was almost the polar opposite scenario for the foe. With the sole exception of Urswyck, every one of Jon Connington's men was put down by the Legionnaires and their allies.

Alas, just as Greta claimed, Connington himself was nowhere to be found, and only half of his men were accounted for. Most of the Golden Company members and some of the pit fighters were missing. All the remaining Brave Companions were at the base. Now, Urswyck was the only one left.

After the raid ended, Tyrion, Ellyn, Dacey, and everyone else in their party returned to the Legionnaire house. They brought their prisoner back with them. Ellyn carried Duncan securely in her arms, and Tyrion dared not leave her side.

When Tyrion and Ellyn stepped inside the Legionnaire House, they were immediately met by Lady Daliah Clegane. She wept in joy when she saw her daughter with her grandson, and she kissed both Ellyn and Duncan on the cheek. Tyrion was not surprised by her reaction. These last few weeks, she had been as worried about Duncan as he and Ellyn had. Probably more so. *The only thing that could possibly be worse than having your child taken from you is having your grandchild from you.*

Tyrion and Ellyn decided to spend some time with her mother, their son, and their nephews. While they were bonding, Dacey had Urswyck interrogated.

Initially, it seemed as though Urswyck would live up to his moniker of 'Faithful.' *But we know*
better than to expect that from a man who killed his own wife. After a couple hours in a room with the Tickler, the Brave Companion readily divulged everything he knew. **Everything.** Once he was done spilling all his secrets, Dacey allowed Brienne Tarth to take Urswyck's head. **Now the Brave Companions truly are no more.**

In the early evening, Dacey gathered everyone together in the study again. This time, even Tyta was able to join them. She claimed to have passed her final test that afternoon, and thus, she had completed her training.

Even though Tyta was no longer subject to her master's constraints, she still said nothing about her final test. However, her uncle could use his imagination.

That afternoon, Tyrion, Ellyn, Duncan, Lady Daliah, Alyver, and Torrhen had decided to have lunch out in the city. They had brought along a properly fair-sized guard detachment, of course. **After what happened in Pentos, we're not taking any more chances.**

They decided to go to the Inn of the Green Eel. While they ate at the inn, Tyrion overheard some of the other patrons talking about a disaster that took place at the Gate earlier that day.

From what the Imp managed to overhear, Izembaro – the builder of the Gate and the head of its mummer troupe – had been killed during a performance. The details were somewhat vague, but it appeared that somehow, a prop spear had been replaced with a real spear, and Izembaro had been impaled during the climax of the play.

The mummer who threw the spear had already been acquitted of Izembaro's death, and currently, the investigation had produced no other suspects. Even the authorities were beginning to suspect this had simply been a terrible accident rather than a murder. After all, Izembaro was admired and respected by all who saw him perform, including mummers from rival troupes. No one in Braavos had any discernable reason to want him dead.

**Unless, of course, someone was contracted by a third party with an unknown motive.** Tyrion said nothing on that subject, but when his niece returned to the house that evening, he kept an eye on her. After all, she had told him she would be going to the Gate that afternoon to see one of the mummers.

In any case, Tyta was now free to return to the Seven Kingdoms. She could go home now. **We'll all be going home soon enough. But... if Connington has his way, some of us will arrive sooner than others.**

Tyrion decided not to lament on that dreary possibility. He kept his mind focused on the present instead. **Let us hear what Dacey has to say.**

Once the Lady of Moat Cailin had everyone's full attention, she shared everything the Tickler had learned from Urswyck with them.

Urswyck was able to confirm much of what Greta had told them earlier on. Not four days past, he and Jon Connington had divided their forces into two smaller companies. While Urswyck's party had gone on to Braavos, Connington's had turned west and galloped straight for the coast.

It seemed that long ago, well before the Pentoshi Bloodbath, Jon Connington had taken precautions in case the Targaryens survived the attempt on their lives. He had considered the possibility that they and their allies might somehow track him to Braavos, and that they might even arrive ahead of him.
Although Tywin Lannister claimed he would send a ship to Braavos to pick up Jon Connington and his men, Connington was not about to take the Old Lion's word for granted. He did believe that Lannisters always paid their debts, but he was wary of other factors that might prevent them from doing so.

As such, he had arranged to have a ship of his own on stand-by. That ship would originate from Braavos, and its crew would all be Braavosi, as well. Months ago, the captain had been given some very explicit orders:

Once he heard of a certain massacre in Pentos, he was to set sail due south until he was exactly fifty miles from Braavos. There he would drop anchor near the shore and wait there until further notice.

Connington had intended to rendezvous with the rest of his men in King's Landing. Most of them, at any rate. Urswyck, the remaining Brave Companions, some of the pit fighters, and even a few of the Golden Company's Westerosi members had no intention of going to the Seven Kingdoms. They, apparently, were content to remain in Essos. They got what they wanted; they spent their last days on this continent.

If by any chance the ship Tywin dispatched did not return to King's Landing, he and Connington would simply arrange for another ship to sail to Braavos. Regardless of how long that took, he was determined to bring Duncan back alive and well. After all, Tyrion Lannister's grandson was the principal component of Connington's deal with the Lion Lord. I suppose this means Father's deal is now void.

Connington would need both Lyanna Stark and Duncan to fulfill his bargain with Father. Now he had lost Duncan. Alas, Lyanna Stark was still his captive. According to Urswyck, he was already on his way to deliver her to Tyrion Lannister. Even if he did know he no longer has Duncan, he would probably take Lyanna to Father, anyway.

Lord Gregor Clegane had learned what Tywin Lannister was endeavoring to accomplish by striking this deal with Connington. He had covered that in the missive he sent his lady wife a fortnight ago.

According to that missive, Father's ultimate goal was to discredit the Mountain, reassert the dominance of House Lannister in the Seven Kingdoms, and instill one of his own vassals as the new Master of Order. He who occupies the seat of Master of Order also controls the Legion without Banners. Even if Rickard was allowed to succeed Lord Gregor as the Legion's next commander, he would be subject to whoever Father appoints to the position.

Currently, Father had the means to do all that. He had somehow become Hand of the King since they sailed from Moat Cailin at the start of the year. I'd wager my axe that he had Jon Arryn poisoned. In any case, the Warden of the Wester and Lord Paramount of the Westerlands now spoke counsel directly into the King's ear. If he got Cersei to support him, his words would carry even greater sway.

We cannot let Father show Lyanna Stark to King Robert. I shudder to think of what bedlam that would produce.

The problem was not that Lyanna Stark used to be Robert Baratheon's intended. Robert had long ago put aside his infatuation for the Northern beauty, and he had found happiness with Tyrion's sister in her stead. So far, he had raised a fine family with Cersei, and he had found happiness.

The true problem was how Robert had gotten over Lyanna Stark. Tyrion was aware that shortly after the Rebellion sixteen years ago, Gregor Clegane had told the king of Lyanna Stark's "dying
wish," and that it was for Robert to find happiness with another woman. That was what had primarily inspired Robert Baratheon to become a better king, a better husband, and a better man. It had made him the respectable and dignified person he was today.

However, if he was to learn that Lord Gregor had actually told him a blatant lie about Lyanna Stark's final words… he would undoubtedly be enraged. Gregor Clegane would be the main target of that rage. King Robert would almost certainly want the Mountain to pay for misleading him so grossly. And Father would be right by his side, offering a long list of suggestions of what to do with Gregor.

Tyrion was not about to let that happen. Nor was anyone else in the Legionnaire house. That was not just because Gregor Clegane was family to several of them and a friend and ally to the rest. It was also because he was a good man. Even if the Seven Kingdoms' prosperity had been founded on a lie, that lie had still brought the realm prosperity. One wrong caused so much right.

When Dacey finished giving the Tickler's report to everyone, silence passed over the study. This silence was extremely tense and unpleasant, and it lasted for the longest time.

The silence ended when Jon Targaryen asked aloud "So, what do we do now?"

"That should be obvious," Ellyn remarked frankly, "We stop Jon Connington."

"How would we accomplish that?" Bronn mumbled drily, "He could already be leagues and leagues closer to Westeros than we are."

"So, we chase after him," Daenerys Targaryen suggested.

"Easier said than done," Lothor Brune contended, "Braavosi ships are generally smaller than Westerosi ships, but they are also much lighter and faster. It is highly unlikely the Zenith or any other ship in our armada could catch up to Connington before he reaches King's Landing."

"Then we'll commission a Braavosi vessel," Tyrion proposed.

"And do what?" Lady Brienne debated, "Even if we could find a ship fast enough to overtake Connington's, Connington would see us coming, regardless of where we came from."

"That's a good point," Polliver conceded, "He'll be prepared to repel any boarders. We could even risk harming Princess Lyanna in the process."

"That may be true," Dacey contended, "But if not that, what else can we do? Our only other option is to somehow reach King's Landing before Connington and stop him before he gets to the Red Keep."

Get to King's Landing before Connington...? That made Tyrion wonder. If they actually could arrive in the capital city ahead of Jon Connington – even if it was just one or two days earlier – they might be able to set a trap for them. Or perhaps they could somehow… foil his plans altogether.

In less than three minutes, Tyrion Lannister came up with a feasible plan to not only rescue Lyanna Stark and keep her existence a secret from King Robert, but also sabotage Jon Connington's schemes and bring disgrace to his lord father.

"I have an idea," the dwarf announced to the room at large. There is no way I can be certain it will actually work, but right now, it is quite possibly our best and last hope.
"What idea, Uncle?" Tyta enquired curiously.

Tyrion slowly turned to the girl and grinned not unkindly. *For that, dear niece, I look to you.*
"And that brings us to where we are now," the Mountain declared, speaking in a very solemn tone. *So much has happened, but our troubles are far from over. The greatest threat has not even begun yet.*

He had spent the last few hours divulging the details of his affairs surrounding the Conclave, the Pentoshi Bloodbath, the dragons, Lyanna Stark, and every other private topic of precedence to the people in the main chamber of the Meeting Tower. Some of them were hearing about some of those secrets for the first time. Others had already heard a few of those tales at least once before. A couple had already been fully aware of all those accounts, and the rest were completely new to all of them.

He wondered how his comrades were handling this influx of information. He glanced around the table, and most of them seemed more than a little overwhelmed. While none of them appeared dumbfounded or flabbergasted, a few looked slightly frustrated or irate. Thankfully, all of them still gazed at Gregor with their usual respect and understanding. *At least they have not lost faith in me,* he observed.

"This is... a great deal to take in, my lord," Harren Botley murmured plainly. He was one of five people who were currently sitting at this table for the very first time. He had been appointed to the position of the Iron Islands' representative on the secret council in Maron Greyjoy's place.

Harren Botley had been a Legionnaire since even before Greyjoy's Rebellion. In fact, of the five newcomers, he had been in the Legion the longest. In spite of that, he had always remained totally unaware of the Legion's most private and delicate affairs. *Until now. Now that he's at this table, he needs to be in the know.*

"I know it is, Harren," Gregor Clegane assured the Ironman, "I don't expect you or the others to readily embrace everything that has been discussed today. But you must be prepared to accept it for what it is: the truth."

"We needn't worry on that; we can handle the truth, my lord," Wendel Manderly claimed. *If Jack Nicholson was here, he would argue otherwise. The thought of that amused Gregor. If only more than one person in this room knew that reference; I could share it. Oh, well; now's not the time for comic relief, anyway.*

Wendel Manderly was another of the newcomers. He had replaced Smalljon Umber as the North's representative on the secret council. *How ironic that both of them would have died at the Red Wedding. In the books, that is.* While Gregor was still dismayed by the loss of the former heir to Last Hearth, at least Smalljon had died a more honorable death in this universe than he had in the show.

Gregor turned to the overweight yet valiant knight from White Harbor and stated "I know you can handle the truth, Ser Wendel. I never would have invited you to this table if I ever suspected you couldn't. That goes for all of you. Only those who are willing to face reality are permitted to sit here."

"Your willingness to trust us is appreciated, my lord," Danwell Frey remarked. He was Brynden Tully's replacement for the Riverlands' spot on the council. *A Frey takes over a Tully's position. Just like the aftermath of the Red Wedding.* Although the Red Wedding never occurred in this universe, Gregor never would have suspected he would be willing to share some of his most
important secrets with a son of the Late Lord Frey. *That just shows how far we've come.* "It is also well-founded; I assure you. However… let us suppose for a moment that the King or someone close to him learns of the things you've hidden from the crown. What would happen to us then?"

"I suspect we would find ourselves in a very dreary predicament," Gregor Clegane muttered straightforwardly, "But I am prepared to take full responsibility for whatever happens afterward. I give you my vow; I will not allow any of you to suffer because of my deeds. I mean to be the sole party held accountable for them."

"That will not do," Gerion Lannister sternly pronounced. The Mountain was somewhat surprised by this sudden outburst from the Westerlander representative, who still held the title of the Legion's longest-serving member. The blond knight protested "They are not just your deeds anymore, Gregor. The instant we agreed to help you hide them from the world, they became ours, as well."

"I concur," Allard Seaworth commented, sitting up straight in the chair of the Stormlands' representative. Renly Baratheon had held that spot for him for many months. *Now, it will only be Allard's once more.* "After everything we have endured together, my lord, we've come much too far to abandon you in your hour of need, if ever it comes."

While Gregor was grateful for his colleagues' loyalty and brotherly love, he still did not wish to see any of them share the blame for his schemes if ever they went wrong. He folded his arms and conjectured "Suppose I was to order you to forsake me. To sever all ties to this council and deny ever having been involved in its most incriminating ploys. What then?"

"We'd tell you to stuff that order up your arsehole," Tormund Giantsbane drily spat. The others muttered words of agreement, though none of them were quite as eloquent or as vulgar as the Free Folk representative. As for Gregor Clegane… he was at a loss for words. Even the goddamn wildling puts my well-being before his own safety now. *What have I gotten myself into? More to the point, what have I gotten them into?*

"The Legion without Banners is all some of us have, my lord," Eddison Tollett debated. He was the one who now served on the secret council as the Vale's representative in Lyn Corbray's place. The decision to appoint him had been perhaps the easiest one. *He may be most-recognized by both the fandom and other characters for his dark humor, but he has much more than just that to offer.* Dolorous Edd had been in Essos with Allard Seaworth for the last two years, and the second son of the Onion Knight had spoken at length of how useful the Valeman could truly be. *I sincerely hope Allard did not embellish his report; we're in dire need of versatile people.* "Should the Legion disband, we'd have nowhere else to go. Except the Wall, but it's already cold enough down here."

"In all likelihood, the Legion won't disband, even if this business with Lyanna Stark reached Robert Baratheon's ears," Gregor Clegane contended, "I suspect the most the King would do is strip me of my title, remove control of the Legion from my house, and turn command of it over to someone else."

"Like who?" Samwell Tarly inquired. Although the heir to Horn Hill was not part of the secret council, Gregor had started including him at most of the council's meetings. *He is my notary, after all.* Aside from that, the young Reachman often gave valuable counsel when it was most needed.

"I do not know, Sam," Gregor confessed, "But we can assume it would be someone whom his Hand would recommend and approve of."

Most of the others' expressions contorted in disgust. Wendel Manderly snapped "I would sooner face the Army of the Dead unarmed than rally behind one of that pompous old lion's underlings."
"All of us would," Gerion Lannister conceded. *If Tywin's own brother says that, he must speak for everyone.* The knight from the Westerlands turned back to Gregor Clegane and stated *You are our commander, Gregor. You and no one else. Robert Baratheon is King, and his word is absolute. But until you die or step down voluntarily, I shall refuse to acknowledge any other man as my superior officer."

"So shall I," Allard Seaworth said firmly, "Come what may, even if the rest of the Legion renounces you, I never will. I swear that on the lives of my father, my mother, and my brothers. We will be your allies to the very end."

Gregor was astounded. He gazed around the table and asked "Is this the popular consensus?"

He expected some of them to counter Allard's statement or to at least hesitate before replying. Alas, the others each gave a light yet prompt nod in response. He did not know how to react. He mumbled edgily "Surely you realize what associating with a disgraced lord would entail."

"Of course, we do," Tormund proclaimed, "It would mean disgrace for the rest of us, too. Even amongst the Free Folk, disgrace is undesirable and something we strive to avoid."

"However…" Gerion went on for him, "If the alternative is denouncing a good man who has faithfully and selflessly served and protected the realm and beyond for seven and ten years… the choice is an easy one. The shame of that cowardly act would be far worse than any disgrace."

"Indeed," the sole female at the table said in agreement, "These men do not follow you because you order them to, Lord Gregor. They follow you because they choose to. This matter is that simple."

The Red Woman had hardly spoken since the meeting began. Yet there was wisdom in the words she had just uttered. Not just wisdom; a fundamental truth which he could not deny. Although the Legion had an established hierarchy, every single member still had the luxury of free will. *At the end of the day, whom they side with is still their decision. I cannot force them to follow me to the depths of hell. But I cannot force them to stay behind, either.* Whether he wished it or not, his officers were committed to stay by him.

Gregor Clegane unleashed a deep, elongated sigh. After that, he smirked and stated "Very well. Your lives are your own to do with as you please. Nonetheless, I would encourage you to think carefully on your decisions. Otherwise, you may come to regret ever knowing me."

"Maybe we will," Dolorous Edd slyly murmured, "We'll deal with that issue when it comes."

"If it comes," Harren Botley countered, "If Lord Tyrion can reach King's Landing in time, all our worries may turn out to be for naught."

"Assuming he truly can foil Jon Connington's plot," Danwell Frey thought aloud. "The Imp is a genius; no one's denying that. Even so, he will be going up against Tywin Lannister. The Lord of Casterly Rock, the Warden of the West, the Lord Paramount of the Westerlands, and – worst of all – his own father. That is an incredible risk. Should he fail."

"Enough," Gregor speedily interceded, "It will do us no good to predict the worst-case scenario. At this point, Lyanna Stark is out of our hands. The only ones who are still capable of saving her are Tyrion Lannister and the people with him."

"What about Lord Willas and our other allies in King's Landing?" Samwell disputed.
"We cannot involve them," the Mountain pronounced, "At present, they are wards of the throne. As such, their activities and movements are being monitored. I refuse to put them or anyone else in unnecessary danger."

"Then the Imp is our last hope?" Dolorous Edd presumed drearily.

"It would seem so," Gregor Clegane admitted, "There is little we can do to assist him other than pray to the gods for his success. If it is any consolation, my sister and my wife both have faith in Tyrion's plan, and as you all know, neither of them ever approve of anything done halfheartedly."

Of course, I'm certain they would have liked to accompany Tyrion to King's Landing. Alas, he insisted on going without them. It had been over eight months since Gregor Clegane had last seen Dacey Clegane, Ellyn Lannister, or Tyrion Lannister. He took comfort in the knowledge that his wife and sister were getting closer to Moat Cailin with each passing second. His mother was, too. However, his brother-by-law would be making a detour before he could even entertain the concept of sailing back to the moat.

Normally, Gregor would be greatly concerned about the odds of such an endeavor. Yet he was not. He was confident in Tyrion's ability and wits. Tyrion can handle himself. In the original World of Ice and Fire, he put up with years of disregard and abuse from everyone he knew, and he still outlived a great many people. Now that he has something to live for, he must be even more determined to succeed.

In less than a fortnight, Ellyn and her son Duncan would be back in the safety of Moat Cailin. Although he had no way of knowing when, Gregor was confident that Tyrion would return to them sometime after that. Tyrion Lannister was not the type of man who would recklessly endanger his life and risk making his wife a widow and his child fatherless. He knows we'd never forgive him if he did that, Gregor thought, slightly amused at the notion.

At any rate, the other people at the secret council table seemed appeased with Gregor's assurances about the probability of Tyrion's plan succeeding. I guess they're ready to move on to something else.

Sure enough, a few seconds later, Samwell Tarly said inquiringly "So, what is next, my lord?"

Good question. We've already been here for hours, but there are still several topics that should be addressed.

"There is one thing I would like to ask," Harren Botley announced. Gregor Clegane looked over at the Ironborn, who glimpsed over at the Red Woman and wondered aloud "Why is she here?"

Ah, we finally get to the elephant in the room. Then again, all things considered, that label applies as much to me as it does to her. We're both equally out of place.

"Lady Melisandre is here at my behest," Gregor informed the Riverlander knight. Now that I know the full truth of her identity, it feels so odd to call her by that name. At present, Allard was the only other person who shared that knowledge, and he was more than willing to stay quiet about it for now. According to Kinvara, he had taken the news rather well when she told him. I cannot claim to be surprised by his preference. In her true guise, she's younger, lighter, and – I must admit – sexier. Not that she could ever compare to Dacey, though.

"May we ask why?" Ser Danwell enquired.

"There are two chief reasons," Gregor Clegane disclosed, "First, I am adding another seat to the
secret council: an Essosi one. As you know, officially, the Legion's jurisdiction only encompasses the continent of Westeros. Despite that, nearly ten percent of its members came here from across the Narrow Sea. After much deliberation, I have decided is past time the foreigners were given their own representative."

"I can understand that logic, my lord," Wendel Manderly stated, "Nevertheless, every person on this council has been in the Legion for at least a decade. Lady Melisandre has been working with us for just slightly over a year. To my knowledge, she is not even a recognized Legionnaire."

"I personally take no issue with appointing a non-Legionnaire to this council," Gerion Lannister interjected, "Even so, while I am certain she has many good qualities, Lady Melisandre may not be the best choice to represent our foreign members. Red priests and priestesses are infamous for their intolerance, especially towards those who practice different faiths. Additionally, from a tactical or militant perspective, she has little to offer."

"I agree," Danwell Frey stated, "The sellsword companies may intend to leave the Seven Kingdoms once the Long Night runs its course, but I say we take advantage of their presence to capitalize on our own strength. After all, their captains are seasoned veterans of many conflicts. People such as Daario Naharis and Brown Ben Plumm might be more suitable for the council."

"You all raise excellent points," Gregor admitted, "But I ask you to hear me out. This is where the second aforementioned reason comes into play. As some of you are already aware, Lady Melisandre possesses something that few others in this world possess. In short, it is the very same thing I used to prepare the Seven Kingdoms against the Army of the Dead."

"Meaning your elusive 'source'?", Allard commented cheekily.

"Exactly," the Mountain affirmed, "That alone makes her far more useful to the secret council than any other individual who came here from the east. Her source is every bit as useful as mine. In some ways, more so. She is as capable as I am of introducing change, establishing order, and preventing disasters."

"And yet the Pentoshi Bloodbath still took place," Dolorous Edd uttered bitterly.

"To our grave misfortune," Ser Danwell added in. Never imagined I would hear a Frey disapprove of a massacre. Melanie looked as though she had a similar thought in mind.

"The Pentoshi Bloodbath was beyond the range of our source," Gregor proclaimed.

"Indeed; there was no way we could have avoided it," Kinvara muttered, "Something you all must realize is that while our source is a valuable tool, that is all it is: a tool. Even the best tools only have a limited amount of usefulness. Our source is no exception. It is not immaculate. Nor does it give us the ability to avert all the world's hardships."

"This is supposed to convince us that you belong on the secret council?" Tormund stated wryly.

"In all honesty, I do not particularly care to be on this council," Kinvara revealed, "I am only here because your commander insisted on it, and because I wish to help him save the Seven Kingdoms. Do I need any other reason?"

"No, those reasons are sufficient," Allard declared. Gregor smiled lightly. I can count on him to vouch for her, even if no one else does. Luckily, that statement appeared to be enough to conclude the discussion on this topic. After that, no one else at the table questioned the Red Woman's presence there.
However, the subject of the source had not yet been dropped altogether. Gerion Lannister turned to the Mountain and stated "Gregor, a few minutes ago, you mentioned that Lady Melisandre is 'one of the few' who possesses the same source as you. Do you mean to say there are others?"

"That is correct," Gregor Clegane replied candidly. No point in concealing this from the council; they need to hear the truth. "There are three such parties in the world. That we know of, that is. There could be more. Two of those parties died a while back, but the third is alive and well. He will be coming to Moat Cailin soon. In fact, he is on his way here as we speak."

"So, who is he?" Tormund enquired.

"Let us refer back to the subject of the Conclave," Gregor professed, "I have already explained to the lot of you that the Citadel was responsible for that calamity with the printing press, and that they are also behind a multitude of far greater conspiracies. While I always suspected the Archmaesters had their own agenda, my visions are rarely helpful in matters concerning the Conclave. Thankfully, I know someone on the inside, courtesy of Prince Oberyn."

"Yes, his daughter Sarella," Samwell recounted, "You've already talked about her at length, my lord. We have established that she is the one who uncovered all that evidence about the Citadel's innerworkings. Would I be right to assume that she is the third party?"

"No, it is not she, Sam," Gregor Clegane illuminated, "I told you that Sarella managed to discover the full scale of the Citadel's machinations, but that is only partly true. In actuality, Sarella learned hardly anything meaningful about the Conclave when she investigated it on her own. Then one of her fellow scholars approached her and offered his assistance. That was when her search yielded more fruitful results. He is the third party."

"The lad's name?" Ser Danwell said curiously.

"He is known as 'Mollander,'" Gregor pronounced, "He hails from the Stormlands, and he has been a novice of the Citadel these past five years. He spent most of that time spying on the Archmaesters. According to Sarella, he knows just about everything about them which is worth knowing."

"But how do you know he possesses the source?" asked Dolorous Edd.

"Because he told us so," Kinvara revealed. The men turned their attention to her, and she expounded "Mollander did not assist Sarella solely out of charity. He wanted something in return. She wrote a letter of her findings to Lord Gregor shortly after she completed her investigation. In exchange for his help, he had her mention him to us, and he wrote a passage of his own in her letter. A sentence in that passage contained a piece of knowledge which only the Mountain and I already held. In other words, only people with the source could have understood it."

"That was all we needed to confirm that Mollander is indeed in possession of the source," Gregor apprised them. Of course, it came as a bit of a surprise at first, but since we already knew there were others like us in this world, it was not too hard to come to terms with the fact. Apparently, he has been meaning to get in contact with me for a very long time."

"Why is he only doing so now?" Harren Botley queried.

"For the same reason I did not contact your commander until a year ago," Kinvara disclosed, "He waited for what he deemed to be the most ideal circumstances to approach the Mountain, just as I did."
"Most ideal circumstances?" Dolorous Edd repeated.

"Much like myself and Lady Melisandre, Mollander has his own timetable, as well as his own ultimate goal," Gregor Clegane elaborated, "Mine is to maintain law and order all throughout the Seven Kingdoms. Lady Melisandre's is to get Westeros through the Long Night. Mollander's is to purge the Citadel of corruption and reorganize it from within."

"Of course, none of us could achieve our objectives singlehandedly," Kinvara went on for him, "Lord Gregor has gotten this far towards his because of the Legion. I worked towards mine by making contact with Allard at Pentos, gaining the trust of the Targaryens, and helping them hatch the dragon eggs. Now, however, I require the Legion's cooperation to further prepare the world against the Others. Similarly, Mollander has been functioning by himself all this time, and thus far, he has been doing well on his own. Nonetheless, he appears to have reached the point where he will need more people to continue his efforts."

"How so?" Ser Gerion stated enquiringly, "What does he mean to do?"

"As to that, we are not entirely certain," the Mountain pronounced, "Mollander wrote to us thrice more after we learned of his existence, but he excluded any clue of his true intentions from all three of his letters. Be that as it may, he quite clearly emphasized his aim to seek out the Legion's services."

"Are we going to indulge his request?" Tormund inquired.

"That remains to be seen," Gregor contended, "At present, I still do not know if Mollander can be counted as an ally. I will need to actually meet and speak with the man before I can arrive at any conclusion."

"Naturally, my lord," Samwell bluntly remarked. "After all, that procedure is standard with all who come looking for the Legion's aid."

"Indeed, Sam," Gregor Clegane conceded, "In the case of Mollander, however, we will need to be even more thorough than we normally are. He is not our typical patron."

"Because of the source?" Allard asked rhetorically.

The Mountain gave a light nod to confirm. "Lady Melisandre calls the source a tool. I too regard it as such, but it can also be seen as a weapon. Before we even consider lending support to Mollander's cause, we must ascertain that he does not plan to use the source as a weapon."

"Do you honestly believe he might try to do that?" Samwell murmured nervously.

"At this time, I am more inclined to believe he will not," said Gregor Clegane. But it is too soon to make any declarations. "Judging by his letters, Mollander is more interested in progress than he is in peace or survival. From my perspective, he has his priorities out of order."

"Then again, he may think the same of us," Kinvara debated.

"That could be," Gregor supposed, "All else aside, Mollander does seem to have Westeros' best interest at heart, just as we do. It would do us no good to assume the worst from him before he even arrives."

"Should we do anything to prepare for his coming?" Gerion Lannister asked.

"Outside of the usual welcoming committee, nothing of the sort will be necessary," Gregor thought
aloud, "Whenever we receive him, we must do so discreetly. In his last letter, Mollander mentioned that he means for this trip to be kept a secret, particularly from the Conclave. As far as the Archmaesters are concerned, he is taking this time away to visit his father in the Stormlands."

"Let us hope they will not see through that story," Harren Botley murmured grimly, "After all, Mollander will need at least a month to get here from Oldtown, and another month for when he goes back."

"Not to mention however long he'll end up staying here," Dolorous Edd drily pointed out, "He could be here until the start of the new year. If so, the Conclave will surely come to suspect something."

"Worry not, Edd," Gregor bade the Valeman, "Mollander is merely a novice of the Citadel. He is not bound by the same regulations and restrictions as true maesters. Until he's forged himself a proper chain, he is still free to come and go as he pleases."

"That is good," Samwell commented approvingly, "Tell me, my lord; if we are not going to do anything to prepare for Mollander, are we not going to speak of him until he reaches the moat?"

"Not quite, Sam," the Master of Order responded, "As it happens, there is another issue Mollander is involved in which we should focus on whilst we wait for him to arrive."

"What might that be?" Tormund asked in interest.

Gregor Clegane reached into his doublet and extracted the first of the three letters he had received from Mollander. It was the one that arrived three weeks ago. He placed it on the surface of the council table and announced, "As a sign of good faith on his part, Mollander has provided us with answers to some long-unanswered questions."

If he did not have everyone's full attention before, he definitely did at this time. Evidently, they all wanted to know of these answers, even though they did not already know the respective questions their commander was referring to. That was such a natural reaction. *Even grown men can succumb to childlike curiosity,* Gregor noted.

In any case, Gregor proceeded to appease his colleagues' inquisitiveness. As he gazed around the table, he told them "We have already talked about Lyanna Stark plenty. You all know that she eloped with Rhaegar."

"By now, the whole realm knows that much," Allard commented drily.

"True," Gregor Clegane contended, "But we ten are among the few who know that Lyanna did not flee with Rhaegar on a whim. Before she left the North, she sent missives to her lord father and brothers. Alas, those missives never reached their destinations."

"Yes, the riders and ravens were waylaid," Dolorous Edd recounted.

"I still find it absolutely fantastic that all six were somehow lost," Danwell Frey mumbled.

"As do I," Harren Botley uttered, "Granted, we at least know what became of the riders. But the ravens… how is it they never arrived?"

"This was during the Year of the False Spring, remember," Wendel Manderly pointed out, "In the wintertime, missives sent by air get lost all the time."
"Indeed," Gregor avowed, "That is precisely why I tend to dispatch two at a time whenever it snows."

"Wouldn't it be a little too convenient if all three of Lyanna Stark's ravens met that fate?" Kinvara argued.

"You've never witnessed a Northern winter, my lady," Allard countered, "Since I joined the Legion, I've seen three. It snows so violently that you often cannot see past your nose. The conditions are even worse above the ground. Ravens have been known to vanish quite frequently in such a climate. Therefore, the concept that each of Lyanna Stark's ravens met the same fate is perfectly plausible."

At that, Kinvara lightly shrugged and commented "You make a fine argument, Allard."

"Let us get back to the topic at hand," Gregor hastily pronounced, "Lyanna's ravens are not our concern. Her riders are. Specifically, the one she sent to Winterfell. The one she sent to the Eyrie was ambushed by the mountain clans of the Vale, and the other she sent to Riverrun drowned in the Green Fork. In more favorable conditions, they may have succeeded. But the Winterfell one... he was doomed to fail from the start."

"Damn that Leech Lord," Wendel Manderly muttered under his breath.

"I share the sentiment," the Mountain stated, "Now, while I was hardly stunned that Roose Bolton was responsible for the rider's disappearance, I still wondered how he could have known about the rider in the first place. Initially, I assumed he may have had men spying on all the Starks. But the true explanation is much simpler than that."

Right then, he passed the letter to Ser Gerion, who was the person on his right. The blond man picked up the letter and started skimming it. Before he was halfway through, his eyes expanded greatly, and his jaw dropped slightly. Then he furrowed his brow, slowly turned back to Gregor, and snapped heatedly "The Conclave told him?"

"What?" Samwell whispered in shock.

Gregor Clegane said nothing; he merely nodded his head.

"How is that even possible?" Danwell Frey asked, perplexed.

"According to Mollander, the Conclave knew of Rhaegar and Lyanna's marriage all along," Lord Gregor revealed, as Gerion passed the letter to Tormund on his right. Of course, Melanie already knew that. I would have known it too if I had lived to see 2017. "He claims the Archmaesters have a documented record of the ceremony, which they've kept hidden from the world for their own gain."

"Yet they shared that information with Lord Roose," Danwell Frey noted in disgust, "What could have possibly motivated them to do that?"

"Mollander claims the Conclave viewed Rhaegar and Lyanna's union as a threat to their dominance," Gregor explicated, "He was from the ruling family of Westeros, and she was from the oldest family in Westeros. A most powerful combination. Furthermore, Rhaegar was conspiring to remove his insane father from power. If he had succeeded, it would have been the start of a new era. One where ice and fire were joined together. The men of the Conclave were unwilling to accept anything of the sort. Knowing how the Boltons have always envied the Starks' position, they sought out Lord Roose to rectify the situation for them."
"How could they do such a thing?" Harren Botley muttered angrily.

"They just did what they've been doing for thousands of years," Kinvara commented plainly. "Controlling the balance of power in the Seven Kingdoms."

"Could they have known that their meddling would eventually lead to war?" Allard Seaworth hypothesized uneasily.

"Oh, almost certainly," Gregor Clegane debated, "I highly doubt the Conclave particularly cared who ended up ruling over the North back then. As long as the Starks did not emerge with a standing in both Winterfell and King's Landing, they were content with whatever outcome their interference produced."

By now, Mollander's first letter had made one complete rotation around the table. It had found its way into the hands of Samwell Tarly, who was seated to Gregor's left. As the Mountain's notary gave him back the letter, the younger man remarked in amazement "This is unbelievable, my lord. I knew the Conclave was power-hungry and ambitious, but I never would have imagined the Archmaesters would commit such a daring and treasonous act against one of the Great Houses."

"It gets even worse than that, Sam," Gregor proclaimed. At that, he reached into his doublet again and removed the second of the three letters Mollander had sent him. That one had arrived a fortnight prior. He elected not to pass this one around. Instead, he held it up and announced, "Based on the contents of this letter, the Conclave is now set on halting the continuation of House Stark. They may even be planning the Starks' downfall."

"How do you mean, my lord?" queried Harren Botley.

"Somehow, the Conclave also found out that Lyanna did not die," the Lord of Moat Cailin explained. *I suspect Kennick may have had something to do with that.* "By then, they had begun to have reservations about the ruling family in the North once more. Most likely, the presence of the Legion was the reason for that. Thus, the Archmaesters passed along another secret to Roose Bolton. This time, however, Bolton did not keep the knowledge to himself. Instead, he shared it with one other individual. Anyone care to venture a guess?"

Kinvara was the only one who knew the answer in advance. The eight members of the secret council seemed stumped at first. Predictably, Samwell was the first person to realize the truth. He gazed up at the Mountain and uttered softly "My lord… do you mean to say… he was the one who told Tywin Lannister of Lyanna Stark?"

"He was," Gregor confirmed grimly, "From what Mollander and I could gather, the Leech Lord thought to get himself in the Old Lion's favor. By the look of things, he did just that."

"Then Roose Bolton is at least partly responsible for the Pentoshi Bloodbath," Wendel Manderly observed.

"Going by that logic, so is the Conclave," Kinvara contended.

"That doesn't necessarily indicate that the Conclave is conspiring against House Stark, though," Harren Botley pronounced.

"Perhaps not," Gregor Clegane, "However, that is not the end of their collaboration with Roose Bolton. You may recall that Robb Stark and Margaery Tyrell were wed near the end of the Great Summer. Recently, they've been trying for a child. Alas, they have been unable to conceive thus far."
"Why's that?" Tormund uttered slyly, smirking, "Impotence?"

Gregor tried not to roll his eyes. Paying no mind to the wildling's jape, he continued with "By all accounts, Lord Robb and Lady Margaery are both young, healthy, and fertile. With that in mind, they should be quite capable of creating an heir. Yet they have not. The reason for that is due to something out of their control. It is also a rather unpleasant one."

"Go on, my lord," Danwell Frey beseeched him. Everyone else was just as intrigued.

Stealing another glance at the parchment in his hand, the Mountain revealed "Mollander claims that someone has been slipping small amounts of tansy, mint, wormwood, honey, and pennyroyal into Lady Margaery's drinking glass."

Samwell went slightly pale in the face. "My lord… those are the components of moon tea."

"That is correct, Sam," Gregor affirmed grimly, "Over the last several months, the Conclave has been supplying the ingredients to Roose Bolton, and Lady Margaery has been consuming them unknowingly."

"That is… astonishing," Ser Gerion murmured. That is putting it mildly.

"But how is he even getting them to her?" Dolorous Edd inquired.

"Could he be conspiring with the maester of Winterfell?" Harren Botley hypothesized.

"No, Maester Luwin has nothing to do with this outrage," Gregor disclosed, "Maester Wolkan, the maester of the Dreadfort, is not a party to it, either. No maester currently stationed outside the Citadel is involved in this grave deed. Roose Bolton is using other people to accomplish it."

"Does Mollander have any notion of who these people are?" Allard queried.

"Yes, he does," the Lord of Moat Cailin expounded, glancing at the second letter again, "It seems that once Roose Bolton receives the ingredients for moon tea, he passes them on to Gryff Whitehill, who in turn passes them on to Sera Durwell. She is the one who feeds them to Lady Margaery."

"Why would Lady Margaery's own handmaiden poison her?" Samwell wondered aloud.

"Apparently, Bolton is blackmailing her," Kinvara answered him, "You see, Sera Durwell is not her real name. Her real name is Sera Flowers."

"A bastard?" Ser Danwell said in surprise.

"Yes," Gregor affirmed, "Other than those with the source, no one outside of House Tyrell is aware of her true background."

"Or so we thought," Kinvara disputed, "Evidently, the Conclave was aware of Sera's heritage, and they passed it along to Roose Bolton. Now Bolton is using it as leverage against her. Unless she complies with his demands, he will expose her secret to the world."

"I can understand why she would wish to avoid that," Dolorous Edd proclaimed, "But that does not rationalize the risk she is taking. If the Starks discover her foul play, she would suffer much worse than exposure at their hands."

"Sera Durwell is the type of person who would rather face death than disgrace," Gregor Clegane
enlightened him, "She is very determined to keep her identity concealed, even at the cost of her own life. In addition to that, Mollander claims that Bolton offered to give her something in return for her cooperation. If she carries out his instructions, he will allow her to wed Gryff Whitehill."

Wendel Manderly snorted in disdain. "Hardly a compelling incentive. No one likes the Whitehills."

"Aren't they the only other Northern family that worships the New Gods apart from yours, Ser Wendel?" Kinvara remarked flatly.

"Yes, my lady," the Northern knight validated, "But the similarities end at that."

*Well, the heads of both houses are notably fat. But at least Lord Wyman Manderly has a likable personality, whereas that callous shitbag Ludd Whitehill somehow manages to be even less likable than the lord he serves as vassal to.*

"It is possible Sera does not think highly of House Whitehill, either," Gregor contended, "Nevertheless, even with the name Durwell, her options for marriage are limited. It is likely she is simply taking whatever prospects she can get."

"Do you think Gryff Whitehill even agreed to wed her?" Harren Botley asked no one in particular.

"Doubtful," the Mountain argued, "Even if he did, I wouldn't expect him to be chivalrous or faithful to her. He's even less of a human than his pompous ass of a father."

"Maybe he doesn't even know of it," Kinvara conjectured, "After all, Bolton might not mean to uphold his end of the arrangement with Sera. The Boltons are not like the Lannisters; they do not take the repayment of debts nearly as seriously."

"How would you know that, my lady?" Dolorous Edd Tollet said curiously. *He's every right to ask that question. Up until last month, Melanie had never been to Westeros before. So, one would have to wonder how she could be so knowledgeable about anyone who lives on this side of the Narrow Sea.*

Fortunately, Kinvara gave an appropriate reply. She stated calmly "You would be amazed by how much the source can tell you about someone you've never even met, Master Eddison."

"Ah, yes, the source," Dolorous Edd mumbled glumly, "It's always the bloody source."

*I'm just glad we normally don't have to give any more explanation than that.*

"All else aside, what does Bolton hope to accomplish from this?" Danwell muttered inquiringly, "Moon tea is not always effective. Furthermore, Lord Eddard Stark has two other sons. As well as two daughters. Even if Lord Robb and Lady Margaery never conceive, the Stark bloodline will endure."

*I do not know what is more ironic: the fact that a man whose wife has suffered a string of miscarriages would be so certain about the continuation of another house's family tree, or the fact that he tried to end the Stark bloodline in the original universe. In any case, the eighth son of Walder Frey presented a fine argument. Gregor Clegane chose to address it. He professed "For the present, Bolton is only giving Margaery essence of moon tea as a temporary measure to prevent the next generation of House Stark from beginning. He will not do anything more until Jon Connington brings Lyanna Stark before King Robert. Once that happens, Tywin will advise the king to chastise the Starks for their deception."

"But Lord Eddard is the only one who knew his sister was still alive," Allard noted.
"And Lord Eddard is the king's oldest and best friend," Kinvara countered, "Just imagine how betrayed Robert Baratheon would feel to learn what the Lord of Winterfell kept from him."

"He would be furious, of course," Wendel Manderly commented, "Even so, I do not believe the King would order the destruction of House Stark just for that."

"In all honesty, the king would probably be too preoccupied with me to deal with the Starks," Gregor speculated. After all, *I'm the one who orchestrated the disappearance of the Targaryens and Lyanna. He will be far more cross with me than with the wolves.* "With that in mind, he would probably leave the handling of House Stark to his Hand instead. If so… Tywin might permit Roose Bolton to use any force at his disposal to bring down the Great House of the North."

"That cannot happen!" Samwell exclaimed firmly.

"Indeed," Tormund conceded, "The Free Folk may dislike the wolves even now, but they are still far preferable to those flayers."

"Aye," Ser Wendel proclaimed, "I will be dead before I bend the knee to a Bolton."

*You are right about that much, faithful Northman.* Gregor gestured for silence, and once it came, he declared "I understand your frustrations; I share them. However, there is something good to come from this affair. We may finally have a legitimate reason to remove Roose Bolton from power."

"What do you mean?" Harren Botley enquired.

"I've been looking for an opportunity to strip Lord Bolton of his title for a very long time," Gregor Clegane explicated, "I have actually had grounds to do so for almost a year now. As soon as I learned Roose Bolton was behind the murder of Lyanna's rider, I could have apprehended him. The only reason I did not was because he could have exposed her wedding to Rhaegar and my involvement in her disappearance beforehand. However, now that Lyanna's marriage is common knowledge and Tyrion is on his way to rescue her from Connington, Bolton is about to lose all his insurance. As such, he no longer has anything he can hold against us, and we can eliminate him without any fear of incrimination."

"I would recommend we do so straightaway, my lord," Allard proposed.

"I agree with Allard," said Gerion, "We've left the Leech Lord unchecked for far too long already."

"The thought is tempting," Gregor admitted, "However, as plausible as this moon tea business may seem, the only real evidence we have of its validity is Mollander's testimony. He claims to have genuine physical evidence, but we will not be able to see this evidence until he gets here. I have decided that until Mollander arrives, we will simply let Bolton be."

"What about when the evidence gets here, my lord?" asked Samwell.

"Once it does, we will determine its credibility," "If it turns out to be authentic, we will be quick to act on it. I expect Domeric Bolton will become the undisputed lord of the Dreadfort within the following fortnight."

"What makes you think he'll be any different from his sire?" Danwell Frey argued. *You are just the embodiment of irony today, aren't you? Considering how dissimilar you are from your father…*

"Domeric was the one who told us of Lord Roose's role in Lyanna Stark's flight," Gregor revealed, "He came forward at tremendous risk to both his own safety and his family's name. He is nothing like his father. If ever his house had any honor, he is the one who can regain it."
"Well, I personally believe it would be safer to do away with House Bolton altogether," said Wendel Manderly, "But I trust your judgement, my lord. If you say Domeric Bolton deserves a chance, we shall give him one."

Everyone else appeared to agree with that proposal, much to Gregor's satisfaction.

About thirty minutes later, Gregor felt that everything of importance had been addressed, discussed, and ruled upon appropriately. Thus, he decided to adjourn the meeting then. *I would say this meeting went rather well, considering that half the attendees had never been to one before.*

It had been almost nine months since more than half a dozen people had been inside the Meeting Tower at the same time. For the last three months, no more than four people had ever entered it at once. Today, there had been ten. Quite a change.

All the same, with Dacey Clegane and Lothor Brune at sea, Willas Tyrell in King's Landing, and Oberyn Martell in Dorne, the secret council was still far from whole. *Dacey and Ser Lothor will be here soon enough. Oberyn's on standby in his homeland, and he'll ride north whenever I summon him. Alas, Willas may not be back for a while longer. Oh, well; at least I can trust him to keep an eye on Rickard.*

When Gregor and his companions departed from the Meeting Tower, Samwell Tarly and the seven members of the secret council each went their own ways. Kinvara, however, would go with the Mountain and talk to him in private, as they had agreed to earlier.

It was worth noting that she had a brief exchange of affection with Allard Seaworth beforehand. *At least they're being subtle about it. I know servants of R'hllor are not bound to take an oath of celibacy, but if Melanie is not careful with Allard, they may become the latest target of the moat's gossip.* Gregor was certain he could trust both of them to be discreet, but he had to watch out for everyone's best interests first and foremost.

Once Kinvara bade Allard farewell with the promise to join him for dinner that night, she accompanied Gregor Clegane to the Lord's Tower. They were both virtually silent the whole way there. Shortly after they began the long ascent to Gregor's solar, he looked to her and remarked "There is something I've been meaning to ask you."

"I'm listening," was all she said in response.

The Mountain took a moment to choose his words, and then he stated "Allard tells me you once told him that you regard me as the most dangerous man alive. I must know; did you mean what you said?"

"At the time, I did," Kinvara confessed, "In hindsight, I admit that my assessment was a little premature. As well as more than a little naïve."

"You were not entirely incorrect or inaccurate, though," Gregor assured her, "I admit that I can be quite dangerous. Oftentimes more than I need to be. Every now and then, I even feel a sudden inexplicable, overwhelming urges to harm someone."

"Just like the original Mountain," Kinvara noted.

"True," the Lord of Moat Cailin conceded, "But unlike the original Mountain, I can exercise enough restraint to control those urges. Or, at the very least, I can focus them on those deserving of my rage. If Mollander is not misleading us, then Roose Bolton may turn out to be its next target."

"If he wasn't an inhumane beast, I'd pity him," Kinvara murmured emotionlessly.
Gregor chuckled at the dryness of her remark. The two of them continued to climb in relative quietness for another couple of minutes, and then he turned back to her and said enquiringly "May I ask why you once thought of me as the most dangerous man in the world?"

"Mainly because of your goals," Kinvara disclosed.

"My goals?" he repeated in bewilderment.

She nodded and enlightened him with "In this universe, the Baratheon/Targaryen feud is not as profound as it was in canon, but their rivalry could still worsen at any time. Back when Rhaegar's children were in hiding, I had no way of knowing that Robert could be persuaded to spare them the same fate he dealt their father. At the time, I firmly believed that a truly peaceful Seven Kingdoms could only come about if either the Baratheons or the Targaryens were the realm's uncontested rulers. Yet you were clearly intent on supporting both factions. In my mind, that was a recipe for disaster."

"I can see where you're coming from," Gregor stated, "To be honest, I do not particularly care who sits the Iron Throne, so long as it is someone competent, qualified, and capable. Robert Baratheon meets all three of those criteria in this universe, so I choose to support his reign."

"Those qualities might apply to one or more of the Targaryens," Kinvara debated.

"Perhaps," Gregor supposed, "Be that as it may, none of them seem to have any interest in reclaiming the Iron Throne. Even if Robert turned out to be an inept ruler, there is no logic in forcing someone to accept a duty they have neither the obligation nor the desire to undertake."

"Robert had neither obligation nor desire when the people of Westeros asked him to be Aerys's successor," Kinvara reminded him, "He agreed to accept the responsibility, anyway. Who's to say the same cannot be done with Rhaenys, Aegon, Jon, or Daenerys?"

"Well, I cannot speak for Daenerys; only you have met her," Gregor contended, "However, based on what Dacey and Allard have told me of her, she has no lingering attachment to her father's crown. She likely gave up on it long ago. As for Rhaegar's children… I know them far better than you do. The Iron Throne means little and less to them."

"How can you be so sure?" she inquired.

"I was there when they bent the knee to Robert and swore him their allegiance," he recalled, "If you had attended the conference at Harrenhal, I'd wager that you would now share my conviction."

"Maybe I would," Kinvara thought aloud, "However… suppose Robert was not so accommodating. Suppose that instead of accepting their fealty, he had ordered the deaths of the Targaryens when he encountered them at Harrenhal. What would you have done then?"

Gregor opened his mouth to give a retort, but nothing came out. His words were caught in his throat. In fact, he was borderline speechless. Hard as he tried, he could not come up with a suitable answer to that question.

During the conference at Harrenhal, the Mountain had been so certain that he could bring about a temporary resolution between the Baratheon/Targaryen, no matter how hopeless the scenario may have become. He had devised dozens of plans to sway Robert's mind in advance, and he had been prepared to use every single one of them if they were needed.

He had been fully prepared to accept any punitive actions the King may have taken against him. He
had been prepared to make some great personal sacrifices. Even so, he had never actually contemplated the likelihood that Robert would still want Jon, Aegon, and Rhaenys to be executed. He wondered how that possibility of that scenario had never once occurred to him. *It could be because I didn't want to consider the possibility that it would actually happen.*

After a bout of silence, Kinvara pronounced "You see? That is why I regarded you as the most dangerous man in the world. In a way, it is commendable that you have always looked out for both the Targaryens and the Baratheons. However, if relations between the two families deteriorated, you could not have picked one over the other. Indecision and neutrality will often yield worse results than choosing a side."

*It always worked well for Switzerland. Then again, the cost of living for the Swiss is ridiculously high. Plus, if Essos is meant to be a reflection of Europe, Switzerland would probably be located in Norvos or the Red Waste.* Gregor gave a dismissive shrug and muttered "Had you been in my position, what would you have done?"

"I would not have gotten myself into that mess in the first place," Kinvara retorted simply.

"I suppose you would have backed only one side from the very start?" Gregor presumed.

"It would have been the safer approach," Kinvara disputed.

"I rarely choose the safer approach," Gregor revealed, "Mostly because it yields the lesser payoff. To produce the greatest results, one must be prepared to take risks. At times, it may even be necessary to risk one's life. You may not be comfortable gambling with your life, but I have been doing it for years, and look how far it's gotten me."

"Pretty far," Kinvara admitted, "But I should caution you. One day, all this gambling could blow up in your face. Especially if you keep trying to save everyone."

At that, Gregor halted. He glared at the Red Priestess and muttered "You think I plan to save everyone?"

"Well, that is what people say of you," Kinvara remarked.

"Whoever those people are, they are mistaken," Gregor professed, "As much as I would like to save everyone, I am not so arrogant and foolish that I actually believe I really can save everyone. And even if I ever did believe that, the Pentoshi Bloodbath would have destroyed my belief."

"The Bloodbath certainly reinforced my belief that none of us are safe," Kinvara remarked.

"Of course, none of us are safe," the Mountain commented, "Even if you and I manage to survive the fight against the Army of the Dead, a lot of people are still going to die during the Long Night. Of that, I'm certain. All the same, I am going to do everything in my power to save most of the people in Westeros. However, I am well-aware that no matter how hard I try, I will never be able to save all of them. Such a thing is utterly implausible."

Despite the grimness of that statement, Kinvara flashed a small smile. "I am glad you realize that much on your own."

Gregor scoffed at her wording. "Worry not. I may not be as pessimistic as you, but I still have a firm grip on what is and isn't within my capabilities."
"Good for you," she commented slyly.

Neither of them spoke another word until they reached Gregor's solar. Once they were inside and the room was secure, they were able to drop their act once more.

"So, what did you want to speak to me?" Melanie Hamilton queried.

"You may recall that at the council meeting, I mentioned that Mollander wrote to us three times," Gregory Welch told her.

"Yes, you did say that," Melanie recounted, "Yet I seem to recall only receiving two letters from him."

"Well, that figures," Gregory muttered. He reached into his doublet and took out the most recent letter Mollander had sent them. He displayed it to her and pronounced "This came in just this morning. Less than an hour before the meeting, in fact. I didn't have time to tell you of it before we convened in the Meeting Tower. With Maester Kennick confined to quarters, I've had to entrust the rookery to the castellan, and even now, he's had difficulty balancing it with his other duties."

"Why didn't you present it to the secret council?" Melanie inquired.

"Because it contains information which only you and I can comprehend," Gregory apprised her.

That caught her interest. She raised an eyebrow and asked, "Is it about the real world?"

"Technically, yes and no," Gregory illuminated, "Let me ask you something. Do you know if your mother ever suffered a miscarriage?"

"Which mother?" Melanie enquired.

"The one from Asshai," he clarified.

"I'll need to think on that," she muttered, rubbing her temple, "To be honest, I hardly knew the woman. I was only with her for the first five minutes of my existence in this world. After that, I was taken away to be a servant of R'hllor. All I knew about her was what the real Melisandre told me."

"By any chance, did she ever mention if your mother lost another child before giving birth to you?" Gregory queried.

"Now that I think on it, she did mention something of the sort," Melanie recounted, "When I was six or seven, I asked Melisandre how I came to be a servant of R'hllor in the first place, and she claimed that she and my mother had made a contract. I still do not know what my mother received in return, but she had agreed to give her firstborn to the Red Priests in exchange for it. However, about a month into her first pregnancy, she lost the child. Normally, the contract would have been nullified by the miscarriage. The only reason it wasn't is because I was conceived the very next day."

"Then it's just as we thought," Gregory muttered bluntly.

"We?" she noted, somewhat baffled.

"Mollander and I," he elaborated, "As it happens, my mother miscarried shortly before I was conceived, too."
Melanie was astonished. "She did?"

"Yes, indeed," Gregory confirmed, "These days, the only people who know that are Lady Daliah Clegane, Maester Velix, and myself. And anyone at the Citadel who may get curious about me. You see, a comprehensive record of all the realm's pregnancies is kept by the Conclave. Including the ones that... you know, end badly. Mollander managed to get his hands on that list, and he made a note of all the ones that resulted in miscarriages in the last century."

"Why would he do that?" asked Melanie.

"Because his mother also miscarried," Gregory disclosed.

As he predicted, that revelation stunned her. "What?"

"See for yourself," he advised her, holding out Mollander's letter. As she took it and began to read, he informed her "This is only a theory, but Mollander believes there may be a correlation between people from the real world and people whose mothers experienced miscarriages beforehand."

"Fascinating," Melanie pronounced, continuing to read, "That actually makes sense. Since we do not belong in this world, we never could have come to it without upsetting the balance of nature. As such, the only way we could have had a place for ourselves is if we took someone else's place."

"Precisely," Gregory conceded, "Of course, this does mean we actually killed the original characters to secure our standing in the World of Ice and Fire."

"Considering who those characters were in canon, those losses are perfectly acceptable to me," Melanie disputed.

"I agree," Gregory remarked, "At any rate, it appears we now have a way to determine if anyone else in Westeros is like us."

"Don't get too excited just yet," she cautioned him, "In a society that lacks the conveniences of 21st century medicine, miscarriages are not uncommon."

"That may be," he supposed, "However, it is extremely uncommon for expectant mothers to become pregnant again immediately after they miscarry."

"You got me there," she rejoined, "Still, there is no telling how many failed pregnancies we would have to look through. There could be dozens, scores, hundreds... maybe even thousands."

"That occurred to me and Mollander, as well," Gregory asserted, "But even if we cannot determine who among that number is like us, we should at least be able to narrow the list of prospects down to a far more manageable amount."

"I just hope we have enough time to go through the whole list," Melanie commented, "I mean, the Others will march on the Wall in... how long do we have now? A year? Two years?"

"I'd say somewhere between one and two," Gregory muttered, "That is not really relevant, though. Remember; it was your idea to search for others from the real world. If you are truly serious about this endeavor, you must be prepared to do the work required to accomplish it."

"I am," she assured him, "I just hope it does not become too time-consuming. After all, we have plenty of other issues that need our attention."

"I know," he said plainly. Fortunately, it'll still be many months before the Night's King comes
Not five seconds later, there was a knock on the entrance to the solar. Gregory Welch and Melanie Hamilton quickly went back to being Gregor Clegane and Kinvara respectively.

The Mountain walked over to the door and opened it up. Standing on the other side was Erryk Ruttiger, the moat's castellan. He was red in the face, panting and sweating heavily, and holding something close to his chest.

"Erryk, are you alright?" the tall man asked in concern, "Did something happen?"

The other native of the Westerlands needed a minute to catch his breath. Once he was respiring normally again, he gazed up at Gregor and declared "To answer your first question, I am fine, my lord. To answer your second question…"

He did not say anything more. Instead, he wordlessly displayed the object he had been holding close to his chest.

It was a raven. A solid white raven.

Gregor felt his heart skip a beat. He blinked rapidly, as though he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. Unfortunately, they were not. The bird in the castellan's grip did not turn black or vanish. It was real. As real as could be. And as real as what it entailed.

White ravens were only dispatched during the changing of seasons. The last time Gregor had seen one was during the conference at Harrenhal. That one had marked the ending of summer and the beginning of autumn.

So, this raven… This can't be. The conference was just one year ago. We... we should still have at least another year of autumn. There must be some mistake. It cannot be true. It cannot.

Alas, it was true. Autumn was now over. Winter had begun.
The four men stood at the peak of the mountain, gazing out at the endless expanse to the north.

They were in the midst of a fierce blizzard. They could hardly even see their immediate surroundings, let alone what was miles away on the ground below. All the same, they knew full well what was out there.

They know it as well as I do.

The red priest shivered slightly, and he pulled his outermost layer of clothing closer to his chest. Noting his associate's discomfort, the Stormlord said in concern "Have you a chill, Thoros?"

"No more than usual, Lord Beric," Thoros of Myr assured him, "You needn't worry; my faith in the Lord of Light keeps me warm."

"I would caution you not to rely too greatly on your lord," the king of the Free Folk advised the Essosi, "The value of fire is not to be understated, but even the gods have no sway over the Night's King."

"That may be," Thoros admitted, "But it is the will of R'hllor that the Army of the Dead should perish. I mean to bring that goal to fruition."

"As do we all," the First Ranger conceded, sighing and folding his arms, "If only we were not so vastly outnumbered... I might have a little more faith in our chances."

"Faith is all some persons have, Lord Benjen," Thoros of Myr contended, "You mustn't take it for granted. Oftentimes, that alone is enough to ensure one's success."

"While I do not wholly agree, I understand the sentiment," Mance Rayder commented, "I personally believe there is hope for the people of Westeros. Our ancestors did not defeat the Night's King once just so their descendants could be exterminated by his forces millennia later."

"Well, someone has to be the victor," Beric Dondarrion pronounced, "The Army of the Dead may prove to be a greater challenge than they were in the Age of the First Men. They've had all this time to build up their strength and numbers."

"Furthermore, they likely know we're waiting for them," Benjen Stark debated, "The second coming of the Long Night was announced nearly six years ago. Think on all those who perished
north of the Wall since then. Most – if not all – of them were aware of the Seven Kingdoms' plans to combat the Others."

"That is no great cause for alarm," Thoros of Myr stated, "The White Walkers would undoubtedly expect some resistance by the time they reach the Wall, anyway."

"Do you suppose they know they'll find some before they get there?" Lord Beric asked.

"It is possible," Mance Rayder thought aloud, "If so, they may see us as more of a nuisance than an actual threat to their campaign. Of course, regardless of the size of our company, we could never hope to dissuade the Night's King from marching south."

"That matters not," Benjen Stark declared, "We will engage them in battle, nonetheless."

"Then you are prepared to die, my lord?" Beric Dondarrion presumed.

"Absolutely," the First Ranger affirmed, "To me and my brothers of the Watch, death is merely part of our duty to the realm. Every time we go north, we set out knowing we might not return. This occasion is no exception."

"Indeed," Beric Dondarrion concurred, "I respect that about the men of the Night's Watch; their willingness to accept whatever fate may await them. We, too, came here knowing we might never go south of the Wall again."


"Yes, that is true," the Stormlord remarked, "However, if I die again, Thoros might not be able to bring me back a second time. Even if he could, I would not want him to."

"Why is that?" Benjen Stark queried.

"For one thing, the revival is an unpleasant experience," Lord Beric disclosed, "One can never come back with their soul intact. You could say it makes one feel… less human. In addition to that, Thoros can only bring back one person at a time. Although I am leading the Legionnaires stationed at the Fist, my group is the smallest and weakest of the three garrisoned there. There are others in our party who are far more valuable alive than I."

"Such as?" the King-beyond-the-Wall enquired.

"You and Lord Benjen, as well as Lord Commander Jeor," the Stormlord replied, "If any of you three was to fall in battle, I wouldn't hesitate to return Thoros' gift so he could use it to restore you to life."

"That is rather noble of you, my lord," Benjen Stark muttered appreciatively, "But consider the size of the Night King's host. Even if you were to bring one of us back, it would matter little."

"Just so," Mance Rayder agreed, "One man may not make much difference in the long run."

"One man could make all the difference in the world," Thoros countered, "It all depends on the man himself and the path he chooses to follow."

There is truth in that statement. I have witnessed that truth for over half my life. My own existence is proof of that truth.
There was a wave of silence over the next few minutes. The only sounds that could be heard were the breathing of the men and the whistling of the wind. If one was to listen closely, a wolf’s howl could also be heard from somewhere to the southeast. The boy was momentarily distracted by the howling, but he quickly returned his attention to his mentor.

Over the last few months, every time the old man and the boy went somewhere in the lands beyond the Wall, they heard a wolf howling. The old man knew it was always the same wolf. The boy claimed the wolf’s presence felt oddly familiar. It vaguely reminded him of his own direwolf. There was a perfectly rational explanation for that, which the old man also knew. However, he had not yet shared this explanation with the boy, as he wished to see if the boy could find out the answers on his own.

Here atop the Frostfangs, Brandon Stark, Mance Rayder, Beric Dondarrion, and Thoros of Myr could not see the old man or his apprentice. Even if the weather had been serene, they would never have even realized either of them was there. Nevertheless, the two of them could see those four men as clearly as if the Sun had been shining that day.

Just one week earlier, the Conclave had sent out white ravens to all the holdfasts in the realm. That meant the seasons had changed. However, that was not why Benjen Stark, Mance Rayder, Beric Dondarrion, and Thoros of Myr were currently in the Frostfangs. As it happened, they and all their colleagues who had gathered at the Fist of the First Men were still unaware that winter had begun. Castle Black had dispatched a party of riders to the Fist in effort to inform them of this development, but the riders had yet to reach their destination.

The real reason these men were out in the Frostfangs was simply to conduct reconnaissance. Every fortnight for the last few months, Lord Commander Jeor had ordered an expedition into the Frostfangs to monitor and report on the Army of the Dead's movements. Thus far, those expeditions had all ended virtually the same way: the Night’s King’s host appeared to get bigger every time, but it never wandered into the Frostfangs. That will change soon.

All the previous expeditions had been led by Watchmen, Free Folk, and Legionnaires of lesser status. This was the first time the leaders of those companies had led an expedition. No one had forced them to undertake this duty; they had all volunteered. They seemed obligated to endure the same dangerous work as their subordinates.

Although there was no one else standing atop the northernmost mountain in the Frostfangs at this time, the four men had not come by themselves. They had been accompanied by around three dozen others. Most of that group was gathered at the southern base of the mountain with the horses. The rest had gone north to get a closer glimpse of the foe.

All forty of those men were risking their lives just by being in the area. Of course, they had known right from that start that there was a high probability that none of them would make it back to the Fist of the First Men alive. The scouts' odds of survival had been even slimmer.

Bloodraven already knew that a few of those men would never see the Fist again. Just minutes earlier, he had seen them meet their ends. Their more fortunate colleagues had managed to escape the same dismal end. They were in the process of hastily retreating up the northern side of the mountain.

A minute later, the remaining scouts reached the summit. They were exhausted from undertaking such a steep ascent in so little time, but they did not allow themselves to rest.

One of the Night Watchmen approached Benjen Stark and urged him "First Ranger, we must get out of here!"
"Calm down, Garth," Benjen urged his fellow black brother, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder, "Now, tell me; what troubles you? Has something happened?"

Before Garth could answer, one of the wildlings proclaimed, "They're coming!"

The company leaders did not need any clarification on who he was referring to. Even so, Beric Dondarrion murmured unsteadily "You mean the White Walkers…?"

"Yes, my lord," one of the Legionnaires confirmed, "The Army of the Dead has finally started to advance!"

"How many?" asked Thoros of Myr.

"All of them," another Legionnaire announced.

The Legionnaire was speaking the truth, but Mance Rayder appeared somewhat skeptical. Luckily, one of the other surviving wildlings was a warg. He turned to the warg and inquired "Is that accurate?"

"Well, even I could only see so far in this weather, Mance," the warg remarked, "But we can be certain the entire host is on the move. All the Others and all their wights are headed this way!"

That was enough to convince the King-beyond-the-Wall and the others that the Night's King had indeed begun his march. They were quick to act upon this news.

"Fall back!" Benjen Stark exclaimed, "We must return to the Fist immediately!"

He, Thoros of Myr, Beric Dondarrion, Mance Rayder, and the surviving scouts promptly began the long descent down the southern face of the mountain. They watched their footing, so as not to stumble and break their necks. Other than that, they concentrated on getting to the bottom of the mountain as quickly as possible with little regard for anything else.

Although the Others were as much an enemy to him as they were to ordinary men, Bloodraven managed to stay as calm and composed as ever. When he turned to his apprentice, he noted that the boy was more than a little uneasy. Fortunately for him, they had no reason to stay there any longer. The bastard knight placed a hand on the boy's shoulder and stated "Let us depart now."

Brandon Stark turned to his teacher and nodded compliantly.

An instant later, they arrived back in the safety of the cave. It has started. The Long Night will soon be here.

The lands beyond the Wall and the North were already covered in white, but everywhere south of the Neck was still relatively temperate. The Long Night would not officially begin until the entire continent was buried in snow. They should savor the Sun whilst they still can. Bloodraven himself had not basked in sunlight in so long that he had nearly forgotten what it felt like on his skin. Not that he was bothered by the lack of it.

Ever since he became the Three-Eyed Raven, Ser Brynden Rivers had managed to abandon all forms of desire. He had not longed for anything or anyone. He never envied the people he watched over or the lives they led. He certainly never yearned for any of their possessions or any material goods. He did not even miss the ability to see with both of his real eyes or the ability to walk with both of his real legs.

Be that as it may, he much preferred venturing outside his cave to sitting idly inside it. At least
then he could experience those abilities again, even if they were only occurring in his mind. Additionally, he could keep himself informed on the affairs of the world without even getting up from his throne.

That was fortunate for him. If ever he did rise from his throne, he would die very quickly. That was not to say death frightened him. Brynden Rivers had already lived longer than he had any right to. Anyone who glanced at him might have thought he was in great pain, but that was simply not the case. He had long ago forgotten what pain even felt like. His last true encounter with it had been just before the children of the forest rescued him several decades past. Somehow, this throne of weirwood roots had numbed his body completely, which in turn inhibited him from undergoing pain for the rest of his life.

Despite all that, Bloodraven knew that even with the weirwood throne, he would not live forever. That did not disturb him in the slightest; he was content with that knowledge. All men must die, he reminded himself. He only hoped that whenever his time came, he would not come back a wight.

Whenever death came to claim Brynden Rivers, he planned to embrace it openly. truthfully, he did not expect to live beyond the Long Night. Even if he did, there would already be another Three-Eyed Raven in the world. Up until now, his only reasons for living had been to be the Three-Eyed Raven and to train a new one. Once his apprentice was ready to take his place, he could die without any reservations.

As it happened, Bloodraven believed Brandon Stark was almost ready to succeed him. Although the boy had only been learning from him for half a year, he had proven to be a promising disciple, a hard worker, an efficient researcher, and an attentive listener. He could be a little too eager or impatient at times, but that could be excused, considering his age. I was not the most calm or patient child at that age, either. Then again, he had not become the Three-Eyed Raven until he was seven and seventy. Brandon Stark was destined to replace him even before his eleventh nameday.

"Will they get away, Ser Brynden?" Brandon Stark enquired in concern. Obviously, he was referring to the men in the Frostfangs.

The elderly bastard of Aegon the Unworthy focused on his apprentice and declared "If they make haste, they shall. Even if they did not have horses, I anticipate they'll flee the Frostfangs without suffering further losses. The numbers of the dead are great, but the Others and the wights move slowly."

Especially in a horde. On the other hand, hordes were deadlier than lone wights or small groups of wights. Now, every wight and every White Walker was headed south. That would be a problem for every person whose heart was still beating.

In any case, the boy seemed relieved. Evidently, he is still attached to the First Ranger, Bloodraven noted. His responsibilities as the Three-Eyed Raven required him to remain impartial, unless there was a conflict between the living and the dead. Eight and forty years ago, he had severed all links to his past, and he had no intention of mending them. To me, House Targaryen is just another family now.

Of course, even if his father's family had retained their crown and their standing, Ser Brynden could never return to them. That was due to a number of factors, namely his age and his physical debilities. Meanwhile, Brandon Stark had no such hindrance. Since nothing and no one was forcing him to stay in the cave, he could leave it whenever he wished.

At present, Bloodraven saw no reason to keep the second son of Eddard Stark with him. So long as he remains impartial in his duties, he can be allowed to return to Winterfell. The children of the
forest never said the Three-Eyed Raven had to remain in this cave. Or in any one place, for that matter.

Although the Three-Eyed Raven could see everything at once, Bloodraven often wondered if a mobile Three-Eyed Raven could actually be more efficient than a stationary Three-Eyed Raven. While he did not have the means to test that hypothesis himself, his successor certainly did. One day, he will be an even greater Raven than I. I do not know how, but he will. His ability to travel could be why.

"May I ask a question, my lord?" the young boy said curiously.

The former black brother nodded and pronounced "Ask me anything, and I will answer."

"Do my uncle and his allies have any hope of triumphing over the Others at the Fist of the First Men?" Brandon uttered hopefully.

"No," Ser Brynden Rivers apprised him straightforwardly, "They mean to make a stand at the Fist. If they do, they will all die. They have no chance of emerging victorious. The only ones who will survive are those who decide to run."

Brandon Stark gazed at his feet sadly. A few seconds later, he looked up at his teacher and stated inquisitively "I understand that they will not be able to stop the Night's King. But will they at least manage to stall his advance?"

"For a while, yes," Brynden Rivers contended, "Alas, they will not hold out indefinitely. Even if every one of the Watchmen, the Legionnaires, and the Free Folk manages to vanquish a hundred wights at the Fist, over ten times that number will be left to march on the Wall."

"What will happen then?" Brandon asked anxiously.

"The Wall's enchantments are sufficient to ward off any undead creature," the ancient man told him, "As long as it stands, the Army of the Dead could never hope to cross into the Seven Kingdoms."

"But could the Wall actually crumble?" the boy conjectured.

"Such a thing is possible," Bloodraven admitted, "However, it would take an object of tremendous power, such as dragonfire or the Horn of Joramun, to topple the Wall easily. Thankfully, the Night's King possesses nothing of the sort. His march will not be halted altogether, but his progress will be slowed greatly. Take comfort in the knowledge that the Army of the Dead could never pass through the Wall, Brandon Stark. They will never go over or under it, either."

"Couldn't they go around it?" Brandon speculated, "The mountains west of Westwatch-by-the-Bridge may be too steep for men to climb over, and the waters east of Eastwatch-by-the-Sea may be too cold for men to swim in, but the Others do not seem bothered by heights or freezing temperatures."

"There is a possibility of that, as well," Brynden Rivers stated, "Should the Night's King choose either of those approaches, his likelihood of entering the Seven Kingdoms would increase, but at the same time, he would lose a significant percentage of his forces."

"I do not think that would discourage him," the wolf boy thought aloud.

"Indeed not, Brandon Stark," the bastard knight conceded, "But before he attempts to go around the Wall, he will most definitely look for a way to destroy it first."
"I believe you are correct, my lord," Brandon Stark uttered grimly. There came a long pause. After that, the lad let out a deep sigh and said, "Would you permit me to apologize?"

Bloodraven was taken aback. "Apologize for what?"

"The Night's King was once a man," Brandon pointed out, "It is said he was another Brandon Stark. If that is true, it means one of my relatives is to blame for all this terror. Please know that I am deeply sorry for my family's role in this catastrophe."

The elderly man tried to form a sympathetic smile, and he stated gently "You needn't apologize for the misdeeds committed by a brother of your ancestor who lived back in the Age of the First Men. Those crimes were his alone to bear, and time has removed any further blame from you and your kin."

Once again, Brandon was reassured. He beamed and said gratefully "Thank you, my lord. I am glad to have this feeling of guilt lifted from my mind."

"That is good," Ser Brynden uttered approvingly, "Your burden is already great enough without involving your personal feelings."

"I can promise you that my feelings will never stand in my way," the wolf boy firmly pronounced.

Bloodraven was oddly impressed by that statement. It was spoken with such… conviction. He truly is nearly ready.

Brynden Rivers took a moment to gaze around the area. For the last five months, the cave had held a total of eighty-four occupants. That number included sixty children of the forest, nineteen House Stark guards, Meera Reed, Jojen Reed, Hodor, Brandon Stark, and Bloodraven himself. There was also the direwolf Summer, as well as a number of goats and fish.

At this time, however, the cave was nearly deserted of its bipedal residents.

Earlier that week, Ser Brynden had announced that winter had begun. The cave's other residents had been quite busy since then.

The majority of the children of the forest had spent the last several days outdoors, observing the Wall's defenses and searching for any signs of wights or Others. The Northmen had elected to go out and do some foraging and hunting, as they would not have many opportunities to do either in the future. Or rather, they would not have many opportunities to forage or hunt in acceptably safe conditions.

At the rate Brandon Stark was learning, he and his companions would be able to return to the Seven Kingdoms fairly soon. There was a chance they would leave even before the Night's King and his forces reached the cave of the Three-Eyed Raven. If so, they would not have to fight their way out, and they were certainly under no pressure to gather fresh meat so expediently. Still, the Northmen would have been more comfortable if they did not have to constantly stop to hunt. Whenever they left, they aimed to get to the Wall as quickly as possible. Thus, they planned to have plenty of provisions already gathered beforehand.

The Reed siblings had joined the House Stark guards, as they had both longed to spend some time outside the cave. In addition to that, while the Northmen could gather large game on their own easily, the Reeds were better-skilled at tracking and trapping smaller animals. For that reason, Brandon Stark had allowed his friends to take Summer with him, as well. The direwolf was as good a hunter as any man, and his prey never got away.
At present, there were only six people in the cave apart from Brynden Rivers and Brandon Stark. Two of them were House Stark guards; they were known as Hallis Mollen and Lew. Another three were children of the forest. Their names were too long to be uttered in the Common Tongue; Brandon Stark and his friends had given them and the other children names based on their appearances. These three were referred to as Ash, Coals, and Scales.

The last person there was the simpleminded gentle giant Hodor.

Lew and Hallis Mollen had stayed behind to guard their lord's second son. Ash, Coals, and Scales had stayed behind to tend to the Three-Eyed Raven. Hodor had stayed behind because Bran liked having him close-by, and because he had no aptitude for scouting, foraging, or hunting whatsoever.

Ser Brynden was pleased that Hodor had lingered. The tall young man's past was shrouded in mystery. Even he, who saw everything at once, did not understand the full extent of the stableboy's background. In fact, Hodor was one of the very few people who could actually bewilder the Three-Eyed Raven.

"I've another question, ser," Brandon Stark remarked.

"I am listening," Brynden Rivers pronounced.

"Should we vacate the Seven Kingdoms?" the wolf boy inquired.

The Three-Eyed Raven was intrigued. "Do you believe we should?"

Brandon shrugged and murmured "We cannot ignore the possibility that the Army of the Dead will overpower the armies of the Seven Kingdoms. Since the Three-Eyed Raven's duty is to ensure the survival of humanity, we should be prepared to save as many people as possible. But once the Night's King arrives south of the Wall, nowhere in this country will be out of his reach. As such, our only hope for survival would be to retreat across the Narrow Sea."

"It could take far longer to evacuate the residents of the Seven Kingdoms than it would the Night's King to get past the Wall," Bloodraven pointed out.

"I realize that," Brandon proclaimed, "Be that as it may, we might still have enough time to evacuate at least half of those who live in the Seven Kingdoms. Perhaps more if we are fortunate."

"I admire your desire to aid your fellow Westerosi," Ser Brynden muttered, "However, even if effective, this ploy would only delay humanity's demise. The Others and their wights are not fair swimmers, but in time, they will find a way to cross the Narrow Sea. They would likely freeze the surface of the water and walk over it."

"I feared that might happen," Brandon Stark commented glumly, "Westeros is not safe, Essos is not safe… am I right to assume that nowhere in the world is safe?"

"That is correct," the ancient bastard confirmed. *Except for this cave, but that could change at any time.* "That is precisely why we must defeat the Night's King before his domain extends to the entirety of Westeros."

"I agree, ser," said the second son of Eddard Stark, "I only wish I shared your faith in our ability. Although the Seven Kingdoms has forged alliances with the Dothraki, multiple sellsword companies, and one of the Triarchs of Volantis, we are still vastly outnumbered."

"The outcome of this war will not be determined by the amount of manpower on either side," Bloodraven professed, "If we are to emerge victorious, we must employ other resources."
"Such as the dragons?" Brandon presumed.

"Correct," the Three-Eyed Raven confirmed, "Of course, three dragons will not be sufficient to stop twenty million wights and White Walkers, but they will be instrumental in eliminating a sizable portion of the Army of the Dead."

"Well, I have already mastered warging into all manner of living creatures, including men," Brandon Stark pointed out. "I would not say you have 'mastered' it, but you are nearly there. However, I have no experience warging into a dragon. If the dragons are to be a resource, perhaps I should attempt to enter the minds of Eliaxes, Draegar, and Ygrenyon."

"You are free to attempt so," Ser Brynden stated, "However, you must remember that dragons are unique. They are not like man, bird, or beast. They cannot be subjugated or driven into submission by any other living being. Thus, you will never be able to fully control them. Not even I, whose veins hold the blood of the dragons, could ever truly master real dragons."

Brandon was clearly dismayed by that information. He mumbled "Is there anyone who can?"

"There is one," Bloodraven professed, "Your cousin, Jon Targaryen. He has the blood of both the First Men and Old Valyria in his veins. That makes him both a warg – like you and your siblings – and a dragon like his half-siblings and aunt."

Brandon Stark had known for a while now that his brothers, sisters, and cousin possessed the same ability to enter the minds of animals that he did. However, he was the only one who had made use of that ability. Up until now, he had never asked why that was. Right then, he inquired "If the six of us are wargs, why am I the only one that has used them?"

"Because their abilities have not awakened yet," Bloodraven answered plainly, "If the dragons are to become our allies, it is up to you to change that. Once your cousin returns to the North, you must go to him and awaken the warg within him."

"Very well, ser," Brandon acknowledged, "I only pray I will be able to do that in time. After all, Jon is on his way to save his mother with Lord Tyrion Lannister. There is no telling how long that will take. It could be months before they are back in Moat Cailin. By then… the Others may have reached the Wall."

"Then you must prepare yourself," Brynden Rivers advised the lad.

"For what, my lord?" Brandon queried.

"For whatever the future may hold," the elderly former black brother expounded, "You and I are aware of everything that is and everything that was. But everything that will be remains unknown even to us."

"What about the greensight, my lord?" Brandon disputed.

"The greensight has its own uses, but even those uses have limits," Ser Brynden contended, "While green dreams can accurately prophesize what is to come, they are worthless if one is incapable of interpreting the symbols. It is critical that you understand that, Brandon Stark."

"I do understand, ser," the wolf boy claimed, "I know better than to rely too heavily on the gifts of the Three-Eyed Raven. I give you my word that I will not abuse them. Nor will I take them for granted."

Bloodraven nodded in approval. "See that you do not. The power of the Three-Eyed Raven is to be
respected and feared, but it is not absolute. You must always remember that there are other awesome forces in the world. Some of which are even greater."

Brandon Stark was at least partly stunned. "What power could be greater than yours?"

"There are several, actually," Bloodraven revealed, "But I will only tell you of two in particular. One is the power of the Night's King. His power exceeds mine by a very wide margin. That is why you and I cannot hope to best him on our own. There is, however, another power which is almost as grand as his, if not more so."

"What would that be?" Brandon muttered curiously.

"You've known of this power for a while now," the ancient knight informed him, "Your cousin serves one of the individuals who possess it."

The young boy promptly realized what his mentor was talking about. "Do you mean Lord Gregor Clegane's source, my lord?"

"I do," Brynden Rivers confirmed, "That power is far beyond even my comprehension. I do not wholly grasp the full scale of the power, but I have seen what all it is capable of."

"The whole realm has seen that," Brandon commented. Indeed. It has effected more change in the past decade than I have in the last five. "We are quite fortunate to have that power on our side."

"I would not be so certain of that," Bloodraven advised him, "Gregor Clegane may be looking out for the prosperity of the Seven Kingdoms, but I'll remind you that I referred to him as 'one of the individuals' who has his power."

That captured Brandon's interest. "Ser, do you mean to tell me there are others?"

"There are," the elderly bastard confirmed, "Currently, there are seven such people in the world. That includes the Mountain That Rides."

"Who are the other six?" Brandon enquired.

"Alas, I only know the identities of four of them," Bloodraven confessed, "The other two are still hidden from my view."

Brandon Stark was deeply confused. "How is that possible?"

"I shall explain," the ancient bastard professed, "Because Gregor Clegane's power – what you call 'the source' – is greater than mine, the identities of those who possess it are hidden from me. I only manage to determine how many have this power because they manifest as irregularities in the world. I cannot locate these irregularities on my own; I can only verify their existence in the world the moment they enter it. A total of seven have existed for the last five and twenty years. That was when the last one was born."

"When did they first appear?" Brandon inquired curiously.

"One of them has existed since before I was rescued by the children of the forest," Brynden Rivers enlightened him, "To this day, I have never learned who he is. The second one was born shortly after I became the Three-Eyed Raven. He turned out to be a slave trader named Yezzan zo Qaggaz. The next three were all born within two or three years of each other. The third is still a mystery. The fourth was Lord Gregor Clegane. The fifth was a Meereenese noble named Hizdahr zo Loraq. It was six years before the sixth one came about. He is a novice at the Citadel named Mollander."
The last one – and, so far, only female – was born in Asshai just a year later. She is a red priestess known as Kinvara, though she has been going by the identity of her late colleague, Melisandre."

"I already knew of that," Brandon remarked, referring to the last sentence, "This is all quite interesting, my lord, but there is much I still do not understand. Firstly, if the people who have the source are hidden from you, how have you managed to discover who they are?"

"That, my lad, is somewhat fascinating," Ser Brynden disclosed, "For as long as those persons remain quiet about this 'source,' they are kept hidden from my view. However, once they share the existence of the source with someone who does not have it, their identities are exposed to me. To date, five of the seven have done just that."

"May I ask when you learnt of each of them?" Brandon said enquiringly.

"Yezzan zo Qaggaz was the first," Bloodraven recounted, "Thirty years ago, he mentioned the source to one of his favorite bed slaves. She dismissed what he told her as something incoherent uttered in the throes of passion. Four years after this, Hizdahr zo Loraq shared the source with his father and mother. His parents assumed he was simply inventing an elaborate story.

"Gregor Clegane was the next," the ancient greenseer continued, "Twelve years ago, he revealed the source to his lady wife and the other top members of the Legion without Banners. He was much vaguer than the two men before him, but his colleagues chose to trust in him. Overtime, he was able to spread the source's existence throughout the world. By the end of Greyjoy's Rebellion, the head of every Great House knew of the source. By the middle of the Great Summer, the source was common knowledge in Westeros."

"Indeed; everyone in the realm knows of it," Brandon commented, "But if everyone already knew, how could you have discovered the other two?"

"It does not matter if they share the source with someone who is already aware of it," Bloodraven apprised him, "I could not tell you why; perhaps the source is somehow different for each one of them. Regardless of all else, whenever they share their own source with another individual, they reveal themselves to me."

"Who was after Lord Gregor?" the second son of Winterfell queried.

"Kinvara," Ser Brynden replied, "She traveled with Hizdahr zo Loraq and Yezzan zo Qaggaz for a time. After they died, she travelled to Pentos and contacted my father's descendants. I suspected she was one of them, but I did not confirm my suspicions until a year past. Shortly after autumn began, Kinvara confessed to having the source to Allard Seaworth.

"The most recent was Mollander," the ancient knight went on, "Less than a turn of moon ago, he told his fellow student of the Conclave, Alleras – who, in actuality, is Oberyn Martell's bastard daughter, Sarella Sand – about his own source. He was the last to be revealed to me. Thus far."

"Have you any idea whom the final two might be?" Brandon enquired.

"Alas, I have none," Bloodraven admitted, "However, the three surviving holders of the source are certain that there are others like them. Unlike myself, they do not know how many, but they believe that whoever these others are, they are native to Westeros."

"Should we be looking for those other two, as well?" Brandon said inquiringly.

"For the present, we need not bother," Ser Brynden proclaimed, "We have more immediate troubles that need tending to. Nonetheless, we will revisit this at a later date. You must know that
the people who possess the source… they have power that could transcend that of anything else in
the world."

"Why do you believe that, my lord?" the wolf boy inquired.

"Because every time they mention this source, I am blocked off from their conversation,"
Bloodraven revealed.

"Blocked off?" Brandon repeated in bewilderment. "How so?"

"I can still witness their discussion," Ser Brynden clarified, "But their speech is grossly distorted.
Particularly when the only ones involved are those who have the source. Whenever the source
comes up in those talks, they speak in a strange dialect."

"So, they are speaking in another tongue?" Brandon assumed.

"No, they still use the Common Tongue," the former black brother disclosed, "But some of the
terms they use are… shall we say, unfamiliar. Even with my greatest efforts, I cannot decipher the
meaning behind those terms. It is as though something is preventing me from getting closer to the
truth."

"What truth?" asked Brandon.

"The truth of the source," Bloodraven explicated, "After observing the source for all this time, I
have concluded that there are only two feasible explanations which could apply to it. Either the
source is beyond the comprehension of those who do not possess it, or we are simply not meant to
learn the real meaning of the source."

"Maybe we should simply turn a blind eye to the source," Brandon suggested. After a brief pause,
he hastily added in "For now, at least. If the source truly is as dangerous as you believe, my lord,
we will have to revisit it at a later date. However, until the Others have been defeated, we can
afford to ignore the source."

"That may be for the best," Ser Brynden conceded, "Furthermore, I do not believe Gregor Clegane,
Kinvara, or Mollander pose any grave threat to the Seven Kingdoms or its inhabitants. So, we shall
let them be for the present. But I assure you; this topic is still far from resolved, Brandon Stark."

"Aye, ser," his apprentice avowed, nodding his head lightly.

There was quietness for a few seconds. Then, across the cave, the Three-Eyed Raven abruptly
heard the muttering of "Hodor."

He gazed over at the huge stableboy – who was actually a man grown, but was referred to as a boy
due to his blissfully unaware and innocent mindset – and saw him accept a platter of food from
Coals. Although Hodor's vocabulary was severely limited, he hardly ever said his name just for the
sake of saying it. There was usually a meaning behind every utterance of it. When he said "Hodor"
that time, he must have meant "Thank you."

As Coals served Hodor, Ash and Scales served Lew and Hallis Mollen. They had brought some
food for themselves, as well. Once they all had their platters, the six of them proceeded to eat their
supper.

The only two people there who were not eating at this time were Brandon Stark and Brynden
Rivers. Of course, Bloodraven derived all the sustenance he required from his weirwood throne,
whereas his apprentice had already had his supper an hour earlier.
While the men and the children ate, Bloodraven thought to address the subject he had been planning to address for a long while. He solemnly turned to the youngest person in the room, and he announced, "It may please you to know that we are rapidly drawing close to the end of our association, Brandon Stark. Before long, you will be ready to head south."

As he expected, the wolf boy was quite pleased by that statement. He murmured somewhat eagerly "How long do you think it will be before then, my lord?"

"That is entirely for you to decide," Ser Brynden debated, "It could be as soon as a fortnight. It could be as late as year's end. It depends entirely on how the final phase of your training progresses, and how willing you are to continue following my instruction."

The lad stood up tall and straight, and he declared "Even now, I am but your humble apprentice, and I am always ready and willing to serve you, my lord. I will begin this 'final phase' whenever you deem me ready to begin it."

"Then we shall begin now," the Three-Eyed Raven proclaimed. He gestured to the foot of his throne, beckoning the boy to sit back down. Once Brandon entangled in the weirwood roots again, his mentor gazed down at him and stated, "Tell me, Brandon Stark; what do you know of your friend Hodor?"

That caught the interest of both his apprentice and the stableboy. The latter gazed up from his supper platter and remarked curiously "Hodor?"

Brandon Stark thought for a minute, and then he pronounced "I must confess that I do not know very little about him, my lord. All I really know of Hodor is that his true name is 'Walder,' he is the great-grandson of Old Nan, and he is fair with a sword, despite his simplemindedness. Oh, and, of course, there was once a time when he actually spoke words other than 'Hodor.'"

"That is all true," Bloodraven affirmed, "Do you know how he came to say 'Hodor'?"

"When I was growing up, I would occasionally overhear my family and retainers talk about that," Brandon Stark illuminated, "But I only heard tidbits of that tale at Winterfell. I did not hear a proper telling until I went north of the Wall. On our way here, we stopped at Craster's Keep for a night, and my Uncle Benjen told us what he remembered of it."

"What exactly did he tell you?" the Three-Eyed Raven queried. He already knew the answer to this question. Even so, he wanted to know how much Brandon knew firsthand.

"It happened on the same day my father left for the Vale," the second son of Eddard Stark recalled, "Hodor had sparred with him in the training rings a couple times that morning. He was also present when my grandfather, uncles, and aunt saw my father off in the afternoon. Just before my father set out, Hodor collapsed very suddenly. He underwent a violent shaking fit, and then… he started shouting."

"What did he shout?" Brynden Rivers asked rhetorically.

"According to my Uncle Benjen, his exact words were 'Hold the door,'" Brandon disclosed, "He shouted that very phrase repeatedly. Before too long, 'Hold the door' became 'Hodor.' He has never spoken a single other word since then."

"Peculiar," Bloodraven commented, "What 'door' do you suppose he was referring to."

"I haven't a clue, my lord," Brandon Stark pronounced, "To this day, no one knows what really happened to him, let alone what he was talking about."
"If you were given the chance to learn the truth of that affair, would you take it?" the former black brother enquired.

"Absolutely," the wolf boy adamantly proclaimed. **Just what I expected him to say.**

"Then it is time the truth was discovered," Brynden Rivers pronounced, "I have seen that incident many times over, and as of yet, I am no closer to finding an explanation than I was when it first occurred. I am going to show you that episode, Brandon Stark. It is my hope that you will have greater luck than I at making sense of it."

"I will certainly try, my lord," Brandon asserted. **I know you will. I have faith in your ability, my boy.** The second son of Winterfell leaned further back into the weirwood roots, and he shut his eyes. Bloodraven proceeded to do the same.

But before either of them could hope up his third eye, they were interrupted by another exclamation of "Hodor! Hodor!"

The ancient bastard and his apprentice opened their eyes once more, and they saw Hodor rushing towards them. He seemed strangely distraught.

"What is it, Hodor?" Brandon asked the stableboy in concern.

"Hodor," the huge man muttered in an urgent tone, "Hodor Hodor Hodor Hodor."

"Do you understand what he's saying?" Bloodraven questioned his apprentice.

"I believe he is trying to tell me something," Brandon conjectured. **That much is evident. A thought suddenly occurred to the Three-Eyed Raven. Did Hodor actually understand what we were talking about a moment ago? Could it be he is not as dimwitted as others believe him to be?** The likelihood of that was low, but not nonexistent.

Hodor then knelt before the weirwood throne and leaned closer to Brandon. The wolf boy queried "What are you trying to tell us, Hodor? Is it about what happened to you?"

The stableboy gave a nod of his head. Brandon was amazed. As was his teacher. **So, he understood us after all.**

"What should we do, ser?" Brandon queried.

"Hear him out," Bloodraven advised the lad. **Even if we cannot translate his speech, we may as well humor him.** Brandon appeared to be having a similar line of thought. So, he complied with the order.

"Go ahead, Hodor," Brandon bade his friend, "We're listening."

At first, the huge Northman did not move an inch. He merely remained frozen in his position, kneeling before the second son of his lord. Then, he gradually leaned forward, as though he meant to whisper something into Brandon's ear. Brandon tilted his head sideways so that his ear was facing Hodor's mouth.

Brandon and his teacher waited for Hodor to say something. But he made no sound. Instead, he reached down with his right arm, and then he slowly lifted that same arm into the air.

By the time Bloodraven saw the rock, it was too late. A split-second later, Hodor slammed it into Brandon's forehead. The boy was knocked out instantaneously. This sudden aggressive action
surprised every other person in that room, including the Three-Eyed Raven himself.

"What in the Seven Hells?!" Lew yelled, jumping to his feet and drawing his sword. Hallis Mollen did the same thing.

As they charged towards Hodor with their blades raised, the tall stableboy rose to his feet and turned to face the guards. He did not look as though he was even going to attempt to resist them.

When they reached Hodor, they kept their swords pointed at him, and Hallis Mollen demanded "Explain yourself, Hodor."

How do you expect a man who only speaks one word to account for his actions? Less than one second after that thought passed through Ser Brynden's mind, Hodor started chuckling. He chuckled for ten full seconds. After that, he finally opened his mouth to speak. He said in a very condescending tone "You are such utter fools."

Those words shocked Lew and Hallis Mollen. Of course, any other words that came out of the stableboy's mouth other than his name might have had the same effect on them. The children of the forest were almost as stunned, and even Brynden Rivers was slightly astonished.

Hodor was quick to take advantage of their momentary bewilderment. He seized Lew by his shoulders and swiftly broke his neck. As the body dropped to the ground, Hodor took Lew's sword and attacked Hallis Mollen. Hallis managed to parry two blows, but the third got past him. Hodor drove his steel clean through the other man's chest.

It took him less than ten seconds to kill the two Northmen. It was not yet too late for the children of the forest, though. Bloodraven turned to his attendants and urged them "Run!"

The three children of the forest did not need any further coaxing. They attempted to flee from the room. Alas, Hodor was too fast for them. He reached them before they were even halfway to the exit. He slashed Scales in the back with his sword, he plunged the blade into Ash's throat, and he smashed Coals' head in with the hilt.

Bloodraven was still in the process of trying to grasp what had just transpired here. Not five minutes ago, there had been eight people in the cave, all of them alive and well. Now, there were five corpses, an unconscious boy, an inexplicably bloodthirsty man, and a permanently immobile elderly man.

Brynden Rivers was frustrated by these sudden acts of violence, as well as the betrayal of the man who caused them. However, he was not saddened, enraged, intimidated, or even scared. He had let go of his emotions long ago. Right now, he was just trying to determine why Hodor had done what he had done.

I expect some form of explanation is imminent.

Hodor took a minute to examine the five bodies on the ground and ensure that each of them was in fact dead. After confirming that he had indeed succeeded in killing Ash, Lew, Scales, Hallis Mollen, and Coals, he smiled in satisfaction.

It was then that he turned back towards Bloodraven. The ancient knight kept his one functional eye on the huge stableboy as he came closer. Once Hodor was within reach of the weirwood throne, he stood perfectly still.

His smile gradually changed to a smirk, and he muttered "You do not know how long I've been waiting for this, Rivers. At long last, I can end this charade."
"What charade?" Ser Brynden said inquiringly.

"The one I've been living for over twenty years," Hodor elaborated bitterly, "Do you know what it's like, having to live a constant lie? Having to pretend that your speech is impaired? Only being able to speak one word for over half your life? Knowing that even a single slipup could ruin everything you work for?"

"Just what are you working for?" Bloodraven asked, "What do you hope to accomplish by doing this?"

"That is none of your concern," Hodor snapped crossly, "Anyway, you won't be around to see what I have planned. I'll make sure of that myself."

He then lifted his sword into the air, gripped the handle with both hands, and positioned the tip of it in the center of Ser Brynden's face. The elderly bastard son of Aegon IV Targaryen did nothing to resist. He had already resigned himself to this fate. All men must die, he reminded himself.

"This is nothing personal, Rivers," Hodor claimed in a haughty yet sincere tone, "Your character always interested me. I enjoyed watching you and reading about you, but after seeing you in the flesh – or whatever you're made of now – I can safely say the show and the books hardly do your character justice. Oh, well; I suppose none of that really matters anymore."

Up until that moment, Bloodraven had only been aware of the whereabouts of five of the seven people who possessed the infamous "source." When those statements came out of Hodor's mouth, he could not make sense of parts of them, but the location of a sixth individual was suddenly revealed to him.

"Oh, and don't worry about your apprentice," Hodor hastily added in, speaking in a condescending voice once more, "I'm not going to kill him. Not yet, at least. All you need to know is that Bran and I will be long gone before his friends return with the other guards and children of the forest. Maybe that'll give you some solace in the last moments of your life."

Sure enough, the news that Hodor was going to spare Bran's life – even if only for the present – did bring the Three-Eyed Raven some peace of mind. It is too late for me, but he still has a chance to survive. That thought was the penultimate thing that went through Bloodraven's head. The very last thing that ever went through it was the full length of Hodor's sword.

Chapter End Notes

Note: So... yeah. That's how it is. Hodor is one of the two aforementioned antagonistic SIs. I'm genuinely surprised no one suspected him. After all, some of you must have realized that the likelihood that the "Hold the door" scenario would actually transpire in this story was extremely low, especially when you consider all the changes I've made in the Night's King's arc.

I'd wager a lot of you are wondering what possible motivation SI-Hodor may have had for eliminating the Three-Eyed Raven and taking Bran prisoner. I can assure you he is not doing this simply for the sake of being evil. He has (at least what I consider) a fairly compelling motive for these actions. You'll find out what that motive is in another three chapters.
Chapter Notes

Note: I'm pleased to say I finally have a new job. My first week doing it was this past one. It was quite rewarding, to say the least. Of course, this DOES mean I will have less time to write from now on. Even so, I am going to try to continue updating every other week, just like I've been doing for the last few chapters. I should warn you, however, that you may see a slight drop in quality. My work can be more than a little tiring, so my focus is divided. I'll still try not to do anything TOO outlandish in this story.

By the way, I'm going to go ahead and say this now: the other evil SI is NOT the Night's King. A lot of people have already made that guess, for some odd reason. To all those people, I now present this counterargument: if the Night's King WAS an SI, wouldn't the Others' campaign against humanity have succeeded in the first Long Night? Or it might not have happened at all, as the original Brandon Stark could have avoided that fate.

That is all I wish to tell you at present. You will find out who the other evil SI is soon enough, I promise you. Just know that he/she is still alive. He/She is neither dead nor undead. I also may or may not leave you clues as to who he/she might be. I've already left several in previous chapters. If you manage to find out who he/she is before the big reveal, then good for you!

Anyway… you may begin.

The sound of footfalls softly echoed around the area. Jon Connington signaled his men to hide. Since the entire chamber was immersed in shadow, that was a fairly simple task. Connington himself remained out in the open, but he placed his hand on the pommel of his sword. That sword had already killed many, including the Tattered Prince, Perwyn Frey, and that red-haired wildling girl. I'll use it to kill plenty more, if I must.

Whoever the footfalls belonged to, he seemed to be making an attempt to progress silently. His efforts were wasted, though. In this place, the walls were so thick that even the slightest sound became amplified by a great factor. Only people who were very light on their feet could enter the vicinity without being detected.

Soon, the owner of the footfalls arrived on site. Connington squinted his eyes, and he quickly discovered who the other party was. The former lord of Griffin's Roost removed his hand from his sword, and his men emerged from the shadows. Why did he even bother to approach us quietly? We all knew he was coming. Then again, all Great Lords had their eccentricities. The lions are certainly no exception.

"How nice of you to grace us with your presence once more, my lord," the exiled Stormlord muttered.

Tywin Lannister furrowed his brow and stated, "You would do well to mind that tone of yours, Connington."
"I meant no disrespect," Jon Connington hastily added in. *If I did, it cannot be helped. We have been down here over a week, and our surroundings are starting to test my nerves. "Even so, these lodgings are far from ideal. Or conventional. Could we not have taken up residence in town instead?"

"It has been less than twenty years since you were in King's Landing," the Lion Lord debated, "There are bound to be some in the city who knew you from those days. We could not afford to take the risk that you would be recognized."

"You make a fair argument," Jon Connington admitted, "Nevertheless, we have been down here for over a week. I was hoping to have concluded this business long before now."

"That was my intention, as well," Lord Tywin claimed, "However, that was before winter came about. For the last turn of the moon, we have been too occupied with gathering the final harvest, summoning his vassals, and assembling the Royal Army to hold court more than thrice."

*Thus, we have had very few opportunities for an audience with King Robert*, Jon realized. "I crave your pardon if this sounds insubordinate, my lord, but I must ask: do you expect us to wait for much longer?"

"Fortunately for you, I do not," Tywin Lannister disclosed, "Tomorrow, the Royal Army begins the march north. Naturally, the king will be leading them. Before he sets out, he will hold court in the morning. That will be the last chance anyone will have to approach him for a long while. Therefore, we will approach him then."

"Very good," Jon Connington murmured, smirking and rubbing his hands together. "Have you made any revisions to the plan at the last minute? How shall we proceed?"

"As we discussed," Tywin replied, "I will inform him that ever since the Targaryens were removed from the Iron Throne, they have been plotting to retake it from him. I will tell him that the Unsullied, the Dothraki, the Volantene nobles, and the sellsword companies – other than the Golden Company, of course – were recruited as a means for them to pursue that objective. I will insist that you and your fellow Golden Company officers only caused the Pentoshi Bloodbath because you discovered the dragons' treachery, and your lingering sense of duty as a native of the Seven Kingdoms incited you to attack the traitors before they could launch an insurrection of their own. That is when you will make your entrance."

Jon Connington nodded in acknowledgement and said, "I am quite prepared for that."

"Is she?" the Hand of the King queried.

"I suppose she is," the younger man commented, shrugging. *Not that it matters. After all, she hasn't a choice in this affair.* "You should know she is well-aware of her current predicament, yet she stubbornly refuses to show fear or any form of weakness."

"I would expect as much from a wolf," the Lord of Casterly Rock uttered. "Where are you keeping her?"

"In there," Jon Connington answered, gesturing to a spot on the far wall. Although the chamber was covered in darkness, one could vaguely make out the outline of a door if they focused hard enough. In its day, it had been little more than a storage closet. Now, it served as a cell for Rhaegar's second wife. Two of the pit fighters – Amara and the Beast – stood guard outside it, along with one of his serjeants, Ser Dick Cole. As he pointed out the door, the Stormlord turned back to the Westerlord and offered "Would you care to see her?"
"Much as it would please me to see the she-wolf in her present state, I haven't the time," Tywin Lannister proclaimed, "With the arrival of the Long Night, the small council has been very busy of late. As such, I cannot be away from the king for too long. Furthermore, I am accepting a grave risk just by being here. Under normal circumstances, I would have sent someone of lesser importance in my place. The only reason I chose to come myself is because I trust no one else with the integrity of this mission."

"I understand," Jon Connington pronounced. In his place, I would not be too willing to trust, either. After a short pause, he said inquiringly "How will we know when you are ready to receive us?"

"I will send someone to fetch you," Lord Tywin explained. He then gestured to the cell door and stated "Until then, you must be certain to keep a close watch on that woman. Everything we have worked for up to this moment hinges on her."

"I have not forgotten that, my lord," Jon Connington assured the Hand, "You can rest assured; I will not err in this matter. I once failed as the Hand of the King. I will not force the same disgrace upon you."

"See that you do not," Tywin Lannister advised him, "Otherwise, Robert Baratheon will not be the cause for your doom this time."

I do not doubt it. Tywin Lannister never made idle threats. Everyone with the sense of a fish knew that. Because of his role in the Pentoshi Bloodbath, Jon Connington already had plenty of enemies in the world. The last thing he needed to make more, especially when the richest – and arguably, most powerful – house in the Seven Kingdoms was involved. He took comfort in the knowledge that soon, all his struggles would finally pay off. By this time tomorrow, most of those enemies could be my allies, just as they were once before.

"I must take my leave," Tywin Lannister announced. He turned around and headed back the way he came. As he departed, he looked over his shoulder and muttered "Until tomorrow, Lord Jon."

"Until tomorrow, my Lord Hand," Jon Conninton rejoined, dipping his head respectfully. I look forward to it. For tomorrow, we shall change the course of history.

Even now, after everything he had managed to accomplish, Jon Connington could hardly comprehend his good fortune. For the longest time, he had been convinced that he would never return to Westeros, let along reclaim his right to Griffin's Roost. Then, shortly after the beginning of autumn, Tywin Lannister had contacted the exiled lord and offered him and his fellow Westerosi exiles a pardon. The pardon came with certain conditions, of course, but Connington and his men were not waylaid by them. They were willing to sacrifice their honor for the right to finally go home again.

That was what led him to the current setting. At long last, Jon Connington was on the verge of getting back everything he had lost in service to the Mad King. Just one day more. Then, my hardships will be over. The ones south of the Wall, at least. He was fully aware that the Others had returned to the world and that they had begun marching south, but that mattered little and less to him. As long as he regained his family's ancestral home, he felt nothing else could ever bother him again. I did not come this far to reclaim Griffin's Roost just to see it fall to a horde of frozen, walking corpses.

As Tywin Lannister departed, Jon Connington covered his mouth with a hand and yawned. He wondered about the hour. It was rather difficult to keep track of time, as there were no openings to the outside. In any case, he was strangely fatigued. In fact, it had been surprisingly easy for him
and his men to tire whilst they resided in this chamber.

*That cannot be helped, either. There is not much to do here other than eat and sleep.* That may have seemed ideal to some, but people such as Jon Connington and his companions were not accustomed to prolonged bouts of dormancy. They were the type of people who derived fulfillment more from physically strenuous activity than anything else.

*Another reason to look forward to tomorrow; no more hiding. Or running, for that matter.*

If Jon Connington was to venture a guess as to the time of day, it was most likely sometime in the late afternoon or early evening. It would soon be time for supper. That meal would be composed of hard bread, cold meat, and dried fruit. The very same sustenance they had feasted on three times a day for the last week.

In preparation for this event, the company had brought along enough rations to last them a full fortnight. *We are fortunate we only ended up needing half of that. If we ran out, we would have had to find a way to acquire more provisions. We might have had to resort to stealing some or convincing Lord Tywin to send us some.*

Supper was eaten expediently and in relative silence. After that, Jon Connington ordered everyone to go to bed. They were hardly in need of rest, but he wanted all of them to be at their best for when they appeared before the king tomorrow.

A week earlier, when Connington and his men first came to King's Landing, they had encountered very few complications. When they sailed into the harbor, Rodrik Greyjoy had arranged for them to dock without difficulty. After that, Janos Slynt of the gold cloaks had helped them sneak into the Red Keep. Both men were reportedly on Lord Tywin's payroll, so Jon saw no reason to question their involvement.

Jon Connington and his men had done very little moving about after the city watch helped them sneak into the Red Keep. Technically, they were no longer in the Red Keep. Instead, they were beneath it. To be precise, they were within the darkened chamber which was used to store the skulls of the Targaryens' long-dead dragons.

They could have done much worse for shelter. All the same, the catacomb could hardly be regarded as someplace suitable for occupancy. While the catacomb was large enough to accommodate the entirety of Jon Connington's group, it was also dark, dank, dusty, eerily quiet, and more than slightly depressing.

*At least it does not smell foul. If this place has one saving grace, that would be it.* One would think the smell down here would be unbearable. Yet surprisingly, it was completely tolerable. That was rather remarkable, considering a certain aspect of their arrangement. There was a hole in the floor which Lord Jon and his companions voided their bladders and bowels into periodically. The hole seemed to go on indefinitely, but in actuality, it only went on for a few hundred feet. Whatever was dropped inside, it ultimately landed in the subterranean sewage tunnel which flowed beneath the Red Keep. The smell below must have been horrendous, but even the sharpest nose could not detect it from this height.

The hole was convenient in that Jon Connington and his men effectively did not have to leave the chamber for anything, including bodily functions. *If only the hole was in a more private spot, though. No matter how many times one does it, pissing and shitting in front of acquaintances is quite awkward.*

The presence of the dragon skulls did nothing to improve the living conditions. If anything, they
just made the experience all the more unpleasant. Still, there was nothing Lord Jon or his subordinates could do about their situation. After all, this chamber was the only room in the whole of the Red Keep – perhaps even the whole of King's Landing – that was warded off from the outside world. Lord Tywin had given them his personal protection, provided they did not leave. In plainer terms, as long as Jon Connington and his colleagues remained in the catacomb, no one would find them there. That included Varys and his little birds.

Lord Jon settled down in his usual spot, near the petrified jaw of Balerion the Black Dread. Most of his companions preferred to sleep much further away from the dragon skulls. Lord Jon had no such reservations. On the contrary, it emboldened him to slumber so close to the relics of a ruined dynasty. A dynasty which I once foolhardily served.

It did not take long for Lord Jon to fall asleep. Interestingly, every night for the past week, his dreams had been much like his current situation in real life: tedious, uneventful, and quiet. They were so similar that it was actually somewhat difficult to distinguish them. With that in mind, he wondered if he might as well have stayed awake.

In any case, Lord Jon was able to sleep soundly for about four hours. Then he awoke very abruptly in the middle of the night. He swore he heard what sounded like steel whistling, anguished groaning, and a door slamming. All of those noises appeared to originate from the center of the far wall.

When he realized that, the exiled lord of Griffin's Roost promptly sat up and turned in the direction of Lyanna Stark's cell. At first glance, it seemed no different from earlier. The entrance was still locked, and Amara, Ser Dick Cole, and the Beast were still standing guard.

When the Golden Company serjeant noticed his commander gazing toward him, Ser Dick asked in concern "Is everything alright, my lord?"

"I believe I heard some noise just now," Jon Connington professed.

"Well, we haven't heard a sound in hours," Amara claimed. She then grimaced and drily added in "Other than the occasional snorer."

"Are you certain?" Jon Connington queried.

"Quite," the Beast mumbled, "Must have been a dream you had."

Jon Connington took a moment to look around the chamber. It appeared as though everyone else was still fast asleep. He quickly confirmed that none of the others had stirred. If those noises had been real, it would follow that at least some of them should have woken up, as well. I suppose it was just a dream.

Eventually, Lord Jon shrugged off his uneasiness and laid back down. I'll be glad to get out of this damned prison. I feel as though it is beginning to take a toll on my senses.

As he drifted back to sleep, there appeared to come another faint sound. This one came in the form of a very high-pitched shriek, much like the cry of a dragon. This time, he did not feel the need to investigate. He simply dismissed the disturbance and got comfortable again.

Ever since he and his men took up residence in the catacomb, he had heard that sound quite often. Or he thought he had, at any rate. He had long ago concluded that this sound was not real. Instead, it was simply his imagination playing tricks on him. He suspected that that may have been an indirect result of sleeping so close to the dragon skulls.
Jon Connington managed to get another four hours of sleep. This time when he awoke, he felt rested and refreshed. Although the chamber was still immersed in darkness, he knew it had to have been well past daybreak. *At long last, the day I have long awaited has come.*

All around him, his colleagues were rising from their own slumber. When they were all up, they ate a light breakfast of hard bread, cold meat, and dried fruit. *This is the last time I'll have to resort to this for nourishment*, he noted in delight.

After he and his men broke their fast, they did what they had been doing for the last eight – now, nine – days: they waited. Luckily, they only had to wait another hour. Following that, they were visited by two young men. They were blond, they were younger than twenty years of age, and they appeared to be the type who were afraid of their own shadows. Before they even had a chance to introduce themselves, Jon Connington knew who they were.

"Are you ready, my lord?" the elder of the two asked when he reached Lord Jon

"We are," the Stormlord muttered plainly. *We've been ready for several days*, he thought bitterly. He glimpsed over his shoulder and called out "Bring her out."

Brendel Byrne and Old John Mudd approached the door on the far wall, opened it up, and passed through it together. Ten seconds later, the two serjeants emerged with their captive between them. She looked much the same as she had last night. Her wrists were shackled behind her back, her clothing was filthy and torn, her arms and legs were bruised in several places, and a sack was drawn over her head. The sack had been concealing her head for almost every moment since they entered this chamber. One could argue it was the most important feature.

The sack served three purposes. Firstly, it was to blind and silence their prisoner. Of course, given how secluded the catacomb was, that precaution not wholly necessary. *But it never hurts to prepare for anything.* Secondly, it was very hard to breathe with the sack on. By forcing such a heavy burden onto their prisoner, Jon hoped to destroy her will to resist or fight. The third reason was mostly for the sake of the theatrics. Lord Jon felt it would add a certain dramatic flair when she was finally revealed to her former betrothed. While he was taking this matter seriously, the idea of making a spectacle of it held an odd appeal with him. He did not even know why. *I suspect it could be Rhaegar's influence. He always was one for exhibition.*

Brendel Byrne and Old John Mudd led the bound Northwoman over to their commanding officer. They stopped when they were directly before him. Jon Connington gazed down at her, folded his arms, and smiled in triumph.

"It is time, *Your Grace,*" he stated, putting a mocking emphasis on those last two words, "Anything you'd like to say before we start?"

He expected her to retort with either a witty insult or an abrasive curse. Those had constituted the bulk of her dialogue for the past week. This time, however, she issued neither type of response. Now, the only sound she produced was a light whimper. It sounded as though she was weeping underneath the sack.

Jon Connington's smile only widened at that. *We have finally broken her. Just in time, too.* He turned back to Tywin Lannister's nephews, and he sternly ordered them "Take us to the king at once."

Lancel and Tyrek Lannister swiftly escorted Lord Jon and his men out of the dragons' tomb. They spent a few minutes traveling through the lower levels of the Red Keep. Before long, they reached a stairwell, which they followed all the way to the upper levels. After so many days below the
surface, the sudden exposure to sunlight was a little alarming. Thankfully, it was not too hard for his eyes to adjust to the brightness. Once he could see clearly again, they continued onward.

At this time, the corridors between the stairwell and the throne room were empty of all people. Except the occasional gold cloak. Lord Jon recalled that Lord Tywin had mentioned that he would have Janos Slynt clear the hallways in preparation for their audience with King Robert. *So far, the Old Lion has kept his word.* The gold cloaks gave Jon Connington and his associates wary glances, but none of them attempted to hinder their progress in any way.

Soon enough, they reached the throne room. The massive double doors were currently propped open, and Janos Slynt himself was standing in front of them. When Lord Jon reached the entrance, the commander of the city cloaks gestured for him and his company to halt. Then he passed through the entrance and announced, "He has arrived, Lord Hand."

From within the throne room, Tywin Lannister declared "Send him in."

Lord Janos hastily reappeared at the entrance and bade Jon Connington to follow him inside. Lord Jon had discussed procedures with his men beforehand. He would initially enter the throne room by himself. They would wait out in the corridor until he gave them the signal to join him.

The Stormlord needed a few seconds to prepare himself mentally. Then he confidently approached the entrance of the throne room and marched in after Janos Slynt.

Within the throne room, he was met with scores of glares. Many of them were hostile or mistrustful in nature. Several others were dubious. Others still were curious. A few even seemed reverent. Whatever the case, Jon Connington did not let those stares impede or intimidate him.

He recognized some faces in the crowd. Lord Gyles Rosby, the cougher. Lady Tanda Stokeworth and her homely daughters. Jalabhar Xho, the exile merchant prince. Ser Aron Santagar, the master-at-arms. Horas and Hobber Redwyne. Ser Dontos Hollard. Ser Illyn Payne, the king's justice. All seven members of the Kingsguard, including the legendary Ser Barristan Selmy. Ser Davos Seaworth. Lord Rodrik Greyjoy. Lord Stannis Baratheon. Ser Kevan Lannister. Varys.

The wards of the crown were there, as well. They must have been Rickard Clegane, Rhaenys Targaryen, Willas Tyrell, Sansa Stark, and Arya Stark. Rhaenys was the only one of the five he had ever seen before, but he doubted she remembered him at all. They were currently guarded by a number of Northmen and Westermen, as well as the former Kingsguard Ser Oswell Whent. Lord Jon also recognized the woman at the head of that group. She was Ashara Dayne, Princess Elia's best friend. At this time, she was giving him a look of utter loathing.

Lastly, the Royal Family was gathered at the other end of the throne room. King Robert was seated in the Iron Throne. Queen Cersei and Crown Prince Jasper sat in slightly smaller wooden thrones on either side of him. Lord Tywin Lannister stood at the base of the steps to the throne, his cold eyes watching Jon Connington closely. *You had better come through here, Old Lion. You do not wish to make an enemy of me, either.*

When Jon Connington reached the center of the throne room, he dropped to one knee, bowed his head, and stated humbly "Your Grace, I must thank you for this audience."

"It is an explanation I desire from you, Connington; not your thanks," Robert Baratheon murmured crossly, "My Hand has been telling me some very intriguing tales. According to him, the Targaryens and the Legion without Banners have been conspiring against me ever since I came to power. He claims that Gregor Clegane and every member of his secret council – including my late brother Renly – were plotting to restore the dragons to the throne."
"Terrible accusations, Your Grace," Jon Connington candidly pronounced, keeping his head tilted forward, "But nonetheless, true."

I imagine Willas Tyrell is trying in earnest not to call me out as a liar. Sure enough, when Lord Jon gazed up from the ground, he noticed the heir to the Reach was fuming. He looked as though he would vehemently deny the Stormlord's statement. He probably would have, if not for his betrothed. At present, Princess Rhaenys had a hand on Lord Willas's shoulder and she was whispering something into his ear. Whatever she told him, it seemed to calm him down. Good. We do not need any more outbursts.

"The Hand of the King claims you have some evidence to support those tales," King Robert muttered, glancing over at Lord Tywin momentarily, "Is that true, too?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Jon Connington responded, slowing rising back to his feet, "With your blessing, I will produce this evidence immediately."

"Very well," Robert Baratheon consented, giving a wave of his hand. I have his full attention now.

Jon Connington turned his head and called out "Enter!"

Over the next minute, his associates filed into the throne room. Old John Mudd and Brendel Byrne were at the head of the group, guiding their captive's movements. They brought her over to Lord Jon, and they forced her onto her knees.

Once she was in position, Lord Jon turned to King Robert and pronounced "What I am about to show you, Your Grace, is a secret Lord Gregor Clegane and his Legionnaires have withheld from you since the end of your rebellion."

By now, Rickard Clegane, Rhaenys Targaryen, Willas Tyrell, and Ashara Dayne were visibly distraught That was to be expected; this revelation would likely yield dire repercussions for the lot of them. Particularly Lady Ashara.

Jon Connington gazed down at the restrained woman. The sack was still on. They had not taken it off since before last night. Now, it comes off for good. He gradually reached up, took ahold of the sack, and pulled it off her head.

A number of gasps could be heard all around the room. Jon Connington grinned and turned back to the Royal Family. Lord Tywin had his usual pompous countenance. The prince looked stunned, and the queen seemed indifferent. The king gave no reaction at first. He leaned forward and focused on this newly exposed face.

After a bit of silence, he turned back to Lord Jon and said enquiringly "Who is that supposed to be?"

Jon could not fault him for not recognizing her straightaway. It has been eighteen years after all. He uttered patiently "Take a closer look, Your Grace. This woman used to be your intended."

Robert Baratheon slowly rose from the Iron Throne, and he began to walk down the steps. Ser Barristan and two of the other Kingsguard stood near him protectively. Soon, he was within spitting distance, and he glanced down at the prisoner.

With the exception of an occasional cough from Gyles Rosby, the next thirty seconds elapsed in total silence. After that, Robert Baratheon scowled, looked up from the woman, and mumbled "Is this some manner of jape, Connington?"
The Stormlord was perplexed "I am afraid I do not understand, Your Grace."

The king glared at him and said, "She may resemble Lyanna Stark at a distance, but up close, even Moon Boy could tell the difference."

Now, Jon Connington was downright bewildered. He turned to the prisoner, grabbed her by the top of her head, and pulled it back to get a look at her. That was when his eyes widened in shock. *What… the… FUCK?!*

She had the same eyes as Rhaegar's second wife. The same hair. The same pale skin. The same build. But that was *not* Lyanna Stark's face.

She began to sob again, and she murmured in desperation "Please, Your Grace… tell them to let me go. I have done no wrong."

The king looked down on her with pity, and he asked, "Who are you, my dear?"

"My name… is… Myrna," she told him softly.

Crown Prince Jasper rose from his seat and declared "That's the name of Jon's personal maid."

"Yes, it is," Rickard Clegane said in agreement, "Her appearance seems to have changed since we saw her last, though."

Jon Connington's agitation lessened slightly. *Even if I do not have the real Lyanna Stark, that boy may have just exposed his father's role in her transformation into Myrna.* He could work with that much.

Alas, he never had a chance to make use of that opportunity. All of a sudden, there came a soft clapping sound from the front of the throne room. The whole assemblage collectively turned in that direction, and they saw a short man standing in the entrance. He had blond hair, and his clothing was the color of crimson red.

"Oh, bravo, Lord Jon," the dwarf remarked sarcastically, continuing to clap his hands together, "It seems I have arrived just in time."

*In time for what?*

Queen Cersei muttered suspiciously "What are you doing here, Tyrion?"

"Oh, I cannot visit my beloved sister and father without prior notice?" Tyrion Lannister wittily commented, giving his usual smug grin. When no one responded to his jibe, he put on a serious expression and stated "If you must know… I am here to put an end to this mummer's farce."

Jon Connington's anxiety was back, and it was now stronger than before.

"When did you get here, Uncle?" Jasper Baratheon inquired.

"Just this morning," Tyrion Lannister claimed, "Minutes ago, in fact."

"How did you get in here so quickly?" Cersei demanded. Jon Connington wanted to know that, too. *The harbormaster and the gold cloaks should have stopped him long before he got here. Lord Rodrik and Lord Janos gave their word that they would stop any friend of the Legion from entering the city.*
"Oh, I have my sources," the dwarf muttered blankly. When he said that, Jon Connington saw him subtly glimpse over at Janos Slynt and Rodrik Greyjoy. Both men noticed the Stormlord looking their way, and they grinned wickedly. That was when he realized the truth. They turned against us.

Jon Connington thought he could rely on Slynt and Greyjoy. Both men's services could be bought for the right price, and Lord Tywin claimed to have paid that price. Lord Tyrion and his allies must have outbid his father for their loyalty.

That may have been the case, as the gold cloaks were now blocking the entrance to the throne room.

"How I got here is unimportant," Lord Tyrion insisted, "Why I'm here, however, is of the utmost importance. There are two men in this room whom I mean to expose for the frauds that they are. One of them is currently standing at your side, Your Grace. The other… has stood at your side for the last few turns of the moon."

Jon Connington and Tywin Lannister feigned outrage at that statement. Remain calm, he advised himself. He has no firm evidence to support that claim.

"You dare accuse your father of such deception, Tyrion?" the Hand muttered heatedly.

"I do more than accuse, 'my lord,'" Tyrion remarked angrily, "I possess genuine proof of your crimes."

"Where is this proof?" Robert Baratheon enquired.

"Out in the hallway," the Imp disclosed, "With your permission, Your Grace…?"

"Proceed, Lord Tyrion," the king beckoned him. Jon Connington began to sweat, but he managed to retain his composure. The information could be false.

Tyrion nodded his head, and he waddled over to the entrance of the throne room. The gold cloaks parted ways to let him by, but they still kept a watchful eye on Jon Connington's party. Lord Tyrion stepped out into the corridor, made a simple hand gesture, and reentered the throne room.

Three people entered after him. One of them was a lowborn man with the guise of a former sellsword. Another was a highborn woman who was nearly as tall as Lady Ellyn Lannister. Jon Connington did not know either of them, but he immediately recognized the third man, whom they were restraining.

Urswyck? What in the name of the Seven is he doing here?"

Tyrion Lannister guided the three newcomers over to King Robert, and he stated "Allow me to introduce my affiliates, Ser Bronn, master-at-arms of Clegane's Keep, and Brienne of Tarth, heiress to Evenfall Hall. The one in irons is Faithful Urswyck, the last surviving member of the recently-disbanded Brave Companions."

Robert Baratheon was both astonished and intrigued. He commented "The Brave Companions were an accomplice to the Pentoshi Bloodbath."

"That is correct, Your Grace," Tyrion affirmed, "You should know, however, that they were an accomplice to far more than just that. Urswyck… tell them what you told us."

"Aye… milord…" the Essosi mumbled nervously.
Faithful Urswyck then proceeded to confess everything.

He talked about how Tywin Lannister had devised a scheme to eliminate the last of the Targaryens and discredit Gregor Clegane. He talked about how the Old Lion had approached Jon Connington with the offer of an alliance. He talked about how the alliance was intended to benefit all parties involved. He talked about how quick Jon Connington had been to accept it. He talked about the plan to kidnap Duncan Lannister. He talked about the full truth of the Pentoshi Bloodbath.

He talked about things he had no business knowing about, such as the hidden rookery in the Red Keep and the plot to incapacitate Jon Arryn in effort to install Lord Tywin as Hand of the King. I never told him or anyone else about those issues. How could he possibly know of them?

Nevertheless, everything Urswyck said was the absolute truth. Except the part about Lyanna Stark. With regards to her, the Essosi claimed that Lord Tywin and Lord Jon had conspired to kidnap Prince Jon Targaryen's maid and pass her off as the real Lyanna Stark.

Overtime, Jon Connington became progressively more worried. The worst part of this situation was that he had no way to refute Urswyck's testimony. If he made any attempt to argue it, he may as well have admitted his guilt.

By the time Urswyck finished his account, every eye in the throne room was glaring hatred at Lord Jon, his subordinates, or Lord Tywin. That included Cersei Lannister and Jasper Baratheon. The Queen stared at her father in disgust, and the Crown Prince looked as though he would call for his grandfather's head.

When Urswyck was done speaking, King Robert glared at Lord Jon and stated through gritted teeth "Is all this true, Connington?"

"Of course, it is true, Your Grace," another voice came from the entrance of the throne room.

Everyone turned toward the voice. The color drained from Jon Connington's face when he saw the voice's owner.

"Jon!" Jasper Baratheon and Rickard Clegane merrily exclaimed in unison.

Rhaegar's third child grinned lightly and stated "Hello, Jasper, Rickard. It is good to see you again."

"Likewise," the heirs to Moat Cailin and King's Landing told their friend.

Prince Jon Targaryen casually sauntered past the gold cloaks, and he walked to Lord Tyrion's side. There he stopped and dipped his head to the king. When he came back up, he immediately fixed his gaze on Jon Connington. Although he continued to smile, the former lord of Griffin's Roost could tell that his expression did not match his mood. He could practically feel the rage and disdain emanating off the young man. It was frightening beyond words.

"What motive do you have for being here?" Robert Baratheon uttered inquisitively.

"I initially came at Lord Tyrion's behest, Your Grace," Jon Targaryen revealed, keeping his eyes on his father's best friend, "In spite of that, I now have reasons of my own for travelling to King's Landing. There are three things that I would like from you. Two of them you can grant me right away. If you so choose, of course."

"What might they be?" the King queried.
"My maid," Jon Targaryen began. He paused there, and then he narrowed his eyes at Jon Connington and muttered "And his head."

Jon Connington resisted the urge to step back.

"Why should I give you either?" Robert Baratheon wondered aloud.

"Myrna is still in my service," Prince Jon proclaimed, "She is an excellent maid, and she is innocent of any wrongdoing. Her only transgression was her likeness to my lady mother."

"I acknowledge that she looks quite a bit like Lyanna Stark," Robert Baratheon muttered, "However, earlier, Rickard happened to mention that her appearance has changed."

"He is not wrong," Jon Targaryen professed, " Permit me to explain. It is true that Myrna looks very much like my late mother. Or so I've been told, as I have only seen her face in the statue above her tomb in the crypts of Winterfell. Regardless, Myrna's façade used to draw a fair amount of unwanted attention to her. To remedy that issue, she chose to alter her appearance. Thus, she changed her hair color, her eye color, and her complexion."

What kind of implausible excuse is that? However, it may not have been as ludicrous as it sounded, as the king seemed to find it somewhat credible. He turned to Myrna and asked her "Is that true?"

"Yes, Your Grace," the young woman insisted, still terrified, " Lord Eddard Stark and Lord Gregor Clegane were aware of my true face when I first entered Prince Jon's service. The prince himself and his friends only learned of it recently."

"I see," Robert Baratheon acknowledged, "Very well; I will have Myrna released and returned to your custody. But I may not be able to give you Jon Connington's head. At present, there are a great number of people who wish for that."

I would wager at least half the people in this room want me dead now. A lesser man would have buckled from such tension. Somehow, Jon Connington was able to hold on to his dignity and his grace.

"I do not doubt that," Jon Targaryen bitterly pronounced, "However, my dispute with Lord Connington is personal. It was by his own hand that my fiancée and our unborn babe were murdered."

All around the throne room, people began murmuring angrily. Jon Connington could not make out exactly what they were saying, but some people were suggesting that they take his head right then and there. So far, Lord Jon had avoided panicking, but even his poise had limits. They were rapidly reaching the end of those limits.

Eventually, Robert Baratheon raised his hand for silence. Once it was quiet again, he turned to Prince Jon and told him "In that case… the man is all yours."

"I thank you, Your Grace," Jon Targaryen said gratefully.

The king turned to the Kingsguard and gestured at Jon Connington. The knights in white armor approached the exiled lord of Griffin's Roost. I will not go down without a fight. Not that easily.

Jon Connington reached for his sword. But before he could draw it, he was grabbed from behind. He could distinctly feel three separate pairs of hands holding on to his arms and shoulders. He
looked back and discovered that he had been seized by Amara, the Beast, and Ser Dick Cole. *They were the ones who guarded Lyanna Stark last night. Could they have...?*

Jon Connington grimaced and mumbled "You traitors."

"Said the crow to the raven," Dick Cole spat scathingly, "This ends now, my lord."

"It feels rather bothersome to be betrayed, doesn't it?" Tyrion Lannister remarked wittily.

The shackles around Myrna's wrists were swiftly removed, and they were placed on Jon Connington's wrists instead. As the Stormlord was turned over to Jon Targaryen's custody, Robert Baratheon looked to the three turncloaks and told them "I appreciate your assistance, but do not think this will excuse your involvement in the Pentoshi Bloodbath. You and every other person here who fought on Connington's side must face charges."

"I do not wholly agree, Your Grace," Jon Targaryen politely interjected, "Despite how fast it happened and how much activity it saw, I managed to witness the entirety of the Pentoshi Bloodbath. You should know that these three are the only remaining members of Connington's company who did not harm or kill anyone on our side during the battle. As such, I believe they can be pardoned for their collaboration."

Robert Baratheon thought on that for a minute. Then he muttered "Perhaps they can. I will decide on this later, after court is adjourned. But what of the rest of Connington's men? What say you of them?"

"They are as guilty as their commander," Jon Targaryen stated crossly, "If the choice were mine, I would say they should be executed before they have can stab someone else in the back."

"You and I are in agreement on that much, my lad," King Robert declared. He looked over at Janos Slynt and ordered him "Seize the traitors."

"Aye, Your Grace," the commander of the city watch said in response.

The gold cloaks moved in on Jon Connington's companions, stripped them of their weapons, and bound their hands behind their backs.

While his men were being arrested all around him, Jon Connington was approached by Jon Targaryen, who was smirking. Prince Jon took his father's former best friend by the arm, pulled him close, and whispered into his ear "Since we are in court, I will not do anything to you right now. But just wait until the king dismisses us. If you are wondering, I am not going to kill you. Oh, no. Instead, I am going to make you beg me to kill you. But even then, I won't. In fact... I might not even kill you myself. Perhaps I'll give my direwolf or my dragon that privilege."

There was venom in his tone. It was enough to make the bravest of men wince, and Jon Connington's bravery had already begun to fail him. It was almost a miracle that he did not faint.

Just then, Tyrion Lannister asked no one in particular "Where is my father?"

At that, Jon Connington and a number of other people looked over at the Iron Throne. At this time, the only people in the area were Queen Cersei and Crown Prince Jasper. Tywin Lannister was nowhere to be seen.

"He must have fled," Jon Targaryen supposed.

King Robert scowled, turned to Janos Slynt, and snapped "Find him and bring him back!"
"Yes, Your Grace!" Lord Janos proclaimed.

As the commander of the gold cloaks left to carry out this task, the murmuring in the room began to increase in volume. Now it was more about Tywin Lannister than Jon Connington. A minute later, Robert Baratheon declared "Settle down, all of you! Court is still in session!"

The assemblage quickly became silent once more. Once everyone was quiet once again, the king turned back to Jon Targaryen and stated "As I recall, you said there were three things you wanted me. At present, you have only spoken of two. What is the third?"

"A peaceful end to the conflict between House Baratheon and House Targaryen," the Targaryen prince professed, "That is as much for your benefit as it is for mine. Even now, after my siblings and I bent our knees to you, I would wager that our fealty is still in question."

"You assume rightly," Robert Baratheon confirmed. "I hope you both destroy each other. I may die soon, but I would not mind that so much if the two of you were end up killing each other.

"Then it would be in your best interests to hear me and Lord Tyrion out, Your Grace," Jon Targaryen contended, "He and I have come up with a potential solution to resolve the feud between our families once and for all, without bloodshed."

"Go on," Robert bade him.

…

For most of Robert's Rebellion, the Lannisters and their vassals had stayed neutral. It was only when victory was nearly within the Baratheons' grasp that Tywin Lannister finally stirred from Casterly Rock and declared for Robert.

There were some who labeled that course of action as cowardice. Tywin, by contrast, called it caution. While honor was something he valued, he always looked down on men who put honor before their lives and their prosperity. As such, Tywin rarely ever took risks that he deemed too great.

That was what incited him to conspire to eliminate the Targaryens. He saw them as a threat to his family's status in King's Landing.

That was also why he sought to expose Lyanna Stark. He viewed her as a threat to his daughter's position as Robert's queen.

He had meticulously devised a plan to remove both threats at once. This plan had involved some risk, but he had been willing to accept that much risk. After all, the alternative was the possible destruction of my house and the rest of Seven Kingdoms.

Alas, in spite of all his careful preparation and flawless execution, his plan had ultimately backfired. It had backfired at the worst possible moment, when it had practically been on the verge of succeeding.

Like every sensible army leader, Tywin could tell when he had lost, as well as when it was ideal to retreat. When Faithful Urswyck revealed the entire conspiracy to King Robert's court, Tywin knew he had lost. But he had not yet admitted defeat. As long as he was free, he would continue the fight, and he would never surrender. I would rather be a corpse than a prisoner. With that in mind, flight was his only option.

When the gold cloaks were preoccupied with Jon Connington and his associates, Tywin Lannister
had elected to slip away. He had noiselessly gone out one of the back doors in the throne room. To his good fortune, those doors were left unguarded, and no one had seen him retreat. Not even Cersei or Jasper.

When he exited the throne room, he encountered a young woman. Judging by her apparel, she must have been a maid. She was leaning over, as if her ear had been pressed against the door.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Your humble servant, milord," she replied, bowing respectfully, "Forgive me for eavesdropping. I was simply curious."

"You are forgiven," Tywin hastily remarked. *Normally, I would not be so lenient, but I do not have time to discipline you.* "In return for that forgiveness, you must tell no one that you have seen me."

"I swear I won't," she assured him, dipping her head again, "Is there anything more I can do for you?"

"No," Tywin sternly remarked, "Unless you know of an unguarded exit out of the Red Keep."

The maid smiled gently and stated "As it happens, I do. Please, come with me."

Tywin hesitated at first. Part of him was inclined to refuse the girl's offer and continue on his own. *There is no possibility she is offering me aid simply out of the goodness of her heart. No one does anything without some form of gain.* All the same, he was compelled to wonder if following her may have been the wiser course of action. In any case, she at least *sounded* sincere.

He ultimately chose to go along with the maid's suggestion. *If I stay with her, I can at least be certain that she does not report seeing me to the gold cloaks.*

"Very well," he told her, "Proceed."

The maid nodded in acknowledgment, and she extended her hand, saying "Come this way, please. We must hurry."

Tywin tentatively took the girl's hand. He noted her touch was warm and soft. *I cannot focus on that right now, though. I have more pressing issues to attend to.* The young maid swiftly led him away from the scene.

The two of them traversed through four hallways. After that, they arrived at a wall. Tywin was perplexed. *She's brought me to a dead end,* he supposed.

It turned out that was not the case. The maid placed her free hand on a stone in the middle of the wall, and she pushed forward. In response, a section of the wall detached from the body and slid aside, revealing a passageway. Tywin raised an eyebrow in fascination.

"Come this way," the maid beckoned him.

Again, Tywin paused to contemplate his choices. When he met this maid, he had not known anything about her. Now, he felt as though he knew even less. He asked her "How did you know this was here?"

"Lord Varys," was all she said in response. *Does that mean the Spider told her of this passageway, or did she just 'happen' to spot him when he made use of it?* Either way, a servant of the Red Keep had no business knowing of its most intimate secrets.
Nonetheless, he decided to press onward. Robert must have noticed my absence from the throne room by now. If so, the gold cloaks would be out looking for him soon, if they were not already. As such, Tywin no longer had the convenience of traveling through the hallways. All I can do now is travel inside them.

He hurriedly entered the passageway with the maid, and she shut the stone door behind them. After that, she retook his hand in hers, and she let him through the hidden corridor.

About five minutes, they arrived at a ladder. The maid released his hand again and stated "I hope you are prepared to do some climbing, milord."

"Climbing?" he said in bewilderment, "I presumed you were leading me out of the Red Keep."

"I am, milord," she asserted, "There is another hidden passageway that leads out of the Red Keep and into the city. However, it can only be accessed from the Tower of the Hand. So, in order to escape, we'll need to get up there first."

Even I did not know that. Before Tywin went any further, he felt the need to ask: "Why are you doing this? What makes you so eager to please me?"

She did not reply straightaway. Instead, she stared at her feet and rubbed her hands together nervously. About ten seconds later, she gradually looked up at the Lord of Casterly Rock and disclosed "Pardon my candidness, milord, but I have always admired you. I admire your strength, your wits, your leadership, and your willingness to protect everything you hold dear. I could not bring myself to turn a blind eye when such a man was in distress."

Tywin was effectively taken aback. I was unsure what to expect from her, but I did not expect her to say that. He noted "You are rather bold."

She blushed and uttered "Oh, no. Not at all. I am hardly ever so forward."

"Yet you are helping me flee from the king," said the Lord Paramount of the Westerlands, "No one faint of heart would ever do such a thing willingly."

"I suppose so," she conceded, "But I would do anything for you, milord."

She is strangely devoted for someone who does not know me personally. "If that is true, may I ask why you never approached me before today?"

"It was not my place to do so," the maid claimed, "Before today, I never would have thought that you would pay any heed to me. After all, I am but a lowly servant, and nobles have better things to occupy their time with than listening to the praise of their servants."

Tywin Lannister was impressed with the girl's logical reasoning. She has a rather mature mindset for her age. "Are you not worried about what will happen if the king discovers you aided me?"

"Of course, that worries me," she pronounced, "Even so, I have come to terms with the risk. What becomes of me does not matter. You must live on. Please, milord."

For the first time in a long while, Tywin Lannister was flattered. She knows her place, as well as the place of her betters. A desirable trait in any good retainer. He lightly nodded his head, held his hand out to the ladder, and stated "Very well, my dear. After you."

The maid blushed a bit and muttered "Actually… would you mind going first?"
"May I ask why?" Tywin Lannister remarked enquiringly.

"It's just… well, you'd notice I am wearing a dress," she pointed out, her face turning even redder.

Tywin soon realized what she was entailing. It was not that she was scared of heights or anything of the sort. She simply did not wish to take the chance that he would see up her skirt. So, this maid is still a maiden after all.

"I understand," he murmured straightforwardly, "Very well. I will lead; you will follow."

The Hand of the King then began the lengthy climb up to his bedchamber. Despite his age, he was in excellent physical condition. The maid was fairly strong for her size, as well. Since he could hear her close behind him for the entire ascent, she seemed to have no difficulty keeping up with him.

Halfway up the ladder, the maid said inquiringly "If you do not mind my asking, where will you go?"

"Casterly Rock," he responded, "Whether in time of war or peace, the Rock is safest place in the world for a Lannister. Its vassals are loyal to my house first and the crown second. Thus, even if the king writes of today's events to them, I know they will never turn against me."

And even if they tried, I could trust in Jaime to wipe out any dissenters. Jaime may have killed the king he had sworn to protect, but Tywin was certain even he would never betray his sire.

"Well, I wish you safe travels, milord," the maid uttered encouragingly.

"You are welcome to accompany me," Tywin proposed. He made that offer not because he had come to enjoy the girl's company or he was concerned for her well-being. He made it to ensure that she would not tell anyone in the Red Keep where he had gone after he fled King's Landing. In addition to that, riding across the Seven Kingdoms was generally safer when it was done with others.

"I may have to decline, milord," she uttered apologetically, "I am not a very fair rider. I am afraid I would only be a burden to you."

"Thus far, you have not," Tywin informed her, "And think on this: if Varys's little birds catch wind of how you abetted my escape, I can assure you the king will not be merciful. You would be much safer on the road than you would be if you remained here."

"You present a fine argument, milord," the maid admitted, "If you truly wish it, I will join you in your flight. I only hope neither of us come to regret it."

"Worry not; we will handle all troubles as they come," Tywin declared. Just as I always have.

A few minutes later, they reached the very top of the ladder. It brought them to a secret door, which directly opened onto the Hand's quarters.

"Now, where is this other passageway?" Tywin enquired.

"Beside the bed," she apprised him, "You go on ahead and gather anything we may need on the road, as well as anything you do not wish to leave behind, milord. I'm going to barricade this door, in case anyone else tries to come the same way."

That would be wise. Varys's little birds could be anywhere. They could be climbing even as we
speak.

As the maid secured the secret door, Tywin made his way to the quarters of the Hand. *This may be the last time I will ever see this place*, he realized. Anyone who knew Tywin was aware that he was not a sentimental man. He never got attached to people, much less to rooms. Still, he had come to appreciate the feeling of empowerment the Tower of the Hand brought him. *I will not let this break me. I am a lion of the Rock. Lions always have their pride.*

When Tywin approached the bedchamber, the bed was out of his field of vision. When he entered the bedchamber, he could see the bed completely.

Straightaway, he saw that someone was lying down on it. Based on the physique and attire, it was a woman. Her face was covered with a pillow, but she was lying on top of the covers, and he could clearly hear her breathing.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

If his outburst startled her, she displayed no sign of it. In fact, she appeared to give no reaction to his exclamation whatsoever. Then she calmly answered him with "I am simply making myself comfortable. Does this displease you, my lord? I know you prefer it when they are small and helpless."

She spoke in a very insolent and condescending manner. *She is trying my patience.* Tywin Lannister snapped angrily "You should know your place, wench."

"Oh, but I do," she claimed drily, "However, it is past time you learned yours."

At that, she removed the pillow from her head, uncovering her face.

Tywin froze when he saw her face. It was the very face they were supposed to have seen in the throne room earlier.

"Considering how rudely your colleagues have treated me since I arrived, I believe I am entitled to a bit of luxury," she commented sardonically, swinging her legs off the side of the bed. "Oh, well. I'll be leaving the city soon, anyway, so it doesn't matter all that much. I am just going to do what I came to do, and then I'll be on my way."

Lyanna Stark rose to her feet, reached behind her back, and pulled out a knife. The blade seemed to be coated in fresh blood.

When she noticed Tywin was gazing at her weapon, she cheekily told him "You are probably wondering whose blood this is. I will only say this: you should have selected tougher guards."

At that, Tywin turned to the main entrance. The door was wide open, and both of the men he had left to guard his quarters were on the ground with their throats slit.

"Here is what is going to happen," Lyanna Stark professed, "When he realized the magnitude of hisgravest blunder, the Hand made a cowardly and desperate retreat to his bedroom. He foolishly chose to entrust the on-duty guards with protecting him. When they realized the extent of his misdemeanor, they decided to kill him out of disgust, outrage, and a sense of true loyalty to the crown. Then, they each got the idea to kill his comrade and then pin the Hand's death on him later on. Alas, they ended up killing each other, resulting in three deaths and no survivors."

"And just how do you expect the king to find all that out?" Tywin Lannister queried irritably.
"That is what Varys will tell him," Lyanna Stark told him plainly, grinning mischievously, "The Spider may be on no one's side, but if he had to pick one, he'd most definitely chose mine over yours."

"How can you be certain of that?" Tywin thought aloud.

"Because my side is better for the stability of Westeros," the Northwoman debated, "At this time, it is also the winning side."

Tywin Lannister was unfazed. He folded his arms and muttered bluntly "A most clever plan, but plans are known to go wrong. In order for this plan of yours to work, I will have to be dead. I can assure you that even unarmed, I am a capable fighter. Do you honestly think you'd be able to kill me with a knife?"

"Oh, I'm not going to kill you," Lyanna Stark revealed.

Just then, Tywin felt a sharp jab in his back. It originated from around his midsection, and it was excruciatingly painful. As the Lion Lord doubled over in pain, Lyanna Stark muttered "She is."

Tywin Lannister roughly collapsed onto his stomach. He clutched the wound in his back, and he groaned in anguish. Despite the pain, he managed to gaze over his shoulder. The maid was standing over him, a bloodied knife in her hand, as well.

The expression on her face was quite unsettling. It was the expression one was liable to find on the face of a seasoned killer.

"That felt good," she stated merrily, "I've been wanting to do that ever since I found out it was you who sent that mercenary after my father."

Tywin Lannister narrowed his eyes and barked through strained breaths "Who... are... you?"

The girl gave no verbal response. Instead, she brought her free hand up to the side of her neck and took ahold of her chin. Then she... removed her face somehow. However, she had another face underneath. That must be her true face.

She was far younger than he originally thought. She could not have seen more than nine or ten namedays. She also bore the look of a highborn girl. Furthermore, her complexion was a little dark, which implied that she had some Dornish heritage. She also had a very developed and precocious figure for her age, which suggested she was from one of the inherently big-boned families.

By putting all that together with what she had said a minute ago, it dawned on Tywin who she really was. He mumbled weakly "You're... the Hound's... daughter."

She smiled lightly, gave a small nod, and drily remarked "Tyta Clegane of Clegane's Keep at your service, 'my lord.'"

"Stabbed in the back by the daughter of one of my own bannermen. Tywin Lannister honestly could not imagine a more humiliating fate."

"Did you have any trouble getting him here, Tyta?" Lyanna Stark queried.

"Luckily, I did not, princess," the girl from the Westerlands told the Northwoman, "He proved to be quite the willing participant in his own demise."

"You must have given a very convincing performance," Lyanna Stark supposed. She did, Tywin
"Thank you, Your Grace," Tyta said appreciatively, "But you should give some credit to the others, too. Although I was unable to attend court, I was able to overhear what was said in the throne room. From what I've heard, the others played their parts just as beautifully as I did."

"Then we are in luck," Lyanna Stark declared, pleased with that news.

Amidst his agony, Tywin Lannister was deeply confused. He glared up at the two females, gripped his open injury, and remarked heatedly "What… is going… on?"

'I'm a Faceless Man," Tyta apprised him candidly, "And I'm not the only one currently in the city. In fact, I'm only the fourth one you've seen today."

Tywin Lannister was flabbergasted. He whispered in shock "What?"

"You heard her right," Lyanna Stark confirmed, "Apparently, your son and my son commissioned the Faceless Men to rescue me and expose you and Jon Connington. Four of them came here with Tyrion and Jon, including Tyta. They actually arrived in King's Landing a full day before Connington and I did. That gave them plenty of time to make preparations."

"Who…?" Tywin began to ask, but his breath was caught in his throat. I must know who ruined my plan.

"The first was that girl Myrna," Lyanna Stark enlightened him, "Her true name is unknown; they simply call her 'the waif.' They replaced me with her last night, shortly after you paid a visit to the dragons' tomb. I suppose I am quite fortunate the House of Black and White had a face which closely matched my own likeness.

"The second was Ser Dick Cole," the Northwoman went on, "You should know something about that cell Jon Connington was holding me and expose you and Jon Connington. Four of them came here with Tyrion and Jon, including Tyta. They actually arrived in King's Landing a full day before Connington and I did. That gave them plenty of time to make preparations."

"At any rate," she continued after a brief pause, "Dick Cole was killed the very first night after we got here. He was replaced with a Faceless Man known only as 'the kindly man.' He served as our man on the inside, and he persuaded Amara and the Beast to turn their cloaks. I asked him to do that as a favor, as those two were rather kind to me during my captivity. At times, they even stopped their comrades from taking advantage of me."

"The third was Faithful Urswyck," Tyta Clegane expounded, "The real Urswyck was executed long ago. Lady Brienne did the deed herself. It was Uncle Tyrion who thought to make use of his face. Unlike the other two, the Faceless Man who posed as Urswyck has a name. He is called Jaqen H'ghar. As it happens, he's the man who recruited me into the organization, as well as the one who foiled your attempt to murder my father."

Tywin was astounded in more than one way.

"For reasons that may be obvious now, Jaqen H'ghar's role was the most important one," Lyanna Stark contended, "After all, it is because of him that we were able to show the king and his court who you really are."
By this point, Tywin was entirely speechless. *I have always thought myself a player in the great game. Now... it turns out I have been played like one of the pieces.*

"The final part was all of this," Lyanna Stark professed, gesturing around the bedchamber, "We all agreed that you were too dangerous to be kept alive. We also could not take the chance that you would somehow figure all this out on your own and end up turning our own plan against us. Hence, we chose to stage your death, effectively eliminating two problems at once."

"We must commend you for playing your part so well, my lord," Tyta Clegane remarked cockily, "But our time must come to an end now. Princess Lyanna and I need to be on a ship bound for Moat Cailin within the hour."

Lyanna Stark then knelt down and stated inquiringly "Have you anything to say before we proceed?"

Tywin Lannister did not wish to die. Even so, he was not about to resort to pleading for his life. If these truly were his last moments, he would face his death with dignity. *What little I have left.* In any case, he had already chosen his last words.

He glared up at the Northwoman and the girl from the Westerlands, and he stated haltingly "You are... mistaken... if you believe... this will end... with me. There is... another... who knows... everything. As long as... he is... alive... your hardships... will never... cease."

Coming from any other man, that may have been regarded as an empty threat. However, even in death, Tywin Lannister did not make empty threats. Everything he just said was entirely true.

The conspiracy to discredit the Targaryens and the Legion without Banners had been the result of a collaboration between himself, Jon Connington, and a third party, whom only Tywin himself knew of. The third party was still at large, and he was very efficient at dodging the notice of others.

*As long as he is still out there, they will never truly win.*

All the same, Lyanna Stark and Tyta Clegane did not seem bothered by that declaration. The second wife of Rhaegar Targaryen merely shrugged and uttered "Very well. We will give your words some thought on the voyage north. Now, we must be on our way. Tyta?"

"Yes, Your Grace," the girl acknowledged, hastening to act. She knelt beside Lord Tywin Lannister, rolled him onto his back, placed the tip of her knife at the side of his throat, and slid it all the way across to the other side, opening it up.

Once that was done, the woman and the girl calmly stood back up and exited the bedchamber through the secret passageway in the back room. They left Tywin Lannister to bleed out on the ground. His last moments were spent all alone. *Alone... with the only person I could ever truly trust. Myself.*
Roger Dunn was, by all standards, a normal guy. In his first life, at least.

He was born in the city of Savannah, Georgia in the spring of 1985. The youngest of three children, but arguably the most gifted. At an early age, he demonstrated uncanny talents for constructing and repairing machines. By the time he was ten, he decided he would become an engineer when he grew up. *And so I did.*

After graduating from high school, Roger moved from the east coast of the United States to the west coast. There he attended the University of California at Berkeley, where he took a double major in Mechanical Engineering and Electrical Engineering. Once he earned both his degrees, his career as an engineer officially began.

For the first few years, he worked as a contractor, travelling between companies every few months or so. Then he found steady employment with the Airbus Group. While that organization was Swiss in origins, he was employed at its main American office in Herndon, Virginia.

He met his wife, Pamela, in mid-2014. The two of them dated for about a year. Then he proposed. She accepted, and they were wed three months later. *She was the love of my first life.* Even now, he thought of her as such. That may have seemed overly sentimental to some, but he did not care. The following two years were perhaps the happiest of either of his lives.

Roger and Pamela were expecting their first child in early 2017. The pregnancy itself went off without a hitch. Alas, Pamela died in childbirth. Their daughter did not outlive her mother by more than a day.
Although Roger tried to appear strong after he lost his wife and daughter, inwardly he was a wreck. His boss offered to give him some time off to cope with the tragedy, but he refused. He firmly believed that focusing on his work would help him cope with his grief.

That ultimately brought about his own downfall. On the thirteenth of October 2017, Roger was conducting a routine inspection on the Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station in Tonopah, Arizona. He was tasked with running a maintenance check on a series of conduits in the facility's lower levels. While he worked, the image of his dying wife and daughter would not stop flashing in his head. That distracted him from his work, which in turn caused his failure to notice a critical malfunction in one of the conduits. Before Roger could realize this error, the conduit short-circuited and subsequently electrocuted him.

The next thing he knew, some woman was pushing him out of her womb. He had no idea who that woman was, but she was not his mother. Nor was the man who held him afterwards his father.

In point of fact, he was not even Roger Dunn any longer. He had started a new life in a new world with a new name. That name was Mollander. A name which happened to belong to a character from one of his favorite franchises. A minor character, unfortunately, but that cannot be helped. It's not like I had a choice in the matter. Even if he could not decide who he would be reborn as, he could still decide who he would be. I'm in full control of what type of person I will become, he reminded himself.

It only took him a couple days to regain his will to live. It took him much longer to come to terms with his change in environment and the circumstances of it. Not only was he in a universe he previously thought to be fictitious, but he also had to start over from the very beginning.

He was born in 274 A.C., a full twenty-four years before the events of the series. In addition to the books and show, he was familiar with The World of Ice and Fire. As such, he already had a fairly decent grasp of what took place in Westeros well before Gared, Will, and Waymar Royce went north of the Wall.

The first eight years of Mollander's second life were mostly unremarkable. The timeline proceeded just as it was meant to, and nothing out of the ordinary transpired. When he was nine, however, the first major deviation from the series storyline occurred.

This particular deviation took place during Robert's Rebellion. For the most part, the Rebellion happened almost exactly as it did in canon. Its precursor had been when Rhaegar Targaryen fled with Lyanna Stark, its beginning had been when the Mad King murdered Lord Rickard Stark and his heir Brandon, its turning point had been when Robert Baratheon killed Prince Rhaegar on the Trident, and its ending had been the Sack of King's Landing.

The last of those events occurred a little differently than Mollander remembered. This time, Gregor Clegane did not kill Elia Martell during the Sack. Quite the contrary, he had gone out of his way to save and protect her. Furthermore, he had escorted her back to Dorne.

In those days, the people of the Seven Kingdoms believed the Mountain had arrived too late to save Princess Elia's children. Mollander was not so quick to swallow that tale. Even back then, he had begun to wonder if there was more to Gregor Clegane than met the eye. I knew there was something he was not telling us.

Mollander next suspected something was amiss about six months later, when Gregor Clegane formed the Legion without Banners. The name is not entirely original, and it is essentially the Brotherhood on a much larger, far better-organized scale.
Mollander had considered joining the Legion at one point. Alas, his clubfoot greatly impeded his ability to fight, and all Legionnaires were required to possess the bare minimum in combat prowess. *Because of this damn foot, I can barely even walk straight.* Mollander had adapted to his disability long ago, but it could still be a nuisance at times. Mainly, he could not enlist in the Legion without Banners, even if he wanted to. On the plus side, the only reason he would want to enlist was to find out if Gregor Clegane really was like him.

Aside from that, his character's place had originally been at the Citadel, and while he was free to go anywhere he pleased (provided he had the right coin), he intended to follow that pursuit. He already had his own agenda regarding the change and development of the Seven Kingdoms. If he was to carry that agenda out, he would need to enter the Conclave.

Although he never enlisted in the Legion, Mollander still had his suspicions about its commander's true identity. Those suspicions were ultimately confirmed a few years later, when Gregor Clegane patented cement and concrete. *Those substances have no business being invented in this world just yet, least of all by the Mountain of all people. Unless, of course, he actually isn't the Mountain.*

When Mollander discovered that there were others from the real world, he was ambivalent on how to react. Initially, he was compelled to reach out to Gregor Clegane. He considered writing to the Mountain, sending a rider to Moat Cailin, or travelling to the moat to visit him directly. In the end, he decided to keep his distance from the Mountain. *There are many advantages to keeping my background a total secret from everyone in this world, including those who share it.*

All throughout his life, Mollander did nothing to give away his true identity or suggest that he did not belong. *The polar opposite of the Mountain.* Gregor Clegane may have been content to draw all that attention to himself, but Mollander elected not to do anything that would make him stand out. Before he shared his knowledge of the real world with anyone, he needed to devise his own game plan.

Shortly after the second coming of the Others became common knowledge in Westeros, Mollander implemented that game plan. He headed to Oldtown, and he entered the Citadel. He spent the next four years forging his links, increasing his knowledge of the world, and investigating the Conclave. He learned many interesting and enlightening things about his superiors. *Everyone gets their hands dirty now and then, but I bet the majority of the Archmaesters have never washed their hands in their lives.*

Whenever he went snooping around the Citadel, he had always been very careful not to get caught. He knew that a single wrong move could have resulted in his dismissal or even his death. To his good fortune, the Conclave never realized – or even suspected – that he was spying on them. The Night's King and the Army of the Dead were undoubtedly the greatest threats to the world, but in Mollander's mind, the Archmaesters had to be the greatest living threats. *They need to be eliminated as such.* When he came to that realization, Mollander also realized he would be unable to accomplish that objective without assistance. As such, he had decided he would approach Gregor Clegane. But not straightaway. He would not do so until the right opportunity presented itself.

Soon after this, a young man named Alleras joined the Citadel. Of course, Mollander knew all along that this person was actually a young woman. He also knew she was Sallera Sand, the fourth of Oberyn Martell's bastard daughters. He was quite aware that she had her own reasons for infiltrating the Conclave. Since her affairs posed no danger to him, he never exposed her or mentioned her secret to anyone. He simply let her be and allowed her to attend to her own business whilst he attended to his.
Sallera ultimately turned out to be useful to Mollander. Through her, he had managed to get in contact with Gregor Clegane. The Mountain had only been interested in learning what reason the Conclave had for trying to destroy his printing press. Mollander was able to provide him with that information. And much more.

Mollander expected Gregor Clegane to be surprised to learn that a novice of the Citadel possessed his famous "source." Perhaps he was. What surprised him was the fact that the Mountain had already been in contact with another such individual. Specifically, he was working with a red priestess named Kinvara, who was masquerading as Melisandre. Interestingly, she once travelled with two other parties who were like them, both of whom had died a while back. Nonetheless, she was under the impression that somewhere out there, there were others still.

For all we know, her hypothesis might actually hold water.

In any case, Mollander decided that the time had come to establish an active relationship with the Mountain and his allies. It would have been too risky and too complicated to continue corresponding with them by raven, so his only option was to speak with them in person. Consequently, he had taken a leave of absence from the Citadel, and he had swiftly headed north.

After a long month of riding, Mollander reached Moat Cailin, which, he quickly noted, did not resemble the ruin it had been in canon. They did a fantastic job of restoring it. I'd wager it didn't even look this good before it fell apart. When he entered the moat's grounds, he was greeted by Gregor Clegane himself personally. Kinvara was with him at the time, as if she had known Mollander would arrive that day. I suppose she really is a red priestess after all. Once preliminary introductions were out of the way, the lord of the moat brought the novice of the Citadel and the red priestess up to his solar. That was when official introductions were given.

Gregor Clegane was actually Gregory Welch, a Central Intelligence Agency field operative from Seattle. Kinvara was actually Melanie Hamilton, a Microsoft programmer from Cheyenne. Mollander revealed that he was actually Roger Dunn, an Airbus Group engineer from Savannah. So, we're all Americans, he noted. That was pretty much the only thing the three of them had in common back in the real world.

They all spent a while talking about their previous lives.

Gregory had been the youngest; he had died when he was only twenty-eight. Whereas here, he was the oldest. He was thirty-four, going on thirty-five. Technically, he was sixty-two, going on sixty-three.

Melanie had been the eldest; she had died when she was forty-six. Now, at twenty-five years, she was the youngest. Technically, she was seventy-one. So, mentally, she was still the oldest overall.

Roger had died when he was thirty-two. Presently, he was twenty-seven. Technically, he was fifty-nine. I may have been in the middle in both worlds, but all things considered, it would seem I'm the youngest.

Their domestic situations had been reversed, as well. Melanie and Roger had both been married with children, but Gregory had always been too busy with work to find a significant other. Whereas in this world, Gregor Clegane had a wife and five children, and Kinvara and Mollander were still single. However, Kinvara had gotten rather close to Allard Seaworth, second son of the Onion Knight. Mollander had likewise formed a tight bond with Sarella Sand before he left Oldtown. Of course, other than the Mountain, they were the only ones who knew of those respective
relationships.

When I become the Seneschal, Sarella won't have to hide her gender anymore. Once that happens, we will not have to hide the nature of our relationship, either. Although Mollander had only known the Sand Snake as a woman for a short time, he had come to view Sarella Sand as his second chance at having a family. After the tragedy of losing his wife and daughter in his first life, he was not about to squander that chance.

Needless to say, all that would depend on how things turned out between the two of them. *Obara and Nymeria may have been willing to settle down, but Sarella is still remaining true to her original ambitions. She might have no intention of having a family ever.* Despite that, Mollander elected not to worry about that just yet. He had more immediate concerns. *I'll just wait for a more appropriate time to discuss this with Sarella. Maybe after the Long Night.*

After discussing their first lives, they talked about what they had been up to more recently. Most of Gregor's plans and goals were already known throughout Westeros, but the full extent of several of them were still unknown to many. The part about Lyanna Stark was only known by a select few, and while he always suspected, Mollander was stunned to learn that she really was still alive. Fundamentally, the Mountain's objective was just what he claimed it was: to uphold peace and stability in the Seven Kingdoms.

Kinvara had her turn next. She was the only one among them who had met others from the real world. Their names had been Herman Lewis and Eugene Quinn, and they had been reborn as Hizdahr zo Loraq and Yezzen zo Qaggaz respectively. Her movements had been confined to Asshai until they came to see her mistress, Melisandre. After killing the Red Woman and stealing her appearance, she had left Asshai with the men from Slaver's Bay. For a while, the three of them had travelled around the Known World, searching for more of their kind. Then Herman and Eugene had died very suddenly. That was when she temporarily set aside her search and chose to seek out the Targaryens instead. She had been providing them and the Legion with guidance and information ever since then. While she was still bent on finding out if anyone else from the real world was still out there, that was not her primary objective. Her actual primary objective was fairly similar to Gregor's, only it had a clearer outcome: to save Westeros from the Army of the Dead.

As far as adventuring was concerned, Mollander did not have very much to talk about, especially when compared to the two of them. Be that as it may, he brought more knowledge to the conversation than both of them combined. He told them about a number of the Conclave's more iniquitous accomplishments. Their attempt at destroying the printing press was far from the worst one. Mollander was convinced that the Archmaesters would continue to suppress the technological advancement of Westeros until someone stopped them. *Obviously, I'm going to have to be that 'someone.'* That was his main directive: to cleanse the Citadel and begin the modernization of the Known World.

"Just what do you mean by 'modernization?'" Melanie asked when Roger revealed his foremost aim.

"I mean just what it sounds like," he informed her, "I'm going to start an era of invention and discovery for the Seven Kingdoms."

"So, you're going to lead the realm into an industrial age?" Gregory presumed.

"Certainly not," Roger disputed, "It will be at least two centuries before this world will be ready to undergo its own industrial age. Three or four centuries before electricity. Five or more before
computers can be introduced. Believe me, I am not going to present the conveniences of the real world all at once. That would cause far greater damage than the Conclave ever inflicted."

"There we agree, Roger," Gregory commented, "I planned for the printing press to be the last breakthrough I gave this world, and I was concerned that even that may have been a little too much."

"Then you can leave any further innovations to me," Roger proposed, "I can assure you that I will be mindful of how much progress we make. It will be gradual, but consistent."

"You better hope so, Roger," Melanie muttered, "From what I remember of the real world's history, no civilization ever reacted very favorably to sudden changes in its culture. Particularly when technology was involved."

"That is true, Melanie," Roger admitted, "But keep in mind that Westeros has hardly evolved at all in the last eight millennia. You could say it has been stuck in the Middle Ages all this time. The Middle Ages in the real world only lasted for about three hundred and fifty years."

"Then this world has a lot of catching up to do," Gregory observed.

"Indeed, Gregory," Roger conceded, "Fortunately, right now, Westeros is adequately prepared to experience its equivalent of the Renaissance. In the real world, the Renaissance was arguably the greatest period for the most revolutionary inventors and intellectuals to be alive."

"Why are you so adamant about instilling this type of change?" Melanie inquired curiously.

"I'm an engineer," Roger told her plainly. Or I was, anyway. "How could I not be so adamant?"

"He has a point, Melanie," Gregory murmured, "Given his profession, you cannot blame him for wanting to make progress. It's in his nature."

"I'm not opposed to his schemes, Gregory," Melanie asserted, "On the contrary, I admire how devoted he seems to them. If carried out properly, I'm sure they'll benefit this world greatly."

You don't have to talk about me as though I'm not here. Thankfully, he regained their attention a few seconds later. Gregory stated "You are going to restrict your changes to technology, correct? You do not intend to restructure the land's social order, too? Even I am not that brash."

"You need not worry on that," Roger assured him, "I agree it would be for the best if the Seven Kingdoms continued to function as a monarchy for now. After all, the class system is the only system they've ever known. It'll be years and years before equal opportunity can be made available. It could be decades before we can educate the smallfolk, and centuries before topics such as democracy can become prevalent in Westeros. Even the Free Folk do not have a full understanding of egalitarianism right now. But I am content with that. As I said before, progress -- any form of progress -- is best when it is made gradually. Too much change at once in any cultural aspect, and people start to freak out."

"Just the point I was making earlier," Melanie commented.

Gregory nodded in agreement, and then he looked to Roger and said "So, tell us. How do you plan to introduce technology to Westeros?"

"For the most part, I will do so indirectly," Roger apprised him, "It has been over two and a-half decades since I last handled anything mechanical or electrical. Luckily for us, I had a photographic
memory in my first life, which I retained in this one. If I wished to, I could draw up the blueprints of virtually any contraption from the twenty-first century, and quite a few from the mid-to-late twentieth. Only reason I haven't so far is because I did not wish to run the risk that someone would dig through my belongings and come across them. As of now, though, I am no longer burdened by that hindrance."

Gregory was the first to understand his implication. "You'd entrust us with your blueprints?"

"Perhaps," Roger explicated, "To be precise, I would entrust you to find some people whom you would entrust with my blueprints. Specifically, people who can be trusted to take the blueprints and hide them away in a secure location for a certain amount of time. All without even looking at them."

"Why would you want them to do that?" Melanie asked. Roger glimpsed over at her and smirked. **How would you react if you saw blueprints for a device from the twenty-fifth or twenty-sixth century?**

"Because other than the three of us, there is no one alive who could understand the blueprints," Roger pointed out, "The majority of them shouldn't be shown for hundreds of years. The rest will still have to be put away for at least six or seven decades before they're ready for public disclosure. I've already decided which contraptions I'm going to draw up blueprints for, as well as when each of them will be presented to the world and how."

"I'm impressed that you've already thought that far ahead," Gregory remarked sincerely.

"Coming from a federal officer, that must be high praise," Roger uttered slyly. Despite the dryness in that statement, he really was flattered to receive such a compliment from the former C.I.A. employee. **I may be the more creative one, but there is no question that he's the better strategist and tactician.**

"I don't know if I would be able to help you in this matter," Melanie confessed, "So far, the only families I seem to have made a positive impact on are the Seaworths and the Targaryens."

"That might be enough," Gregory contended, "If it is not, it happens that I have no shortage of good, reliable connections in the Seven Kingdoms. I can think of at least one family in each of the nine major regions whom I could count on to preserve some documents indefinitely."

"That's good to hear," Roger remarked in approval, "But whoever you pick, make certain they come from families who traditionally value and practice honor and integrity. We need to be able to depend on these families to not unearth the blueprints before the preselected dates I have given for them to be unearthed."

"We understand completely," Gregory told him, speaking for both himself and Melanie, "I'll take some time to reflect on this issue, and I'll get back to you on it at a later date."

"So will I," Melanie stated, "Though I should warn you not to expect too much from me."

"In any case, I appreciate the cooperation," Roger muttered thankfully.

The three of them continued talking for about an hour after this topic was concluded. After that, they left the solar as Mollander, Kinvara (disguised as Melisandre), and Gregor Clegane. The red priestess went to the Worship Tower, and the Mountain led the novice from the Citadel to the Boader Tower. Quarters had already been arranged for Mollander, and he quickly got settled into them. Other than when he went to the Banquet Tower for dinner, he stayed there for the rest of the
day. He spent some of that time reflecting on his first meeting with Gregor Clegane and Kinvara. He was quite pleased with how it had gone. *It appears we are already off to a good start. I look forward to our next meeting.*

It turned out he had to look forward to it for quite a while. Close to a full week, in fact. That was through no fault of his own, though. The problem was that Gregor Clegane was kept preoccupied with his own affairs, which included both business and personal matters.

The day after Mollander arrived in the North, Moat Cailin received some more visitors. They came by ship, arriving in the moat's harbor at around midday. All of them were members of one of several companies the Mountain had sent across the Narrow Sea over the course of the last year for various reasons, such as retrieving the Targaryens. Among them were his wife Dacey Mormont, his sons Alyver and Torrhen, his mother Daliah Clegane, his sister Ellyn Lannister, his nephew Duncan Lannister, and Princess Daenerys Targaryen herself.

When Dany stepped off the Legionnaire flagship *Zenith*, her dragon, Draegar, disembarked alongside her. Based on the color scheme, Draegar had originally been Rhaegal. Mollander would never forget the instant he saw that magnificent creature. *My first time seeing an actual dragon.*

Funny. I'm not really certain what I should be feeling right now. *How should I react?* Whatever the case, he was in awe.

The Mountain spent most of the next three days reconnecting with his estranged relatives. He had not seen his mother in several months. He had not seen his wife or sister since the beginning of the year. Much had changed since then. As it happened, Lady Ellyn was currently pregnant with her second child. That was a cause for a bit of celebration in the moat.

Since Mollander understood and appreciated the worth of family just as much as Gregor Clegane did, he elected not to impose upon the taller man's reunion. He was certain Gregor would have appreciated his discretion, had he known of it. *In his position, I would not wish to be disturbed, either.*

At any rate, Gregor Clegane spent almost every waking moment of the following three days with his family. He spent all the non-waking moments – *is that even a real term?* – with Dacey Clegane. In fact, he spent the whole of the evenings and nights alone with his wife. Even if no one told him of that, Mollander probably would have figured that out on his own.

It was said that the main bedchamber of the Lord's Tower had excellent acoustics, due to its being the highest point in all of Moat Cailin. If the window was left wide open, one could reportedly hear everything that went on in there. That proved all too true the first night after the moat's lady returned home. Anyone with a functional pair of ears could hear just how *delighted* the lord and lady were to be back in each other's arms. Mollander did not get much sleep that night. *I expect noone did. Would it hurt those two to close their fucking shutters?*

Thankfully, someone else in the moat must have had a similar thought and voiced it to Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey. The following night – and every night after – they made sure to close their window before they went to bed. Mollander was able to sleep peacefully after that.

By the fourth day after his family returned to him, Gregor was ready to concentrate on more serious matters. Alas, private audiences with Mollander and Kinvara were not at the very top of his list of priorities. Before he could arrange another one of those, he had to see to his duties as the Master of Order and the commander of the Legion without Banners first.

Lord Gregor held a meeting with the secret council every day for the next four days. Mollander and Kinvara were allowed to attend the secret council meetings strictly as observers. Mollander had
to admit that he was fascinated to witness how the Legion operated at the topmost level.

With the return of Lady Dacey and Ser Lothor Brune, the council was almost whole. Only Willas Tyrell and Oberyn Martell were still absent. But that would not be the case for long. The Mountain confirmed as much at the first day's meeting.

He announced that the Red Viper had set out from Sunspear earlier that week. He had left Dorne with all of his homeland's fifty thousand spears, along with the remainder of the Golden Company and the entirety of the Dothraki horde.

The heir to Highgarden, meanwhile, had departed King's Landing alongside King Robert Baratheon and the Royal Army. His destination was the same as Oberyn's: Moat Cailin. They were headed straight there.

The King was bringing everyone with him, including Princess Rhaenys Targaryen, Sansa Stark, Arya Stark, Crown Prince Jasper Baratheon, and Rickard Clegane. Unsurprisingly, Lord Gregor and Lady Dacey were very happy to know that their firstborn and heir was coming home. Soon enough, their family will be whole once again.

Jon Targaryen was also on his way, but he was coming separately from the others. He, Tyrion Lannister, Lord Gregor's niece Tyta Clegane, and a few others would be travelling by sea. In all likelihood, they would reach their destination at least a week before King Robert. That'll give us plenty of time to remedy the dilemma with Lyanna Stark.

On the plus side, Robert Baratheon and Jon Targaryen appeared to have established a tentative ceasefire and a temporary alliance with one another. According to what Gregor Clegane told the secret council, both families had agreed to set their feud aside until the Night's King was defeated. At least there is no confusion as to who the real villain is.

It was not just the Royal Army that was coming. King Robert had called upon every lord in the realm to assemble his forces and march north. Every single one of them had already accepted the call, and they were preparing to make for Moat Cailin, if they had not done so already. The North is about to get rather crowded, it would seem. Good thing it's so damn big.

Most of the time expended by the secret council's meetings consisted of plans to receive the armies of the Seven Kingdoms once they arrived. Needless to say, Moat Cailin was not nearly large enough to accommodate every soldier in the realm, not to mention all the servants and camp followers they would bring along. As such, Lord Gregor and his officers opted to set aside huge plots in the vast expanse north of the moat. If allocated properly, the entirety of the Westerosi armies could camp in that expanse.

In addition to preparing for a large influx of soldiers into the north, the Mountain and his officers debated the possibility of moving another group of people in the opposite direction. Lord Gregor was considering having all Northern civilians and non-combatants evacuated to the south. That would ensure that even if the Army of the Dead successfully invaded the North, some of its inhabitants would be spared the gruesome fate of joining the Night's King's army. Of course, if the Others make it past the Neck, the southerns will still suffer the same fate. By then, it would be more a question of how fast we could evacuate to Essos. There'd certainly be no place left on this continent to run to. Even the Iron Islands would not be safe once the surface of the seas froze over. No place would be safe then.

At one of the meetings, the Mountain brought up the issue of the printing press and how Maester Kennick had attempted to destroy it. Everyone who was already aware of that incident was still angered by it. Everyone who was not already aware was downright furious, particularly Lady
Dacey. That's to be expected. The incident endangered the lives of her daughter Vallory and her third son Larys.

Lord Gregor asked Mollander to speak when this subject was being discussed. The novice from the Citadel proceeded to inform the secret council that the Archmaesters were behind the fiasco with the printing press. He also apprised them of the full scope of the Conclave's conspiracy to control the Seven Kingdoms. The expressions of shock and disbelief on their faces were a sight to behold.

Mollander assured the secret council that not all maesters were so crooked. In fact, based on his findings, over half the maesters throughout the realm were either unaware of or opposed to the Conclave's methods. That number included Maester Caleotte, Maester Luwin, Maester Vyman, Maester Velix, Maester Aemon, and even Grand Maester Marwyn himself. In fact, Maester Kennick was one of the few maesters in service to a certain house who answered to the Conclave directly. It all makes sense now. The Conclave predicted that Gregor Clegane would be a threat to their dominance in the Seven Kingdoms, and so they assigned one of their agents to Moat Cailin.

Near the end of his account, Mollander briefly explained his plan to improve and change the Citadel from within. He claimed his only objective was to bring about the betterment of Westeros. He emphasized that in order to accomplish his objective, he would need the Legion's help. To his satisfaction, the secret council was willing to give it. However, Gregor told him they would not be able to resolve this affair until after the Others had been defeated. Mollander could accept that. We need to keep our priorities straight.

At present, Mollander had enough dirt on the Citadel to warrant an immediate intervention, even without the crown's consent. He believed the Legionnaires could even afford to detain and execute most of the Archmaesters without a trial. That's how I'd prefer to do it. Those sons of bitches can't be allowed to defend themselves. They'd just find some way to cheat justice yet again. In spite of that, Mollander assured the secret council that however they dealt with the Conclave would ultimately be their choice. I can't be too demanding. If I am, I could lose them.

Finally, after a week of constant delays and setbacks, Gregor Clegane was able to find time to host another private gathering between himself, Kinvara, and Mollander. He held this one in the early evening, shortly after supper.

After finishing their last meal of the day, the three of them went straight from the Banquet Tower to the Lord's Tower. When they got there, Gregor Clegane escorted Kinvara and Mollander back up to his solar. Once they were inside that room and the door was shut and bolted, they became Gregory Welch, Melanie Hamilton, and Roger Dunn once more.

Roger was hoping to address the subject of who else may have been from the real world at that meeting. He expected Melanie would be eager to get to this matter, seeing as she was the one who brought it to their attention in the first place. In preparation, he had brought along his list of all the miscarriages that had been recorded in the last century. He put especial emphasis on all the cases where the mother still managed to give birth not long after losing the first child.

Before they could get to this matter, however, Melanie was compelled to voice her thoughts on another issue. Both Roger and Gregory assumed they were already past this issue. Nevertheless, it did warrant at least some revisiting.

"I am still somewhat bewildered by this whole fiasco with Tywin Lannister," Melanie confessed to them, "I mean, I can understand why he sought to bring disgrace upon the Targaryens and their allies. Despite the fealty they showed Robert, he still perceived them as a threat to his daughter's position, as well as his grandson's. But what could have possibly motivated him to believe that the Pentoshi Bloodbath was a good idea?"
"I have wondered that very same question many times myself," Gregory disclosed.

"So have I," Roger stated. Then he added in "Even though I only learned the full truth of it recently."

"Could there have been more to his conspiracy than we thought?" Melanie supposed.

"Maybe there was," Gregory debated, "By now, I've come to accept that just about anything is possible. After all, as ruthless and conniving as Tywin was, there was always a method to his madness. Even so... I cannot see what could have incited Tywin to authorize the Pentoshi Bloodbath. When you think about all the animosity it produced and combine that with all the risk it shouldered, as well as the dubious payoff and the incredibly low probability of success... it does not add up. The Red Wedding took place under far more ideal circumstances in Tywin's favor. He removed the single greatest threat to his family, formed an alliance with vassals of the lords he overthrew, and only pissed off the Northmen and the Riverlords. He did all that without incriminating himself. But the Bloodbath... I feel as though it was doomed to fail from the start."

"That could not be the case," Melanie contended, "Tywin would not have orchestrated the Bloodbath if he knew the odds were so strongly against him."

Roger sat in silence for a minute, rubbing his chin and reflecting on this conversation. Then he thought aloud "Or maybe he did know, but he went ahead with it anyway."

"Why would he do that?" Melanie muttered in perplexity.

"Tywin's goals may not have been as clear cut as we believed them to be," Roger debated, "Perhaps he was counting on the Pentoshi Bloodbath to fail. When you think about it, there are still several ways its failure could have benefitted him or his family."

"How do you figure?" asked Gregory.

"I have some theories," Roger disclosed, "Three in particular."

"Feel free to share them with us," Melanie said bluntly.

"Firstly, Tywin could have been misleading Jon Connington all along," "Perhaps he cooperating with Connington and the Westerosi members of the Golden Company under false pretenses. In other words, he was lying about returning their citizenship to the Seven Kingdoms. Maybe his ultimate plan was to turn on the dissident officers of the Golden Company and pin the Bloodbath on them. Or... maybe he meant to keep his word with the exiles, and he planned to have them publicly turn against him and pin the blame on him instead. Either way, there would have been no personal gain for either party."

"The first part of that theory is certainly feasible," Melanie remarked, "But the second part... not so much. Hard as I might try, I cannot see Tywin willingly using himself as a scapegoat."

"Tywin would do anything if it served his purpose," Gregory countered, "Still, I have to agree with you on this point. Even if doing so enabled him to discredit the Legion without Banners and the Targaryens, Tywin would not have given up his power and his status like that if he had any other alternative. If it was for the sake of people outside House Lannister, he certainly would never do such a thing."

Well, you never know. Roger shrugged his shoulders and muttered "Fair enough. There is plenty of room for discussion here. But before that, I still have two other theories I'd like to mention."
"Go on," Melanie bade him. She and Gregory were all ears.

"My second theory is that maybe Tywin honestly believed that what he was doing was the right thing," Roger contended, "I mean, let's face it; the man has always had a sense of morality that is ambiguous at the best of times and nonexistent at the worst. Therefore, he may have seen it as his obligation to rid the world of dangers, hazards, and evil or wicked things."

"That's what I've been doing ever since I became Master of Order," Gregory mumbled candidly.

"True," Roger admitted, "But we all have different perceptions of evil and wickedness. Tywin could have taken it upon himself to rid the world of what he believed to be its vices. While he may have started out with standards, he could have cast his ethics aside altogether at some point. Although Tywin is a shrewd and cunning individual, it is possible that his views of the world may have become deeply distorted or misguided."

"I think you're confusing him with Aerys," Melanie conjectured.

Roger snorted. *Whoever said Aerys was smart?* "Not at all. But Tywin may have ended with the same *mindset* as Aerys. After all, anyone is capable of going insane. A combination of House Clegane's rapid rise to prominence, the Legion's influence, the Targaryens' pardoning, and his own thirst for power could have driven him to madness. Perhaps he became so paranoid that the concept of eradicating his enemies through any means necessary consumed his mind. So much so that he lost all sense of right and wrong, and he elected to eliminate anyone who stood in his way, even for the most trivial of reasons."

"Strange as it may seem, I can see that happening to some degree," Gregory remarked.

"The idea has merit," Melanie supposed, "But consider this: if Tywin really did lose his nerves and his code of ethics, how was he able to organize and carry out the Pentoshi Bloodbath without anyone noticing? Moreover, why would he have gone to such lengths to keep quiet about it? Surely, he would have mentioned it to someone else."

"Ah, you make you a good argument," Gregory contended, "One needs to be in the right frame of mind to organize a massacre, especially if one's involvement is meant to remain clandestine. If Tywin truly was blinded by power and mentally ill, there is no way he could have maintained his cover so well."

*This is going nowhere.* Roger folded his arms and sighed irately. "Should I even *bother* to give my third theory?"

"Well, I can't guarantee that either of us will agree with it," Melanie stated, "But we'll at least give you the benefit of the doubt."

"Yes, continue," Gregory beckoned him, still giving Roger his full attention.

The engineer leaned back in this chair and took a few seconds to choose his words. After that, he professed "My third theory is that… Tywin wanted the world to hate him."

Gregory and Melanie were stunned. The latter enquired "How so?"

"On the surface, Tywin has only ever seemed to care about House Lannister," Roger pointed out, "But House Lannister is full of enigmas, and he was no exception. As such, what if Tywin actually had a plan to bring prosperity and order to *all* of Westeros?"

"How would getting the world to hate him benefit the Seven Kingdoms?" Gregor uttered
Roger elaborated with: "He would start by ordering a deliberately atrocious act of violence, meaning the Pentoshi Bloodbath. Then he would allow some time for hatred to take root in the victims and fester. Overtime, the hatred would spread, until it encompassed the whole of Westeros. After that happened, Tywin would announce that he was responsible, thereby make himself the target of all the world's hate. Once he gathered all that hate… he would die."

"You mean he would commit suicide?" Melanie assumed.

Roger shook his head and clarified "No, he would have someone else – ideally one of his most loyal vassals – kill him publically. The sight of this act of justice being done on the most hated man alive would probably be enough to sway the world to cast aside all that hate. As a result, the world would likely become a much more compassionate, more understanding, and more peaceful place."

Initially, Gregory and Melanie said nothing. They just stared at him blankly for a full minute, as though they were dumbfounded. *It suddenly got quiet in here.*

Eventually, Melanie raised an eyebrow and murmured "You're kidding, right?"

Roger was taken aback. He said as politely as possible "Excuse me?"

"This is Tywin we're talking about," she remarked, as though he had forgotten, "He had one of the best minds in the entire Ice and Fire franchise. No one ever said he did not want peace in the Seven Kingdoms. But you honestly expect us to believe that the best solution he could come up with was to sacrifice himself and be eternally hated by everyone else while they enjoyed his peace?"

"Implausible," Gregory conceded, "It's implausible in every meaning of the word. Forget about Tywin; I cannot see anyone subjecting himself or herself to that absolutely miserable fate."

"Then it's a dumbass theory?" Roger wryly assumed, frowning.

"To put it mildly," Gregory sardonically affirmed, "No one is more committed to resolving conflict in this world than I, but I would never try such a flawed, reckless, and needlessly tragic approach as that one. Who in their right mind would ever go through that… idiotic plan?"

*Who ever said the individual had to be in the right mind? The last character who tried that tactic wasn't.* Evidently, this theory was by far the least believable one, according to his companions. He sighed again and muttered "Not everyone is as resourceful and clever as you are. Some would argue that that strategy is an ingenious one."

"It sounds like something an idealistic child would come up with," Gregory countered. *Technically, it is.*

"That aside, how utterly pompous do you have to be to think you can actually acquire all the world's hate?" Melanie argued. "That's as impossible as acquiring all the world's love. There are some people who just cannot bring themselves to hate others, no matter what crimes they've committed. There are also plenty of sadists and masochists, who would approve even the foulest misdeeds."

"Quite so," Gregory professed, "And even if by some miracle this peace did come about, it wouldn't last. I would give it a few years at most. Then we'd all be back at each other's throats. People always find a reason to hate, fight, and kill one another. Look at our own history. Genghis
Khan, Attila the Hun, Hitler, Stalin, bin Laden… they were all almost universally hated, yet their deaths only brought a temporary respite from violence.

"It's happened in the World of Ice and Fire, too," Melanie interjected, "Take Joffrey, for instance. I doubt anyone other than Cersei ever loved him. But did the cycle of violence and hatred end with him at the Purple Wedding? It most certainly did not. It did not end with Viserys or Ramsay either. I doubt it would even end with the Night's King."

"Indeed," Gregory concurred, "In any case, it certainly did not end with Tywin in the original events of the series. So, why would it have ended with him in this timeline?"

"Alright, alright!" Roger exclaimed in annoyance. These two are beginning to try my patience. "You've both made your point. You don't have to tell me it was a stupid theory. I realized that on my own."

"I apologize if we upset you," Melanie said hastily.

"You didn't," he assured her. Too much. "In hindsight, I admit that while that theory may have made sense in certain other franchises, it has no place in this one."

"For my curiosity's sake, what other franchises might it have been credible in?" Gregory queried, "No offense, but due to its absurdity, it sounds like a plot element from a melodramatic cartoon."

At that, Roger anxiously glanced off to the side. Without turning his head, he mumbled quietly "Well, it's not from a cartoon, per se…"

That seemed to catch Gregory's interest. "What do you mean?"

Roger hesitated at first. Should I tell them? As he recounted from experiences in his first life, bringing up this type of subject matter in a conversation had rarely gone over well. It had even gotten a few people ostracized from society. But seeing as how the three of us need one another, I suppose I do not have to worry about that here. Still… who knows how these two will react?

Ultimately, Roger turned back to the other two and informed them "It happens that none of those theories were entirely original on my part. The basis for each one of them was partly inspired by a different series. All three of those series belonged to a type of animated medium. Now, this medium is technically not a cartoon, but in the real world, it was often mislabeled or mistaken as cartoons in the Western Hemisphere."

Melanie looked as though she was beginning to understand. As for Gregor… he must have figured it out already, as he appeared more than a little exasperated. The tall man closed his eyes, placed his hand against his forehead, and mumbled drily "Roger… don't tell me you got those theories from…"

He paused for a moment, and then he softly breathed out the last word: "…anime."

"Yes, I did," Roger shamelessly admitted, furrowing his brow, "Do you have a problem with that?"

"No, as long as you don't talk about it anymore," Gregory remarked, removing his hand from his face and opening his eyes. At least he's not looking at me with contempt. That's a step in the right direction.

Melanie just scoffed and cheekily muttered "Well, what do you know, Gregory? Even in this world, we can't get away from weeaboos."
Gregory chuckled a bit. Roger grimaced and snapped "Okay, two points, Melanie. One, I am not – nor have I ever been – a weeaboo. While I respect and admire Japanese culture, I do not think it is superior to western culture. Equal, perhaps, but not better than. Two… how do you even know that word?"

"My elder daughter," Melanie revealed, "She was a self-proclaimed weeaboo. Talked about anime all the time. Every now and then, I tried to listen to her in effort to share her interests. But I was always lost halfway through our conversations. Then again, is it really a conversation when one side does all the talking?"

"I feel your pain," Gregory commented wittily, "A guy I worked with at the C.I.A. was just as obsessed with anime. He never shut up about it. My desk was nowhere near his, but I still bumped into him rather often. He kept requesting transfer to one of our offices in Southeast Asia. A number of my other coworkers and I always hoped his request would be accepted. Anything to get him out of our office."

*I suppose I cannot blame them. Even I dread those types of encounters.* Roger cleared his throat to regain their attention, and then he pronounced "Alright, I want to make one thing very clear: I was nothing like your daughter or your colleague. I admit I may have been a bit of an otaku, but for me, anime was strictly a hobby. My interest in this franchise was far greater. Also, it may interest you to know that what has happened to us is not entirely unheard of, especially in anime. While there is certainly no precedent for this that I know of in the real world, there are literally dozens of series where one or more people are transported to a different world. Often without any explanation whatsoever. Usually it is a world which resembles a video game, but sometimes it is a completely new world altogether. In most cases, the characters have no way of going back to the real world, just like us. So, anime is probably more relatable than you give it credit for. Besides, unlike most westerners who watch anime, I actually have an excuse for harboring an interest in it."

"Why would you need an excuse?" said Melanie.

"Do you really want an answer to that question?" Gregory mumbled sarcastically.

Roger paid no mind to that statement. Instead, he told them "I've no desire to waste much more of our time on this topic, so I'll keep it brief. My great-grandfather fought in the Pacific during World War II. He was part of the occupation of Japan after the Japanese surrendered. While he was stationed there, he befriended one of the local soldiers. They got along famously. When the occupation ended in 1952, he brought the soldier and his wife back home to Savannah with him. Our two families have been next-door neighbors and close friends ever since. Growing up, I spent a lot of time over at their place. Even though they were just as American as we were, they never forgot their native tongue. Because of that, I was able to learn how to read, write, and speak Japanese."

Melanie smirked. "Well, in that case, what choice did you have but to develop an interest in anime?"

*At least she understands my situation.* Roger smiled lightly and said "Precisely."

"It is not as though someone forced you to watch anime," Gregory contended, "Just because you learn a language, that doesn't mean you have to partake in its heritage. I am fluent in both Spanish and Italian, but I still preferred having the subtitles on whenever I watched films in either of those languages."

*Subtitles do make everything easier, even if something gets lost in the translation.* In spite of that,
Roger was starting to get annoyed. "Do you have some kind of disdain for people who like anime?"

"No, I've just never cared for it," Gregory proclaimed, "My biggest experience with anime is cracking some jokes about it. For instance, another of my colleagues at the Agency once jested that anime was Japan's revenge against the United States for Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

Roger snickered. That's actually kind of funny. "If that was the case, it's quite an effective means of revenge. After all, by the time we died, it had all but infested our culture."

"Not our entire culture, thankfully," Gregory refuted, "You see, yet another of my colleagues got the idea that anime really was created with the intention of tainting western civilization. I could never tell if he was being serious, but he thought to do a bit of investigating so he could confirm or deny the validity of that hypothesis."

"You mean a federal agent expended valuable resources to conduct a personal investigation on a form of Japanese entertainment?" Melanie uttered in astonishment.

"No, he conducted this personal investigation on his own time," Gregory apprised her, "It only lasted a couple days, anyway. At the end of it, he shared his findings with us."

"So, what did he determine?" Melanie asked in interest.

At that, Gregory grinned and cockily stated "He claimed that anime really was designed to entice and captivate westerners, but it was only effective on 'lonely, insecure virgins with poor social lives.'"

Melanie got a good a laugh at that. Roger narrowed his eyes and mumbled "I resent that."

"His words, not mine," Gregory insisted, holding up his hands defensively.

"Even so, I resent it," Roger repeated, "I'll have you know I met my wife through anime."

Gregory was intrigued. "Is that right?"

Roger nodded his head to confirm. "I met her at the 2014 A-Kon convention in Fort Worth, Texas. At first, we just talked about our mutual interest in anime. But I quickly discovered we had much more in common than just that. We had similar tastes in music, food, films, and, of course, the Ice and Fire franchise. She was even an engineer like me, albeit a civil engineer."

"She sounds like a nice, fine young woman," Melanie noted.

"She was," Roger murmured, a modicum of sadness in his voice. After Pamela died, there was nothing left for me in the real world. A thought occurred to him. Perhaps that's why I was sent here; this may have been a chance to start anew. That was just another theory. While it may have made sense in his case, it might not have applied to Gregory or Melanie. Based on what they told him, both of them had been happy with their first lives when they ended. Roger then shook his head slightly and stated "I believe we've wasted enough time on this topic. Let's move on to more important matters."

"Gladly," said Melanie.

"What did you have in mind?" Gregory queried.

Roger did not give a verbal response. Instead, he turned his attention to the knapsack he had
brought with him. He wordlessly removed the knapsack's strap from around his shoulder, opened the front flap, and removed a small stack of papers. This parchment was fresh, though some of the contents had been copied from some very old records. *I couldn't afford to bring the originals, lest someone at the Citadel discover they were missing.*

Roger placed the papers on the surface of Gregory's desk, and he declared "Here is a comprehensive list of all successful pregnancies that have occurred in Westeros in the past hundred years where the mother suffered a miscarriage immediately beforehand. Those are the ones that are of interest to us."

"How confident are you that a miscarriage preceding a successful pregnancy really could indicate that the person born might also be from the real world?" Melanie enquired.

"Fairly confident," Roger proclaimed, "When I found out it happened to both myself and Gregory, I began to suspect. Then I discovered it happened to you, too, Melanie. That was when I concluded it could only be one of two things: a coincidence or a pattern. I found the latter to be more feasible."

"At least it gives us a lead," Gregory commented, "I just hope it doesn't turn out to be another dead end."

"You need not worry on that," Melanie asserted, "Herman, Eugene, and I searched the entirety of the lands across the Narrow Sea, and we found nothing. If there are others from the real world out there, they must be here on *this* continent."

"It's not just that," Gregory contended, "There are places in Westeros that the Conclave's domain does not extend to. North of the Wall, for one. Not counting the ones that took place since they migrated south, I'd wager there are no Free Folk births in that list. The same goes for the mountain clans of the Vale. Some houses in the Iron Islands still have yet to accept maesters, and Greywater Watch has never even had one."

"Yes, that does leave a wide margin for error," Roger glumly admitted, "But aren't we mainly doing this because of Melanie's belief that there is someone like us who may be up to some foul play?"

"Yes, we are," Melanie confirmed.

"Then we shouldn't worry about most of the missing entries," Roger debated, "All things considered, a person from the real world would hardly be any threat to us in the mountains of the Vale, the Iron Islands, or the swamps of the Neck."

"I suppose you're right," said Gregory, "But what about north of the Wall?"

"Now that's a different matter altogether," Roger thought aloud. *Imagine the horrors that would result if one of us was incorporated into the Army of the Dead.* "Alas, there is nothing we can do about it. We'll just have to make do with what we have."

"Very well," Gregory conceded, "May I see the list?"

"Certainly," Roger answered him. He picked up the stack of papers and divided it up into thirds. He gave one of the smaller stacks to Gregory, another to Melanie, and kept the last for himself. "Fortunately, I made three copies. That way, we don't have to share."

"Smart thinking," Melanie remarked. Roger flashed a grin at her approval. "I have a question, though. Why did you only look as far back as a hundred years ago?"
"Because other than Maester Aemon – and Ser Brynden Rivers, technically – there's no one else from before then who's still alive," Roger enlightened her, "Although the Night's King is our greatest adversary, the dead on this side of the Wall are of no concern to us."

"Understandable," Gregory stated, "Now, let's get to work."

Yes, let's. Otherwise, I wasted a whole quill pen and ink set – as well as an entire night – for nothing.

The three of them spent the next two hours endeavoring to determine which other characters might have been people reborn from the real world. They discussed the list frequently, and every now and then, they voiced a thought. Most of the time, those thoughts were just observations or comments.

"Why am I not surprised to see multiple iterations of 'Frey' here?" Melanie mumbled bluntly.

"Walder Frey was a busy man," Roger stated, "If only he spent a little less time fucking and a little more time actually being a father."

"Indeed," Gregory murmured, "I'm just glad no one from the secret council is on this list. Ever since we first addressed this topic, I've been wondering if one of them may have been a sleeper agent."

"Oh, relax," Melanie cockily advised him, "Every single member of the secret council is much too loyal to the Legion and its commander to even ponder the idea of betraying you. Even I can tell that much."

"So can I," Roger conceded. It is almost ridiculous how devoted the secret council is to him.

At one point, when Gregory was browsing through the section of the list which contained the names from the North, he paused. He looked to Roger and pronounced "There's this one name here. It just says 'Walder.' That couldn't mean…"

Roger lightly nodded his head to confirm and drily uttered "He who held the door is here, too."

Melanie suddenly appeared nervous. "You don't suppose… Hodor of all people…?"

"As of now, it's still just a possibility," Roger debated, "Tell me, Gregory; did you ever meet him?"

"Yes, a couple times," the taller man revealed, "He's not much of a conversationalist in this universe, either."

"Interesting," Roger muttered. I would've thought his fate could have been altered by our intervention somehow. "Where is he now?"

"Near the start of the year, Bran went north of the Wall to seek out Bloodraven," Gregory notified him, "In addition to the Reeds and Summer, Lord Eddard assigned a score of his household guard and Hodor to accompany him. They've been up there all this time, and there's been no word from them since."

Then there's not much we can do if Hodor really is one of us. Oh, well. What are the chances of that anyway? I'm pretty sure he would be articulate if that was the case. They soon dropped the issue and continued examining the list.

For some reason, Gregory and Melanie were convinced that people from the real world could have
been reborn only as characters whose names were given in canon. By using that guideline, they managed to narrow the list down to less than a tenth of its original size. By crossing off the names of everyone who was already dead by this point in time, they brought the list down even further. It ultimately came out to somewhere between fifty and a hundred names. Now that is what I call progress.

"I believe this is enough for today," Roger pronounced, once they got that far. Gregory and Melanie seemed to be of a like mind. Even so, they were just as pleased with their progress as he was. "You can hold on to your copies of the list. But remember to store them someplace safe and secure."

"Of course, we will," Gregory sharply proclaimed, "We are not so negligent as to leave something like this out in the open for anyone to stumble across."

"Aside from that, I don't want to have to explain this matter," Melanie stated, "You two may be able to come up with a believable excuse on the spot, but my ability to sell a story isn't quite as superb."

"It got you into the Targaryens' good graces, didn't it?" Gregory commented jokily.

"True," Melanie admitted, snickering a bit. "Alright, are we done here?"

"I suppose so," said Roger, "However, before we go, there is one last thing I would like to bring up."

"We're listening," Gregory told him, once again speaking for himself and Melanie.

Roger hesitated for the longest time. He had no way of knowing how the two of them would react to this last issue, but he predicted it would not be pleasant. No point in putting it off any longer, I guess. It would have had to have come up at some point, anyway.

Eventually, Roger looked around at his two associates, and he declared "I believe we should start to consider telling people the truth."

"What truth?" asked Gregory.

"The full truth," Roger expounded, "About us, and who we really are."

A long interval of quietness followed that statement. Gregory and Melanie just stared at Roger for that entire interval. They looked as though they were seriously reflecting on what he just said. He dared not utter a word, lest he interrupt their train of thought. Despite how focused they seemed, he honestly had no idea what they may have been thinking. Do they like it? Do they dislike it? Do they hate it? Do they think I am making a joke? Do they think I am brilliant? Do they think I have gone soft in the head? I would appreciate some feedback.

Melanie was the one who broke the silence. She maintained a neutral facial expression, and she muttered straightforwardly "Roger, with all due respect… are you out of your fucking MIND?!"

Roger was surprised by her outburst, but he lightly shook his head and calmly said in response "Far from it, Melanie. Why? Do you no like my recommendation?"

"Of course, I don't," Melanie retorted snappily, "What you're proposing is… insane."

Roger frowned. "How is it insane?"
"Do you even need to ask?" she stated sarcastically, "We have established that Westeros is a medieval society. Do you know what they did to people who spouted out wild tales and incomprehensible nonsense in the real world during the Middle Ages? They burned them as witches."

"People call you a witch all the time, yet no one's ever tried to burn you," Roger pointed out.

"Well, I am a follower of R'hllor; they might think fire wouldn't have an adverse effect on me," Melanie argued. She then shook her head and said "That's beside the point, anyway. What you are suggesting is that we tell the people of this world that their entire existence is based on a work of fiction."

"Perhaps it was based in fiction," Roger countered, "But after coexisting with the inhabitants of this world for so long, I have seen sufficient proof that each and every one of them is as sentient as we are."

"I'm not disputing that," Melanie asserted, "What bothers me is that the real world may not be within the confines of their imagination. Do you think they could even comprehend the existence of another world? A world where they only exist as characters in a story?"

"Oh, I've no doubt they would find it difficult to swallow," Roger pronounced, "In their position, I would probably be just as skeptical and just as shocked. Be that as it may, it would be pointless to deny the reality of the situation. Soon enough, they could come to accept it."

"Why do you even want to tell them?" Melanie asked demandingly, "What would that possibly accomplish?"

"It would provide us with insurance," Roger sternly proclaimed. He paused for a few seconds, and when he noted the perplexed looks Gregory and Melanie were giving him, he continued with "Allow me to explain my meaning. To do that, I'd like to go back to the topic of anime for a minute."

"Must you?" Gregory mumbled, clearly not pleased with concept.

"Only to illustrate a point," Roger insisted, "Whether or not you believe it, anime does have its uses."

Gregory rolled his eyes, but then he stated "Fine. Carry on."

Roger ignored the rude gesture and professed "The three particular anime I mentioned earlier – the ones which formed the basis of my theories regarding Tywin's inspiration for the Pentoshi Bloodbath – had one major detail in common. In all three, the protagonist fell from grace by the end of the series. Do you know why? Because each one of them was too secretive about the source of his power. In all three series, the truth of the main character's deeds and abilities became known to others, but he was not the one to reveal them. Someone else exposed him. Once that happened, even his closest allies turned against him. Each series concluded with the main character dying alone, abandoned, and unwanted. All because he was unwilling to confide in his peers. I have no intention of ending up with that same outcome. Do either of you?"

Gregory and Melanie thought on that for a bit, and then they both shook their heads. Roger suppressed the urge to grin. It appears they're starting to see things my way, he noted.

"The circumstances are radically different for us, though," Melanie debated, "I mean, who would possibly be 'someone else' in our case?"
Roger glared at her incredulously. *Is she serious?* He murmured blankly "I would have thought that'd be obvious, especially to you."

"Why me in particular?" Melanie stated inquiringly.

Roger held up his copy of the list they had been working on, and he responded with "It was you who first suggested that there's another one of us out there, stirring up trouble."

Melanie's eyes widened in shock. "You believe that other party would reveal who we really are?"

"It's a possibility," Roger contended, "Of course, it would be difficult for them to do so without revealing themselves in the process. But they may find a way around that obstruction. Or worse yet, they may not even care if they give themselves up. For all we know, their sole motivation could just be to fuck with us for their own amusement."

"As unpleasant and unlikely as that may be, he has an excellent point, Melanie," Gregory pronounced. *At least one of them is starting to see things my way.* Roger did not give his hopes up just yet. The taller man still seemed quite dubious. "We have been talking about this malevolent person for a while now. It is not that hard to fathom that he or she might choose to divulge the real world to the characters of the Ice and Fire series, regardless of the repercussions. Or maybe *because* of them."

"I admit that that could happen," Melanie supposed, "But the odds that it actually *would* be-"

"Still large enough to warrant some precautionary measures," Roger interrupted, "I'm not advising that we should tell *everyone* the full truth. It would still be for the best if as few people knew about it as possible. Ideally, we could each just tell our significant others. I could tell Sarella, you could tell Allard, and Gregory could tell Dacey. If anyone else ever confronted us on the source, we could at least have the three of them to support us."

"Assuming they don't declare us mad first," Melanie countered, "I love Allard, but I do not think I could ever bring myself to tell him the full truth."

"I don't share your reservations," Gregory remarked, "I trust Dacey with my life. I've been married to her for almost fifteen years. I've actually come close to telling her the full truth on several occasions."

"Then why haven't you?" Roger queried.

"I never saw the need to," Gregory stated candidly, "But in light of what we just discussed, it appears the need might have finally presented itself. Nonetheless… we can only tell Dacey, Allard, and Sarella the full truth if we can be absolutely certain they would never share it with anyone else. As I said before, I trust my wife with my life, and I trust Allard almost as much. Only you can speak for Sarella, Roger."

"I'd vouch for her any day," Roger declared solemnly, "She's hidden her own identity for over two years. What other proof do you need that she can keep a secret?"

"I still don't like this," Melanie commented, "Whether we tell them the full truth or not, there is much at stake. But I would rather take my chances and keep the existence of the real world to the three of us."

"If it bothers you that much, you could just not tell Allard," Roger proposed, "I'll still tell Sarella, though, and Gregory could still tell Dacey if he so chooses."
"Bad idea," Gregory refuted, "It cannot just be one or two of us sharing the full truth. Either all of
us share it with someone or none of us do."

"Then I say we put it to a vote," Roger suggested, holding his arm in the air, "I vote we tell them."

"I vote we do not," Melanie promptly retorted, holding up her arm in turn.

Although he expected her to do that, Roger could not help but grimace at the woman clad in red. Still, he did not get angry. Instead, he turned to the tallest person there, and he observed "Looks like you're the tiebreaker, Gregory. So, what say you? Should we tell the full truth? Or should we withhold it?"

The former engineer and the former programmer gazed at the former federal officer intently. He did not open his mouth straightaway. In fact, he did not open it for quite a time. He just sat in his chair, pondering on how he would cast his vote.

Roger soon recognized the expression on Gregory's countenance. It was the look of indecision. A look that rarely seemed to come across the Mountain's face in this universe.

*For the first time in a very long while, he honestly has no idea what to do.*

Chapter End Notes

Note: As of yet, I have not even decided myself whether or not I'll have them reveal the full truth. Soon enough, I WILL make a decision. Otherwise this story won't progress very far. At present, I'm more inclined to have them NOT tell the full truth. But that decision is not yet final.

Anyway, you probably understand the purpose of that warning I gave at the beginning of the chapter. I just want to be clear on one point: I do not have any contempt for anime or people who enjoy it. I admit to enjoying it myself every now and then, but mostly because I watch films from every country, including Japan. Furthermore, anime is a pastime I only OCCASIONALLY partake in. I promise you I am not one of those people who feel the need to post a comment like "Top 10 Anime xxxx" on literally every YouTube video and Internet forum they come across.

By the way, the three anime Roger referenced are actually real. I probably don't need to put a disclaimer, but just in case, I'll go ahead and mention that I do not own any of them. For those of you who are not familiar with those three series yet may end up checking them out someday, I won't give away their names, as spoilers to all three are found in this chapter. However, for those of you who are still curious, I will give you a hint as to their names. Their respective initials are GL, DN, and CG. Still, the last one may be insanely obvious to anyone who has seen it, given how much context I provided.

That's all for now. See you all again by the end of May, hopefully!
The Collapse Commences

The wind gave another sharp whistle. It sounded different from last time. This time it almost sounded feral, as though it was carrying the call of a wild animal alongside it.

He listened a little more closely, and he distinctly recognized the noise as the howl of a wolf. He had heard that particular howl countless times since his flight began.

Even now, after travelling through the snow for so many days, that howl made him restless. *I swear that damn wolf is following us.* That may have seemed a strange notion to some, but anyone who grew up as a retainer of the Starks of Winterfell knew better.

He could not help but wonder about this wolf. Just by relying on his ears alone, he could tell it was not Summer. However, it felt and sounded eerily similar to Summer. *Don't let it get to you,* he advised himself. *It is just another predator. All you need to worry about is how to avoid becoming its prey.* That was just one of the numerous challenges he was up against.

The lands north of the Wall were notorious for their inhospitality and morality rate. Even the strongest of the Free Folk and the Night's Watch could fall victim to any one of its many hazards at any time. When roaming through this vast tundra, people generally preferred travelling in groups. *That's the safety in numbers mentality at work.*

A person's chances were even slimmer when he was out there on his own, fending for himself with no one to watch his back. The average life expectancy for such an individual was around three days. *I've been out here for three weeks. Yet every obstacle this land has thrown at me, I've overcome. It truly is the man who decides to live, not the company.*

Technically, he was not entirely on his own. However, his sole companion was more a hostage than a partner. In any case, the boy was in no condition to render assistance. If anything, he was merely a burden. *A necessary burden, though.*

"Can you tell me where we're going now, Hodor?" Bran Stark asked, for perhaps the hundredth time since their flight from the cave of the Three-Eyed Raven. His captor rolled his eyes. *After going this long without a proper answer to that question, can he not take a hint?*

"You'll find out soon enough," the tall man gave the same reply he had given every other time. "And I told you to stop calling me that. My name is Stephen Ward."

"I thought your birth name was Walder," Bran remarked.

"In this world, yes," Stephen affirmed.

"What do you mean by 'this world'?" Bran inquired in interest.

"Refer to my response to your last question," Stephen mumbled flatly, "Be silent now. If you break my concentration, it could mean the ends of both of us."

"Perhaps I would rather die," Bran stated in an uncharacteristically bold tone, "It would likely be much better than allowing you to use me for whatever foul purpose you have in mind."

Stephen just smirked, gazed over his shoulder, and murmured "If that is how you feel, then I would remind you that this far north, death is not the ending. I personally have no qualms with meeting such a fate, but is it something you'd like?"
That quickly shut Bran up. Stephen scoffed. *I didn't think so. Now, back to climbing.*

At this time, they were scaling the side of a cliff. Actually, Stephen was the only one doing the scaling. He was carrying Bran on his back, just as he had for most of the last three weeks. A rope was used to secure the boy's body to his. Two more ropes were used to bind Bran's arms and legs. Although he was not nearly strong enough to resist or put up a fight, Stephen found he was much less of a nuisance when his limbs were immobilized.

The cliff was rough and bumpy all over, as well as slippery in some parts. Luckily for Stephen, he was wearing thick gloves, and he possessed both an excellent grip and sharp depth perception. By relying on those senses, he managed to climb all the way up to the edge of the cliff in less than a half-hour. When he pulled himself on top, he grinned in satisfaction.

*With that, we're finally out of the haunted forest. Next stop, the Milkwater. Then... the Frostfangs.*

He felt giddy just thinking about how close they were to his intended destination. Soon, his mission would be completed, and his ultimate objective would be all but guaranteed to succeed. *It's too early to celebrate just yet, though. I must focus. Even at this stage, there are plenty of things that can go wrong. That's one thing this franchise is famous for; things going wrong.*

The moment he thought that, he heard a loud screech somewhere over his head. Stephen looked up and saw a large bird soaring towards him. Its talons were outstretched, as though it meant to attack. Stephen hastily dove forward before the bird reached him. As it flew past, he maneuvered on the ground. He was careful not to roll over, lest he risk accidentally crushing Bran. He did not particularly care for the boy's well-being, but he needed him alive. *Even though I'm fairly certain he is to blame.* As Stephen recovered, he knelt on the ground and glimpsed over his shoulder. Sure enough, Bran's eyes had gone white. In other words, the bird was not being so aggressive by its own volition.

Stephen drew his dagger as he rose to his feet. He was confident he could handle this situation with a short blade. If this bird proved to be more difficult than that, he would get out his sword or the bow he had taken off Hal Mollen's corpse. *I don't expect this to take very long.*

By now, the bird had broken out of its dive, and it was already swinging around for a second strike. It rose high into the sky, spread its wings again, and lunged toward Stephen with its claws outstretched. The tall man did not flinch. He stood idly by with his knife in hand and waited. When the bird was within spitting distance, he shuffled to the side and thrust his knife upward. He managed to stab the bird in the middle of its wing.

The bird let out a shrill shriek as the steel entered its body. After Stephen withdrew the blade, the bird erratically flapped its wings in a desperate attempt to remain in the air. Before too long, it dropped to the ground. Even after it landed, it was still moving, but it was in anguish. *Better put it out of its misery.*

Stephen approached the fallen prey, knelt before it, and turned it over. *So, what is it this time?* It turned out to be a hawk. A rather plump hawk, he noted. Hawks were not the most appetizing things with wings. They tended to have too much muscle for his taste. *Oh, well. At least it's a fat one.* He swiftly brought the knife to the hawk's throat and sliced through it. Bran withdrew before the bird breathed its last. *He's smart not to share his victim's pain.*

"Nice find, Bran," Stephen commented drily. Then he sneered and added mockingly "I couldn't say the same about your approach, though. It's starting to get sloppy and predictable. Do try to do better."
"Oh, I will," Bran spat heatedly. Stephen merely chuckled at that. *I'm certain you will. Try all you'd like. I have no intention of letting you prevail.*

For the duration of his captivity, Bran had tried warging into many different animals and setting them against Stephen. He had done this at least twice a day every day since they left the cave. He had possessed bears, stags, wolves, rabbits, foxes, badgers, and all types of birds. Thus far, not a single one of them had managed to put as much as a scratch on Stephen. He had killed all of them quite easily. *One of the perks of being a hunter in my past life*, he thought with pride.

As Stephen wrapped up the hawk in some clean cloth, Bran uttered curiously "Why haven't you ever tried to stop me from warging?"

"What would be the point?" Stephen proclaimed, tucking the wrapped hawk into a supply pack, "There is nothing I can do to suppress your ability to warg. Even if you were unconscious, you'd be able to enter the minds of the beasts of the world. Besides… it makes foraging for food a hell of a lot easier. Thanks to you, I don't have to hunt as much."

That was quite true. Every animal Bran had warged into, the two of them had ended up eating. Although Stephen had packed plenty of rations before they left the cave, he knew better than to let anything go to waste. *Food is precious in the wild, especially meat.*

Stephen Ward stood back up and stated "We should be at the Milkwater by sunset. Once we're there, we'll make camp. The hawk will be tonight's supper. However, if you're in the mood for fish instead, feel free to reach out to some when we get to the river."

"Are you mocking me?" Bran mumbled crossly.

"Yes, I am," Stephen said plainly. *And there's nothing you can bloody well do about it.* "So, no fish? Very well; we'll settle for the hawk. I'll let you have the wings and legs. Everything else is mine."

"I don't want any," Bran stated bitterly.

"Now, now, don't be like that," Stephen rebuked him, as though Bran was a misbehaving brat, "You may be angry, but you still need to eat. You will eat, even if I have to force the food down your throat."

That threat seemed to destroy any lingering desire to argue Bran may have had. The boy just grumbled and fell into a sullen silence. *Maybe now I can have some peace.*

Right then, the sound of the wolf howling from earlier returned. In response to that, Stephen rapidly gazed all around him to ensure that he and his prisoner were still alone. To his relief, they were. There was no wolf or any other animal in the immediate area. After confirming this, he marched onward.

Several hours later, Stephen spotted the Milkwater in the distance. Despite the freezing temperatures of their climate, the surface of the water did not appear to have frozen over completely. However, there was a thick layer of ice over a certain section of the river. *It should still be there tomorrow. Hopefully. That'll make fording the Milkwater much less difficult.*

Although they were no longer in the haunted forest, there were still some trees here and there. As it happened, a small group of trees stood close together at the eastern shore of the Milkwater. They still had most of their leaves, and they tended to lean on each other. Because of that, their topmost branches formed a type of canopy. *That should provide adequate shelter for the night.*
When Stephen got to those trees, he unfastened the rope around his waist, and he carefully set his prisoner down on the ground. He kept Bran's arms and legs bound for the present. The only times Stephen ever untied him was when he had to eat or relieve himself. *He already did that earlier today, so he should be alright for now. Now, to get a fire started…*

Stephen proceeded to collect some of the fallen branches around the base of the trees. After that, he took the two straightest sticks and rubbed them together over some moss and twigs. Within moments, the sticks produced a spark, and the kindling caught fire. He blew on the cinders to strengthen them, and he consistently added more wood for fuel. Soon, the flames were sufficiently hot for cooking meat.

Stephen then tended to the hawk. After chopping off its head, plucking out its feathers, and skinning it with his knife, he stuck it on a skewer and roasted it over the open fire. In less than an hour, the bird was fully cooked. That was when he freed Bran from his bonds.

Stephen pulled the legs and wings off the hawk, and he passed them to Bran, who – despite his reluctance to cooperate – accepted them quite willingly. Stephen helped himself to the breasts and thighs. He eagerly bit into the succulent meat, paying no mind to all the grease.

While they feasted on hawk, Stephen picked up another of his supply packs and dug through it. He pulled out a package of rations from the cave. As he unwrapped it, he looked to the boy and told him "There's still some goat cheese and dried fruit left, if you're interested."

"This is fine," Bran proclaimed bluntly, nibbling on a bird leg.

"Very well," Stephen said disinterestedly, shoving a small handful of cheese and fruit into his mouth, "Let me know if you decide to change your mind. But if it's meat you'd like seconds of, go ahead and search the area for something else to warg into. I'll be ready for it, whatever it is."

"Don't tempt me, Hodor," Bran Stark murmured sourly.

"Stephen!" the tall man sharply corrected him, "*Do not* associate me with that imbecile!"

Bran looked astounded. "What do you mean 'that imbecile?' You *are* Hodor."

"Only in body," the tall man countered, "In mind, I am Stephen Ward."

"As you continue to remind me," Bran commented wryly, "You speak as though I am supposed to recognize that name somehow."

"You aren't," Stephen apprised him, "According to your late master, there are only six people in all this world who might be familiar with my real name, but the chances that even one of *them* would know of it are trivial at best."

"May I ask which six?" Bran inquired.

*That should've been obvious.* Nevertheless, Stephen enlightened him with "The ones who have what you call the 'source.' In other words, Gregor Clegane, Hizdahr zo Loraq, Kinvara, Mollander, Yezzan zo Qaggaz, and that unknown seventh party."

The boy seemed to understand a little bit more, but only a little bit. "Why might *they* know you?"

"Because they're all from the same place as I," Stephen disclosed.

Bran was perplexed. "What place?"
Stephen was hesitant to respond. *I could just tell him it is none of his business and dismiss this topic altogether.* While that was certainly an available option, he had already used it for the last twenty days. Bran looked as though he was fed up with receiving nothing but silence for an answer. Of course, he was in no position to demand or request anything from Stephen. Even if he pestered the tall man continuously for information, his captor was under no obligation to enlighten him. *Still… perhaps the time is right to tell him. It is not as though the truth will actually help him in any way. In fact… maybe it will destroy what little resistance to me he still has.*

Ultimately, Stephen looked Bran in the eye and told him "This time tomorrow, we'll be in the Frostfangs. Therefore, I think now would be an appropriate time to tell you everything. After putting up with this rough treatment without complaint – other than the frequent animal attacks – I suppose you deserve an explanation. Nonetheless, you must know this knowledge won't be of much use to you in the long run."

"Why is that?" Bran enquired.

"You'll find out," Stephen darkly muttered. He did not begin his explanation just yet. He decided to wait until they finished their dinner first. Once the hawk's bones were all that remained of it, Stephen added another log to the fire. Then he turned to face Bran and started his account. He opened up with a very straightforward statement: "First of all, you must know I am not a native of the Known World."

As he predicted, Bran was bewildered. *Who wouldn't be?* "What do you mean?"

"Old Nan may have told you stories of other worlds, where magic and other phenomenal entities exist," Stephen elaborated. *Perhaps using my "great-grandmother" as an analogy will help him to understand.* "Of course, the majority of her tales were mere fallacies and parables. Be that as it may, there actually are some other worlds out there. I know because I came from one."

"You are from another world?" Bran uttered in disbelief.

"Yes," Stephen confirmed, "That world is quite different from this one. It is far more advanced in every way, particularly with regards to technology. Our achievements are beyond anything that has been invented here. We have a carriage that can move without horses. We have an instrument that can draw a portrait in an instant. We have a contraption that can be used to talk to people thousands of miles away. We have a device that can present the exact same performance of a play over and over again. We have a machine that enables us to travel by flying. We can store whole libraries on a tablet the size of a single regular book. We can even send a man to the moon and back."

Bran was absolutely dumbfounded. His eyes were dilated and his jaw had dropped. It seemed he was struggling to comprehend what he had just been told. After a minute of tense silence, he murmured softly "That is… impossible…"

"No, it is very much possible," Stephen asserted, "In fact, most of those inventions were patented long before I was born."

At this point, Bran was equal parts fascinated and flabbergasted. After taking another minute to absorb what he had just heard, he stated inquiringly "If your world was so advanced, then why did you and the other six people with the source choose to come to this one?"

"We didn't," Stephen revealed, "We were brought here involuntarily. As to who or what is responsible for that, I have no idea. But it does not really matter who or what brought us here. What matters is that we are here."
"Well, how were you brought here?" Bran asked.

"Again, I do not know all the particulars," Stephen proclaimed, "All I do know is that we died there and were reborn here."

"Then this is a kind of second life for you?" Bran presumed.

"Exactly," Stephen affirmed, "Since our physical forms expired in our previous lives, we cannot go back to our world. As a matter of fact, we have no way of going back. Not that we would want to go back."

"Why wouldn't you want to go back?" Bran inquired, somewhat baffled.

"Well, I cannot speak for Gregor Clegane and the others," Stephen professed, "They may have left something or someone precious to them behind. It is also possible that all six of them died before they planned to. Neither circumstance applies to me. There was nothing of value or interest to me in that world, and I died by my own hand."

That appeared to startle Bran. He stammered "You… ended your own life?"

"Yes, I committed suicide," Stephen mumbled candidly. "Do not look so alarmed. Deaths caused by self-inflicted harm are not uncommon in my world. If you lived there long enough, you would understand."

"I don't think I would want to live there," Bran contended.

"That makes two of us," Stephen commented drily, "As advanced as my world was, it was hardly an ideal place to be. It was not a paradise. It was miserable and depressing. Countries and governments could never get along with one another. They were always at each other's throats for the most pitiful of reasons. They liked to think of themselves as civilized, but in actuality, they were almost as barbaric as the people of this world."

"And because of that, you killed yourself?" Bran assumed.

"No, that wasn't what drove me to kill myself," Stephen disclosed, "I'm certain most other people in my world did not have such a cynical view of it. But then again, those people were raised to coexist in the world's modern society. I, however, was not."

"How were you raised?" Bran queried.

"To answer that, I must tell you a little bit more about my background," Stephen pronounced, "In my previous life, I was from a country called England. It may interest you to know that England's shape and size is about the same as that of Westeros. I was born in the outskirts in the capital city of London. London is located in the south of England, which would be somewhere in Dorne to you."

"My childhood was not a glamorous one," he continued after a pause, speaking a little more bitterly now, "I was an only child, and my parents were impoverished. My mother left when I was quite young, and my father died when I was eight. I spent most of the following decade on the streets of London. Every once in a while, I found myself in an orphanage or a foster home. I never stayed too long in any one place, though. Whenever I had a roof over my head, I tended to suffer both physical and mental abuse from my 'caretakers.' Once I came of age, however, I was able to make a fresh start for myself."

"How did you do that?" Bran asked, intrigued.
At that, Stephen grinned and stated "One of the advantages of growing up on the street is that you learn to fend for yourself. You also find the strength to fight against the most dangerous predator alive: other men. By comparison, it is much easier to survive all on your own against animals. That is precisely what I did after I turned eighteen; I left London and society behind.

"I lived in the wilderness for the next twenty years," he went on, thinking fondly on those past experiences, "Taught myself to hunt, to fish, to locate fresh water, to climb trees and mountains, to make or find shelter, to evade predators, and every other skill that was required for that lifestyle. Needless to say, it was arduous work at first. Thankfully, I quickly became quite adept at it. I also enjoyed every single moment of it. Living as a hermit in the wild was a far cry from my dreary existence back in civilization."

"So, that's how the two of us have lasted this long by ourselves," Bran noted, gesturing to their surroundings.

"Indeed," Stephen validated, also looking around. Two decades of living in the wilderness in the real world have prepared me for virtually any hardships this land has to offer. "Granted, it was never this cold in England, but I've never really minded the cold. It is worth being one with nature."

Bran then raised an eyebrow and pointed out "If you truly were so pleased with that lifestyle, why did you end your life?"

"Because I was robbed of it," Stephen Ward uttered crossly, "Although I lived alone in the wild for the most part, at least once a year I hiked to an adjoining town to replenish my supplies and sell some of the game I hunted. When I was forty years old, I happened to enter the town at an especially turbulent time. The literal instant after I entered the town, some fool in one of those aforementioned horseless carriages ran into me."

For a split-second, Bran looked both stunned and sympathetic. After that, his concern faded away, and he asked curiously "Do you know who did it?"

"No," Stephen illuminated, "The culprit fled the scene, and he was never caught. There were no other witnesses to the accident, and when I gave the vehicle's description to the local authorities, they concluded that the driver must have been from out of town. In any case, the damage had been done. Both my legs were broken irreparably. Even with all my world's advances in medicine and rehabilitation, it was decreed that I would never walk again."

Here he paused once again. He took a minute to gaze at Bran's lower body, and he scoffed lightly. Isn't this ironic? He remarked "If things had been different, you would have known what that was like."

"What are you talking about?" Bran enquired in perplexity.

Stephen did not bother to answer that question. Instead, he resumed his tale with "Naturally, after that fiasco, my days in the wilderness were over. I was stuck in civilization permanently. Although I had no health insurance – not that I expect you to understand what that is – the government offered to provide for me. Their apparent generosity surprised me, but I soon found out the real reason behind it. It appeared that when they heard of my twenty-year isolation in the wild, there was some debate as to whether I was actually of sound mind. In other words, they suspected that I was unwell in mind as well as in body."

"Just because you left society to be in the wilderness?" Bran stated. He sounded astonished.
"That's correct," Stephen muttered frankly, "According to them, one must be insane if he wishes to abandon the luxuries and conveniences of civilization for a life of seclusion in the mountains. At any rate, when the government offered to support me, I was ambivalent. Normally, my pride would have compelled me to refuse, but at the time, I would have lost everything except my pride. So, in the end, I accepted the government's offer.

"After that, I was moved to a facility in London," the former hunter recounted, "Since I had no family, friends, or other home to return to, I spent the last few years of my life in that facility. I kept to myself mostly, and I did not disturb the other patients. As such, I was allowed to remain indefinitely. While I was never really happy there, I at least tried to tolerate my new environment. But soon enough, I was reminded why I left society in the first place. All the filth, hatred, and depravity of civilization was still prevalent after two decades. In fact, it had somehow gotten even worse than before I left."

"Surely it could not have been as terrible as you claim," Bran debated.

"Oh, it was," Stephen firmly countered, "I did not give in to despair just yet. For a time, I forced myself to cope with my situation. Alas, despite my best efforts, the experience ultimately proved too much for me to bear. So, after three years of that torture, I elected to end my suffering with a length of rope."

Right here, he paused yet again. He allowed himself a few seconds to savor the dumbfounded expression on Bran Stark's face. I'm not about to tell him what I went through to end my life, though. He would probably laugh in my face.

Stephen Ward had tried and failed to commit suicide five times before he finally succeeded. He had considered cyanide, opening his wrists, drowning himself, jumping off the roof of the facility, or a "natural" death. Alas, he was unable to get his hands on poison or sharp cutlery, his bathtub was too small, the roof was inaccessible, and there was no way to cause a gas leak anywhere in the facility.

After all those possibilities were ruled out, his only remaining option was to tie his bedsheets together. Of course, it was no simple feat for a man confined to a wheelchair to hang himself without anyone noticing. Luckily, he had managed to bribe one of the other patients into tying one end of the makeshift rope to the top of his bedroom door. I should count myself fortunate he did not rat on me. Otherwise, I might still be in that terrible place.

"I was prepared to end it all then and there," Stephen informed Bran Stark, "But it seems the universe had other plans for me. Because right after I heard the sound of my own neck breaking, I heard the sound of myself wailing. The next thing I knew, I was in the arms of a strange, unfamiliar woman. The other people in the room all referred to as 'Old Nan,' who, apparently, was my great-grandmother."

And lord, was that the most confusing moment of either of my lives, he thought cheekily. After a short round of quietness, Stephen continued with: "At first, I thought I was delusional. Before very long, however, I realized that this was all very real. Somehow, I found myself in a new world with a new identity. I could not guess as to how or why, but I concluded that the how and the why were irrelevant. Rather than coming up with a way to explain my new setting, I chose to take advantage of it instead. That is what led us to where we are now."

Bran furrowed his brow, folded his arms, and remarked "That still does not explain your actions. If being in the wilderness made you so happy, why didn't you ever try it in this world? Why didn't you ever join Winterfell's hunting parties? Why did you choose to work in the stables instead? Why didn't you share this with anyone else? Most of all… why did you say nothing but 'Hodor' for
the last twenty years?"

A wicked smile came across Stephen Ward's countenance. He leaned a little closer to the boy and declared "Now, we transition to the very stimulating part. Firstly, you should know that I was aware of this world even before I was reborn into it."

Bran was downright baffled. "I'm afraid I do not understand."

"It's simple," Stephen revealed, "My world created your world."

Bran was taken aback, as the tall man expected him to be. He murmured quietly "W-w-what?"

Stephen drove on relentlessly: "In my world, there are authors who compose works of literature across all genres. There is one author in particular who specializes in the genre of fantasy. His most popular and beloved series is known as 'A Song of Ice and Fire.' In that series, he writes about the conflicts in the fictional land of Westeros."

"F-fictional land?" Bran repeated with a stutter.

Stephen solemnly nodded his head and proclaimed "Everything you've ever heard, everyone you've ever loved, all you've ever known… was originally the thought of a single man. That one man created this entire world all on his own, as well as everything and everyone in it."

"But why did he create us?" Bran inquired.

"I just told you," Stephen uttered plainly, "You were created to entertain the people of my world."

Bran looked appalled. He muttered irately "How could anyone ever think of the Long Night as entertainment? Better yet, why would the people of your world find mine entertaining? If they really are as advanced as you claim them to be, why would our society be of any interest to them?"

"Simple," Stephen contended, "They never had to endure the hardships of this world. As such, they can look past all the pain, misery, and agony of the characters and focus instead on all the excitement, thrills, and intrigue provided by the plotline. You see, in my world, everybody enjoys an epic tale."

"Is that all we are to them?" Bran assumed dejectedly, "A myth?"

"No, not even a myth," Stephen told him, "At the end of the day, this world is just an idea. A concept, if you would. The concept of Westeros and the rest of the Known World is the only thing that makes any of this… real. If the author had not published the books, this world would never have even existed."

Predictably, Bran seemed quite dubious. He probably does not believe a single word I've told him. A couple minutes later, the boy gazed up at him and queried "Did you really live in the wilderness for twenty years?"

That's what stood out to him? Resisting the urge to laugh, Stephen replied with "Yes, I did."

"Then if these books are real, how are you so familiar with them?" Bran pointed out. "There are no libraries in the wilderness in this world. Do you expect me to believe that is not so in yours?"

"No, it's the same in my world," Stephen disclosed. "There is a total of seven books in the 'Song of Ice and Fire' series. Three of them were published before I turned away from society. I decided to bring along some reading
material, just in case I ever had to face boredom. The first three 'Ice and Fire' books were among
the ones I packed."

_They were rather large books; I almost did not have enough room to pack them._ As the former
hunter reminisced on that, he stated "While I was in the wilderness, three more books were
published. In addition to that, at some point, two other men propositioned the author about
adapting his works to a… 'theatrical performance.' He gave his approval, and the two playwrights
put a troupe together to act out the events of the books. They produced over six dozen separate
hour-long plays which chronicled the events of 'A Song of Ice and Fire.' I always purchased a copy
of the books whenever they came out, but I did not see the dramatic performances until after my
hospitalization. They served as a good distraction from the loss of my legs. As for the seventh and
final book, it was published while I was hospitalized. I delayed my suicide just so I could buy a
copy and read it first."

That was all true. Stephen Ward's personal wilderness adventure began in 2002 and ended in 2022.
He was hospitalized from 2022 to 2026. Near the end of that interval, the last book _finally_
came out. The day after he finished reading it, he killed himself. _Not because the book was terrible or
anything, of course. Though I will admit it was somewhat disappointing. Luckily, I can do
something about that now._

By this point, Bran was at an utter loss for words. He seemed as though he was struggling to come
to terms with what he had just been told. Stephen was hardly surprised. _I would just love to know
what is going through his head right now._

"You're lying," Bran ultimately declared. His tone was firm, but he did not sound very convinced.
"You must be lying. The things you've told me cannot possibly be true."

"Tell yourself that all you'd like," Stephen drily bade him, "Doing so won't change the truth, and
the truth is that you and almost every other person in this world used to only exist in the author's
mind."

"'Almost every other person?"' Bran noted.

"There are only seven people in this world who existed before it came to life," Stephen clarified,
"Those seven would be myself, Yezen zo Qaggaz, Hizdahr zo Loraq, Gregor Clegane, Kinvara,
Mollander and the final unidentified party. Even then, only the people who were reborn were
actually real. Like the rest of you, the characters we were reborn as only existed in the story, as
well."

"Then there really was a Hodor once?" Bran supposed.

"Yes, there was," Stephen confirmed, "He was a good lad. Unwaveringly loyal, amazingly strong,
and extraordinarily gentle."

"What happened to him?" Bran said curiously. "In the story, I mean."

"Oh, he died," Stephen replied straightforwardly. He then scowled and added in "Because of you."
Bran was saddened, then startled. "What do you mean because of me? Did I… kill him?"

"No, but you may as well have," Stephen mumbled bitterly, "There is a reason I killed the Three-
Eyed Raven when I did. Your master was going to take you into the past and show you fragments
of Hodor's life from before… his speech became impaired."
"How do you know that?" Bran asked, skepticism evident in his voice.

"Because he did that in the original story, as well," Stephen expounded. When he saw how hopelessly confused Bran was, the tall man professed "Allow me to explain. At one point in your training, Bloodraven showed you Hodor when he was still Walder. Sometime after that, he showed you the place where the Night's King and most of his forces were gathered. On that occasion, you were careless enough to let the Night's King touch you, thereby nullifying the children of the forest's barrier against the undead. Subsequently, the wights assembled outside the cave stormed it, killing everyone except you, Meera, and Hodor.

Already, Bran was awestruck. All the same, Stephen continued with: "In all the turmoil, your mind wandered back to the past, specifically to the day when Hodor got his new name. For some reason, you were compelled to warg into Walder. That caused him to suffer a seizure, what you call a 'shaking fit.' Meanwhile, Meera and Hodor managed to get out through the cave's back entrance, which was covered by a huge door. But even then, the wights did not break off their pursuit. So, while Hodor barricaded the door, Meera dragged you away to safety. As she did this, she repeatedly called out to him 'Hold the door!' Somehow, that exclamation reached Walder in the past, and, with you in control of his mind, it consumed his thoughts. That was all he could say. 'Hold the door.' 'Hold the door.' That soon became 'Hold door,' which in turn became 'Hodor.' After that day, he never said anything else."

For the second time since suppertime, Bran was completely speechless. Either he had no words, or he could not find any. It must be one or the other. Eventually, Bran composed himself and queried "Did that truly happen?"

"Yes, it did," Stephen proclaimed, "But only in the original story. As you can see, it did not happen here. That is why I revealed my true nature to you and Bloodraven when I did. I could not risk either one of you finding out that I was just feigning my speech impediment all along."

"Why did you even bother to put yourself through that experience?" Bran Stark asked, almost demandingly, "What did you hope to accomplish by playing the fool?"

"For the most part, I pretended to be Hodor so that I could preserve the world's storyline," Stephen Ward explicated, "That was simple enough for the first few years of my act. Then Robert's Rebellion happened, and Gregor Clegane and the others decided to start complicating matters. Because of them, just about every major or prominent character's story arc was upset in some way. Fortunately, yours was not compromised in any such fashion. That was just what I was hoping for."

"Why did you hope for that?" Bran murmured inquisitively.

"Your story arc is critical to my own objective," Stephen responded. As Bran opened his mouth to speak again, the tall man cut in with "No need to ask me what my objective is. I'll go ahead and tell you now. You see, Bran, I gave up on society and retreated to the wilderness for one reason: I had lost all faith in civilization and humanity. That very same reason was also why I chose to end my own life. My world was advanced, yes, but living in it was – for lack of a better term – a nightmarish experience.

"Then I was reborn in this world," he swiftly went on, "At a glance, Westeros is every bit as conflicted and vicious as my world. However, unlike my world, this world offers a possible solution for bringing a permanent end to all of its disputes. And I mean all of them."

"What solution might that be?" Bran asked.

Stephen could tell he was genuinely intrigued. "Before I answer that, I would like to draw your
attention to the struggles of humans, animals, and the Others, and how they occur in nature. Humans kill animals and the Others, animals kill humans and the Others, and the Others kill humans and animals. Furthermore, humans kill one another, and animals kill one another. As for the Others... they never kill one another. Never."

"What does that matter?" Bran thought aloud.

"It matters because there is something to be learned here," Stephen debated, "The sad truth of reality is that the Others are better than us."

For an entire minute, Bran just stared at the former hunter as though he had just sprouted wings. Then the boy grimaced and snapped "Have you taken leave of your wits?"

"I have not," Stephen sharply retorted, "In fact, as far as this franchise is concerned, I seem to be the only sane person in either world. It is you and everyone else who are mad. You all see the Night's King as your enemy. I, however, know better. The Night's King's does not intend to destroy the world. He intends to unify it. Why else do you think he revives the people he slays?"

"To strengthen his forces, of course!" Bran yelled, "He does that to benefit himself, not other people!"

Stephen shook his head dismissively and said "Every good leader concerns himself with building up his ranks. The Night's King already has more than enough units to conquer the Seven Kingdoms and beyond. If he so desired, he could just leave his slaughtered foes wherever they fall, and he could get by with the units he already has. Yet unless they've been burned, he still reanimates his victims. To me, that is an indicative sign that he does not see humans as mere prey. He may see us as his vassals instead. All we need is a little bit of enlightenment."

"Are you saying you want humanity to fall?" Bran presumed.

"That's correct," Stephen freely admitted, "That brings us to where we are at present. While I was in the real world, there was a time when I thought that your character was useless and that your story arc was just some elaborate filler. Then I read the final book and watched the final theatrical performances, and in them, you displayed the full scope of your powers."

"What did I do?" Bran queried. He must think I'm an idiot if he honestly expects me to tell him that.

"I won't say; it would spoil everything," Stephen uttered cockily, "If you are wondering, you are not the one who defeats the Night's King. However, you are instrumental in his downfall. If not for you, the Seven Kingdoms does not stand a chance against the Others. Hence, the reason why I've brought you out here. I am going to hand you over to the Night's King."

Like most Northerners, Bran's skin was naturally pale. In addition to that, the only light in the area was that which was emitted by the fire. Nevertheless, despite the boy's complexion and the surrounding darkness, Stephen Ward could physically see the color drain from Bran Stark's face. Bran backed away a little and muttered "You cannot be serious."

"I am completely serious," Stephen proclaimed, "By giving over the new Three-Eyed Raven to the Others, I will practically ensure victory for them in the coming war against the people of Westeros. That is my true purpose for saying nothing but 'Hodor' for over twenty years. I have been planning this scheme for even longer. So, don't even bother reasoning with me, persuading me to give up, or pleading with me to let you go. I have already come too far to have a change of heart. At this point, nothing is going to prevent or discourage me from achieving my objective."
Ever since the beginning of this conversation, Bran had sat remained sitting on the ground. When the former hunter revealed his aim, he jumped to his feet and declared "Then I'll run away!"

Stephen gave a hearty chuckle. He chided derisively "You're welcome to try. It would take me at most an hour to track you down. Probably less. How long do you think you'll last out there by yourself?"

"It would still be preferable to becoming the Night's King's tool!" Bran shouted.

"That'll happen, anyway," Stephen reminded him, "Regardless of how you die."

"Not so," Bran countered, "Bodies touched by fire can never return."

Right after he said that, the boy seemed to get an idea. He slowly turned towards the fire that had been warming and lighting the vicinity all this time. Stephen did not like the new expression on Bran's face at all. He seemed to be gazing at the flames almost longingly. *He wouldn't*...

It turned out he would. Without warning, Bran dove towards the fire.

Stephen hastily jumped forward, extended his arms, and grabbed Bran in midair before he could come in contact with the flames. He's fast, but I'm faster. Despite that cheeky thought, the tall man was furious. He roughly pulled Bran away and spat angrily "And you call me mad?"

"Let me go!" Bran exclaimed, thrashing against Stephen's tight grip.

"Not going to happen, lad," Stephen calmly refuted. He then retrieved the ropes, and he proceeded to tie Bran up again. As he bound the boy's arms behind his back, he said "There are already enough things out there that could be dangers to us. The last thing we need is you to be a danger to yourself, as well."

"You're a danger to me!" Bran disputed.

"I can understand why you'd think that now," Stephen remarked, tying Bran's legs together next, "But within the next twenty-four hours, you'll be thinking differently."

"Are you truly this blind?!" Bran snapped, "What do you think will happen once you deliver me to the Night's King? You think he'll thank you? Praise you? Reward you for your fealty? No, he will not. Whatever he does to me, he'll do to you, too!"

"You think I didn't realize that?" Stephen countered, checking the knots on both ropes. *Just because the real Hodor was a halfwit, that does not mean I am, too.* "Personally, I doubt the Night's King is aware that I am his ally. Even if he is, I'm quite certain he intends to make a wight or a White Walker of me, anyway. However, that notion does not disturb me. In fact, I look forward to being assimilated into his army. It would be the perfect opportunity to prove my loyalty."

"How could you prove yourself?" Bran murmured, trying and failing to break free of his restraints.

"Do you ever wonder how the Army of the Dead functions?" Stephen asked rhetorically, gently setting his captive back against the trees. Rather than wait for a response, the former hunter pronounced "I believe they form a type of hive mind. Every single one of them can hear what all the others are thinking. Except the Night's King. Naturally, he can still hear the thoughts of his subordinates, but when his thoughts are involved, the White Walkers and the wights only hear what he lets them hear. That's why he's the leader, after all. A leader must have some kind of advantage over his followers."
"At any rate, I remind you once again that I am not a native of this world," he solemnly continued, "With all the knowledge I possess of my own world, I would be an invaluable member of the Night's King's forces. He would know precisely what Gregor Clegane and the other five are capable of. He would also know how he was defeated in the original version of this world's story. With all that together... the Seven Kingdoms do not stand a chance against him. Everyone in Westeros and beyond will all become his pawns soon enough. All due to the information I will share with him and his army."

"You'd just be robbing yourself of everything that makes you special," Bran contended.

"That doesn't trouble me," Stephen stated wryly, "The only thing I care about is ensuring that the Night's King emerges triumphant from the Long Night. Under his guidance and rule, the world will finally know true peace."

"Or true fear," Bran argued.

Stephen firmly shook his head. "There will be no need for fear once the Night's King takes over. Nor will there be a need for hatred. Or any of the other bad emotions."

"What of the good ones?" Bran pointed out, "What of love, happiness, and hope?"

This time, Stephen gave an indifferent shrug of his shoulders and stated "I suppose there will be no need for them, either. There is not helping that. Some sacrifices must be made. You cannot deny that a world without feeling is worth considering if it also means a world without suffering."

"Well, I believe the world is fine as it is," Bran pronounced decisively.

"You're free to think that now if you so choose," Stephen commented, "But come tomorrow, those ideals of yours will be a thing of the past."

"Because you'll let the Night's King forcibly change them?" Bran assumed heatedly.

"Essentially, yes," Stephen admitted, "You may come to appreciate what I am doing, though. All of this will ultimately serve the greater good."

_The greater good_, he joked mentally.

By now, Bran seemed to have lost his willingness to continue arguing. In fact, his fighting spirit seemed to have faded altogether. It was almost as though he had finally resigned himself to his fate. _It is about fucking time. These damn Starks and their obstinate nature. Oh, well. At least he might actually cooperate with me now. I was hoping to accomplish that much before we reached the Night's King._

"Let's turn in for the night," Stephen proposed.

Bran said nothing. He just nodded his head compliantly.

At that, the former hunter smirked. _I've done it. I've shattered his resistance. He should not be any more trouble now._

Right after that thought crossed his mind, he the sound of a wolf howling. It appeared to be the same wolf he had heard on multiple occasions over the last twenty-one days. However... there was something different about its howl.

Every other time when Stephen heard it, the wolf had always sounded as though it was a great
distance away. This time, it sounded much, much closer.

He warily looked around the area. When he last checked it a few minutes ago, he had verified that he and Bran were all alone. It was unlikely that had changed much in just a few minutes, but he had to be certain. *Never take the wild for granted*, he told himself. *Always stay on your guard.*

That was when he saw them. Two small yellow orbs, penetrating through the thick, immense darkness. Almost immediately, Stephen could tell that they were eyes. As to what those eyes belonged to, he had an inkling of an idea. But he was praying that it was wrong. *Whatever it is, it's fucking huge.*

Without turning his head away from this animal, Stephen called out to Bran "What did you bring to me this time?"

"I didn't bring him," Bran claimed. Indeed, his eyes had not turned white, meaning he had not activated his warging ability. Of course, since he was still talking to his captor, that much was already obvious. "He came here on his own."

Stephen did not know whether to believe him or not. "Why did he come here?"

Bran merely shrugged as best he could with his arms bound, and then he gave a devious smile and announced, "Perhaps he just wished to look after his son's master."

'*His son's master?' What the hell is that supposed to mean?* Less than five seconds later, he received an answer to that question.

The yellow eyes moved gradually approached the fire. At first, all Stephen could see was the creature's silhouette. Then it stepped into the radius of the light produced by the fire. Stephen felt his heart skip a beat and his breathing jerk to a halt.

It was a direwolf. But not just any direwolf. It was massive, even for a wolf. It was larger than a fully-grown bear, and at least seven times as fearsome. In fact, it was bigger than any animal Stephen had ever seen in either of his lives. Loath as he was to admit it, it was a magnificent beast.

Struggling to maintain his composure, the former hunter muttered quietly "What is this thing?"

"He's been following us almost since the cave," Bran announced, making an effort to sit up, despite his bound hands and feet, "I suppose my bond with his son was what drew him here."

*There he goes again with that 'son' business. 'What's all this about his 'son'?*"

"Take a closer look, Stephen," Bran suggested. He uttered that last word as though it was a curse. There was a hint of smugness in his voice. Before the tall man really had a chance to study the direwolf more closely, Bran disclosed "That is the wolf who sired Summer and his littermates."

After an evening of forcing Bran to endure shock after shock, it was finally Stephen's turn to be shocked. *You've got to be kidding me. That's... the direwolves' FATHER? This enormous monstrosity?*

The huge direwolf had stood very still for the last three minutes. Just then, it showed its teeth and let out a hostile growl. Those gestures were rather slight, but they were enough to leave an impact.

Stephen Ward had spent twenty years of his first life in the wilderness. In all that time, he had never encountered anything that he regarded as a serious threat. These last three weeks roaming through the lands north of the Wall, he had felt much the same.
When he faced off against this direwolf, however, he found himself with a completely different mindset. This was the first occasion in either of his lives that felt genuinely terrified. He may have finally met a foe he could not triumph over. *That does not mean I won't try. Wolf or no wolf, I cannot fail the Night's King.*

For the longest time, Stephen glared at the direwolf, not daring to take his eyes of it. Then, he made a move to draw his sword. He wrapped his hand around the hilt easily enough. However, he very instant he pulled the weapon from its sheath, the direwolf pounced with both its claws and fangs bared.
Note: We've reached the final ten chapters. These will focus primarily on the conflict I have been building up to this entire time. Just a head's up: from this point onward, NOBODY is safe. Expect death. Along with quite a few time-skips. These last ten updates will probably seem very fast-paced, especially when compared to most of the ones that came before. Also, updates may be even more spaced out than usual, as my new job and other obligations are taking up a lot of my time.

Aroooooooooo!

The horn resounded loudly around the area. That was neither the first nor second time it had done so that day. It was the third. That dreaded but inevitable third blow, which every living person there fully knew the meaning and significance of.

It has begun. The war that would determine the fate of humanity was finally underway.

Benjen Stark turned to the Reeds. The girl was trying to pacify a restless Summer, whereas her younger brother was simply standing idle in solemn silence. How could a child be so calm in so desperate a situation?

"I must leave you," he informed them grimly, "For the present, you may stay here if you so desire. But you are absolutely forbidden from getting any closer to the Fist than this. And the moment I or one of my rangers tell you to head south, you are to do so immediately."

"But Bran is still out there," Meera Reed pointed out.

Benjen grimaced. Does she think I do not know that? He murmured sternly "I will have no defiance from you or Lord Jojen, Lady Meera. The only reason I have not sent you down to the Wall already is because I share your concern for my nephew's well-being. But we have graver problems now, and I will not allow you to get involved in them."

Lady Meera looked as though she was going to protest again. Before she could, Lord Jojen placed a hand on his sister's shoulder and told her "Lord Benjen is in the right, Meera. It would do us no good to put ourselves in harm's way, even if it was for Bran's sake. He would not wish that for us, either."

Benjen was glad at least one of the crannogmen would listen to reason. He declared "I will say no more on this matter. Whenever I tell you to head south, you will head south."

"As you say, my lord," Meera stated softly. She sounded bitter, but there did not seem to be any more disobedience in her voice. Still, even though she may have given her word, people were known to go back on their word. I'll just have to trust Lord Jojen to keep her in line.

At any rate, he could not be bothered with this issue any longer. I must get to the Lord Commander at once. He swiftly walked over to his garron, climbed into the saddle, and galloped towards the Fist. As he made his way up the steep slope, he tried to remain focused on his current setting.
Nevertheless, he found his mind drifting back to the Reeds.

They had turned up at the Fist earlier that week. They had brought along Summer and seventeen of the twenty Stark guards Ned had assigned to protect Bran and his friends. Only Lew, Donnis, and Hallis Mollen were unaccounted for. Wights had claimed Donnis, but Lew and Hal Mollen had reportedly been killed by a living person. The others had reason to believe Hodor had been the one to do the deed.

Benjen had been in denial when he first heard that. Then he found out that in addition to the two guards, the Three-Eyed Raven and three of the children of the forest had been slain. Furthermore, the sword that slew Brynden Rivers had also sliced clean through his throne of weirwood trees, and it had even dented the stone wall behind it.

Benjen Stark only knew of two men strong enough to accomplish a feat of such amazing strength. One was the current Master of Order and commander of the Legion without Banners. The other… was his family's stableboy.

It had been years since Lord Gregor Clegane last went north of the Wall. To Benjen's knowledge, the Mountain had hardly even left Moat Cailin at all in the last twelve months. Aside from that, Hodor had actually accompanied Bran to the cave of the Three-Eyed Raven.

When the Three-Eyed Raven and the other five victims were murdered, almost everyone else had been out hunting or scouting the vicinity. Only two others had remained in the cave, and both of them had disappeared without a trace. Those two were Old Nan's great-grandson and Benjen's nephew.

The surviving children of the forest stayed behind in the cave to burn the dead. Meanwhile, the Reeds and the Stark guards went off in search of their liege lord's second son. They looked everywhere between the cave and the Frostfangs, but they found no sign of Hodor or Bran. Even Summer could not track down his master or his master's captor. How could Hodor have evaded them so well?

Their search ultimately brought them to the Fist of the First Men. They had arrived almost a week ago. When Benjen learned of their predicament, he and some of his rangers had received special permission from the Lord Commander to assist with the search. Alas, they did not have any more luck than before. It's too late now. We must assume and prepare for the worst.

Benjen did not fear for his own life; as a sworn brother of the Watch, he was always ready to die. He was far more concerned for Bran and for Hodor, even if the latter had turned against them. All the same, he had no time to worry about his nephew or his childhood friend. As much as it pains me to think, they're likely dead. Even if they are not, there is nothing we can do for them. They are on their own for now.

Benjen rode his horse through the camp. The majority of his black brothers and their wildling allies were already at their posts. Those who were resting in their tents before the horn sounded had either been roused by the noise or their comrades. Despite still being half-asleep, they were in the process of hastily arming themselves and heading to their own posts. Fortunately, it appeared no one had died in their sleep this time. Benjen was grateful for that much. The last thing we need right now is a wight infiltrating our ranks from within.

Soon, Benjen spotted Lord Commander Jeor Mormont. He was standing at the northern edge of the Fist with the top rangers, wildling leaders, and Legiionnaire officers. Everyone was already gathered there. Mance Rayder, Beric Dondarrion, Alliser Thorne, Mallador Locke, Jeremy Rykker, Jarman Buckwell, Ottyn Wythers, Thoren Smallwood, Styrl, Harma Dogshead, Alfyn Crowkiller,
Rattleshirt, and the Weeper.

It seemed Benjen Stark was the last to arrive. *I would have gotten here sooner, had the Reeds been more cooperative,* he mused. Still, he did not begrudge the Reeds for his delay. They were his brother's vassals, and, moreover, they were children. Their safety was his concern.

Benjen dismounted when he reached the senior members of their company. The others noted his presence, but other than a slight nod, most of them did hardly anything to acknowledge it. At least no one made a comment on his tardiness. *At this point, I doubt they even care on that.*

Benjen Stark walked to the very front of the group, and he stopped beside Lord Jeor Mormont. The elderly man looked as dignified and fearless as ever. Clad in his black chainmail armor and armed with an obsidian blade and a Valyrian steel dagger, he very much looked the part of the leader of the Night's Watch. One could almost regard him as the embodiment of everything good about the Watch. His raven sat perched as his shoulder, as always.

The Old Bear did not turn his head when the Lord of Winterfell's brother appeared at his side. He just folded his arms and proclaimed "It is time, Benjen."

"*Time! Time! Time!*" the raven screeched.

The First Ranger ignored the obnoxious bird and stated "Aye, my lord."

He then turned to face his front. Even on a clear day, the area immediately north of the Fist was difficult to see. Alas, it had snowed every day for the last turn of the moon, including this day. Thankfully, it was only a light flurry today, as opposed to the fierce blizzards they had suffered on most other days.

Despite the weather, Benjen could easily make out a huge black horde on the ground below. This mass was accompanied by the feeling of the earth shaking and the sound of millions of feet marching. The Army of the Dead was upon them.

Originally, Lord Jeor meant to launch an offensive against the Army of the Dead. This campaign would have involved venturing out into the Frostfangs and attacking the Others in their own territory. By all accounts, this plan would have had an excellent likelihood of success.

Alas, in a dire twist of fate, winter happened to start a year earlier than anticipated. Because of that, the Army of the Dead began marching south that much sooner. Th Night's King was ready to execute his own plan well before the Old Bear was with his. Therefore, an offensive strategy was no longer an option for the Watchmen and their allies. Their only choice was to rely solely on defensive measures.

*Winter has come for us,* Benjen reflected somberly.

"Hold steady!" Lord Commander Jeor called out. That order echoed around the vicinity, and it was repeated many times on the ground below.

Half their forces were assembled at the base of the Fist. All of those units were on foot. Trenches had been dug in the ground before them, along the northern and western sides of the Fist, and large caltrops had been planted in the trenches. These were traps meant for the Others and their wights. Currently, those traps were all that stood between the living and the dead.

There was no way around the trenches; the only way to get past was to go through. Be that as it may, they obviously would not halt the Army of the Dead's march entirely. Although the wights could not climb, once the trenches filled up with enough of them, the remaining wights would
easily be able to walk over the accumulated remains of their comrades. Even with caltrops, this was
unavoidable.

Fortunately, the White Walkers and their wights were susceptible to fire. As such, the Lord
Commander had had the caltrops soaked in pitch earlier on. At this moment, the caltrops were so
flammable that the slightest spark would set them ablaze. Several black brothers were kneeling on
the surface above each caltrop with flint rocks in hand, waiting for the Lord Commander's order to
set fire to the wood.

The Army of the Dead came closer and closer with each passing second, and yet the black brothers
kneeling before the caltrops remained on standby. Benjen could imagine that some of them were
sorely tempted to flee or set fire to their caltrops prematurely. But they all firmly held their ground.

Benjen was well-aware that the Lord Commander intended the caltrops to burn for as long as
possible. For that reason, he was holding out until the very last moment to give the order to ignite
them. The men assigned to the caltrops had been informed of this, too. They were all good men;
brave and loyal to the last. Even so… they were much closer to the foe than anyone else in their
company. Just one wrong move or minor misstep, and they would suffer a fate worse than
death. And they all know that.

However, Lord Jeor planned to thin out the Army of the Dead's numbers even before they reached
the trenches. Currently, every archer, crossbowman, and spear-thrower in their company was
stationed about ten feet behind the kneeling men. Their arrowheads, the tips of their bolts, and
their spearheads were all made of obsidian. A single touch of that substance would neutralize any
undead individual straightaway, regardless of where it was hit.

Behind the marksmen, the giant Mag the Mighty was crouching down beside a cart. The red priest
Thoros Myr stood on the other side of the cart with his sword in his right hand and a torch in his
left. The cart itself contained the nineteen kegs of black powder Lord Gregor Clegane and the
Legion without Banners had gifted to the Watch. Each keg had a wick sticking out of a hole in the
lid.

The idea behind this arrangement was that Thoros would light the wicks one at a time, and when
the timing was right, Mag would toss the kegs into the center of the Army of the Dead. To prepare
for this tactic, Thoros of Myr and Mag the Mighty had practiced setting fire to small barrels of dirt
and chucking them away every day for the last fortnight. Their speed, accuracy, and grace had
improved significantly since they began. By now, the red priest and the giant seemed to have
established a fine rhythm with their routine. If any of us can stop the Night's King, it would likely
be those two.

Lord Commander Mormont did not plan to use the black powder just yet. He would have Thoros
and Mag wait until the marksmen ran out of projectiles and the trenches were overflowing with
wights. In a sense, the black powder was their last line of defense before the Others reached the
Fist of the First Men.

When the Army of the Dead was about fifty feet from the trenches, the Lord Commander called
out "Marksmen, at the ready!"

"Marksmen, at the ready!" Kedge Whiteye exclaimed in response. As the best shot in their entire
company, he had been given command of the marksmen division.

Accordingly, every archer notched his bow with an arrow, every crossbowman fitted his
contraption with a bolt, and every spear-thrower raised his javelin over his head. Soon, they were
all prepared to release, but they had not yet taken aim.
Once the Army of the Dead halved their distance to the trenches, Lord Jeor announced "Prepare to volley! Aim only for the White Walkers!"

"White Walkers only!" Kedge Whiteye shouted in turn.

It was simple enough to tell the White Walkers from the wights. The former had skin, whereas the latter did not. Additionally, given how pale that skin generally was, a person could be a safe distance away and still be able to discern one from the other.

The reason they were only targeting White Walkers was due to an interesting discovery. Apparently, whenever a White Walker was slain, all the wights he had revived would crumble alongside him. Lord Beric and his fellow Legionnaires had learned that on their way up to the Fist.

This development gave the Night's Watchmen and their allies another advantage over their undead adversaries. It also provided proof to substantiate the Old Bear's belief that if the Night's King was slain, the entirety of his host would perish, too. That belief was the whole reason they had come out here in the first place. His motives and hopes were not misguided after all. If only the Night's King would show himself now. We could end this war just as soon as it started.

Alas, they were not so fortunate. No one in their company had any clue as to what the Night's King looked like, much less where he was or how to find him. For all they knew, he was at the very back of that massive horde. If so, their chances of encountering him were extremely low, and their chances of actually defeating him were almost nonexistent.

I cannot think like that, Benjen chided himself. The Night's King will be stopped. If not by us, then by Ned, the Mountain, or someone else. The gods could not be so unjust as to allow someone such as he to bring about the downfall of men.

Lord Commander Jeor Mormont waited until the Army of the Dead was within ten feet of the trenches. Then he yelled "Release!"

"Release!" Kedge Whiteye repeated, loosing his own bowstring. Benjen watched as Kedge's arrow sailed through the air and over the trenches. It struck a White Walker at the very front of the undead column in the forehead. The effect was instantaneous; the White Walker let out a shrill scream, and he shattered into a sea of fragments. Less than one second after he collapsed, about three or four dozen wights dropped to the ground, as well.

It was a good kill on Kedge's part. Alas, most of the other marksmen were not as precise with their own first shots. Only one out of every five or six managed to hit another White Walker, and many ended up hitting the same ones. Luckily, all of them at least managed to hit a wight, so none of their projectiles were completely wasted. On the bright side, between all the White Walkers that were hit, more than five hundred wights were neutralized. Benjen would have been gratified, were it not for the fact that there were still around twenty-five million of them left.

Each of the archers, crossbowmen, and spear-throwers had only been given half a dozen arrows, bolts, and javelins respectively. They were expected to make their shots count as much as possible. Kedge Whiteye, Lord Jeor Mormont, Mance Rayder, and Lord Beric Dondarrion had spoken with the marksmen beforehand. They had strongly emphasized to them the importance of conserving their projectiles and using them efficiently.

"Again!" the Lord Commander proclaimed.

"Again!" Kedge Whiteye echoed the command.
"He's starting to take after that damn bird," Rattleshirt humorously remarked, gazing over at the raven on Lord Jeor's shoulder.

"Bird! Bird! Bird!" the raven screeched.

A few of the others scoffed at that. Benjen just threw an unamused scowl in the direction of the Lord of Bones. Making japes at a time like this? Could he really be that impetuous?

On the ground below, the marksmen swiftly readied and released another volley. The second volley brought about considerably more fruitful results than the first. This time, one in every three or four projectiles struck a White Walker, and the majority of those found a different target. Altogether, almost a thousand wights were subsequently obliterated.

Despite the damage inflicted by the first two volleys, the Others were not discouraged in any way. Not that we expected them to be. The undead host simply continued to advance at the same slow but steady pace.

"Release at your leisure!" Jeor Mormont announced.

"Fire at will!" Kedge yelled, simplifying the order but basically repeating it.

Over the next several minutes, scores of arrows, bolts, and javelins flew across the trenches and into the Army of the Dead. The marksmen were showing some notable improvement. By now, as many as half the projectiles managed to strike a White Walker, and almost none of the true shots hit the same one. Benjen had to admit he was impressed with their performance. With an inexhaustible supply of dragonglass, we might have been able to hold out like this indefinitely.

For the last few years, the Watch had received constant shipments of dragonglass from the Targaryen stronghold of Dragonstone. Since the majority of the black brothers preferred melee weapons over ranged weapons, most of it went into making swords and daggers instead of arrows, bolts, and spearheads. Kedge and a few others had proposed focusing more on the projectiles instead, but while the quantity of obsidian they were given was vast, it was not unlimited. In order for every member of the Watch and the Free Folk to receive a blade of obsidian, they had to cut back on the number of projectiles that were produced. In hindsight, that may have been an imprudent decision on our part.

Then again, even ranged weapons could not always guarantee victory over one's opponent. Nor could they be relied upon to keep the foe away forever. As it happened, by the time most of the marksmen fired for the fourth of fifth time, the Night King's forces finally managed to reach the trenches. The first hundred or so wights that entered the chasm ending up falling flat on their faces or backs. Most of the ones who followed were able to land on their feet instead.

As the undead soldiers continued piling into the trenches, Lord Jeor bellowed "Ignite the caltrops!"

As soon as the Old Bear issued that directive, the black brothers kneeling by the trenches proceeded to carry it out. All of them placed their hands just above their preassigned caltrops, and they rapidly struck their flint rocks together. Some managed to produce a spark instantly. Others needed a little longer. Thankfully, none of them needed more than thirty seconds. Whenever a spark was generated, a caltrop promptly caught fire. Soon, the whole trench was alit in roaring flames.

The wights closest to the caltrops faltered for a moment. They almost looked as though they were going to turn back around. Benjen saw that as curious. Is it possible they are afraid? They do not just recognize fire as a weakness? They know to be afraid of it, too? Before the wights at the head
of the column could make any attempt to retreat, they were unintentionally pushed forward by their indifferent, unwavering fellow wights from behind.

The wights at the front all came in contact with the burning caltrops. Within a matter of seconds, they were on fire, too. Unlike the Others, they did not scream. Interestingly, they were rather silent as they burned. Benjen was intrigued. The wights feel fear, but not pain. The Others feel pain, but not fear. Could the Night's King be the only one who feels neither? In any case, humans felt both.

The northern and western sides of the trenches quickly began to fill up with the bones of the undead. The caltrops were large and wide enough to cut off most of the access between the side facing the Army of the Dead and the side facing the Fist. Nevertheless, a number of wights were somehow able to slip past the burning obstacles. Luckily, they were few enough that the amount could be controlled.

The men who had ignited the caltrops cast aside their flint rocks and drew their obsidian blades. They remained kneeling above the trenches, and they stabbed and thrust at every wight that came within reach of them. Before very long, the bones of the undead were beginning to pile up on the eastern and southern sides of the trenches, as well.

By this point in time, several thousand wights and a couple hundred White Walkers had been vanquished. Up until now, the black brother and their allies had gotten by without suffering even a single casualty. But that soon changed.

Even whilst the projectiles were still soaring and the caltrops were still burning, some wights managed to cross the length of the trenches unharmed. Those that did extended their arms towards the kneeling men, successfully grabbing some of them by their collars and vests. A few of the brothers were able to pull themselves free, but the rest were dragged screaming into the trenches. None of them ever climbed back out. Bedwyck was one of them, Benjen noted dismally. Those were the first losses, but he was not foolish enough to think they would be the last.

Sure enough, not long after this misfortune transpired, the marksmen totally exhausted their cache of projectiles. Despite maintaining high accuracy and producing a steep kill count, they still only managed to wipe out a tiny fraction of the Army of the Dead. Now that their ammunition was spent, ranged weapons had no more usefulness in this fight. Everything from this point onward would be determined by melee weapons. We still have the black powder, of course, but we cannot afford to waste that.

The marksmen were told to retreat back to the base of the Fist. The infantrymen were sent in to replace them. Their objective was to provide support for the kneeling men until reinforcements arrived.

"I feel we will not be of any good to anyone from up here," Mance Rayder observed.

"Just so," Lord Commander Jeor Mormont conceded, gazing around at his associates, "A proper commander never forces his men to fight a battle which he himself is unwilling to fight. That is one ideal all three of our groups share. Therefore, get to your horses at once. We are joining into the fray."

Everyone acknowledged that declaration without raising an objection or a single word of protest. So it appeared, anyway. Benjen was fairly certain that some of the wildling leaders were still reluctant to take orders from a Watchman. But they all had a common goal, and they had always intended to partake in the battle against the Others. Because of that, Benjen assumed, they could bring themselves to make an exception, if only this once. Our previous enmities truly are meaningless now, he supposed.
Benjen Stark was the only one of them who had ridden a horse to the edge of the Fist. When the Old Bear gave that last order, he got right back on it. Everyone else had to return to the camp to retrieve their own horses. Knowing haste was of the essence, they hurried.

Once all the commanders were mounted, they speedily made their way down the slope on the southern side of the Fist of the First Men. On the way down, Benjen happened to spot the Reeds and Summer. They were still with the seventeen Stark guards and the dozen black brothers he had tasked with their protection. If they had any wits at all, they would go ahead and flee. Benjen was somewhat inclined to tell them that himself, but he could not afford even that small delay. Right then, his rangers needed him far more than Lord Howland's children did.

The other half of their forces was stationed at the bottom of the slope. They were all on horseback, and up until this point, they had been on standby, waiting for the signal to charge. If the marksmen and the infantrymen formed the vanguard and the mainguard respectively, the cavalrymen formed the rearguard. At present, they had no reserves. If they did have reserves, those would be whoever was still at the Wall. Gods willing, the reserves will not be the only ones to live past this day.

Lord Jeor was in the process of rallying the cavalrymen. He got to a vantage point so that they could all see and hear him. Then he drew his obsidian sword and announced "Men of the Watch! Of the Free Folk! Of the Legion! Our foe is out there! He and his minions mean to slaughter every one of us! Should they succeed, they will not stop there! Oh, no; they will then invade the Seven Kingdoms! They will destroy everything and murder everyone you have ever known! But we shall not make it effortless for them! For on this day, we shall show the Night's King the modern people of Westeros are not so easily subjugated!"

That succeeded in getting the cavalrymen motivated. When the Old Bear finished his speech, each one of the mounted men brandished his own dragonglass blade, held it up high, and yelled energetically. The Lord Commander then turned to the northwest and charged in that direction. Benjen Stark and the cavalrymen took off after him. The vast majority of them were swinging their weapons in the air and continuing to cheer. I pray they'll still be as enthusiastic when we reach the other side of the Fist.

When they got to the other side of the Fist, Benjen discovered that the timing of their arrival could not have been any better.

Thus far, the deep trenches and the burning caltrops had greatly impeded the advance of the Others. Any White Walker or wight that so much as brushed up against one of the caltrops caught fire. Alas, the caltrops had only been soaked in so much pitch, and there was no way to replenish the fuel for the fires. Over half of them had already been extinguished. None of the men who had been kneeling in front of the trenches were still doing so. All of them had either retreated or died.

Furthermore, so many wights and White Walkers had collapsed that the trenches were nearly full of them. By now, even the caltrops that were still on fire were practically buried under great mounds of bones. As such, there was no longer anything obstructing the Army of the Dead from the Fist of the First Men. Waves of undead were now crossing over the piled-up remnants of their fallen comrades, and they were marching towards the men on foot.

The cavalrymen rushed to the aid of their grounded colleagues. Several of the infantrymen and the marksmen had already fallen victim to the Army of the Dead. As he rode closer to the filled-in trenches, Benjen Stark spotted wights swarming all over Squire Dalbridge and Deaf Dick Follard. Both men were quickly subdued in the ensuing onslaught.

Benjen was riding between Ser Alliser Thorne and Ser Jarman Buckwell. He directed their attention to some of the younger infantrymen. He recognized a few of them as Pypar, Matthar, Grenn, and
Toddler. They were all among the newest of the black brothers. They were fighting back with all their might, but they were on the verge of being completely surrounded by the undead.

By charging in at full force, Benjen, Ser Alliser, and Ser Jarman mowed down a-third of the wights attacking the fresh recruits. They hacked their swords down at the rest from atop their mounts. For a while, it seemed as though the three of them would triumph. Then two of the wights abruptly seized Ser Jarman's horse by the flank. In response, the animal whinnied in fright and reared on its hind legs, throwing Ser Jarman from his saddle. Even amidst all the violence and noise, Benjen could quite clearly hear Ser Jarman's neck snap when he landed against a huge stone on the ground.

Benjen and Ser Alliser managed to clear away the rest of the wights without losing their balance. In doing so, they saved most of the new recruits, including Grenn, Pypar, and Matathar. Toddler and a few others were not so fortunate; they were mercilessly cut down.

About thirty feet away, Rattleshirt, Harma Dogshead, the Weeper, and Alfyn Crowkiller had climbed off their mounts, and they were struggling to organize the Free Folk. Even for them, the acknowledged leaders of the wildlings, this was a difficult task to accomplish, particularly in the heat of battle. They all have the same goals: stay alive, and kill anything that's already dead. How could they not be more agreeable?

For a moment, Benjen wondered if the Lord of Bones could somehow blend in with the Army of the Dead. As it happened, his unique armor did nothing to protect or conceal him from the undead. Evidently, the Others could not be fooled by a suit of bones.

In fact, the suit ended up being extremely disadvantageous instead. At some point, the Weeper mistook the Lord of Bones for a wight and drove an axe of obsidian into his throat. Rattleshirt dropped to his knees and gripped his neck, choking to death on his own blood. The Weeper quickly realized his error, but before he had time to feel any guilt or remorse over it, a White Walker with a longsword impaled him from behind.

Benjen Stark swiftly turned his head away from that grisly bit of carnage… only to catch a glimpse of another one. Less than twenty feet away, he spotted another White Walker thrusting a spear into the underside of Thoren Smallwood's chin.

A man weak in body or mind would have given out from such an injury immediately. However, Thoren was known to be obstinate. He refused to die just yet. In spite of his mortal wound, he somehow found enough strength to lift his dragonglass sword and slash at his assailant. In effect, the Other shrieked in anguish, released his weapon, and shattered. A score of nearby wights collapsed right after him. Only then did Thoren Smallwood allow himself to drop to the ground.

We're losing too many too fast, Benjen grimly observed, slashing at three wights on the ground in front of him. Not five seconds later, he witnessed Kedge Whiteye getting stabbed through his one remaining eye by another Other with a dagger. At this rate, we'll all be dead before the Night's King comes anywhere close to here.

The sad truth of the matter was that despite their superior organization, effective weaponry, brilliant tactics, and thorough preparation, Benjen's forces were still grossly outnumbered. If it was by a factor a five to one or even fifty to one, the scenario may have been manageable.

But the Army of the Dead was around five thousand times larger than Benjen's company. Worse yet, they proved to be far more skilled combatants than the First Ranger assumed they would be. Already, they were cutting through the infantrymen, the marksmen, and the cavalrymen alike as though they were parchment. We never had any hope of winning this battle, but I would have thought we'd at least do better against the Others than this.
Fortunately, not everyone was faring as poorly. There were a distinct lot who were distinguishing themselves in various manners. The most notable ones were those who bore no banners.

Of the five thousand people who were fighting the battle on the side of the living, only a mere four dozen of them belonged to the Legion without Banners. Yet each Legionnaire fought with the strength and prowess of ten black brothers or wildlings. They were commanded by Lord Beric Dondarrion. Under the Lord of Blackhaven's direction, only one of them had died so far. *We could definitely use some moral support right about now. Count on the Legionnaires to give it.*

Benjen noted that even Thoros of Myr was participating in the fighting. He was the only one who was not armed with a weapon made of Valyrian steel or dragonglass. Instead, he wielded a regular steel sword. However, his blade was just as effective against the undead as anyone else's, as it was on fire. That was Thoros of Myr's signature move; whenever he entered a battle, it was with a burning sword.

Despite being a very religious individual, Thoros of Myr was a formidable warrior. Anytime a wight came near him, he skillfully and fearlessly countered its advance. He drove it off, cut it down, or set it aflame. He was careful not to stray too far from the cart of black powder kegs. He also made certain neither his burning weapon nor any of the wights got too close to the cart. His priority was to protect the cache of black powder until Lord Jeor or Lord Beric authorized him to use it.

Mag the Mighty was fighting alongside the red priest. Whenever a group of wights came near, he gave them a powerful swipe of his arm. Every time he did this, he sent at least a dozen of them flying. This action did not actually kill any of the wights, but it *did* push them back or break apart their bodies.

Anytime a White Walker approached the giant, Mag picked him up and tossed him over at his human allies. Before the White Walker could recover, someone would thrust a blade of obsidian into his body, effectively eliminating both him and any wights he had revived all at once.

All of a sudden, in the midst of all this carnage, Benjen heard someone shout "My lord! Over there!"

It sounded like Lord Beric Dondarrion. The First Ranger gazed over at the Lord of Blackhaven, and sure enough, the latter had called out to Lord Commander Jeor. Lord Beric was using his sword to point to a particular spot in the ranks of the Army of the Dead.

As Lord Jeor turned his head to follow the point of Lord Beric's sword, Benjen did the same. Almost straightaway, they both noticed what had captured the Stormlord's attention.

Approximately one hundred yards north of the Fist of the First Men, a single individual was standing all on his own. There were no wights or White Walkers within a seven-yard radius of him, and he gave off an inexplicably hostile and irrefutably authoritative ambiance. At a glance, Benjen could tell that man was dead inside, just as everyone else in the massive host around him was. It was quite evident that he was an Other. But not just any Other. The one who commanded all the other Others.

*He's here,* Benjen thought. For a reason he could not fathom, he was both shocked and awestruck.

"Thoros of Myr!" Lord Jeor called out to the red priest, "The black powder! Use it!"

"Aye, my lord!" the follower of R'hllor shouted in acknowledgment. He hastily fought off any remaining wights in the immediate area, and he hurried over to the cart of black powder kegs. He
gazed up at his giant partner and announced "The time is now, Mag."

Mag the Mighty only grunted in response. He hardly spoke or understood any of the Common Tongue, but he did not need to speak the same language as Thoros to understand him. After disposing of the White Walker that had most recently approached him, he went over to the cart and stood beside it.

Thoros still held his torch in his left hand. He placed the flame near the front of one of the kegs to light the wick sticking out of the lid. Soon, the wick was lit, Thoros withdrew his torch, and Mag picked the keg up. He quickly looked around for his target. Although the Night's King was over three hundred feet away, Mag spotted him easily. Once he was locked on the undead commander, Mag raised the ignited keg, took aim, and flung it forward.

The keg ended up landing somewhere about five and twenty yards short of its target. Even so, when it exploded, it succeeded in obliterating everything within fifteen feet of it. No fewer than fifty wights perished in the explosion. There must have been at least a couple White Walkers hit, too; a number of wights who were not within the blast radius crumbled, as well.

This was Benjen's first time seeing black powder at work. He could not deny it was a rather impressive and deadly substance. I can see why Lord Gregor wished to gift it to us, as well as why he was so eager to be rid of it. While it is a powerful weapon against the Army of the Dead, it is also capable of inflicting destruction upon the living.

Thoros of Myr had already lit another keg. In turn, Mag the Mighty grabbed that one, aimed a little more carefully this time, and gave it a hefty toss. Then, without so much as pausing to breathe, he lifted up another lit keg, aimed it, and flung it into the air.

The results of the second and third throws were not very different from those of the first. While Mag managed to land the next two kegs a little closer to the Night's King, they were both still too far to include him in the blast radius. Another several dozen wights and a few more White Walkers were demolished, but that did not appease Benjen Stark in the slightest. The powder is wasted on them. If just one of the kegs could reach the person it is intended for...

The Army of the Dead appeared to have realized what Thoros of Myr and Mag the Mighty were attempting to do. Soon after the fourth keg was launched, a number of White Walkers focused their efforts on stalking the red priest and the giant. Like the first three, the fourth keg missed its target, too.

"Protect them!" Lord Jeor shouted, pointing to Thoros and Mag. He had not given that command to anyone in particular, but Benjen and many others were obligated to answer it.

Benjen thrust his obsidian sword into the clavicle of the nearest White Walker. He managed to wipe out more than thirty wights with that one fatality.

Nearby, Ser Alliser Thorne was locked in combat with four Others. He managed to defeat three of them in rapid succession, but the fourth swung a double-sided battleaxe into the Crownlander knight's abdomen. The blade seemed to cut through his boiled leather and chainmail as though they were silk. Ser Alliser sputtered momentarily. Then his eyes rolled back, and he fell out of his saddle.

All of a sudden, Benjen found himself up against at least ten wights. He managed to defeat most of them without difficulty. But when he got to the last two, he paused. He did this because he recognized their faces. One of them belonged to Alfyn Crowkiller, who used to be one of the more notorious enemies of the Watch. The other, to his dismay, was Pypar.
Their current disposition startled Benjen Stark. He had not even seen either of them die. They could have died as recently as one minute ago. How could I have missed that?

Nevertheless, it had happened. Pushing the thought of how they died out of his mind, Benjen solemnly slashed his obsidian blade at both his former adversary and his former brother in black. He sliced both of them open along their torsos, thus relieving both of them of their sorry state of existence.

By now, Thoros of Myr had ignited half a dozen more kegs of black powder, and in turn, Mag the Mighty had chucked each one at the Night's King. The giant's aim was constantly improving, but he kept missing the Night's King.

Benjen wondered why Mag was not hitting his target. When he and Thoros practiced this routine, he was always very precise. Could it be the tension and bloodshed of all this fighting is impairing his aim? Or perhaps the black powder is more difficult to handle than we supposed?

There was also the possibility that the Night's King was simply out of range. Benjen prayed that was not the case. We cannot wait for the Night's King to get closer. By the time he's crossed a third of the distance between himself and us, we could be overrun.

Indeed, by now, more than half of Benjen's company had already fallen. At this rate, the battle would be concluded within another hour. Our only options now are to retreat or destroy the Night's King. If we do neither of those soon, we are all lost.

"Concentrate, Mag!" Thoros beckoned the gargantuan warrior, "We've only nine kegs left! You must make them count!"

It was unlikely Mag actually understood what Thoros of Myr said, but at the very least, he seemed to understand the tone and the implication of the red priest's words. Subsequently, he picked up the eleventh lit powder keg, took longer than before to aim it, and threw it at a curved angle. Apparently, he accounted for wind resistance this time. It was a magnificent throw. If the gods were just, it might have actually annihilated the Night's King.

Unfortunately, just before this keg reached its destination, one of the Others rushed in front of his commander, grabbed the keg in midair, and dove forward with it clasped tightly in his arms. The keg promptly exploded, killing the Other, all the wights he had revived, and everything else within fifteen feet. The Night's King, however, was still unharmed, having remained outside the blast radius.

Benjen was aghast. He had always thought the White Walkers were mindless creatures with no regard for anything or anyone, including each other. But what he witnessed a moment ago… it implied otherwise. Did that one just… sacrifice himself for his king?

"Fuck!" Beric Dondarrion swore angrily, "That keg would have done it. Damn that interfering bastard…"

Benjen felt much the same as the Lord of Blackhaven, though he was not as vocal. We should have foreseen this, he supposed bitterly. Of course the Night's King's vassals would willingly part with their own existence in exchange for the preservation of his. They owe him everything. And us, nothing.

Mance Rayder then brought his horse over to Mag the Mighty, and he spoke to him in an outdated tongue. When the King-beyond-the-Wall finished talking, Mag the Mighty gazed down at his leader, gave a light smirk, nodded his head, and grunted once more.
"What did you say to him?" Benjen called out to Mance Rayder.

"I told him to throw two kegs at once," Mance called back to the First Ranger, "Then, should that fail, to try throwing one immediately after another."

"Ah," was all Benjen said in response. He found he liked both of those approaches. *We should have considered them sooner. The probability of hitting the Night's King may improve significantly if his bodyguards have multiple threats to contend with.*

Before Thoros of Myr could light another of the kegs, Mag the Mighty picked two more of them up off the cart and held both of them out to his shorter partner. The red priest only needed a few seconds to comprehend what the giant was suggesting, and based on the wicked grin across his countenance, he seemed to approve of it. As such, Thoros swiftly set fire to the two wicks.

Benjen watched as Mag the Mighty raised one keg in either of his hands. He took longer than he did on any of his other attempts to properly concentrate on his target. *He's learning,* Benjen noted. Evidently, giants were not the half-wits most men believed them to be.

When Mag seemed confident he would not miss, he raised both his arms at the same time and prepared to launch them. Right before the giant threw the kegs, Benjen looked to the north so that he could watch where they landed.

The very same instant he turned his head, something sailed through the air. It moved much too quickly for him to clearly see what it was, but it appeared to be very long and thin. Initially, he thought nothing of it. The two lit kegs flew through the air a moment later. However… they only travelled about a dozen yards before they landed on the ground, near the very front of the Army of the Dead. This time, some of Benjen's allies were caught within the blast radius. *What in the hells just happened?*

He quickly received an answer. Out of nowhere, Mag the Mighty roared in pain. Concerned, Benjen looked back over at the giant, and he saw the source of that scream, as well as the reason for that poor throw.

A spear was protruding from the front of Mag's body. It had sunk into his chest, right where his heart was. He gripped the shaft of the spear and attempted to extract it, but it was somehow wedged in his chest cavity. Before long, he stumbled backwards and slammed against the base of the Fist of the First Men. He then collapsed onto his side and lay absolutely still.

Benjen Stark was astounded. *Who…?*

He soon found that out, too. He turned to face the Army of the Dead again, and then he saw it.

All this time, the Night's King had been advancing at a slow, uniform, and casual pace, contrary to the hasty, erratic, and dogged approach of his soldiers. Even so, he was now close enough that Benjen could see him very clearly. At this time, his right arm was outstretched in the air in front of him, and half a dozen White Walkers were standing within spitting distance. Five of them were armed with spears. The sixth was unarmed.

*The Night's King just took out our giant,* Benjen realized in horror.

He did not stop there. A few seconds later, the Night's King lowered his arm and held it out to one of the armed White Walkers. That White Walker in question obediently stepped forward, handed over his spear, and backed away. The Night's King then raised the spear up in the air, as though he meant to throw it.
It occurred to Benjen that he may have been the Night's King's next victim. With that in mind, he speedily maneuvered around the vicinity, hoping to make himself as difficult a target as possible. While he did this, he continued to defend himself against the wights and White Walkers that were swarming all around him. In turn, his attention was split between the enemy up close and the enemy at a distance.

Less than fifteen seconds later, the Night's King threw another spear. It turned out Benjen was not the intended next victim. Its true target was Lord Beric Dondarrion. The spear sailed directly into the Legionnaire officer's head. It sank so deep that the top two inches of the spearhead jutted out from the back of the Stormlord's neck.

For the following few seconds, Lord Beric swayed listlessly in his saddle. Then he slouched over the side of his horse and collapsed hard onto the ground.

"Beric!" Thoros of Myr yelled in shock, plainly saddened by the death of his friend and leader. He was not the only one who felt this way. The majority of the four dozen Legionnaires had survived for this long, but the sudden loss of their commander took a great toll on their morale and structure.

At that moment, Benjen Stark realized what the Night's King's intent was. He's eliminating the most critical figures in our army. If that was indeed the case, the next victim would have to be either Mance Rayder or Lord Jeor.

Benjen hastily gazed around the area in effort to locate the King-beyond-the-Wall and the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. He spotted the former first.

Mance had just suffered an injury to the left arm. Luckily, it did not seem life-threatening. In addition to that, he had already retaliated against the Other who had inflicted the injury. He seemed to be handling himself quite well.

Benjen hurriedly made his way through the crowd of the undead. He was beginning to recognize more and more of them as his newly-deceased allies. He was forced to cut down several of them, as they refused to yield or let him be.

Without warning, a strong force smashed into him from the side. Benjen was abruptly thrown off his horse. Within moments, he was surrounded by wights.

Despite the shock and aches from receiving such a harsh impact, the First Ranger was not beaten yet. First, he recovered his blade and slashed upwards at the wights standing over him. He managed to neutralize all of them in a single swing. Before their bones were even on the ground, Benjen struggled to his feet and looked for his horse.

That was when he discovered what had knocked him off his horse. Mag the Mighty had come back. The giant's eyes were hollow and lifeless, and he was violently swinging his arms at any breathing person who came within two yards of him.

Benjen was not foolish enough to engage an undead giant in combat. Instead, he busied himself with running away from this massive foe. To his relief, that was not too difficult to accomplish. Once he got away from Mag, he focused on getting himself off the ground as quickly as possible.

To his misfortune, it turned out his garron had already been claimed by the Others. Thankfully, he did not have to remain on the ground for very long. Another garron with an empty saddle soon trotted within arm's length of him. He recognized the steed as Ser Ottyn Wythers'. As to where Ser Ottyn himself was, there was no sign. He's almost certainly dead, Benjen admitted glumly. While that was unfortunate, the elderly knight may have saved Benjen by letting his horse outlive him.
Benjen took ahold of the garron's reins, and he pulled himself up into the saddle. Then he resumed fighting his way over to Mance Rayder. The King-beyond-the-Wall was surrounded by wights on all sides, but even with his injury, he was holding his own.

Benjen Stark opened his mouth to call out to Mance Rayder. Alas, before the First Ranger could utter a single sound, the Night's King flung another spear into the air.

Just as before, his aim was impeccable. The spear plunged into Mance's upper body, right below his neck and just above his lungs. Mance immediately slumped over and landed roughly on his back.

_Damnit_, Benjen thought irately. _Damnit. Damnit! Damnit! DAMNIT! GODSDAMNIT!_ Needless to say, he was furious. Not to mention dispirited. Of course, the loss had a far more devastating effect on the Free Folk. Most of the remaining wildlings were beginning to lose their will to keep fighting.

Just then, he heard someone call out to him "Benjen!"

To his relief, it was Lord Jeor's voice. He looked in the direction the shouting had come from, and to his relief, the Old Bear really was still alive. _I must keep it as such_, he decided determinately. He rode his mount over to the Lord Commander, and he stated "My lord… the Night's King is-"

"Yes, I see what he's doing," Lord Jeor interrupted. _Of course, he does_, Benjen thought. _That's one of the many reasons why he's the Lord Commander._

"What are we going to do?" Benjen queried nervously.

"Get out of here!" Jeor rejoined.

Benjen was stunned. He murmured in perplexity "Are we retreating, my lord?"

_You are,"_ Lord Jeor declared, "The battle is lost, but that does not mean all our lives are forfeit. You are to gather anyone can still ride and return to the Wall posthaste. I and a token force will stay behind to buy you time to escape."

Benjen was speechless. He sternly proclaimed, "My lord, I cannot abandon you!"

_"You will!"_ Lord Commander Jeor adamantly insisted, "And you must. The Wall is now the only thing that stands between the Seven Kingdoms and their doom. You have to inform the citizens of this so that they may better prepare. You cannot let them suffer the same fate as the rest of us."

To say Benjen Stark was conflicted at this moment would have been an understatement. Usually, he never questioned or disobeyed orders. After all, he believed in Lord Jeor's ability, and he always trusted him to make the right decisions, no matter how desperate the situation. But now… the Old Bear was asking him to leave him behind. How could he possibly do such a thing?

On the other hand, Lord Jeor would not tolerate _any_ insubordination. Furthermore, the Old Bear was always fully prepared to die. Benjen knew he would want his death to have meaning, and to men like Jeor Mormont, there was no death more honorable than the kind that involved giving one's life in the service and protection of other people.

Most of all, Benjen's comrades were still dying all around him. If he spent much more time deliberating over this matter, there would be no one left to save. At a time like this, it would do no one any good to argue with the Lord Commander.
Ultimately, Benjen Stark chose to concede. He somberly looked the Lord Commander in the eye and mumbled respectfully yet reluctantly "Aye, my lord."

Lord Jeor Mormont nodded in acknowledgment and patted the First Ranger on the shoulder. He gave a soft smile and muttered in an uncharacteristically warm tone "Good luck, my friend. Do the Watch proud in my absence."

Oh, I shall. May the Others take me if I do not. Of course, if he did not leave the vicinity soon, they would take him, anyway.

Benjen Stark then turned his horse around and rode through the remnants of his company. He called out as loudly as possible "Everyone who has the strength to ride, fall back! We are retreating to the Wall!"

Luckily, most of the surviving members of the task force heard him issue that proclamation. The majority of those were in a position to follow up on it.

While a considerable percentage of the cavalrymen had survived up to this point, nearly all of the marksmen and infantrymen had been killed. Only a select few of those groups still remained. Some of them were fortunate enough to find a ride. Benjen saw Fornio do what he had done; he hopped onto a mount whose previous rider was long dead.

Meanwhile, Matthar and Grenn were fleeing from the battle, but they were being chased by a large number of wights. Ser Mallador Locke and Ser Jaremy Rykker rushed in to aid the two younger black brothers.

While his horse was still moving, Ser Mallador extended his arm to Matthar, who grabbed the Northern knight's hand and allowed him to pull him onto his saddle. The two of them managed to get away from the scene before the wights came anywhere close to them.

Ser Jaremy tried to do the same with Grenn. Alas, by the time the lad managed to take ahold of the Crowlander knight's hand, the wights were already upon him. Subsequently, he was grabbed from all sides and forced onto the ground, unintentionally yanking Ser Jaremy down from his mount in the process. Within seconds, wights were swarming all over both men.

"Retreat!" Benjen yelled repeatedly, urging as many riders as possible away, "Retreat!"

Every mounted man who was not surrounded or too fatigued hastily withdrew from the battle. Dozens of riders managed to flee to safety. But hundreds more stayed behind. They were either trapped or unable to get away for a similar reason.

They all knew what they'd face out here, Benjen reminded himself. They knew what was at stake. You cannot blame yourself for that. Nor can you save all of them. Be content with those you can save.

Those thoughts were what helped him to cope with the guilt of leaving so many of his friends, allies, and brothers behind. Once everyone who could get away had, Benjen Stark swiftly headed south.

He did not stop or slow down even once as he galloped along the western side of the Fist. He waited until he was at the very edge of the haunted forest to decrease his speed. Only then did he bring himself to look back. Even from there, he could still make out Lord Jeor Mormont. The Old Bear seemed to be engaging over a dozen wights and White Walkers all at the same time.

For a while, he seemed to have the upper hand over his undead opponents. Then, out of nowhere…
came the fourth spear. The *moment* it entered Lord Jeor's midsection, the Old Bear fell, landed on the ground hard, and became totally motionless.

"NO!" Benjen shouted. That was not a quick shout. It lasted several seconds at the least.

While Benjen had no way of knowing *how* he sounded at the time, he presumed he may have sounded like a broken man. Truthfully, he was not broken in any meaning of the world, but even a stranger could detect the denial and grief in his voice. Indeed, at the sight of his beloved commander falling from his horse, Benjen Stark was overcome with sorrow and regret. Part of him was inclined to rush to Lord Jeor's side. The more rational part won over and reasoned that doing so would only get him killed, too. So, he kept himself from doing anything foolish or rash. Even so… he suddenly found himself in great emotional distress. *This cannot be happening. The Old Bear… so many others… at what cost?*

Just then, he felt someone tapped his arm. Despite the overwhelmingly powerful negative emotions he was currently undergoing, Benjen managed to regain his composure and remember his discipline. After pulling his mind together, he turned to the person who had touched him.

It was Alyn, one of Ned's guards. He looked well. *Why wouldn't he? He wasn't in the battle.* Be that as it may, Alyn looked just as restless as any of the survivors.

"My lord," he stated edgily, "We cannot linger. Once the Others have killed everyone at the Fist, they'll come after us next."

*He's right*, Benjen gravely admitted. *Every second we delay is a second we allow the Army of the Dead to gain on us.* He could not allow that to transpire. He had orders to get these survivors back to the Wall, and he would see that task done. Moreover, he would **not** let Lord Jeor's death be in vain.

Benjen Stark turned his horse – *Ser Ottyn's horse, actually* – around and rode it into the haunted forest. Alyn followed him close behind, and the two men quickened their pace to catch up with the other survivors.

They met up with their associates after about five minutes of riding. That was when Benjen realized just how few of them remained.

Five thousand noble souls had gone to the Fist of the First Men. As of now, less than a couple hundred had escaped with their lives.

Benjen took note of who all was left. Amongst the survivors, he recognized Jafer Flowers, Fornio, Othor, Mallador Locke, Ebben, Hake, Matthar, Aladale Wynch, Sty, and even Thoros of Myr. Interestingly, the red priest had somehow found time to load the six remaining kegs of black powder onto his sturdy destrier. *He couldn't have picked up a grounded soldier or two instead?*

Benjen decided not to voice that thought. There did not need to be any more pessimism going around. Apart from that, at the end of the day, the black powder was an effective weapon for fighting the Others. Such tools were as invaluable as additional soldiers. Still, Benjen wondered if they could have saved more of their colleagues. *Even if it was just a few more.*

"What now, my lord?" asked Thoros of Myr. It took Benjen a few seconds to realize the red priest was talking to him. Then it occurred to him that he was the highest-ranking officer still alive. *These men are all looking to me for guidance and assurance now.*

Ultimately, he sat up straight and announced "Craster's Keep is only a few days' journey from here.
Provided we do not stop, that is. There we will resupply and only rest long enough for us to recover the strength we need to reach the Wall. Then we will ride for the Wall as expediently as our endurance will permit. If you have any issue with that plan... keep it to yourself. I do not need any of you making things difficult for the rest of us."

That came out more bitter than he intended, but Benjen Stark would not be making any apologies. He could be a benign leader when they were on the other side of the Wall. For now, he had to be cold, strict, and imposing. *We'll never make it back to Castle Black if I treat them gently.*

"The First Ranger has spoken!" Othor proclaimed.

"Aye!" Jafer Flowers declared, "To Craster's Keep! Then, to the Wall!"

The other riders gave a chorus of acknowledgment. They all sounded totally compliant. Benjen had to resist the urge to smile. *With that sort of willingness and cooperation, we're all but guaranteed to reach the Seven Kingdoms without incurring any further losses.*

At any rate, Benjen and his ragtag party of survivors prepared to get underway. However, before they could head out... they heard an animal growl.

It was a very low, very deep growl. Benjen could not tell which direction it had come from, but it sounded close. Uncomfortably close, in fact. Benjen gazed down at Summer, but his nephew's direwolf was not responsible for the noise.

"What was that?" another of Ned's men, Hayhead, asked anxiously, looking over the area.

"Could it have been a bear?" said Quent, yet another one of Ned's.

"That sounded too big to be a bear," Ebben debated.

Benjen thought that a quaint observation. *The only animal out there that could be bigger than a bear is a mammoth. But mammoths don't growl. Not like that.*

Meera and Jojen Reed were nearby, gazing at their surroundings curiously. They did not seem afraid. Even so, Benjen gestured for them to stay close to him.

All of a sudden, Lady Meera pointed with a gloved hand and exclaimed "My lord, look!"

Benjen Stark followed her finger and saw what had drawn her attention.

A colossal wolf, certainly larger than any bear he had ever seen, was plodding towards them. The horses suddenly became jittery and nervous. Some threatened to throw off their riders. But the men all managed to remain mounted. They did not escape the massacre at the Fist of the First Men just to be ejected now.

Benjen cautiously brought his hand to the hilt of his sword. This one was his regular steel longsword. He doubted obsidian would have much effect against a living opponent, especially one as large as that direwolf. He did not draw just yet, though. *Any sudden moves, and I could be a dead man.*

As the wolf came nearer, Benjen noted some interesting things. Firstly, the wolf was walking with its head erect. That indicated it had no intention of hunting or stalking Benjen or his party. If it had, its head would have been lowered. Furthermore, its fangs and claws were not bared. In fact, it did not look the least bit feral. It actually looked strangely calm and peaceable. *What does it want with us, then?*
Just then, Summer bounded forward. He approached the giant wolf and stopped in front of it. The massive wolf gazed down at the smaller wolf. The two of them spent a long minute sniffing one another.

After that, they did something Benjen did not expect. They placed a paw on each other's shoulder, and they nuzzled each other affectionately. *What is going on?*

"Why is Summer acting like that?" Meera wondered aloud.

"Because it is only natural for a son to greet his father in such a manner," a voice from somewhere behind the huge direwolf responded.

Benjen's eyes widened in astonishment. That voice… it sounded like his nephew's.

A few seconds later, a young boy appeared from behind the massive direwolf. Benjen looked a little closer, and he murmured in amazement "Bran?"

The boy gave a light nod and uttered plainly "Hello, Uncle."

Benjen was tempted to jump off his horse, rush over to his nephew, and embraced him warmly. Then he remembered where he was, who else was with him, and how they saw him. It would not do for him to be so openly sentimental, even with his own family. Plus, there was a chance his horse would bolt if he got off it, given how restive it seemed to be in the presence of the direwolves.

As such, Benjen merely rode over to his nephew, grinned down at him, and stated "I am relieved to see you unharmed."

"Likewise, Uncle," Bran retorted candidly. He then held up his hand and said "If it's no bother, might I ask you for a ride?"

"Of course," Benjen asserted. He reached down, took ahold of his nephew's hand, and lifted him up into the saddle. He placed Bran in front of him. Once the boy was securely between him and the head of his horse, he asked "What happened to you?"

"I will explain on the ride south," Bran claimed.

Benjen was content with that for now. "What about Hodor? Where is he?"

"Right there," Bran told him, gesturing at the massive direwolf.

Somehow, Benjen had missed this beforehand, but the direwolf was carrying a large mass on its back. As a signal from Bran, it sat on its haunches and allowed the mass to roll off its back and onto the ground. It turned out to be a bloodied, bruised, and battered Hodor. Currently, he was unconscious.

"Hodor was the one who killed Bloodraven and took me from the cave," Bran apprised his uncle. *Just as the Reeds thought. I still don't believe it, though. Walder, of all people... turning against us?*

"What was he trying to accomplish?" Jojen enquired curiously

"I shall explain that, too," Bran proclaimed, speaking more to his uncle than his friend, "For now, I require your help getting him to the Wall. He cannot be allowed to die."
Benjen was somewhat surprised. "Why would you care? He murdered your master, and he likely tried to murder you, as well. Why not simply let him expire?"

"The thought is appealing," Bran admitted frankly, "At this point, I would not mourn Hodor if he were to die. Be that as it may, as long as he is north of the Wall, he must not die. I know how that must sound, Uncle. Even so, please heed my warning. If Hodor dies in these lands, the Night's King shall become immeasurably stronger."

"Then why not simply kill him and burn his remains?" Thoros of Myr proposed. _That's not a bad idea._

Nonetheless, Bran firmly shook his head and countered with "We cannot take the chance that he will come back before his remains are burned completely. Besides… long as he's alive, he still has use to us."

_I wonder what use that might be?_ Benjen decided not to ask. He would simply wait for Bran to give his explanation before he addressed any of the questions on his mind.

Benjen ordered some of his men to check and clean Hodor's wounds. He did not bother giving the tall man proper medical treatment; all he cared about was that his injuries would not get infected. After that, he ordered for Hodor's hands and feet to be tightly bound, and then he had the tall man bound to the large direwolf's back. Thankfully, the direwolf did not seem to resent being used as a pack mule. _For want of a better term._ Once all that was done, the party swiftly began making its way south.

Benjen Stark rode at the front of the column. The Reeds, Thoros of Myr, and the direwolves were closest to him. Benjen still had so many questions. How did Bran and Hodor survive for this long? What had they been through? What was Hodor hoping to achieve? What led him to kill Bloodraven? Who was this large direwolf? Where did it come from? What was its motivation?

With every passing minute, the questions seemed to keep piling up in his mind. In spite of that, he decided to withhold from asking any of them until they were a safe distance away from the Fist of the First Men. _I should at least wait until we get to Craster's._

"We will not have a breather until we reach Craster's Keep," Benjen notified Bran, "Then we are marching straight for Castle Black. Once we get there, we must separate, as I am needed at the Wall. You and your companions will have to make for Winterfell on your own."

"I am not going to Winterfell," Bran revealed.

Benjen was taken aback. "You are not?"

"No," the young boy confirmed, "I would be of no help to anyone there. I must go where the new Three-Eyed Raven is needed."

"Then where are you going?" Meera inquired in interest.

"To the one place in the world that may hold a secret to defeating the Night's King," Bran responded. _That would definitely be useful._ At this point, Benjen was willing to consider just about any approach if it meant stopping the Army of the Dead once and for all.

"And where is that exactly?" Jojen asked, though his tone suggested that his question was at least somewhat rhetorical.

Bran Stark slowly looked over at his friend, and he answered him with "Moat Cailin."
Together

*What a day.* That was the first thing that came to Ashara Dayne's mind when she exited the Knowledge Tower. Recently, she had been making that observation or similar observations quite often. Of course, one could not fault her for that. Winter had started not too long ago, and the whole of the realm knew what this winter brought with it. Furthermore, the weather of late had been absolutely dreary.

A few days after the Royal Army departed from King's Landing, it had started to snow. It had started as little more than a light flurry. Ashara had no issue with that much. However, as they got closer and closer to the North, the amount of snowfall gradually increased each day. By the time they passed the Crossing, it was all the way up to their shins.

When they reached the Neck, they received a brief respite from the sudden drop in temperature. It happened that the bogs experienced a temperate climate year-round, regardless of the season. The trees of the marshlands also formed a natural canopy against the elements. Sunlight and rain alike hardly ever got through. It was the same with snow. Even the Causeway did not witness more than an inch or two a day.

That had come as a delightful surprise to almost everyone in Ashara's company. Ashara herself was one of the few who were not surprised. Having been an inhabitant of Greywater Watch for fifteen years, she was already well-acquainted with the Neck and its typically consistent weather patterns. *The most violent tempest in history could have been raging above us, and we might not have even noticed that.*

Then the Royal Army arrived at Moat Cailin, and they effectively lost all their protection against the elements. Ironically, when they emerged from the swamps, the moat had been in the middle of a fierce blizzard. While probably not the most violent storm in history, it was certainly the most violent one Ashara had ever seen.

That was three weeks ago. Although the blizzard ended after a couple days, the weather had been almost as unpleasant every day since then. Even if there was no snow on the ground in the morning, there would always be at least three feet of it by nightfall.

At this time, there was about a foot of snow covering the moat. Although it was not snowing currently, that could change at any moment. Thankfully, with only a foot of snow on the ground, it was still safe for her to move around the moat without resorting to the catwalks. She pulled her thick woolen cloak around her body and her shawl over her head, and she determinedly shuffled outside.

Ashara did not know the exact time of day, but if she had to guess, it was either the late morning or early afternoon. *Of course, given how little sunshine is able to pass through the clouds, it may as well be evening.* She could not recall the last time she had clearly seen the Sun and not just a few of its stray rays. Perhaps it was the day she left King's Landing. Maybe it was sometime before or after. In any case, she longed to see it again. Even if it was only for a few minutes, she would have welcomed it.

*My people were not bred for this type of climate,* she thought. It was said that in Dorne, the Sun burned one's skin even during the winter. Ashara was no longer certain if that was true or merely a rumor. After all, she had not been in her homeland since the end of King Robert's Rebellion. Up until the conference at Harrenhal a year ago, the world had believed she had committed suicide. Thus, she could not afford to be seen or recognized by anyone.
Even after the truth of the Targaryens became known, Ashara was unable to go back to Dorne. She had been too preoccupied with watching after her charges to schedule a visit. However, that did not bother her in the slightest. In all honesty, there was nothing for her in Dorne. She had left that life behind. Her family at Starfall would probably have welcomed her back, but after being apart from them for so long, they hardly even felt like kin to her anymore. More like distant relatives.

Besides, her charges mattered much more to her than her old life did. At the start of the year, she had promised their parents and guardians that she would keep a close eye on them and look out for their well-being. That pledge began when they went south, but it did not end when they went back north. That was what she was compelled to think, at any rate.

Even now, whilst they were in the safety of Moat Cailin, she felt a personal obligation to protect and watch over all of them. As long as they did not turn her away, she would continue to do so. They are not my children, but they are the closest things I'll ever have to a child of my own. With them around, her life had meaning. She had lost that after Brandon was murdered by the Mad King and their daughter was delivered stillborn. Gregor Clegane and his allies had given it back to her. For that, I shall always be grateful.

Seeing a beautiful Dornishwoman trudging tirelessly through the foot-deep snow by herself, one might wonder where she was going. Interestingly, even Ashara did not know. She had nothing planned for the day, aside from eating, sleeping, and enduring the cold. But I must do something more than that.

That was not as simple as one might think. The truth of the matter was that there was not much to do in the North, especially during the winter. Moat Cailin was perhaps the best place in that region to find recreation and distraction, but even the moat did not have unlimited prospects.

Lately, Ashara had been struggling to find ways just to pass the time. She had spent most of the morning reading books in the Knowledge Tower. However, as much as she loved books, they could only capture her interest for so long. For now, she needed something else to do.

What she really wanted to do was assist in the preparations against the hardships ahead. Alas, her abilities to provide in that regard were somewhat restricted. Ever since arriving in the North, King Robert had been holding summits in the Meeting Tower almost daily. However, the only individuals who were allowed to attend were the top officers of the Legion without Banners, the Lords Paramount, the commanders of the Royal Army, and anyone else of equal or greater importance.

Despite her connections to the Legion without Banners and some of the Great Families, Ashara Dayne was rarely included in those meetings. She was not necessarily kept in the dark, but she still did not know much more than the average soldier who stood guard outside the meeting chambers. That information likely wouldn't be particularly useful to me, anyway. As long as the subjects the King covered with the Legion and the Lords Paramount did not endanger the lives of the people she cared about, she did not mind being left out of those discussions. They were certainly of no concern to her at this time. At present, her foremost concern was deciding on a destination and getting back indoors.

I probably should have thought on that before I stepped outside. Oh, well. No use lamenting on it now. I'll just have to rely on intuition. She wondered; where would be the most practical place for her to go right now? The Knowledge Tower was located along the eastern edge of the moat. Ashara was eager to get back inside as soon as possible, so she elected to go to one of the adjacent buildings. Those were the Banquet Tower, the Captains' Tower, the Drunkard's Tower, and the
Meeting Tower.

There was nothing of interest to her in the Captains' Tower, as that was where the Legion's captains, lieutenants, and their families resided. Entry to the Meeting Tower was only permitted to a select few individuals, so that was not an option, either.

Since it was around midday, lunch would be served in the Banquet Tower soon. However, Ashara did not feel very hungry at this time. She was, however, more than a little thirsty. *I may as well head to the Drunkard's Tower,* she reasoned. *It's closest, and I can find something to warm me up there.*

Ashara Dayne proceeded towards the Drunkard's Tower. As the name suggested, the entire building was one large tavern. Many wines and liquors of various years and vintages could be purchased on every floor. Ashara did not visit this tower often, but whenever she did, she usually preferred going to the third floor. That was where alcoholic beverages from the Reach, Dorne, and the Free Cities were sold.

When she got up to that floor, she discovered that two of her charges – the eldest two, in fact – were already there. Willas Tyrell and Rhaenys Targaryen were seated at the bar, sharing a bottle of Arbor gold. Ser Oswell Whent stood against the nearby wall, observant and wary as ever.

A few seconds after Ashara entered the pub, Rhaenys spotted her and waved her over. The Dornishwoman swiftly made her way over to her best friend's daughter and her fiancée.

"Good morning, my lady," Willas greeted her.

"So, it *is* still morning?" Ashara presumed.

"Not for much longer, but yes," said Rhaenys.

Ashara lightly nodded and asked, "How are the two of you faring this morning?"

"I suppose we're doing well," Rhaenys commented. *Considering the storm that's brewing and the creatures that will accompany it, we're all doing well.* She gestured to the other barstool beside her and beckoned the older woman "Please, sit. Have a drink with us."

Ashara Dayne smiled and planted herself next to the Targaryen princess. Rhaenys passed her the bottle of Arbor gold, and she took a long swig from it. She soon felt a warming, slightly tingling sensation. The wine was already working its wonders. *It only takes a little bit to provide some relief from the cold.*

After Ashara drank, she gave the bottle back to Rhaenys. As the dragon woman took another sip, Ashara looked around at her intended and remarked "I thought you had a meeting today, Willas."

"It ended an hour ago," the Reachman revealed, "I came here straight after."

"The talks were *that* bad, huh?" Ashara murmured slyly. She meant that as a jape. But when she saw the uneasy expression on Lord Willas's face, it did not seem so amusing. She said anxiously "Can you tell us about it?"

"Certainly," Willas replied, "Normally, I'd be sworn to secrecy about the contents of those meetings. However, all our recent talks have been about surviving the Long Night, and we have nothing to gain by concealing *that.* Sooner or later, the issues we've discussed will become common knowledge."
"Yet you've been avoiding them ever since we got here," Rhaenys pointed out, holding the bottle out to him, "I can tell something is bothering you, Will. Why not talk about it?"

Willas did not seem eager to go along with that proposal. Even so, he chose to indulge his betrothed. He sighed deeply, accepted the bottle from her, took another drink, and proclaimed "This morning, a raven flew in from Castle Black. The news it brought was not good. In fact, it was downright abysmal."

Although that statement was ominous, Ashara and Rhaenys were intrigued by it. The latter leaned closer to the heir to Highgarden and asked him "What has happened?"

"A fortnight ago, the Army of the Dead descended on the Fist of the First Men," Willas disclosed, "The Night's Watch, the Free Folk, and the Legion attempted to fend them off. But of the five thousand soldiers who were garrisoned there, only about two hundred managed to escape the carnage. They only got back to the Wall last night."

Ashara grimaced. Earlier that year, a task force composed jointly of the Night's Watch and the Free Folk had ventured north of the Wall. They had travelled all the way to the First of the First Men, where they set up camp. Sometime later, they were joined by a small group from the Legion without Banners.

The task force's goals had been to prepare for the arrival of the Others, to counter the advance of the Army of the Dead, and, if possible, to defeat the Night's King.

Evidently, they had failed.

"The survivors fled during the battle, correct?" Rhaenys assumed.

"Correct," Willas affirmed, "They did not even have time to pack up their camp."

"Then how did they make it back to the Wall without provisions?" Rhaenys inquired.

"They didn't," Willas pronounced, "After the first day or two, they stopped at the home of a wildling named Craster to replenish their stores. They also forcibly evacuated Craster and his family when they resumed heading south. Apparently, they were the only people who were still living in the haunted forest."

"Then there is no one still breathing north of the Wall?" Ashara conjectured.

"Indeed," Willas muttered bitterly, "As of now, the Wall is the only thing that stands between us and the Others. You could say it is both literally and figuratively the difference between life and death."

Rhaenys winced at that. Likewise, Ashara felt a surge of uneasiness pass over her. She grabbed the bottle of Arbor gold and took another swig. This time she drank much longer and more deeply. When she finally separated it from her lips, she mumbled "I can see why your first compulsion was to come here after that meeting ended. If that news is not a good excuse to get drunk, I do not know what is."

"Quite so," the Reachman conceded. There came a short period of relative silence. The only sounds to be heard were those of glasses clinking and the other patrons quietly conversing. Ultimately, Willas ended the silence when he turned to Ashara and said inquisitively "Can I confide you, my lady?"

"You needn't even ask," the Dornishwoman asserted.
Willas paused for a moment, as though he was contemplating his words. Then he pronounced "I have talked this matter over with Rhaenys, and I've decided. After we defeat the Night's King, I'll be leaving the Legion."

Ashara Dayne was stunned. "Why?"

"It is not because I am dissatisfied or anything of the sort," Willas apprised her, "These last eleven years have been very fulfilling. I have benefited the realm in so many ways, just as it has benefited me. I love Lord Gregor and I love my fellow Legionnaires. However... I love Rhaenys, too. After we wed, she and I intend to start a family. We have no personal issue with doing that here, but as the heir to Highgarden, I have greater obligations to my house and its vassals. I've come to realize that the North is no place for the future Lord Paramount of the Reach to raise his children."

"You do present a fine argument," Lady Ashara admitted.

"I am glad you see this from our perspective, my lady," Rhaenys remarked, "I only hope Lord Gregor will be as understanding."

"I am confident he will be," Ashara Dayne insisted, "He may even commend you for your decision. He values family bonds just as much as you do. Still, I expect he will be at least a little disappointed to lose you, Willas. It will be very difficult to replace you."

"Perhaps not," Willas candidly debated, "After careful consideration, I have chosen to recommend Samwell Tarly to represent the Reach in my stead."

Ashara cocked her head and stated curiously "Why Samwell Tarly? I do not ask because I feel he is not worthy of the part; most likely, he is. But why him specifically?"

"Ever since Maester Kennick's betrayal, Samwell has been carrying out the maester's duties," Willas Tyrell expounded, "He is shouldering that responsibility alongside his other duties as Lord Gregor's notary. All without any decrease in performance or productivity. In addition to that, his combat prowess and diplomatic skills have greatly improved since I went to King's Landing. Most of all, in the absence of myself and most of the secret council, Samwell has already been assisting Lord Gregor on a regular basis. I personally believe Lord Gregor could not hope for a better replacement than he."

"Well, with your recommendation, he is all but guaranteed to receive the appointment," Rhaenys contended, "I imagine he'll be eternally grateful to you after that."

"Yes, timid though he may be, he never has trouble expressing his gratitude," Willas uttered humorously.

"In any case, I wish you two the best of luck," Ashara Dayne proclaimed. Both with explaining your plans to Lord Gregor and your aims to start a family.

Lady Ashara stayed with Lord Willas and Princess Rhaenys for about another twenty minutes. After that, she bade them farewell and left the pub. While it is tempting, I cannot just drink all day.

It was already past noon. Lunch was being served in the Banquet Tower, but Ashara was still not hungry. In light of the most recent development of the Others' whereabouts, she did not have much of an appetite. She felt more like praying instead. Thus, she headed for the Worship Tower, which was located right next to the Drunkard's Tower. I'd still like to know how that happened.

When she got to the Worship Tower, she found that the building was rather crowded. The
Lady Ashara preferred to pray directly before a septon. However, Septon Norvin was not currently present in the sept. She went to look for him, and she found him in one of the private chambers adjoining the sept. He was preparing to conduct a ceremony. It was a small ceremony; only four other people were present.

One of them was Ashara's brother, Ser Arthur Dayne. Another was his own charge. The last two were his charge's lover and her brother.

Ashara noted that Aegon Targaryen and Talisa Maegyr were standing directly before Septon Norvin, but Hollistor Maegyr and Arthur were standing somewhat off to the side. The scholar and the knight seemed like impassive observers, whereas the prince and the healer seemed quite eager for the septon to begin.

Ashara quickly realized what was transpiring here. Aegon and Talisa were about to be joined together. Elia's daughter was just talking about her plans to marry. Now her son is following through on his own plans. Ashara did not know very much about Prince Aegon or Talisa Maegyr, but she did not see any wrong in what they were doing. They were both old enough to make this decision on their own. His parents were dead, and hers were in Volantis. There was no way or need for either of them to get permission to marry. I just hope they know what they are doing and what it entails.

Ashara felt as though she was intruding, so she moved to exit the chamber discreetly. However, before she could fully shut the door, she heard Aegon call out to her "Don't go, my lady."

At that, Ashara froze in place. She stood perfectly still with the door slightly ajar, her hand clenched tightly around the doorknob. A couple seconds later, Talisa beckoned her "Please, come back in."

Lady Ashara hesitantly opened the door and stepped back inside the chamber. Five pairs of eyes were on her now. Fortunately, none of them seemed un receptive or mistrustful. It would appear I am welcome here, she supposed.

Once Ashara closed the door behind her, Arthur smiled and stated cordially "Good to see you, Ash."

She smiled back and muttered "Likewise, Art."

Even now, when they were both in their forties, they continued to address each other by the abbreviated versions of their names. She liked that. It reminded her of their youth, before the Targaryens entered their lives. The world had been so simple back then. Not that she resented the dragons, of course.

Few people acknowledged this fact nowadays, but House Dayne once had a stronger connection to House Targaryen than any other house in Dorne. Arthur was Rhaegar's sworn shield; Ashara was Elia's chief lady-in-waiting. The Dayne siblings were once the most loyal retainers of the Crown Prince and Princess. Yet they're dead, and we're not.

Ashara returned her attention to the young couple in front of her. She stated merrily "Might I be the first to convey my congratulations?"

In response, Aegon told her bluntly "While we would certainly appreciate that, my lady, we would
prefer if you held off on doing it just yet."

Ashara was perplexed by that answer. She asked, "Why is that?"

"We wish to keep this affair a secret for a while, my lady," Talisa elaborated.

"I am afraid I do not quite understand," Ashara remarked.

"Allow me to explain, my lady," Hollistor Maegyr requested. The Dornishwoman turned to the Volantene nobleman, and he informed her "The Pentoshi Bloodbath was – without question – the worst experience of our lives. On that, all four of us are of a like mind."

*It was probably the worst of mine, as well, and I was not even there.*

"Be that as it may," Hollistor went on, "The Bloodbath was helpful in one regard. It opened up our eyes on a fundamental truth: no matter how strong our bodies and souls become, our lives will always be fragile. They can end at any time."

"It is just as he says," Aegon conceded, "Up until the Bloodbath, we took our lives for granted. Maybe if we had been warier and less negligent, more of our people might have survived."

"Ser Gerold might still be alive," Arthur conjectured.

"As well as our brother," Talisa contended.

"And my mother," Aegon added dismally. Ashara's heart ached for the young man. Although Elia's daughter had hardly known her, her son had lived with her for his entire life. Naturally, their mother's death hit him much harder than it did her.

"Hence, this ceremony between my sister and Prince Aegon," Hollistor continued, "When the Others come for us, neither of them will simply remain idle. He means to meet the enemy on the field of battle, whereas she will tend to the casualties on our side. They will both be exposed to grave danger, which they are well-aware of. Although there is a very real possibility they may not come back, they have accepted that risk. Therefore, before the Army of the Dead invades the Seven Kingdoms, they wish to declare their love for one another before the gods."

Ashara understood now. The dragon prince and the Volantene noblewoman were readying themselves for the future. By holding this ceremony now, their bond would be recognized by gods and men alike, regardless of what occurred thereafter. *If I had a lover, I would probably do the same.*

"That does explain the ceremony," Ashara thought aloud, "However, why are there only two others in attendance?"

"Right now, everybody else in the moat is preoccupied with preparations for the Long Night and their own personal matters," Talisa revealed, "We felt this would just be an unnecessary distraction."

"If we are both fortunate enough to survive this war, we'll have some proper nuptials in the south," Aegon illuminated, "On that occasion, we'll publicly announce it in advance, and we'll include more of our family and friends. We'll even invite Talisa's parents and other siblings."

"I cannot guarantee that they'll turn up," Hollistor stated candidly, "But I know they will at least try."
Based on the grin and nod of approval he gave, Aegon was pleased to hear that. *His own parents will never be able to attend. It would likely mean a great deal to him if his bride's parents did.*

After a short interval of quietness, Septon Norvin stepped closer to the dragon prince and the Volantene healer, and he asked them "My lord, my lady, are you ready?"

"Yes, we are, ser," Talisa said in response. Ashara chuckled. *Calling a septon 'ser.' There are not many people who do that. Talisa is almost too polite.*

Just then, Aegon left Talisa's side for a moment and went over to Lady Ashara. He proposed "My lady, would you like to stand witness for the ceremony?"

"Of course," the Dornishwoman replied happily, smiling. Aegon smiled back and led her over to Arthur and Hollistor. Once she was standing between her brother and the Volantene nobleman, Aegon rejoined his bride. That was when Septon Norvin began the private wedding ceremony.

The ceremony did not last very long. Ten minutes at the most, if Ashara had to guess. Clearly, Prince Aegon and Lady Talisa wanted to keep it simple and straightforward. Nevertheless, the ceremony was carried out properly, and in the end, the pledge was appropriately sealed with a kiss.

*I'll count on them to handle the bedding ceremony on their own. They don't need me for that.*

Ashara then remembered why she came to the Worship Tower in the first place. After the ceremony, she asked Septon Norvin if he would pray with her. As expected, the septon accepted her request without hesitation.

Ashara then spent the next fifteen minutes praying to the Seven. She prayed not only for herself, but also for the people she loved and cared for, including the ones whose souls had already passed on. *Rhaegar, Elia... if only you were here now. You'd be so proud of both of your children.*

When Ashara Dayne finished her prayer, her stomach growled a bit. She realized she finally felt hungry. Luckily, she had been in the Worship Tower for less than an hour. *They should still be serving lunch in the Banquet Tower.* She elected to head over there next.

Sometime while she was praying, it had started snowing again. Not wanting to risk getting lost in the whiteout, Ashara decided to use the catwalks this time. As such, she went up to the floor where the Worship Tower's catwalks were located, and she followed the one that led to the Banquet Tower. Once there, she made her way up to the dining hall on the second highest floor.

Lunch that day came in the form of roast chicken, mashed potatoes, steamed vegetables, and bread. Fortunately for Ashara, everything was still hot and fresh when she got there. After receiving a plate of food – along with a goblet of water and a tankard of ale – from the cooks, the Dornishwoman went to find a place to sit.

Ashara could not spot any familiar faces, and she was not in the mood to start up a conversation with a total stranger. So, she chose to have lunch by herself. As it happened, one of the trestle tables near the back of the dining hall was currently empty. She sat down there and began to consume her meal.

About five minutes after she started eating, nine more individuals entered the dining hall. Three of them were young men. Another three were young women. The last three... were wolves. Only a few of the people in the dining hall shied away from the wolves. The rest of them did nothing. For a while now, the vast majority of Moat Cailin's residents had come to tolerate the wolves' presence. Most people still felt uncomfortable around them, but they knew that as long as they did nothing to
harm or threaten the wolves' masters and mistresses, the beasts would behave themselves.

Lady Ashara Dayne observed the six humans among the nine newcomers as they received their own food and drinks from the cooks. The three of Stark descent were each given an additional whole chicken for their animal companions. Once they all had their meals, they proceeded to search for a place to sit. By now, most of the other trestle tables were full up. There were some that had vacancies, but none that had enough space for half a dozen individuals. *I suspect most of their occupants would be reluctant to have direwolves gorging by their feet, anyway.*

Before too long, Lady Arya Stark noticed the nearly-empty table in the corner, and she pointed it out to her companions. Moments later, Ashara Dayne was approached by the whole group.

"Good afternoon, Lady Ashara," Lady Sansa Stark told her sweetly. The Dornishwoman smiled at the auburn-haired girl and gave her a nod of acknowledgment.

"Would you mind if we sat with you?" Lady Arya asked.

"Not at all," the Lady of Starfall said in response, gesturing to the numerous vacant spots on the benches. They were quick to accept her offer.

The Stark sisters sat on either side of Lady Ashara Dayne. Crown Prince Jasper Baratheon and Lord Rickard Clegane sat across from Sansa and Arya respectively. Prince Jon Targaryen and Princess Daenerys Targaryen sat between the two of them. Lady, Nymeria, and Ghost lay at the heels of their mistresses and master, and they swiftly tore into their chickens.

"I am glad you chose to join me," Ashara uttered merrily.

"It's our pleasure, my lady," Daenerys assured the older woman.

"Indeed," Jon concurred, "No one should have to eat alone in a public place."

"You, especially, my lady," Lord Rickard Clegane added in.

Jasper nodded his head and commented "After everything you've done for the lot of us, Lady Ashara, we would be doing you a huge discourtesy if we sat anywhere other than here."

Ashara Dayne was taken aback. More than that, she was speechless. She was unused to such praise. So much so that she was not certain how to react. On the one hand, she was inclined to blush. On the other hand, she was extremely flattered. She ultimately picked the humble approach. She reticently glimpsed over at the wall and claimed, "You are too kind. Truly, I have not done all that much for the lot of you."

"On the contrary," Rickard Clegane countered, "When Arya, Sansa, and I were summoned to King's Landing, that was the first time any of us ever journeyed outside the North. Back then, the three of us may as well have been setting foot on a foreign country. Despite travelling to the capital with house guards and being friends of Jasper's, it was you who really helped us get settled in that city."

"There's also all the assistance and moral support you provided us when my father had us investigate that hidden rookery," Jasper recalled.

"While we are discussing your virtues, my lady, I would like to mention the continuous loyalty you've shown to my family," Daenerys noted, "You may not have been in a position to aid myself or my brother, but I am most grateful for how you've looked after my brother's children."
"As am I," Jon professed, smirking lightly, "Speaking of which, I do not believe I have properly thanked you for your role in the matter of my mother, my lady."

"Oh, you've already thanked me plenty, Jon," Ashara Dayne assured Rhaegar's youngest child.

"Maybe, but I still feel indebted to you," Jon Targaryen stated. Ashara did not know what to say to that. I suppose I should simply accept his thanks. It's only natural that he would feel this way. I mean, it was because of me that Jon was reunited with Lyanna six years ago, even if he did not learn that she was his mother until last year. Aside from that, for the longest time, he believed that I was his mother.

While Ashara enjoyed being held in such high esteem by her younger charges and their friends, she preferred not to remain the center of attention for an extended period. Therefore, she elected to change the subject. She gazed around at the six youths, and she said inquiringly "So, what have you all been up to today?"

"Well, Sansa, Rickard, Arya, and I just came from the Artist's Tower," Jasper apprised her, "We watched some minstrel named Marillion give a rendition of his latest song. It was about a stag and a wolf who formed an alliance and evaded death by taking shelter on a mountain."

"Obviously, he was singing about our fathers," Sansa muttered plainly, "Overall, it was a lovely performance. The song itself was not romantic enough for my taste, but, of course, that was not the point of it. It should inspire the men when they go off to war."

Maybe when this war is over, Marillion could compose a second song about the wolf, the stag, and the mountain. He could sing about how the three were joined by a dragon and together, they triumphed over death itself. But it's too early now. The Night's King must be dealt with first.

"Before that, we spent some time honing our swordsmanship," Arya recounted, "The training yard is buried in snow, so we had to go to the Armament Tower to train."

"How did that go?" Ashara queried.

"If anything, we got in a decent workout," Rickard replied, "Sansa's form is getting much better. Jasper and Arya have improved their skills, as well. They are still not quite on my level, though."

While that may have sounded like a haughty statement, Rickard did not say it in a haughty tone of voice. All the same, Sansa, Arya, and Jasper seemed slightly annoyed by it.

"Laugh while you can, Rick," Arya mumbled solemnly, "One of these days, I'll beat you."

"I'll believe that when it actually happens, Arya," the heir to Moat Cailin uttered cockily, "Until then, just keep living your fantasies."

Rickard Clegane was regarded by many as the best swordsman of his generation. Although he was only three and ten, he had already triumphed over quite a few individuals from older generations, too. As far as Ashara Dayne knew, there were only three people who had ever bested Rickard in a melee duel: his father, his mother, and the king. She was certain there were others who could beat him, such as Ser Jaime Lannister, Ser Barristan Selmy, and his own uncle Lord Sandor Clegane. But he had yet to spar with any of them.

"What about the two of you?" Ashara asked Jon and Daenerys, "What have you been doing to pass the time today?"

"Nothing that would be appropriate to discuss during lunch, my lady," Jon answered frankly.
Initially, Ashara assumed he was making an innuendo. When he saw the expression on the Dornishwoman's face, Jon scoffed and clarified "Nothing like that, my lady. What I meant was… we were in the Reproach Tower."

Daenerys nodded her head and stated, "We decided to pay Jon Connington yet another visit. This time, we brought the dragons along."

Now Ashara fully understood why Jon had no desire to talk about his most recent activities whilst eating. Doing so would possibly destroy their appetites or compel them to regurgitate what they had already consumed.

Jon had left King's Landing at approximately the same time as King Robert and everybody else. However, unlike his friends, Lady Ashara, and the Royal Army, he had not returned to Moat Cailin by ship. Instead he, his mother, Lord Tyrion Lannister, and several others had commissioned a Braavosi galley to transport them back to the moat by sea. They had taken Jon Connington along as a prisoner.

On the voyage north, Jon had begun to "repay" Connington for all the suffering he had caused him. At least once a day, he beat the man viciously. Then he used Dark Sister to carve into his skin. Every now and then, he let Ghost have a bite of flesh. From what Ashara heard, those were by far the least brutal wounds the dragon prince had inflicted onto his father's former best friend. In spite of that, Jon was careful not to wreak any mortal injuries just yet.

Daenerys had reached Moat Cailin well before then. Lady Dacey Clegane and her company had sailed there straight from Braavos, and Daenerys had been part of that group. By the time her nephew reached Moat Cailin, Jon Connington was already half-dead. All the same, Jon Targaryen and his aunt were not nearly finished with him. They planned to keep Connington alive for quite a while.

Jon Connington was moved to a cell in the Reproach Tower, the most ominous and fearsome of Moat Cailin's twenty towers. There were only two reasons why anyone would ever go to it: to interrogate or to suffer. Of course, what Jon and Dany are doing in there could hardly be viewed as an interrogation in any meaning of the word. But as far as Connington is concerned, the suffering part is handled.

Ever since then, Jon and Daenerys had gone to the Reproach Tower at least once a day. Sometimes they brought along Ghost. Sometimes they brought along Ygrenyon and Draegar. After Ashara and her party arrived, they sometimes brought along Rhaenys, Aegon, Oberyn, and Eliaxes, as well. Whoever accompanied them, they never stayed in the Reproach Tower for more than an hour per day. Still, an hour with them must feel like a century to Connington.

Ashara Dayne had not seen Jon Connington ever since his arrest in the throne room of King's Landing. At present, she had absolutely no desire to see him ever again, and not merely because his crimes and misdeeds disgusted her. It was said by the guards of the Reproach Tower that Connington no longer looked human anymore. In fact, he was almost completely unrecognizable as a man, an animal, or any other creature. The things Jon and Daenerys had allegedly done to him… they could make even the Dothraki, the Faceless Men, and the Boltons shudder.

Lady Ashara cared naught for Connington himself. This fate is nothing less than what he deserves. Be that as it may, she did worry about the impact his treatment might have on Jon and Daenerys.

"How much longer is this routine going to go on for?" the Dornishwoman muttered crossly, looking the Targaryen prince and princess in the eye. "We've all been here for three weeks. Connington has been in our custody for more than twice as long as that. I feel no sympathy for that
traitor whatsoever, but his torture cannot go on forever. I would advise you to go ahead and put him out of his misery. If not for his sake, then for yours."

"Worry not, my lady," Daenerys beckoned the Dornishwoman, "Today shall be the last day."

Ashara raised an eyebrow in interest. "How do you mean?"

"I told Connington I would not end his life until I was satisfied," Jon explicated, "Truthfully. I achieved satisfaction over a fortnight ago. That was when this matter stopped being about revenge and instead became about justice."

Ashara found that to be an interesting choice of words. Revenge, then justice? Normally, it is the other way around.

"At first, I only wanted to hurt Connington as much as possible," Jon confessed, "He killed Ygritte. He killed my unborn daughter. He killed both of them personally. I was consumed by my thirst for vengeance. Once I finally had him in my grasp, I was able to quench that thirst."

"I was much the same," Daenerys revealed, "Connington was not the one who killed Drogo or my unborn son. I still do not know who was to blame for their deaths. Since the other collaborators are all dead now, I suppose it does not particularly matter. In any case, Connington was responsible for orchestrating the Bloodbath. That made him as good a target for my own rage as any."

"So, Dany and I vented our grief and frustration out on him," Jon professed, "Overtime, however, we found ourselves thinking more and more about all the other victims of the Pentoshi Bloodbath. We also thought about all the people they left behind, and how those people had not been afforded their own opportunity to claim own retribution."

"That made us wonder; just how many people were upset by the Pentoshi Bloodbath?" Daenerys continued, "Needless to say, the Bloodbath left a terrible impression on the whole realm, but the number of people who were personally affected by it… it had to be no less than ten thousand. The vast majority of them were still without satisfaction."

"Thus, for the last two weeks, we have not been torturing Connington for our own enjoyment," Jon explained, "Instead, we have been doing it for the families and friends of the Bloodbath's other victims. We vowed to make him continue to suffer until he had suffered enough for ten thousand people."

"This morning, we finally became convinced that he has," Daenerys pronounced, "That is why we took the dragons to see him. They hadn't had breakfast yet."

And I don't think I'll be able to finish my lunch. Luckily, Ashara Dayne's plate was almost empty by now. As she slowly pushed it away, she presumed "So, it's finally over?"

"Yes, my lady," Jon confirmed, "So, you needn't fret about anyone's well-being. Including ours."

"Jon Connington was a blight on this world," Daenerys contended, "We did the world a service by removing him from it. Nevertheless, we were careful not to derive too much pleasure from his torment. I assure you we have no intention of taking after my father."

"Or grandfather, in my case," Jon stated, "Right now, all we wish to do is forget about Connington. Although he ruined many lives, he was far from the greatest threat to the world."

"Indeed," Ashara Dayne conceded, recalling what she had learned in the Drunkard's Tower. She washed her lunch down with a swallow of iced water, and she grimly declared "I spoke with Willas
and Rhaenys earlier today. They told me of a missive that came in from Castle Black last night. They discussed the contents of that missive at today's meeting with the king and the secret council. I do not know if you are aware, but according to that missive, the Others are now past the Fist of the First Men."

"As it happens, we are aware, my lady," Jon Targaryen disclosed, "Rickard, Jasper, and I were asked to attend that part of the meeting. Their fathers summoned us there."

"Only you three?" Ashara noted. I can understand why Lord Gregor and King Robert would want the heir to Moat Cailin, the Crown Prince, and Rhaegar's son to appear at their talks, but what reason would they have to exclude Lord Stark's daughters and Rhaegar's sister?

"Sansa and Arya were not invited," Daenerys enlightened her, "I was, but even now, being in the same room as the Usurper does not appeal to me. So, I chose to abstain."

"I see," Lady Ashara commented. I suppose that's fair. It's ultimately the decision of the Mountain and the King, after all. "So, tell me; what do you make of this affair?"

"This news about the Others is disconcerting," Jasper admitted, "But we cannot despair just yet. So long as the Wall is standing, there is still hope."

"But should the Wall collapse...?" Sansa hypothesized. Unpleasant to think about, but we cannot ignore that possibility.

"Then we'll have to trust in the ability of men," Rickard professed. Arya Stark frowned at that, and she momentarily peeked underneath the table. Rickard grimaced and rubbed his leg, as though he felt a slight twinge of pain down there. He then smirked, glimpsed over at the dark-haired girl sitting across from him, and drily added in "And women."

At that, Arya smiled. Ashara suppressed the urge to laugh. He probably would have said that even if she had not kicked him.

"It is truly unfortunate; what happened at the Fist," Jon Targaryen commented grimly, "However, I can take some small amount of comfort from the knowledge that Uncle Benjen survived."

"And Bran," Arya interjected, "Don't forget about Bran."

"I'd never forget about Bran," Jon reassured his cousin, smiling at her.

"Has your brother been north of the Wall, too?" Lady Ashara asked the Stark sisters.

"Yes, though we ourselves did not know of that until today," Sansa replied, "We confronted Father after we heard of this from Jasper and Rickard, and he admitted that Bran had indeed gone north of the Wall near the start of the year."

"All this time, Father has been telling us that Bran was staying at Castle Black as a guest of the Watch," Arya stated, "The truth came as quite a shock to all of us. We did not get the whole truth out of Father, though. He refused to tell us what Bran was doing in the lands beyond the Wall, but he insisted that it was of great importance."

"Where is your brother now?" Ashara Dayne inquired.

"According to Uncle Benjen's missive, Bran is on his way here to Moat Cailin," Jon Targaryen revealed, "He should arrive in a week or so. However, the nature and the purpose of his visit is currently unknown to all but him. Apparently, he wishes to have an audience with Lord Gregor,
Lady Melisandre and that Mollander fellow."

"What possible business would he have with the three of them?" Daenerys Targaryen wondered aloud.

"Perhaps it has something to do with the source," Rickard theorized.

"That would be my guess, too," Jasper agreed with his best friend.

"I believe that is exactly what is going on," Jon declared, "It could be possible that there is yet another person out there who has the source."

At this point, that would not surprise me. I only wish we understood the source for what it is a little better. Is it a series of visions? Is it a glimpse into a parallel world? Is it a recollection of one's previous lives? The three known people who have the source cannot seem to coincide on what it actually is.

"In any case, this is not our problem," Daenerys debated, "We can leave this matter to Lord Gregor, Lady Melisandre, and Mollander. We should be more concerned about the host of undead that chased Benjen Stark, Bran Stark, and their companions all the way back to the Wall in the first place."

"The princess has a point," Ashara proclaimed, gazing around the table, "Now that the Fist has fallen, how is King Robert acting on this development?"

"Alas, there is nothing we can do to stop the Army of the Dead before they reach the Wall," Jasper pronounced. I already knew that much. "For now, the most we can do is organize our forces and keep them organized."

"That in itself could prove a challenge," Rickard debated, "This is the first time in the history of Westeros that all its inhabitants have had to come together. Naturally, some people are still reluctant to set aside their previous grievances."

"Once they realize just what we are up against, they should be more than willing to do so," Sansa contended.

"Let us hope so," Daenerys murmured plainly, "As of now, almost all the Lords Paramount have already arrived in Moat Cailin with the full might of their respective domains. The only exception is the Westerlords; they're the last to arrive."

"They should be here in a couple days," Jasper proclaimed, "My uncle Jaime will be leading them."

"Indeed," Daenerys mumbled, scowling at the mention of that name. Ashara was not surprised. Even if she never knew her father, she must still resent the Kingslayer for how he earned his moniker.

"My father mentioned that my uncle Sandor and my aunt Obara will be riding near the front of the Westerlander column," Rickard stated, "They're also bringing my cousins Mors and Dermot with them. Once they get here, it will mark the first occasion since Greyjoy's Rebellion that my father's entire family was gathered in one place."

Hardly an ideal time for a reunion. But if the gods are unjust, this may be the last opportunity anyone ever has for one. If Ashara Dayne had a choice, she would have preferred to spend her last days with loved ones, as well.
Arya then inquired "When the Westerlords get here, how many soldiers will we have?"

Jasper thought on that for a moment, and then he announced, "By combining them with the Royal Army and the other armies from the Seven Kingdoms, I would say we would have around one hundred and fifty thousand units."

"Far more than that," Rickard pointed out, "We must also take into account the Free Folk, the Dothraki, the Unsullied, the Volantenes, the Golden Company, and the other sellsword companies."

"He is right," Sansa conceded, "Those forces compose more than twice the full might of the Seven Kingdoms."

"Altogether, we should have approximately five hundred thousand combatants," said Daenerys.

"Impressive," Jon muttered. *Quite so. I do not believe anyone has ever amassed a force so large and so diverse as this one.* "Still, I fear even that may not be enough. The Night's King has five and twenty million in his army. Our only chance of victory is if each of us kills fifty wights or White Walkers."

"Or if one of us kills the Night's King," Rickard argued.

"Yes, but the odds of that are…" Jon began. He did not finish his sentence. Truthfully, he did not need to. Everyone at that table was well-aware of how trivial the odds of meeting the Night's King himself in combat and defeating him were.

"Aside from that, we have more than just the Army of the Dead's overwhelming numbers to worry about," said Jasper Baratheon, "Right now, the Wall is up. It is formidable, but it is not insurmountable. If the Night's King somehow finds a way to get past it…"

"I thought the Wall was supposed to defend itself," Arya remarked.

"It does," Jon affirmed, "It is possible to climb the Wall; the Free Folk used to do it rather often. However, less than half of those who were daring enough to climb it actually reached the top."

"That is no concern of ours," Daenerys insisted, "I doubt the undead even have the capacity to climb a ladder."

"I agree," said Sansa, "They cannot go around or beneath it, either. Obviously, they cannot go through it, as it is enchanted against them. Thus, their only option is to destroy the Wall. Fortunately for us, it would take something tantamount to dragon fire to bring it down."

"I wouldn't be too certain of that," Rickard Clegane disputed, sounding a little tense, "During the meeting, my father spoke of an artifact known as the Horn of Joramun. It is an ancient artifact that dates all the way back to the Age of the First Men. Its power is beyond astonishing. Supposedly, it could even subjugate a dragon."

Ashara Dayne whistled in amazement. "That is powerful."

"Yes, but that is not the extent of its power, my lady," Rickard apprised her, "It is said that if someone blows the horn within a certain distance of the Wall, the whole structure will crumble."

The whole table went silent at that. Over the following minute, the only sounds that could be heard were those of Lady, Nymeria, and Ghost gnawing on the remnants of their chickens.
Ultimately, Daenerys broke the silence when she muttered anxiously "Where is this horn?"

"Its whereabouts are unknown at present," Rickard disclosed, "According to my father's source, the horn was last in the possession of either the Free Folk or the Ironborn. He has already spoken with the remaining wildling leaders and Lord Victarion Greyjoy on this issue."

"What has he discovered?" Sansa queried hopefully.

"It turns out the Free Folk and the Ironborn both have a large horn in their possession," Rickard responded, "Alas, neither one even remotely resembles the Horn of Joramun. My father has no other clue as to where the real one could be. All he does know is that it must be somewhere out there."

"I pray it is not north of the Wall," Jasper remarked uneasily.

"Even if it is, there is no guarantee the Army of the Dead will find it," Arya asserted.

"But if they do, what then?" Sansa countered.

"Then the Wall will fall," Jon uttered straightforwardly, "Once that happens, we will have no choice but to engage the Others in combat. We will inevitably face them in battle, and we will fight until everyone on their side or our side has perished. This matter is that simple."

Ashara was stunned by how candid and eloquent the Targaryen prince was being. Even more alarming than that was how everyone else at the table seemed to share his sentiments. Are they so willing to accept their fates, no matter the outcome? They cannot be prepared to meet their deaths. They may think they are, but I know for a certainty they are not.

At that moment, Ashara Dayne firmly stated "I want all of you to promise me one thing."

"Anything, my lady," Daenerys proclaimed. The other five gave murmurs of agreement.

The Dornishwoman took a minute to glance around the length of the table. She started on Arya Stark. Then she gradually turned towards Rickard Clegane, Jon Targaryen, Daenerys Targaryen, Jasper Baratheon, and she ended on Sansa Stark. After getting a good look at all six of them, she faced her front and declared "Come what may, you must survive the Long Night."

Unsurprisingly, the six of them did not know how to react to that request. Their facial expressions ranged from bewildered to astounded.

"Well, we will certainly try our hardest to survive, my lady," Jasper Baratheon claimed.

"That is not good enough," Ashara Dayne muttered sternly, "You cannot simply have confidence in your ability to survive. You must take steps to ensure that you live past this winter and beyond. I want you to give me your word that you will not perish in the fight against the Others."

"With respect, my lady, you're asking us to make a promise we do not know we can keep," Rickard argued.

"No, I am not," Lady Ashara disputed, "I understand why you might think this request is unreasonable. But I would not ask the unreasonable of any of you. You should know that by now."

"But how do you expect us to fulfill that request, my lady?" Sansa said inquiringly.

"Do you expect us to flee from the battle?" Daenerys presumed
"Or perhaps even stay out of it altogether?" Arya conjectured, making a face which suggested that even the concept disgusted her.

"No, I am not asking you to remove or distance yourselves from the battlefield," Ashara asserted, "I am simply asking you to take especial care of yourselves whenever you are on or near it. You must keep in mind: when you go out there, you will not just be putting your own lives at risk. You will also put the legacy of your families at risk."

"I think you may be exaggerating, my lady," Jon Targaryen countered, "If we die, our family names won't become extinct. Our bloodlines would live on, even without us."

"That is not the point of my speech, Jon," Ashara Dayne mumbled, slightly irate.

"Then what, might we ask, is the point?" Jasper queried. The other five seemed to have that very same question on their minds, as they looked just as eager for an answer to it as the Crown Prince did.

"The point is..." Ashara tentatively began. Here she stopped and hesitated. She debated with herself on whether or not to continue. Should I tell them? They may not agree with what I have to say. They may even come to resent me for it. Ashara had no desire to generate any friction between herself and any of the young adults seated around her. Even so, they were all clearly in need of some guidance. Some very specific and direct guidance.

Eventually, the Dornishwoman decided to go on. Even if they do come to resent me for what I am about to tell them, they must hear it. Otherwise, they may never acquire the initiative they need to move forward.

Ashara let out a heavy sigh, and then she professed "All of you are young, healthy, and strong. You belong to some of the most powerful and influential families in the realm. You all have many, many reasons to live. The world has so much to offer you. More importantly, you have so much to offer the world. When I look at the six of you, do you know what I see?"

She paused for a moment, as though she was expecting a reply. In actuality, she was not, but if any of them had one, she would listen to it, anyway.

"What do you see, my lady?" Daenerys Targaryen enquired.

"I see the future of this country," Ashara Dayne expounded, "I see the parents of the next generation. Most of all, I see three particular unions who will produce the children of that generation."

Judging by their reactions, all six of the young men and women were flabbergasted by that statement. Just as I expected them to be. Even so, Ashara did not regret saying it. They needed to hear it.

"You mean... us..." Arya Stark murmured awkwardly, trying to avoid gazing at Rickard Clegane, "With... each other?"

"Of course, I do," Ashara bluntly confirmed, "You should not be so astonished. What I have told you is not merely my opinion. It is also a conclusion I have reached by observing the lot to you. It is true that none of you are betrothed. Even so, I can tell you are well-suited for each other. Surely you must have realized this by now."

"Is really that obvious to you, my lady?" Sansa Stark queried unsteadily, unable to look Jasper
Baratheon in the eye.

"It is," the Dornishwoman solemnly claimed, "I have lived twice as long as any of you. In some cases, three times as long. In all that time, I have seen all types of relationships start, progress, and end. I have become an excellent judge on determining if a man and a woman belong together. Thus far, all the signs suggest there are three ideal couples sitting before me at this time."

"What signs?" Jon asked in interest.

"To begin, there's the way you constantly look out for each other," Lady Ashara elaborated, "There is also the way you interact so well. The way you trust in each other. The way you rely on one another. Most of all, the way you have helped one another improve upon yourselves."

While Ashara made a very valid argument, the six young adults around her still seemed confused. Perhaps I should give them some examples of my meaning. She stated "Allow me to provide some clarity. Jasper, do you remember what you were like before you returned to King's Landing?"

The Crown Prince raised an eyebrow in bafflement. "What do you mean, my lady?"

"You used to be so insecure and uncertain about your position as the heir to the Iron Throne," Ashara Dayne reminded him, "The realization that you would one day have an entire realm to rule was quite overwhelming for you. But that was not due to cowardice on your part. Your problem was that you had a chronic fear of failure."

"That is true, my lady," Jasper glumly admitted, "Interestingly, Lord Gregor came to that very same conclusion once."

"Yet when you are with Sansa, your self-confidence soars," Ashara Dayne pointed out, "She gave you the reminder that your life has value, and that you are far more capable of great deeds than you gave yourself credit for. Ever since she came to live at the capital, you have never once questioned your worthiness to rule or lead, and you have refused to ever even acknowledge failure as an option. In simpler words, whether or not you realize it, she makes you want to be a better man."

The black-haired prince took a moment to reflect on those words. Then he lightly grinned, gazed over at Sansa, and muttered "You're quite correct, my lady. Sansa does have that effect on me. I want to be a better man not just for my sake, but for hers, as well."

The auburn-haired girl could only blush and stare at her feet.

"Then there is you, Sansa," Ashara Dayne continued, "You used to be a very selfish and shallow girl. All you ever thought about was becoming queen of the Seven Kingdoms. Nothing else mattered to you except crowns, fine gowns, ballrooms, ladies-in-waiting, and a seat beside the Iron Throne."

Sansa was stunned. Evidently, no one else had ever talked to her in such an outspoken manner before. I will not apologize, though. She needed to hear that.

"I would be offended, my lady," Sansa Stark muttered quietly. After a pause, she turned to the Dornishwoman and added in "If not for the fact that you are absolutely right. There was a time when I really was as selfish and shallow as you claim. Looking back, I am ashamed that I was once that kind of person."

"What matters is that you aren't any more," Ashara assured her, gently placing a hand on her shoulder, "You have grown considerably in the past year. Your interest in Jasper may have only
sparked from his status, but I have seen how you behave around him. You no longer think of him as Jasper the Crown Prince. Instead, you think of him as Jasper the handsome, strapping young man."

At that, Sansa blushed again. Then she murmured "You are not far from the truth, my lady. Right now, I do not care what title Jasper has; prince, lord, knight, or even a commoner. As long as he is… himself, I believe I can find happiness with him."

Jasper was very pleased by that statement. He lifted his hand and placed it on top of Sansa's. Their eyes met, and they smiled at each other affectionately. That's one.

"Now we come to you, Rickard," Ashara declared, turning to the tallest person there, "You are the eldest son and heir of a recently-founded house, whose lord has been maintaining peace and stability in all of Westeros since before you were born. Because of that, you grew up doubting if you would live up to your father's expectations and if you would make him proud. Those doubts squandered your potential, and they kept you from accomplishing any grand deeds of your own."

"Just so, my lady," Rickard Clegane acknowledged bitterly, "People always praise my father in front of me, as though I am unaware of his achievements. They never do me any favors by speaking of him with such reverence. All they really do is place that much more pressure on me."

"Does the pressure ever get to you?" Ashara asked rhetorically.

"It used to," Rickard notified her, "But strangely, it does not bother me so much these days."

"I believe I know why," Ashara Dayne proclaimed, "A certain individual caught your fancy, thus removing the burden of doubt from your mind."

Although she did not look at Arya Stark when she said that, she could still see the younger Stark sister fidgeting out of the corner of her eye. It appears yet another of my observations is correct.

"I was aware of your feelings for Arya, even before you told me of them," Ashara disclosed, "You managed to keep them hidden from just about everyone other than myself. Of course, I knew at a glance that your feelings were genuine. Your subsequent actions were sufficient proof of that. After all, you took up flirting just to attract her attention."

Rickard nervously turned away at that, and Arya seemed intrigued.

"Luckily for you, your ploy eventually worked," Ashara recounted, "I noticed you stopped comparing yourself to your lord father around the time Arya began to reciprocate your feelings. Soon after that, you stopped fretting over the possibility that you would be a disappointment to name of Clegane. Now, you face each day with a fearless attitude and a bright spirit. You owe all of that to the person sitting across from you."

"Yes, I do," Rickard conceded, grinning a bit, "Arya made me realize that I don't have to become my lord father. Nor do I have to follow in his footsteps. I simply have to show him what I myself am capable of. As long as I give it my all, that should be enough both for him and for me."

"Precisely," Ashara uttered approvingly. She then turned to the other Stark sister, who seemed to have already grasped that she was next. "Arya… in another life, you would have made a fine Dornishwoman. In this life, however, you would have made a poor one."

Arya Stark was taken aback. "Why, my lady?"

"Because Dornishwomen do not go out of their way to hide their emotions or their affection,"
Ashara Dayne disclosed, "Whereas you used to do that on a regular basis. When you were first introduced to me, you were perhaps the coldest girl I ever met. You acted as though you were too good to conform to the standards of other highborn ladies."

"Just because I'm a woman, that does not mean I should only wear skirts!" Arya snapped angrily.

"I know, and I agree," Ashara told her calmly, "But even men do not wear breeches every single day of the year. Irrespective of gender, a proper noble must balance both their duties to their soldiers and their duties to their household. A person who only focuses on one or the other is undeserving of nobility."

Arya opened her mouth, as they she was going to supply a sharp retort. In the end, she simply pursed her lips together and said, "I suppose you are correct, my lady."

"I know how you must feel," Ashara assured the wolf girl, "Traditionally, our sex has been viewed as the weaker one. Many women may be willing to accept that, but some of us are not so eager to submit. Your case, however, is an extreme one. You used to go out of your way to avoid anything that was customarily associated with women. At one point, it seemed to me that you were trying not to be seen as female at all. It was almost like you actually wanted to be treated as a male."

"For a while, I did," Arya confessed, "When my efforts did not succeed, I eventually gave up."

"No, I believe you gave up for something other than that," Ashara contended, peering over at Rickard once more. "Rickard's feelings for you may have been unrequited at first. But even before you and he went to King's Landing, you began to feel the same way."

"What makes you say that, my lady?" Arya enquired. She sounded impassive, but Ashara could detect the tension in her voice. She isn't even attempting to deny it, she noted.

"I first noticed when you learned that Elia Martell gave Rickard his first kiss," Ashara explained, smirking at the memory, "You tried to pass your reaction off as curiosity, but I was not so easily fooled. It was jealousy without question. If you truly did not have feelings for Rickard, you would not have reacted that way to another woman kissing him. You certainly would not have cared if a woman my age kissed him."

"Are you saying you are going to kiss him, my lady?" Arya uttered suspiciously.

Ashara Dayne giggled. "Relax, my dear. I have no intention of taking Rickard's second kiss. I am certain he would allow me to do so, anyway. No; there is only one person he'll share that with."

Arya gazed down at the ground and stared at it uncomfortably. While she did that, Ashara continued with "There is also the matter of Rickard's flirting. You could not have known of this at the time, but the whole reason he took up that practice was to get you to notice him. I would say it worked."

Arya said nothing; she merely grumbled quietly.

Ashara then frowned a bit and stated, "Then there was that incident with the Grand Maester's acolyte."

Every person at the table tensed up at that. Even now, when this affair was long past them, they did not like talking about it. Arya in particular dreaded it. I hope she'll forgive me for bringing it up once more. The Dornishwoman professed "You saw how outraged Rickard was when you told him about how Jullen tried to take advantage of you. Of course, I myself was not there; so, I did not see
it, either. Still, we are all beyond relieved that he did not succeed. However, that was not enough
for Rickard; he was determined to make Jullen pay for his attempted assault. So, he killed him
without remorse and without hesitation. Rickard killed someone just for trying steal your virtue. He
would not have done that for just anyone, would you have, Rickard?"

The heir to Moat Cailin shrugged and declared "If the victim were any other female, I would have
simply arranged to have the assailant arrested. But in this instance, the victim was Arya. That
awoke a feeling of bloodlust within me. I felt as though Jullen's death was the only thing that could
appease it."

"Did it?" Lady Ashara inquired.

"Yes, it did," Rickard proclaimed, "It brought me an oddly rewarding feeling. How would I
describe it? It can be compared to what Jon and Dany were talking about earlier, about how their
revenge against Jon Connington became more centered around justice instead. I similarly felt as
though what I did to Jullen was justice for Arya and any other girl he may have previously
assaulted in the Red Keep."

"Well, I commend you for that," Ashara muttered admiringly.

"So do I," said Arya, reaching across the table and placing her hand on top of Rickard's. He happily
accepted the affectionate gesture.

"You have matured quite nicely since you travelled to King's Landing, Arya," Ashara told the
younger Stark daughter, "You are no longer ashamed of your gender, and at the same time, you
have become a much more tolerant and accommodating person. In spite of what I said earlier, you
might actually be the model of an ideal Dornishwoman."

Arya smirked. "Perhaps, my lady. However, I do not believe I would be happy in Dorne. There is
one thing it does not have that the North does."

"Snow?" Ashara assumed jokingly.

Arya shook her head, turned to Rickard, and clarified with "Tall men."

He snickered at that, and he held Arya's hand in his delicately. Ashara was very pleased to see this
exchange of affection.

"That's two. One more to go. She suspected the last couple would either be the easiest or the
hardest.

Ashara Dayne finally turned to the two Targaryens, and she told them "Jon, you grew up not
knowing who you were. Daenerys, you grew up on the run because of who you were. Neither of
you knew very much about the other until Lady Dacey's company arrived in Pentos. By then, both
of you already had someone else in your lives. Alas, much has changed since then. Both of you lost
your significant others and your babes at the exact same time. As someone whose beloved was
murdered by a cruel tyrant and whose daughter died in childbirth, no one knows better what you
two have been through than I. Now, after Brandon Stark died, I never found love again. I could
have tried to if I wanted to, but I never did. I will not use my circumstances as an excuse. I may
have gone into hiding, but Greywater Watch had a fine selection of eligible bachelors. Any one of
them could have made a suitable replacement for Brandon. I ended up sharing a bed with a few of
them, but none of my relationships ever advanced past that stage. In spite of that, I have come to
partly regret never being able to start over with another man. So, I encourage you; do not make my
mistake. You should seize this opportunity while-"
"Let me stop you right there, my lady," Jon interrupted as respectfully as possible. At that, Ashara Dayne quieted down and listened to what the Targaryen prince had to say.

All of a sudden, Jon wrapped his left arm around Daenerys' upper body and pulled her close. In turn, she wrapped her right arm around his waist and held him close to her. They both looked at Lady Ashara and smiled widely.

The Dornishwoman was dumbfounded. What is going on?

She got an answer a few seconds later. Jon informed her "The day before we left Braavos, Lord Tyrion had a very similar conversation with us."

"He pointed out that both of us knew exactly what the other was going through," Daenerys illuminated, "He also mentioned that we still had a chance to replace what we lost. He subtly suggested that we… 'aid' one another in that pursuit."

"At first, we assumed he only made that suggestion as a way to resolve both our adversities at the same time," Jon pronounced, "But as we spent more time together, we came to realize that Lord Tyrion's proposal had some appeal. Interestingly, Rickard's grandmother mistook us for a couple when we first met her."

Yes, Lady Dacey and her son Alyver told me of that. Lady Daliah Clegane also assumed Alyver's brother Torrhen was Jon and Dany's child. I can only imagine how delightfully awkward that must have been.

"We took some time to reflect on this matter while we were apart," Daenerys reminisced, "When Jon got back from King's Landing, we brought it up again. By the end of that conversation… we came to realize that there really was more between us than just the bond of aunt and nephew."

"So, for the last three weeks, we have been seeing each other in secret," Jon revealed.

"Why keep it secret?" asked Jasper.

"We didn't want to become a subject of gossip," Daenerys elucidated, "Especially when you consider how previous relationships between two Targaryens have turned out."

"Well, according to Mollander, the belief that incest caused madness was actually false," Rickard pointed out, "The Conclave was to blame for your father's mental illness, not the fact that your grandfather and grandmother were siblings, too."

"I suppose that's true," said Daenerys, "Even so, Jon and I would like to keep our new relationship a secret from the rest of the moat for at least a little while longer. So, if you all would not mind…?"

"You have my word; I'll stay quiet," Rickard assured them.

"No one will hear of it from me," Sansa pronounced.

"I won't tell a soul," Jasper declared.

"Neither will I," Arya remarked.

The Dornishwoman lightly grinned and professed "If that is what you wish, I will not speak of this to anyone."

"Thank you," Jon and Daenerys said in unison gratefully.
"In any case, I hope all of you find happiness in your newfound relationships," Ashara told the six young adults, "So now, more than ever, you must promise me that you will survive the Long Night."

Crown Prince Jasper Baratheon leaned forward and announced, "With the gods as our witnesses, my lady, we will do everything in our power to honor your request."

Prince Jon Targaryen, Princess Daenerys Targaryen, Lord Rickard Clegane, Lady Sansa Stark, and Lady Arya Stark all muttered in agreement.

Ashara Dayne felt very content at this time. She found comfort in the knowledge that the future generation of Westeros was secure. Still, she was slightly envious of these six young adults around her. All of them had found someone they could spend their lives with and raise a family with, whereas her own chance to have such things had passed by long ago.

That was not to say she was all alone in the world. She still had her brother, her godchildren, her charges, and plenty of friends. *I also have Ser Barristan,* she reminded herself with a smirk. *Whatever else happens, I'll always have my memories of Barristan the Bold.*
Prospects And Requirements

Chapter Notes

Note: This is perhaps the dullest chapter in the entire fanfic. Truth be told, I got bored just WRITING parts of it. That may just be my personal opinion, though, and I'm simply not taking enough pride in my work. Anyway, this will be the last "buildup" chapter. Four of the remaining seven chapters (including the next one) will be heavily action-based. By the way, before you read this update, there is one thing I would like to declare: I do not hate the British. A number of my friends in real life are from the United Kingdom, actually. Nor do I hate people of any other nationality. In addition to that, no character in this story is ever meant to – at any time – voice or embody my own ideals or beliefs. Just felt the need to mention this, in case some of you get the wrong idea about a few particular passages in this chapter.

The return trip south to the Wall had been a long and arduous one. More so than the initial trip north because unlike then, they had to escort a grumbling elderly wildling and his wives and daughters south against their will. Thankfully, they made it back to Castle Black without incurring any further loss of life.

Once they reached the Wall, the journeying was over for Uncle Benjen, Craster, and the rest of the Night's Watchmen and the Free Folk. For Bran Stark, however, the journey was only halfway complete.

Although Bran was tired when he reached Castle Black, he only allowed himself an hour's respite before he set out again. The only reason he even stayed that long was so he could ensure Uncle Benjen dispatched a message to Moat Cailin, telling them of his impending visit. After the raven went south, Bran soon followed after it. He was accompanied by Meera, Jojen, Summer, Summer's father, Father's seventeen remaining guards, and Thoros of Myr, the only Legionnaire who had survived the Fist of the First Men. And, of course, their prisoner.

Bran was determined to reach Moat Cailin as soon as humanly possible. He would have been willing to skip meals and sleep if it meant getting there faster. Had he been travelling alone or with just the direwolves, he might have done just that. Alas, his human companions insisted on stopping periodically to eat or rest, and he could not deny them either. As tempted as Bran was to leave them behind, he knew he could not afford to. He needed them to help him transport Hodor to Moat Cailin.

Even so, Bran did not permit any unnecessary stops. Nor did he linger any longer than what was required. He allotted one hour for meals and no more than five for sleeping. Anyone who could not comply with that arrangement would be left behind. He did not even care if there was a blizzard. Instead of seeking shelter from the storm, they braved it.

Bran did not even stop to enter his ancestral home when he passed it. Other than his uncle, he had not spoken to any member of his family since before he began apprenticing under Bloodraven, almost nine months ago. I've missed them all terribly, but I have no time for visits.

Due to his newfound abilities as the Three-Eyed Raven, Bran was already aware that his father, sisters, and cousin were at Moat Cailin. At present, his mother and brothers were still in
Winterfell. *I will see them after I've spoken to Lord Gregor*, he decided. A discussion with the Mountain was his top priority. Everything else would have to wait.

After riding for nearly a fortnight, Bran finally made it to Moat Cailin. He and his party had hardly encountered any other people during their venture through the North. Yet when the moat was within their view, they came upon a camp. "Large" was much too simple to describe the camp; it was massive. From the very center, the crowd went on for miles in every direction. Bran had never seen so many people in one place. *Even Robb's wedding was not this packed.*

Even more noteworthy than the crowd's size was its diversity. There were people of all manner of backgrounds gathered there. Not only from Westeros, but from Essos, as well.

Dothraki seemed to comprise the largest percentage of the army. At a glance, around one in every three individuals had braided hair. Although they generally went around topless, the North was hardly an appropriate place for that practice. Currently, the horselords were all clad in fur coats. *The climate obviously does not agree with them, but at least they are not complaining.*

In addition to the largest *khalasar* ever, there were multiple sellsword companies throughout the camp. Those included the Windblown, the Second Sons, the Stormcrows, and what was left of the Golden Company. There were also a hundred Volantenes in service to the grandchildren of Triarch Maegyr.

As Bran drew closer to the moat, he began to see some more familiar faces and banners. There were Dornishmen, Reachmen, Ironborn, Stormlords, Crownlords, Westerlords, Ironborn, Riverlords, Valemen, and, of course, Northmen. A number of his fellow Northmen recognized Bran as he rode through the crowd. They called out to him as a show of respect. Other than a nod or a light wave, he did nothing to acknowledge them.

Finally, after traversing through that enormous camp, Bran reached the concrete wall that formed the northern border of the grounds of Moat Cailin. On a typical day, the gate in that wall would be closed. However, given all the people who had been moving between the moat and the camp lately, it was being kept open on a regular basis. Even so, it was still heavily guarded.

As Bran and his companions approached the gate, one of the guards stood in their way and demanded "Who approaches?"

"Brandon of House Stark, second son of Lord Eddard," Bran replied in his best "lordling" voice.

The guard promptly bowed his head and stated "Welcome, milord. If you are searching for your lord father, I believe he is presently in the Captains' Tower."

"I thank you for telling me this," Bran remarked, "However, my father's whereabouts are not my most immediate concern. Do you know where I might find Lord Gregor Clegane at this hour?"

"Alas, I do not," the guard admitted, "Lord Gregor's schedule is usually quite inconsistent. Of late, even more so. My apologies for not being of use."

"It is no bother," Bran muttered. *I'll just locate him myself.* He relaxed in his saddle and opened his third eye. After taking a moment to search his surroundings, he found what he was looking for. His mind returned to his body, and he told the gate guard "If you will excuse me, ser, I will be on my way."

"Of course, milord," the guard acknowledged, stepping aside for the second son of Winterfell.

Bran Stark swiftly entered the grounds of Moat Cailin. The moat was bustling with just as much
activity as the camp to its immediate north.

Meera brought her horse up next to Bran's, and she asked him "Where are we going?"

"The Meeting Tower," Bran answered her. That was where he had found Lord Gregor with his third eye. At present, the Mountain was in a meeting with the secret council. Kinvara and Mollander were in attendance, as well. Fortunately, the meeting appeared to be reaching its end. *I must hasten there before they disband.*

Thoros of Myr escorted Bran and the others to the Meeting Tower, as he was the one most familiar with Moat Cailin's layout. Even without the red priest, Bran could have gotten there without having to ask anyone for directions. *One of the many advantages of being the Three-Eyed Raven; I can never get lost now.* That was how he managed to join up with Uncle Benjen and the other survivors from the Fist.

When they got to the Meeting Tower, Bran gave the order to dismount. Almost everyone was able to do this without assistance. However, it took the combined efforts of Alyn, Hayhead, and Quent to pull Hodor down from the sturdy black destrier that had carried him from Castle Black to the moat.

Hodor had irons on his wrists and ankles, and a sack was pulled over his head. The bag had only been removed to give him food, and after they left the Wall, he had only been fed once a day. *Starving him might make him less defiant and more willing to cooperate,* Bran supposed.

Hodor had barely spoken at all since his first encounter with Summer's father. For some reason, he had gone back to saying nothing but "Hodor." As such, Bran was the only living person who had ever seen the stableboy speak anything other than his name in the last twenty years. *But that does not matter. Even if he has everyone else fooled, I know he is merely putting on some mummer's farce.*

Bran went inside the Meeting Tower, followed by the wolves, his friends, his allies, and Hodor. They made their way to the building's main conference chamber. By the time they got there, the secret council's meeting had ended. Luckily, the council members had not left yet.

A few seconds later, the door to the chamber opened, and the council members started to file out. Bran identified Ser Lothor Brune, Ser Danwell Frey, Lord Willas Tyrell, Harren Botley, Prince Oberyn Martell, Ser Wendel Manderly, Tormund Giantsbane, Eddison Tollett, Ser Gerion Lannister, Allard Seaworth, and Lady Dacey Clegane. They exited the chamber in that order.

The novice from the Citadel known as Mollander and the red priestess who called herself "Melisandre" were the next to step out. As always, Lord Gregor Clegane was the last to leave. That was when Bran came forward.

"Lord Gregor!" the wolf boy exclaimed, hastily moving towards the tallest man there.

The Mountain turned when he heard his name. When he saw who had called him, he grinned and said "Ah, Lord Bran Stark. We have been expecting you."

*Good.* When Bran reached the Lord of Moat Cailin, he folded his arms and stated, "Then I assume you know why I'm here."

"You seek an audience with myself, Lady Melisandre, and Mollander," Lord Gregor said bluntly.

"That is correct," Bran affirmed, "I must speak with the three of you at once. This is not a request."
He spoke in a tone with as much steadfastness as a boy of ten namedays could muster. *I pray that will be enough to earn his compliance.* All Bran could really do at this time was issue a demand. He knew there was no way he would come off as daunting or tough to someone as strong and influential as Gregor Clegane. Aside from that, Lord Gregor was King Robert's Master of Order. As long as he held that title, no one outside of the Royal Family would ever dare to cross him or make an enemy of him without shouldering a great deal of risk.

Be that as it may, Moat Cailin was a part of the North, and the northern branch of House Clegane was a vassal of House Stark. In matters outside of peacekeeping, Lord Gregor's family was still subject to Bran's. If need be, Bran was willing to exercise his status as a son of Stark to force Lord Gregor into heeding his demands.

Fortunately, it did not appear that would be necessary. Just a few seconds later, Lord Gregor nodded and said "As you wish, my lord. As it happens, I have no other urgent business to attend to at this moment."

"Neither do I," said "Melisandre."

"Nor I," said Mollander,"So, shall we relocate to the Lord's Tower?"

"Perhaps we should," the Red Woman commented, "The Mountain's solar is usually more secure and comfortable."

"In there will suffice," Bran Stark asserted, gesturing to the open door of the conference chamber. *I have no intention of delaying this talk for even a single minute more. Besides, after spending most of the last fortnight in a saddle, climbing the tallest tower in Moat Cailin is the lastthing I want to do right now.*

"Very well," Gregor Clegane conceded. He gazed around at the people who had just left the conference chamber, and he announced, "Melisandre, Mollander, head back inside. Everyone else, you are dismissed for the rest of the day."

Lady Dacey Clegane and the other ten men on the secret council proceeded to depart from the area. At the same time, the red priestess and the novice from the Citadel reentered the conference chamber. As Lord Gregor prepared to follow them inside, he gestured for Bran to do the same.

The wolf boy turned to Meera, Jojen, and the Stark guards, and he told them "Stay out here. Keep a close eye on him."

They all knew he was referring to Hodor. Bran suspected he would have need of the treacherous stableboy fairly soon. Before he got that far, however, he would have to carefully address a certain subject related to Hodor, and he would have to bring that up all on his own. At any rate, the Reeds and the guards agreed to remain without until he summoned them.

After Bran entered the conference chamber, Lord Gregor went in right after him. He then closed and locked the door, and he held his arm out to the large table in the center of the room, saying "Take any seat you'd like, my lord."

While there were over a dozen chairs to choose from, Bran simply picked the one closest to him. After sitting down, he impatiently waited for the three adults to take their own seats. Once they were all settled, Lord Gregor turned to Bran and uttered inquiringly "Now, my lord… what can we do for you?"

Bran gave a very straightforward response: "Let us discuss the source."
"Certainly," the Mountain remarked. His tone was very frank.

"We anticipated that that was at least one of the reasons for your visit, my lord," "Melisandre" claimed.

"Indeed," Mollander debated, "What other reason would you have for speaking to the three of us alone?"

Bran was not surprised by how candid the three of them were being. As far as I know, the source is the only thing the three of them have in common. They must have known that I realized that, and thus, they expected it to be a chief topic of this meeting.

"So, what would you like to discuss?" Lord Gregor queried.

"I wish to discuss the source itself," Bran proclaimed, looking around the table, "Are you aware that for the last several months, I have been north of the Wall?"

"Yes, we're aware," Mollander claimed, "Your uncle mentioned it in his missive."

Even if he hadn't, you would have been aware, anyway. "Do you know what I was doing up there?"

"You were studying under the Three-Eyed Raven," "Melisandre" responded.

"Correct," Bran murmured, "However, that is not yet common knowledge. I suppose you three know of it because of the source?"

"That is right," Gregor Clegane confirmed, leaning back in his chair, "We also know that now that you have returned to the Seven Kingdoms, you have effectively succeeded Bloodraven. As a result, you can see everything now."

"It is as you say," stated Bran, "Everything that ever is or was, it is now within my sight. I know Lord Gregor made my aunt disappear from the world and then gave her a new identity so that she could start over in it. I know Mollander has been helping a female acolyte infiltrate the Citadel whilst keeping her own identity a secret. I know Lady Melisandre is using someone else's face to cover up her real identity. Is that not right, Kinvara?"

When he said that, he glared over at the sole female in the room. If she or her male colleagues were astonished by Bran's words, none of them showed it. The Red Woman nonchalantly brought her right hand up to the pendant around her throat and pressed down on the ruby. In response, her appearance began to change. Her hair grew slightly shorter and darker, her face became younger and less wrinkled, and she gained a few inches in height.

"Very good, my boy," Kinvara muttered, once her true façade was revealed. It sounded like praise, but she may have meant it as mockery.

"That is impressive, lad," Mollander claimed, "However, you are not the only one who knows of those private facts. At least one other person outside this room is aware of each of them. As it happens, none of those people even have the source."

"I know that, too," Bran professed, "However, that is not the point I am trying to make."

"Then, with all due respect, what is your point?" Lord Gregor enquired. He seems disinterested, Bran noted.

Even so, he provided an answer. He explained "At some point in your lives, all three of you have
been an accomplice to making someone pretend to be someone else. Unbeknownst to everybody else, you yourselves have been pretending, as well. In point of fact, you are pretending to be someone else just by being alive."

That statement seemed to perplex the three adults. Kinvara said inquisitively "What do you mean?"

Bran gravely pronounced "What I mean is that while the three of you may have been born into this world, you are not native to it. Instead, you are native to a universe where Westeros, Essos, and the rest of the Known World only exist as a story told in many forms."

Bran paused here and waited for a response to that statement. He got none. All three of them were rendered speechless. *I seem to have backed them into a corner.* He folded his arms and murmured "Since you are not even bothering to argue against that accusation, I have all the proof I need to confirm that it is true. Therefore, I propose that we end this charade. Once we've done that, we can focus on truly important matters."

Bran was trying not to come off as smug or haughty. He hated it when his elders talked down to him like that. He was certain that grownups were even less content when children spoke to them in such a way. *I mustn't anger them. I still need their assistance, and I will not get that if they're angry with me.* To ensure their cooperation, he would have to continue showing them proper respect.

"What is it you want of us, Bran?" Gregor Clegane asked. Candid, as ever.

"Honesty, my lord," the wolf boy replied, "I want the three of you to tell me the truth of who you are. The entire truth."

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Kinvara proclaimed.

"Not so fast," Mollander promptly refuted, "I think we should tell him."

At that, Kinvara glared at the novice incredulously and snapped "I thought we were past this."

"No, we're only past telling our significant others," Mollander countered, "Even now, I still think we should have done that. If we had, we may have been better prepared for this."

"Or we might have landed ourselves in an even worse predicament," Kinvara debated, "Telling anyone about our world is out of the question. That's what we decided."

"No, it's what we decided back then," Lord Gregor pointed out, "As both of you may recall, we decided that by vote. I sided with you once before, Melanie. I can tell your position has not wavered since then. Nor has Roger's. But this time, the circumstances are much different. So, I'm going to have to cast my vote in his favor. I am sorry, but I believe we should come forward."

Kinvara was quiet for a minute. Then she lightly sighed and mumbled "Alright, Gregory. Far be it from me to throw this world's one truly democratic group into disarray."

Bran was fascinated. *Why are they suddenly calling each other by different names?* Then it occurred to him. *Those must be the names they had in this other world.* He already knew Hodor – or Walder, as he was once called – used to go by the name of Stephen Ward.

Lord Gregor Clegane turned towards Bran Stark, and he declared "We will tell you everything you wish to know, Bran. In turn, I would like you to answer any questions we have."

"That is fair," Bran stated. *I already meant for this to be an exchange of information, not an extortion.*
Lord Gregor then sat up straight and asked, "Where should we start from?"

"You can start by telling me your real names," Bran proposal.

"Gregory Welch," the Mountain revealed.

"Melanie Hamilton," the Red Woman disclosed.

"Roger Dunn," the Conclave spy proclaimed. "If you'd like, you can call us by those names. But only when no one else is around."

Bran nodded, and he asked "Did you know one another… before?"

"No," Gregory Welch replied, "The three of us all belonged to the same country, but we never met. Until recently, we were complete strangers, even in this world."

"I see," Bran muttered, "Can you tell me why or how you came to this world?"

"We cannot," Roger Dunn confessed, "Even now, that remains a mystery to us. All we can do is speculate."

"The only thing we do know is that we can never go back to our original world," Melanie Hamilton remarked, "You see, we all died there."

Just like Hodor. I mean, Stephen. He recalled that Stephen Ward claimed to have committed suicide in the other world. He wondered if these three had done the same. "May I ask how you died? Did you by any chance… take your own lives?"

The three adults seemed astounded by the suggestion.

"We most certainly did not," Roger Dunn asserted, "I will admit that at the end of my first life, I wanted to die. Nonetheless, my death was an accident. Granted, the accident was mainly due to negligence on my part."

"My death was also an accident," Melanie Hamilton pronounced, "But in my case, someone else's negligence was to blame."

"I was murdered," Gregory Welch illuminated. Bran was stunned by how bluntly he said that. "Fortunately, the person responsible for my death did not outlive me by long."

Bran was intrigued. Then they all died before their time. That made him wonder about something. He murmured enquiringly "How much time passed between your deaths in that world and your arrival in this one?"

"None," Roger informed him, "The instant after we died there, we were reborn here. Our last memories of that life were immediately followed by our first memories of this life."

"There was nothing in-between," Melanie affirmed, "No lights, no darkness, no noise, or anything."

"It could be the work of the gods," Bran thought aloud.

"That would be the most logical explanation," Gregory admitted, "After all, the only things I can think of that would be powerful enough to transport people between worlds are divine beings."

"Unless it's in the realm of science fiction," Roger contended.
Gregory rolled his eyes. He mumbled "Yes, science fiction franchises would be an exception. But this world is a fantasy one. Fantasy and science fiction have a very clear distinction."

"Which is…?” Roger beckoned him to go on.

"Fantasy keeps everything within the boundaries of human comprehension," Gregory argued, "It carefully follows its own laws. Science fiction, on the other hand, violates all laws, including its own."

Roger shrugged and remarked "Perhaps. I still don't agree with all that stuff about 'divine beings,’ though. I understand that you and Melanie believed in God before all this, Gregory. But I was an atheist in my first life. Even after coming here, my beliefs have not changed."

"No one is asking you to change them, Roger,” Melanie assured the novice from the Citadel.

"I know, and I am grateful for that,” Roger claimed.

Bran said nothing as the three adults talked amongst themselves. He was once again intrigued by the subject of their conversation. *Science fiction and fantasy? What are those? Could they be types of stories? And do the people of this other world only believe in one god? If any?*

"Might we continue?” Bran interjected, trying to be patient.

"Yes, we should stay on-topic,” Gregory pronounced, "However, before you present us any more questions, there is something we would like to ask you first, Bran."

"Very well, my lord,” Bran agreed.

The tall man looked the wolf boy directly in the eye, and he asked him "How is it you came to know the truth of the source? Is it something you discovered as the Three-Eyed Raven?"

Bran had been expecting some questions such as those to be asked at some point. Thankfully, he had already prepared an answer. He revealed "No, it is not. My new capabilities as the Three-Eyed Raven actually had almost nothing to do with how I learned of your origins. Even Ser Brynden Rivers did not know who you three really were. All he knew was that you were somehow unique."

"Unique in what way?” Melanie queried.

"According to Ser Brynden, whenever someone with the source was born in the Known World, an anomaly appeared,” Bran elaborated.

"'An anomaly?’” Roger repeated.

"That was the only term he ever used, ser,” Bran disclosed, "Now that I have succeeded him, I can sense the presence of people with the source, as well. As such, I have also come to realize why Bloodraven did not provide a clearer description. People with the source give off a very different aura from other people. This aura is difficult to describe, but it makes the three of you and those like you seem quite out of place, almost as though you do not belong in the Known World."

"Well, that figures,” Roger commented, "We don't belong in the Known World. We didn't ask to come here. We didn't know we would come here. Yet here we are, and because of us, Westeros is now radically different from what it would have been."

*Yes, and apparently, that is mostly for the better.* Bran said inquisitively "Is that for your benefit or the Seven Kingdoms?"
"Both," Gregory replied, "We are looking out for everyone's best interests, including our own."

Stephen Ward made that same claim. Thankfully, Roger Dunn, Melanie Hamilton, and Gregory Welch appeared to have a more practical and less insane interpretation of what was best for the Known World. Aside from that, all three of them had already proven that they had no evil intentions. After all, Gregor Clegane had unified the living inhabitants of Westeros, Kinvara had brought dragons back into existence, and Mollander had acquired the means to expose and remove the corruption plaguing the Conclave.

"So, you can sense all the people who are like us?" Melanie asked rhetorically.

"That is correct," Bran Stark confirmed, "However, there are a few conditions. Firstly, I cannot determine their exact whereabouts. Although I am sitting and talking with the three of you right here and now, you do not feel any different to me from ordinary people. Proximity seems to have no effect on my abilities whatsoever. Furthermore, if a person with the source remains quiet about it, I cannot even determine that individual's identity."

Roger raised an eyebrow and asked, "How so?"

"When the people with the source first appeared in the world, Ser Brynden did not know who they were," Bran expounded, "He just knew that they were somewhere out there. Their actual identities were hidden from him."

"Then how did he know about us?" Melanie enquired. "For that matter, how did you?"

"I knew because Ser Brynden told me," Bran disclosed, "He knew because you gave yourselves away."

"What do you mean by that?" Gregory queried.

Bran elaborated with "Ser Brynden said that whenever someone with the source talked about the source itself with someone who did not have it, that person's identity was revealed to him. At some point in your lives, each of you shared the source with someone else. So did Yezzan zo Qaggaz and Hizdahr zo Loraq."

That caught Melanie's interest. "Then you know about them, too?"

"Aye, my lady," Bran validated, "By the end of his life, Bloodraven had managed to identify five of the anomalies. I can locate all the ones he already identified. Although the two from Slaver's Bay have passed on, I can still sense the residue of their existences. Their impression on the world is not as strong as it was when they were alive, but it still has not faded away."

"Fascinating," Roger remarked, rubbing his chin, "Tell me something, Bran. Including us and the ones who have died, how many anomalies are out there?"

"As of now, seven," Bran responded.

"There are seven of us in total?" Melanie said in interest.

"That is correct," Bran stated, "Now, I will finally answer your earlier question."

"Which one?" Gregory muttered inquiringly.

"The one about how I know the truth of the source," Bran professed. He then got out of his chair and requested "Please excuse me for a moment."
Bran proceeded to walk over to the entrance of the chamber, unlock the door, and push it open. He poked his head out into the hallway. All the people who had accompanied him from the Wall to Moat Cailin were still gathered without.

"Is everything alright, Bran?" Jojen asked in concern.

"Everything is just fine," the wolf boy assured his friend. He looked over at the Stark guards, and he told them "Bring him in."

Father's men then forced the prisoner onto his feet, and they marched him over to the door to the conference chamber. As they roughly forced him into the chamber, Bran whistled for Summer and his father. The direwolves promptly bounded over to the second son of Ned Stark, and they followed him back into the conference chamber.

Gregory Welch, Melanie Hamilton, and Roger Dunn appeared to be surprised. He wondered if their surprise could be attributed more to the enormous man in shackles with the bag over his head or the fearsome wolf that was even more enormous. Either way, the new arrivals must have made an impact on the three of them.

At Bran's order, the guards forced their prisoner to sit down in one of the chairs next to his. Once they accomplished that, he told the men "Good work. You may go now."

The guards dipped their heads and filed out of the chamber. Once they were out, Bran shut and relocked the door.

As Bran made his way back to his chair, Gregory Welch drew everyone's attention to the only creature in the conference chamber that was even bigger than him. He inquired curiously "Who is this wolf? And why is Summer so attached to him?"

"That's his father," Bran answered both questions at once.

"Really?" Melanie remarked, looking the father direwolf over. "He's… magnificent."

"Indeed," Roger conceded, "And I thought the dragons were extraordinary."

"You speak as though you knew nothing about him," Bran noted.

"We don't," Gregory apprised him, "There was never any mention of the direwolf who sired Summer and his siblings in any version of the saga of Ice and Fire. The direwolf who birthed them was not a key figure, either. Originally, the mother was already dead by the time you, Robb, Jon, and your father found her and her pups. She was never meant to survive long enough to see them grow."

Whereas in this world, she lived to see the pups' first name day. We even gave her a name: Lyarra. It's a pity she perished during the Pentoshi Bloodbath. Had the mother direwolf survived the Bloodbath, she might have been reunited with her mate and their entire litter. Maybe she was always doomed to die, Bran supposed. Still, he knew it was no use lamenting on that loss. Or any other loss that had ever transpired. All men must die. That goes for animals, too.

"Have you given him a name yet?" Melanie asked.

"I have not," Bran confessed, "I have considered a few possible names, but I feel as though none of them would do him justice."

"What about Bigby?" Roger proposed, a bit of amusement in his voice.
Gregory and Melanie chuckled at that. The former of them commented "Good choice."

*Is that meant to be a jape? Or is he being serious? Either way, Bran was not too fond of the Citadel novice's suggestion. That sounds like a name Rickon would come up with.*

"We can bestow a name upon him later," Bran remarked disinterestedly, "Right now, his presence is not of the utmost importance. He is only here for protection."

"Whose protection?" asked Melanie.

"Ours," Bran replied.

"What is he protecting us from?" Roger inquired.

"Him," the wolf boy proclaimed, pointing to the huge, restrained man seated beside him. Bran then stood up in his chair and announced, "If you would, allow me to introduce you to one of the two remaining individuals from your world."

He raised his hand up to the prisoner's head, took ahold of the sack, and swiftly pulled it off.

Roger's eyes widened, Melanie gasped, and Gregory was downright flabbergasted. All three of them murmured in unison "Hodor…?"

The captive just smirked and pronounced "Hodor yourselves."

He was being strangely calm and cheeky about his current predicament. *He suddenly regained his speech again,* Bran observed. *Apparently, he'll let me hear him speak, and he'll let them hear him speak. But no one else. I wonder what he expects to gain from this farce.*

"I assume you are aware that Hodor is not his real name," Bran contended. As the other three adults nodded, he went on with "As you may know, he was born with the name 'Walder.' However, that is not the first name he was ever given, either. His true first name is Stephen Ward."

"The lad speaks the truth," Stephen admitted casually. He gazed around at the other three adults, and he cockily proposed "Might you do me the honor of telling me your names, as well?"

"Roger Dunn."

"Melanie Hamilton."

"Gregory Welch."

When the three of them shared their names with Bran earlier, they had seemed quite reluctant to do so. Now, they did not seem nearly as reluctant, but they did sound rather bitter. Additionally, their expressions of shock and alarm had changed into expressions of curiosity marred with disgust.

"Pleased to meet you," Stephen Ward stated sardonically, "And where do you lot come from?"

"Savannah."

"Cheyenne."

"Seattle."

*Why are they indulging him? They're under no obligation to supply any answers. In spite of that, Bran did not interject. It was not as though that information would help Stephen Ward in any way.*
Nevertheless, he was slightly puzzled by the inconsistent answers they gave to that last question. He declared "I thought you said you were all from the same country, my lord."

"We are," Gregory claimed, "Those are the names of three of our country's cities."

"Oh," Bran acknowledged, "Then pardon my interruption."

"No worries," Gregory reassured him. Melanie and Roger muttered their agreement.

Stephen gave a loud snort. He mumbled bitterly "Ah, Americans. That explains everything."

Bran was startled by this abrupt shift in his behavior. He seemed so annoyed and resentful. A huge contradiction to how laidback and indifferent he was being less than a minute ago.

"Just what the hell is that supposed to mean?" Roger snapped.

"Your actions speak for themselves," Stephen pronounced, "It's just like you people; interfering with the structure and development of other nations. You could not even make an exception for the Known World. It is bad enough that you had to temper with this world's timeline. But that wasn't enough for you. Oh, no; you went even further and decided to introduce things from our world. All those new inventions, languages, songs, foods… You just had to taint Westeros' culture with our own culture."

The three younger adults listened to that spiteful rant in silence. At the end of it, Melanie scoffed. "Funny you should say that. From what I've seen, the world is doing just fine, even with our influence. In fact, I would say it is doing much better."

"She's right," Roger conceded, "We haven't been tainting the Known World. We've been improving it."

"Who said it needed improvement?" Stephen countered.

"Everything and everyone could use some improvement," Gregory debated, "I know there are some people who hate even the very idea of telling a story in a way that diverges from the original version. But you are something else altogether. Can you honestly tell me that a world where bastards born of incest sit the Iron Throne and the Seven Kingdoms are torn apart by civil war is preferable to this?"

Bran was stunned. Was that actually meant to happen? If so, I am glad it did not come to pass. The wolf boy did not know very much about what the Known World would have been like if the people with the source had not interfered, but based on what he had heard so far, it did not sound very appealing. Yet Stephen continues to defend it.

"Perhaps it is not preferable," Stephen contended, "Even so, what you've been doing is an insult to the integrity of the original story."

"And I suppose what you did was not?" Bran sharply refuted.

That remark captured the attention of the other three adults. Roger asked, "What did he do?"

"He killed Bloodraven, ser, and he attempted to hand me over to the Others," Bran disclosed.

Now the three of them were positively shocked. Melanie uttered softly "He did not…?"

"He did," Bran recounted, "Thankfully, before we could reach the Frostfangs, I was rescued by
Summer's father. Before even then, however, he told me all about the source. He told me how every person with the source came here from another world. He told me how the Known World only exists as a story in that other world. He claimed the story began as a series of books, and it was later adapted into a series of theatrical performances. He also claimed to be from a country whose geography paralleled that of Westeros. I believed he called it 'England.'

Roger raised an eyebrow and remarked "An Englishman, huh?"

Stephen nodded, grinning smugly. Melanie muttered "Well, that explains his resentment towards America."

"Was your country at war with his?" Bran inquired.

"It was once," Gregory apprised him, "Twice, actually. Despite being a relatively new nation at the time of those conflicts, America won both times. However, those conflicts took place two centuries before our lifetimes. During that time, England and America became close allies and good friends."

"Yet Stephen does not seem fond of you or your people," Bran noted.

"Sadly, he is not the only one," Melanie disclosed, "America had its fair share of enemies. One of the reasons for that is its foreign policy. Some would say we have a habit of reaching outside our domain, prying into the affairs of the rest of the world, and conforming them to our standards."

"Only because you do," Stephen spat venomously.

"So what if we do?" Roger sharply retorted, "What gives you the right to criticize us for compromising the integrity of other nations? As I recall, England was subjugating weaker, less developed countries well before America was even founded. So was every other fucking European country, for that matter."

"He's absolutely right," Gregory concurred, glaring at Stephen Ward, "So don't you dare criticize us for our own style of interference, you goddamn hypocrite. You have no room to talk, anyway. I mean, turning Bran over to the Army of the Dead? What the hell were you even thinking?"

Stephen scoffed and stated "You three should look at the bigger picture. The Night's King is not out to eradicate all life. He is out to save it. Under his leadership, this world will finally and truly be able to achieve everlasting peace. Why do you refuse to realize that?"

Melanie stared at Stephen as though he had just transformed into an actual giant. She murmured "What in god's name are you talking about? Have you lost your mind?"

"I seem to be the only one still in control of his mind," Stephen debated.

"He is under the impression that the Night's King is the hero of this world's story," Bran enlightened the younger three adults, "Somehow, he is convinced that the Night's King is out to unify humanity, not destroy it."

"What possibly led you to that conclusion?" said Roger, glaring at Stephen.

"Think about it," Stephen suggested, "Humans kill each other all the damn time. Have you ever heard of a wight or a White Walker killing another of its kind? Certainly not. Unlike us, the Others always look out for one another. The Night's King's objective is not global conquest. It's global unification."

"I can actually see how you can be led to believe that," Gregory thought aloud, "That is not to say I
agree with your stance. Quite the contrary; I think it is completely insane. The Others are neither living nor dead. They are somewhere in-between. If they were to succeed in their campaign, what kind of life do you think they would be subjecting the people of the Known World to?"

"Who's to say the Others are mindless?" Stephen disputed. "It might not seem obvious, but they are intelligent beings. While they may fight like an unruly mob, they are clearly organized around a central figure. They know they cannot go over, around, or under the Wall, and they can only get past it by knocking it down. They are even capable of devising strategies to overcome that obstruction."

"Just because a creature is intelligent, that does not mean its lifestyle would be ideal," Melanie contended, "There are plenty of animals that are intelligent. Some are almost as intelligent as we are. But would you ever want to live as an animal?"

"Speaking as a warg, my lady, existing as an animal is not unpleasant," Bran commented. *It can actually be quite enjoyable.* "That is not to say I am siding with Stephen Ward, of course. I still much prefer my own human body."

"Well, Bran, you would be able to keep that body, even if you joined the Army of the Dead," Stephen pointed out.

"Yes, but what would become of his mind?" Gregory argued, "Intelligent or not, the Others are still essentially lawless savages. They do not care about stability or security. All they are doing is forcibly imposing their barbaric way of life upon the rest of the Known World. They are no different from a tyrannical empire."

Roger then smirked and pronounced "Luckily for us, if the real world is any indication, empires are always doomed to fail. Always. You would know that better than us, Stephen."

"What are you talking about?" Stephen Ward mumbled.

"It is true that the British Empire was once something to be reckoned with," Roger professed, "At the height of its power, it occupied more territory than any other empire in history. Then democracy became popular, and empires started to fall out of style. By the start of the 21st century… well, your countrymen couldn't even keep the Irish under control."

The date did not evade Bran's notice. *The twenty-first century? That means their world is at least eighteen hundred years older than ours.* Suddenly, Stephen Ward's claims about all the advanced technology in his world made a bit more sense, and they seemed a little more credible. *In that much time, the Seven Kingdoms could become just as advanced.*

At any rate, Stephen scowled angrily. He spat "Shut your hick mouth, Yank."

"'Yank?'" Melanie uttered in amusement. "Is that the best you can come up with? Nobody says that anymore. Or rather, nobody said that, back in our world."

Roger seemed amused, as well. Gregory, however, was not. He slammed his fist on the table to get everyone's attention. The noise was so loud that it made Summer and his father growl suspiciously. Once the Mountain had everyone's attention once more, he announced "Enough. We are not here to exchange insults like children. We are here to address and handle serious topics. If we keep straying off-topic, we'll be here all day."

"Then let us no waste any more time," Bran proposed. *I narrowly escaped the clutches of the Others. The Night's Watch may have stalled them at the Fist of the First Men, but they are still*
marching south. The only reason Bran had even travelled to Moat Cailin was to find a way to stop the Army of the Dead permanently. He sat up in his chair, and he declared "Lord Gregory, Lady Melanie, Ser Roger, it is time we got to the heart of why I came here. I mean to save the Known World from the Others, and I will need your help to do it."

"Well, fortunately for you, Bran, we already have that same objective," Gregory pronounced, "But tell me; why do you believe the three of us can make such a difference?"

"The same reason I've kept Stephen Ward alive," Bran disclosed, "The four of you know this world better than anyone. That includes me, the new Three-Eyed Raven, and my predecessor, Ser Brynden Rivers. At first, I was reluctant to accept the possibility that I and every other person in the Known World are nothing more than characters in an epic tale. However, I have decided that even if that is true, it makes no difference when all other matters are taken into consideration. This world is still my home, and at present, my home is in grave danger. I will do everything in my power to protect it from those who would bring harm to it. Since this world is now your home, too, I imagine you would do the same. Your familiarity with this world's story would be invaluable to me, as you know how to defeat the Night's King."

Gregory Welch, Melanie Hamilton, and Roger Dunn seemed perplexed. The tallest of them said inquisitively "What led you to that assumption?"

"Since you know this world's story, you must know how it ends," Bran argued.

Gregory, Melanie, and Roger slowly gazed around at each other. They look nervous, Bran noted. How can that be? Then the cause of their discomfort dawned on him. He murmured quietly "Do you mean to tell me you do not know the ending to this world's story?"

"Alas, we do not," Gregory confessed. Roger and Melanie grimly nodded along.

"How can that be?" said Bran, almost demandingly, "Stephen Ward claims he knows how the story ends."

"He must be lying then," Roger supposed.

"Or..." Melanie began, scratching her temple. She turned toward the shackled man, and she queried "When did you die?"

Stephen was under no obligation to answer her question. Even so, he bluntly replied with "The same year the Ice and Fire saga was finally completed: 2026."

The three younger adults were intrigued. Bran was also curious, but for a different reason. He already knew this other world was in its twenty-first century by the time the people with the source died, but he did not know when exactly each of them had left it.

"When did the three of you die?" Bran inquired.

"2018," said Melanie Hamilton.

"2017," said Roger Dunn.

"2016," said Gregory Welch, "All three of us died long before the author finished the book series."

"What about Hizdahr zo Lorrqaz and Yezzen zo Qaggaz?" Bran asked the sole woman in the chamber. Even if they're gone, they might have lived to see long enough in the other world to see this world's story finished. If so, perhaps they passed that knowledge on to the Red Woman.
"They died in 2016 and 2017 respectively," Melanie revealed.

Whatever hope Bran had left, it seemed to vanish at that moment. He assumed in dismay "Then none of you know how the story ended?"

"I'm afraid we do not," Roger admitted glumly.

"However, if Stephen does..." Gregory commented, turning to the prisoner. Bran did not miss the wicked grin that had spread across the Mountain's face. Just looking at that grin made him feel uneasy.

Stephen Ward, however, was unfazed. He pronounced "You're a fool if you think I would ever divulge that information. Do what you want to me. It won't change a thing. I will never talk. Never."

"You might feel that way now," Gregory contended, "But I was a federal operative in my first life. Interrogation was one of my specialties. I know plenty of ways to get suspects to speak. Some of my techniques are so unpleasant that even the Free Folk would call them uncivilized."

"Is this supposed to scare me?" Stephen sardonically retorted, "In my first life, I lived alone in the wild for twenty years. In this life, I spent just as many years pretending to be a lackwit. Do you think that kind of determination can be broken so easily?"

"Not at all," Gregory responded, "But no one's resolve is insurmountable. Every person has a breaking point. I'll just need some time to get to yours."

"For your sake, you better do that soon," Stephen taunted the slightly taller man, "Otherwise, you'll simply end up wasting your precious time with me, and you'll only learn what you want to know when we are both members of the Army of the Dead."

"Is torture even the best way to go?" Roger debated, "I mean, it isn't always an effective or reliable means of acquiring information."

"Maybe there's another way," Melanie thought aloud. She turned to the wolf boy and proposed "Bran, do you think you could warg into Stephen? Maybe you could access his memories."

"That would not work, my lady," Bran proclaimed, "I tried that several times when I was his prisoner, but I had no success. It could be possible that people with the source are immune to waring."

"That makes perfect sense," Roger stated, "Since the power of the Three-Eyed Raven interprets us as anomalies, it would follow that you could not invade our bodies or our minds. We're basically foreign entities, after all."

Bran nodded at that, and then he unleashed a heavy sigh. He muttered "Then it appears our only option is to resort to torture. I just pray we can extract some useful knowledge from Stephen Ward before it is too late. He told me I played an important role in defeating the Others. That was why he intended to give me to the Night's King in the first place. But he never told me just what I did which was so pivotal in the war against the Army of the Dead. I myself am at a loss."

"I may have a theory," Gregory Welch professed. Bran turned towards the tallest man there, and the Lord of Moat Cailin continued with "As you know, Bran, your cousin Jon is the son of your Aunt Lyanna and the late Prince Rhaegar. The Starks are descendants of the First Men, and the Targaryens are from Valyria. The First Men. There were plenty of skinchangers, greenseers, and wargs amongst the First Men. It happens that you, your cousin, and all your siblings are wargs.
However, you are the only one whose abilities have awoken. Furthermore, dragons have returned to the world, and dragons are originally from Valyria, as well. That is why they follow the Targaryens as their masters. But having Targaryen heritage alone is not enough to win the dragons' obedience."

Bran quickly realized where the Mountain was headed. He assumed "Then only someone with the blood of both the First Men and Valyria could hope to fully control a dragon."

"Precisely," Gregory Welch confirmed, "That is where you come in, Bran. You will have to be Jon's guide. You must help him to awaken his abilities. Once you've done that, you must also help him improve and perfect them. The dragons are perhaps our greatest asset against the undead, and we must ensure both their loyalty and their safety. Because if the Night's King manages to kill them, he'll be able to incorporate it into the Army of the Dead."

Bran was astounded. *Dragons in the Army of the Dead?* Just the concept of such a thing made him feel queasy. He murmured in a restless tone "Could that truly happen?"

"It happened in the original story," Melanie apprised him, "Or one version of it, anyway."

"That's how the Others got past the Wall in that version," Roger recalled, "The Night's King slew one of the dragons in battle, revived it, and used its power to annihilate Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. After that, the Others were free to begin their invasion of the Seven Kingdoms."

"We cannot allow that to happen!" Bran exclaimed.

"As long as we take good care of the dragons, it will not," Gregory assured him, "But time is of the essence. We must prepare the dragons for the Others' arrival as soon as possible."

"In other words," Bran thought aloud, gazing at the Mountain, "you want me to start teaching Jon how to control them."

"That is correct," Gregory said with a nod.

"Then I shall do so," Bran decreed, "If you honestly believe it will aid us in our struggle against the Others, I will do everything in my power to accomplish this task, my lord."

"Very good, Bran," Gregory Welch murmured in approval, "I have every confidence you will succeed."

"Your faith in me is most appreciated, Lord Gregory," Bran Stark pronounced, "I am merely relieved that I can be of use to the Legion, and that I can still prepare the Seven Kingdoms for the horrors of the Long Night. I traveled to Moat Cailin in hopes that you, Lady Melanie, or Ser Roger would tell me how to defeat the Night's King. In light of the fact that all three of you died before this world's story could finish being told in your world, I was beginning to worry that I had come all this way for naught."

"Well, actually, Bran," Roger Dunn interjected, "Even if you were unwilling or unable to instruct your cousin Jon, your journey to Moat Cailin would not have been wasted."

"How so, ser?" the wolf boy asked in interest.

"Earlier, you mentioned that the Three-Eyed Raven has the ability to detect the presence of people with the source," Roger recounted.

"Yes, that is what I said," Bran affirmed, "I cannot determine their exact whereabouts, but I can
determine their identities if they discuss the source with people who do not have it."

"Yes, I remember you saying that," Roger muttered. "You also said that there are seven of us altogether. Four are currently in this chamber, and two more died in Slaver's Bay. That brings us to a total of six."

Bran had already figured out where the Citadel notice was going with this issue. He solemnly revealed "I do not know who the seventh one is, ser."

"Damn," Roger mumbled, "Oh, well. It couldn't hurt to ask."

"I suppose not," Bran conceded, "May I ask why you are so interested in this matter?"

It was Melanie who answered this time. She claimed "For a while now, we have been trying to find others like us. Hizdahr, Yezzen, and I managed to search the whole of Essos and every other part of the Known World before they died. As of now, Westeros is the only place left where there might be more. I'm glad to know that our endeavors were ultimately not wasted."

"In fact, Bran, you may be the key to uncovering the identity of the final person from our world," Gregory pointed out, "Is there anything you can tell us about this person? Anything at all? Even the slightest tidbit of information could turn out to be a valuable clue."

"At the very least, I can assure you that the seventh one is still alive," Bran Stark professed, "Even now, I can feel that person's presence. It is not a weak presence like Hizdahr zo Loraq's or Yezzen zo Qaggaz's. If anything, this person's presence is stronger than any of yours."

"Interesting," Roger commented, "Why do you suppose that is?"

"It could be because that individual has been around the longest," Bran conjectured.

"Is that pure speculation, or a legitimate hypothesis?" Gregory inquired.

"The latter," Bran replied, "Bloodraven told me how long each person with the source has lived, as well as when each of them first appeared. The last time one of them arrived in this world was five and twenty years ago. That was when Kinvara was born."

"Then I'm the youngest person with the source?" Melanie presumed.

"Just so, my lady," Bran confirmed, "Your presence is stronger than the two who have died, but it is the weakest of the five who are still living."

"Who is the next weakest?" Gregory queried.

"Mollander," Bran explicated, looking over at Roger, "As it happens, he was the next to last to be born in this world. He was born seven and twenty years ago."

"So, each person born into this world gives off a slightly weaker presence than the one who came before?" Roger speculated.

"That appears to be the case," Bran concurred. "The next eldest was Hizdahr zo Loraq. He was born three and thirty years ago. Currently, he gives off the weakest presence overall, but it was likely stronger than either Mollander's presence or Kinvara's when he was alive. Gregor Clegane was born almost five and thirty years ago; his presence is much stronger than either of theirs. But it is not quite as strong as that of Hodor, who was born seven and thirty years ago. However, Yezzen zo Qaggaz was the oldest one I know of; he was born four and forty years ago. Now that he is
dead, though, only Hizdahr zo Loraq gives off a weaker presence than he."

"Then the seventh person from our world must have been born more than forty-four years ago," Melanie debated.

"Evidently," Roger stated in agreement, "You know, that may be the very clue we need to uncover their identity. Bran, when was the first of us born?"

"I do not know the exact year," Bran confessed, "Even Ser Brynden did not know that. According to him, the oldest person with the source was already around when he became the Three-Eyed Raven."

That revelation seemed to interest all the adults, including Stephen Ward, who had been totally silent for the last several minutes.

"What year did Brynden Rivers become the Three-Eyed Raven?" Melanie asked no one in particular.

"252 A.C.," Gregory responded. I believe that is accurate. Bloodraven did disappear north of the Wall eight and forty years ago.

"Alright, then the first person from our world must have been reborn before then," Melanie contended.

"It would seem so," Gregory pronounced, "Do either of you have your lists?"

"I do," Roger proclaimed, reaching into his robes and pulling out a stack of parchment. "I always keep mine on hand, both for safekeeping and convenience."

"Lists?" Bran said inquiringly.

Again, Melanie explained with "In our search for others like us, we noticed something remarkable. Whenever someone from our world is reborn here, that person's mother suffers a miscarriage about a month before that person is conceived."

"So far, that condition has applied to all of us, including Hodor," Gregory added in, "With that in mind, Mollander thought to put together a comprehensive list of every miscarriage that has occurred in the Seven Kingdoms over the last century. We have used that list as our baseline for locating other people from our world."

"By focusing on certain other factors, we have managed to narrow the list down to less than fifty individuals," Roger proudly declared, "However, this latest development should narrow it down even further. There cannot be more than a dozen suspects who were born over fifty years ago. At this rate, we may be able to uncover the identity of the seventh person before the Others reach the Wall."

"I hope that will be so," Bran commented, "The Others remain our greatest concern. It would be best if all other threats were already neutralized by the time they move to invade us."

"What do you mean 'other threats?'" Gregory noted.

"There is one more thing you should know about my ability to detect people from your world," Bran disclosed, "As I stated previously, I sense the existence of such people by the auras they produce. If I concentrate closely enough on their auras, I can determine their true nature, and I judge it based on how an individual with such a nature would affect Westeros. For example, Gregor
Clegane has by far the most benevolent nature, given all he has done to bring the Seven Kingdoms together. Whereas Hodor's nature is definitely the most malevolent, given his desire to see the Army of the Dead win this war. Kinvara and Mollander's natures are somewhere in-between, but they are much closer to Lord Gregor than to Hodor. Based on what little remains of Hizdahr zo Loraq and Yezzen zo Qaggaz's auras, their true natures were fairly neutral.

"And the seventh one?" Roger bade him to go on.

"Hostile," Bran straightforwardly announced, "Not nearly as hostile as Hodor, but more than enough to warrant our attention. Despite being around longer than any of you, this person has wisely remained quiet about the source. Whether that is due to caution or unwillingness to trust, their silence is cause for alarm. They could have been using the source to their advantage all this time without any of us realizing. I have no way of knowing this for a certainty, but it could very well be possible this person may have had a hand in some of the more recent disasters that have struck the world. Not the least of which would be the Pentoshi Bloodbath." 

"If so, I am all the more motivated to uncover his identity," Roger declared.

"Or hers," Melanie added in, "We cannot assume the person's gender just yet."

"In any case, I would urge you to hurry," Bran advised the adults, "This individual may have been lurking in the shadows for the last fifty years, but he or she could still strike at any moment. They could strike just before our battle with the Others, when all our concentration is directed elsewhere. They could strike during the battle, when we would be vulnerable to attack from all sides. They could even strike after the battle, when we'd be too weak to do anything to stop them, even if we emerge victorious. If we are not careful, this person could even replace the Night's King as the cause of our undoing."

"That will never happen," Gregory Welch asserted, "Gregor Clegane will not let it happen."

"Neither will Kinvara," Melanie Hamilton conceded.

"Nor Mollander," Roger Dunn insisted.

Stephen Ward said nothing. He just sat in his chair, looking rather smug. *He's hoping they'll fail. But as I know full well, hope by itself is insufficient.*

Bran Stark appreciated the others' motivation. He shared it, too. He was once the second son of Winterfell. Back then, he had no obligations, responsibilities, or expectations, other than to show respect to his father and mother and fealty to his elder brother. Now he was the Three-Eyed Raven. As such, it was his duty to preserve, sustain, and defend the Known World, as well as to keep it from falling into oblivion. *And I mean to do just that. I will protect this world from everything that could harm it, including those who came to it from other worlds. I will never allow invaders to destroy all I hold dear.*
Ice was a versatile substance. It could chill warm beverages. It could treat fevers. It could lessen an ache in the head or body. It could perversely food stores for an almost indefinite amount of time. *In the most extreme of cases, it can even form a barricade.*

When Jaime Lannister first saw the Wall in real life, he had been awed by its brilliance for a brief moment. When that moment ended, however, he realized that that brilliance was not so grand as he initially believed. In fact, he found he was indifferent to the structure. *It may be unique in a number of ways, but it is basically just a wall like any other.*

There was nothing truly remarkable about the Wall. Not its size; Casterly Rock was three times higher, and he did not envy the men tasked with maintaining order for over three hundred miles. Not its composition; that much ice only invited a sensation of perpetual coldness. Not its garrison; it was manned in the same fashion as any other stronghold. Not even the fact that it reportedly defended itself; a barrier that could not repel invaders was useless. *What did Tyrion and Ellyn get out of this?*

Last year, Jaime's brother and sister-by-law had visited the Wall for nearly two months. While he could understand their desire to see the Wall, he could not fathom what had compelled them to stay that long. *I have been here two weeks, and I've already had more than my fair share of this experience.*

Despite that, Jaime Lannister was not going anywhere. After all, Tyrion and Ellyn's visit had been for pleasure and unofficial business with the Night's Watch. As such, they had been free to come and go as they pleased. Jaime, on the other hand, was there to prepare for battle. He did not have the luxury of leaving whenever he wished. He was determined to make a stand at the Wall. If need be, he would die there. *I most likely will, and I am prepared for that.*

Jaime Lannister did not fear death. He was always ready to face it. Even so, he would have preferred not to have spent his last days alive in such dreary conditions. He had not seen the Sun since he and his retainers arrived at the Wall. Every day since then, the average temperature seemed to have dropped by at least one degree. Alongside the temperature, the morale of his soldiers seemed to drop accordingly. *If the Others do not get here soon, my men may lose their will to fight completely.* If that possibility did come to pass, Jaime would still permit no insubordination. House Lannister handled deserters the same way the Watch did. *Between myself and the Others, I believe my bannermen would rather take their chances against the Army of the Dead. At least the Night's King might give them a merciful death.*

Currently, it was shortly after noon at Castle Black, but due to the lack of sunlight, it may as well have been midnight. Jaime was sitting outside the blacksmith's workshop. The smith, a grizzled Stormlander named Donal Noye, was being kept very busy. There was a long line of people waiting to see him to have their weapons and armor serviced.

Jaime was not one of those customers. He was only there to rendezvous with two other people. His equipment did not require servicing, anyway. His armor was always polished and free of dents, and the weapon he carried was *Brightroar*, the Valyrian steel ancestral sword of House Lannister. There were only three smiths in the Known World who could temper Valyrian steel, and the one-armed Donal Noye was certainly not one of them.

Jaime had only gotten to the workshop a few minutes earlier. He had come straight from the training yard. Lately, he had been spending much of his time there. The Night's Watch had lost half
its strength at the Fist of the First Men, and many of those who were stationed at Castle Black were new recruits. As a result, Jaime was asked by the surviving officers to help break in the green boys. He had agreed simply because he felt it would be a productive way to pass the time. *For their sake, they better be learning and refining their own techniques. I have no tolerance for those who waste my time.*

Personally, he felt there was not much hope for the boys. Most of them had very little talent with a blade. Some had none whatsoever. Only a few really stood out, but none of them were anywhere near Jaime's level. There were perhaps a couple who *could* get up to his level. Alas, they did not have nearly enough time to get there. Still, the Night’s Watch and their allies would need every fighter they could get when the Army of the Dead came. *A barely competent warrior is still far better than a totally incompetent one. And even the total incompetents could still be useful as shields or diversions.*

In Jaime’s experience, there was only one way to become a formidable swordsman: one had to train and improve their ability constantly. He himself had worked tirelessly to develop his own ability, and it ultimately earned him his knighthood. Every single day since then, he had continued to practice and hone his swordsmanship. He had never allowed himself even one day to rest. Today, there were maybe three men in the Seven Kingdoms who could best him at a duel. Those three were Gregor Clegane, Barristan Selmy, and Robert Baratheon. *Perhaps I could triumph over Ser Barristan and the king under the right circumstances. Be that as it may, I doubt even I could defeat the Mountain in single combat.*

Just then, the entrance to the blacksmith's workshop opened, and two men emerged from it. One was Ser Addam Marbrand, Jaime's closest friend and most loyal vassal. The other was Ser Kevan Lannister, Jaime's uncle and Robert Baratheon's Master of Coin. Both of them had scheduled an appointment with Donal Noye to have their swords sharpened and armor hardened. Based on their facial expressions, they were quite pleased with his services.

They were also the very people Jaime had planned to meet up with. He was prepared to call them over. Fortunately, he did not have to. Immediately after Ser Addam and Uncle Kevan stepped outside, they noticed Jaime sitting on a nearby bench. They made their way over to him, and they respectfully dipped their heads, saying "My lord."

Jaime wanted to scoff and sigh at the same time. Although he was now the Lord Paramount of the Westerlands in every sense, he felt it would be a while before he was accustomed to being addressed as "my lord" all the time. Up until now, most people had just called him "ser," "milord," or "Kingslayer."

Jaime Lannister rose from his bench, nodded at his fellow westermen, and stated "I've been informed you both wished to speak with me. Is that true?"

"Yes, my lord," the two men responded simultaneously.

"Very well," Lord Jaime remarked, "What say we go inside first?"

"I would prefer that," Ser Addam muttered.

"So would I," Uncle Kevan conceded.

The three men departed from the vicinity, leaving behind a long line of individuals who were still waiting to see the Watch's blacksmith. *If they are not careful, they might freeze before they have their turn.*
Jaime Lannister doggedly trudged through the snow with his uncle and best friend. They made their way to Hardin's Tower, which, despite being a broken battlement, could still adequately shelter one from harsh weather and frigidity. *Since no one is using it right now, we can talk there without interruptions or eavesdroppers.* Jaime did not know what exactly these two men wished to discuss, but he had some theories. A few of which were not particularly pleasant.

At one point, Addam Marbrand momentarily halted and shivered. It was obvious to Jaime that he was very cold. Luckily, Addam was not one to complain. *Gods know he has every right to.*

Right now, the yard of Castle Black was illuminated by torches. That was the only source of light anywhere on the fortress's exterior. If not for those torches, the entire area would likely be shrouded in absolute darkness. *Just yesterday, I could barely see past my nose without the aid of the torches. Now, I cannot accomplish even that much.*

"It gets colder and darker every day," Jaime Lannister observed.

"Yes, it does," Ser Addam Marbrand agreed.

"If only those were the only hardships we were up against," Ser Kevan commented.

"Indeed, Uncle," Jaime Lannister murmured. As they made their way to Hardin's Tower, he gazed up at the Wall, and he thought of what awaited them on the other side. He stated "I wonder; is it the cold and the dark that bring the dead? Or is it the dead that bring the cold and the dark?"

"I could not say," Addam admitted, "But if it must be one or the other, I suspect the former."

"That's my belief, as well," Uncle Kevan proclaimed. "As we all know, a long summer is followed by an even longer winter. We just had the longest summer in Westerosi history at ten full years. As such, the next winter is bound to last at least eleven years. Furthermore, just as a longer summer is generally hotter and brighter, a longer winter is generally colder and darker. This dreadful winter would have happened with or without the Others."

"That is a fine point, Ser Kevan," said Addam, "As I recall, the last autumn ended a year earlier than we anticipated. Some might attribute that to the movements of the Night's King. However, now that I think on this, if the Night's King truly had control over the elements, the Army of the Dead could have bypassed autumn altogether."

"Precisely," Uncle Kevan conceded, "Had the Night's King been overeager to invade us, he could have marched on the Seven Kingdoms in the midst of the Great Summer. Yet he waited until now, when the Conclave has already confirmed the changing of seasons. Therefore, this winter is not a result of the Long Night; the Long Night is a result of this winter."

"In other words, even after the Others have been defeated, we will still need to brave the rest of this winter?" Jaime conjectured.

"It would seem so, my lord," Addam supposed.

Jaime suppressed a groan. He could not imagine enduring this nightmarish climate for the whole of the next decade. It was snowing everywhere in Westeros, and the North was receiving the worst of it. *If I somehow survive this war, I am never going anywhere north of Casterly Rock ever again.*

Soon, Jaime and his companions reached Hardin's Tower. Addam removed a nearby torch from its sconce and entered the crumpling building. Jaime and his uncle followed him inside, and Ser Kevan shut the door behind them. The roof of the front room was still intact, and the door had no notable gaps or openings. *This is hardly glamorous, but at least we have some shelter. And some*
privacy.

The three men tried to get comfortable. *Of course, how comfortable can one get in a rundown building amidst a frozen landscape?* When they were settled, Jaime asked the other two men "Now, why did you wish for an audience with me?"

"We simply have some questions we would like to ask of you," Addam Marbrand disclosed, "This is not what you would call a pressing matter, but I assure you we are not wasting your time, my lord."

"Addam, there is no need for formality," the new Lord of Casterly Rock stated, "It is the just the three of us here. You can call me 'Jaime.'" Ser Addam did not seem convinced. "Are you certain that will not be inappropriate, my lord?"

"Of course," Jaime assured his best friend. He then smirked and uttered "I could *order* you to address me by my given name."

"That will not be necessary," Addam assured the young blond man, grinning in amusement, "If you insist, I will only call you 'Jaime' when we're alone."

"Good," said Jaime. *He's hasn't forgotten that we grew up as comrades.* Now that the issue of addressing one another was out of the way, Jaime Lannister told the two men "Proceed with your questions at your leisure. I'll answer them as best I can."

"There are two key issues we would like to discuss with you, Jaime," Uncle Kevan revealed, "The first one directly pertains to the situation at hand."

"Go on," Jaime beckoned them.

"It has been a fortnight since we came to Castle Black," Kevan stated, "Twice as much time has elapsed since we left Moat Cailin. Undoubtedly, you have noticed you are the only head of the Great Families that has travelled this far north. Even Lord Eddard Stark is not here at present, despite the fact his own brother is the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch."

*For less than a turn of the moon, that is.* In the aftermath of Lord Jeor Mormont's demise at the Fist of the First Men, the Night's Watch had been in a hurry to select his successor. Benjen Stark had been elected as the next Lord Commander in a landslide victory. *He will likely be the last man to ever hold that title,* Jaime supposed.

"Is there a point to what you are telling me, Uncle?" the Lord of Casterly Rock queried impatiently.

"Of course, there is," Kevan asserted, "Ser Addam and I have been meaning to bring this subject up for a while now. The only reason we have not is because you've been so preoccupied with your duties and other obligations. Now that we have your attention, we can address the issue. So, tell us; out of all the Lords Paramount, why did King Robert only order *you* to reinforce the Wall?"

"He didn't," Jaime responded plainly, "I volunteered."

Ser Addam seemed perplexed. "You… volunteered? For *this?*"

"Yes, I did," Jaime confirmed. *Needless to say, I'm starting to regret it, but it's no use lamenting on that now.*
"May I ask why?" said Addam.

Jaime was tempted not to give an answer. Truthfully, it was a very personal matter that had led him and his bannermen to where they were now. However, there was a very big chance that they would never go back to the Westerlands. I suppose they at least have a right to know why they may be sacrificing their lives here at the end of the civilized world.

Jaime sighed deeply and pronounced "In light of my father's... treacherous and deplorable actions, great shame has been brought upon House Lannister and, by extension, the whole of the Westerlands. As such, I believe steps must be taken so that my family and those who are sworn to it can repair the damage caused by those foul misdeeds."

Kevan raised an eyebrow and muttered "Do you mean to say you brought us all the way out here in effort to regain your honor?"

"Who said anything about my honor?" Jaime refuted, "I care not for my own honor, Uncle. I forsook it long ago, when I broke my oath to the Kingsguard and slew the Mad King. Be that as it may, my brother, sister, nieces, nephews, daughters, and vassals have done nothing so irredeemable. They deserve better than to suffer disgrace because my lord father was too blinded by power to see the extent of his wrongdoings."

"I... understand your motivations, Jaime," Ser Addam claimed, "No one will deny that the Pentoshi Bloodbath was a grave offense to all of Westeros. But I do not believe all the Westerlords should atone for that catastrophe simply because their liege lord was the one to orchestrate it."

"This is not just about the Pentoshi Bloodbath, Addam," Jaime contended. "This grievance goes well beyond that. Think back to Robert's Rebellion. At my father's command, the Westerlands stood idle for most of the war, swearing neutrality until victory was within one side's grasp. Some may call that caution. I call it cowardice. That will not happen this time."

"So, for those reasons, your objective is for history to say that the Westerlords formed the Seven Kingdoms' first line of defense in the struggle against the Others?" Kevan Lannister presumed.

"It would be ideal if such an outcome was to actually transpire," Jaime debated, "As of now, however, we cannot predict how this war will end. For all we know, when the fighting is over, there will be no one left to pass on the tale of the second coming of the Long Night. If so, I mean for the westermen to go out on their feet, not on their backs or knees. And should humanity be fortunate enough to overcome this hardship, I do not intend to be remembered only as the firstborn son and successor of a tyrant and a murderer. Nor do I intend for the Westerlands to be remembered only as a malicious or indifferent country. This is the perfect opportunity for us to finally distinguish ourselves and prove our worth to the rest of the Known World."

Fortunately for Jaime, that monologue was what ultimately convinced Ser Addam Marbrand and Ser Kevan Lannister to understand his true reasons for volunteering. By now, they seemed to have embraced the logic behind his intentions. In any case, he was quite relieved to put an end to this argument. Jaime Lannister was proficient at conflicts that involved swords and shields, not the type that relied on negotiations and wits. That is Tyrion's specialty.

"Well, if nothing else, the Night's Watch will appreciate our assistance," Addam contended.

"Indeed," Uncle Kevan concurred, "After that crushing defeat they suffered at the Fist, I doubt they can properly man the Wall with their remaining forces. Of course, our numbers are not nearly great enough to repel the Army of the Dead, but at the very least, our presence should help reinforce the Wall and provide the Watch some much-needed additional strength."
It may very well be that the only thing we'll really accomplish is stalling or delaying the Others' advance for a short time. Even if that turned out to be the case, it would still be enough for Jaime Lannister. They would at least buy some time for the Royal Army and the rest of their allies to prepare for a full-scale invasion. As long as his soldiers managed to achieve some noble purpose, Jaime would be content with whatever fate awaited him.

"I want you two to tell me honestly," Jaime pronounced, "Do you believe this is a foolhardy endeavor?"

"I may have thought that before," Ser Addam confessed, "However, now that you've given some insight, my stance has changed. I am convinced you are only trying to do the right thing, Jaime."

"As am I," Uncle Kevan claimed. If only that knowledge could somehow bolster the morale of our units.

"Both Uncle Gerion and the King advocated my decision to come here," Jaime recalled, "I am somewhat relieved the two of you have chosen to give it your support, as well."

"Think nothing of it, Jaime," said Addam, "We trust you, and we just your judgement.

Let us hope your trust does not turn out to be misguided. Already, the men are restless. Jaime then folded his arms and remarked "You said there were two issues you wished to discuss, and only this one relates to our present condition."

"That is correct," Kevan confirmed, "The other is a much more... personal affair."

"What do you mean?" Jaime inquired.

Addam hesitated before he clarified with "We are hoping you might be willing to talk about that missive we received shortly after we arrived at Castle Black."

Jaime furrowed his brow and scowled. Well, I suppose I should have foreseen this. Even so, he dreaded this subject. In fact, he loathed it with every fiber of his being. But until it was properly addressed, there was no escaping it.

"What is it you want me to say?" Jaime said calmly.

"We just want to know if there is any truth to those allegations," Addam Marbrand stated, "I know it is beyond insolent and meddling to ask a man about his personal life, especially when that man is one's liege lord. Even so... this could affect a great many people."

"Of course, when you consider the much greater threat we are faced with, this issue is virtually insignificant by comparison," Kevan Lannister argued, "Be that as it may, unless humanity is wiped out completely, the problem will not simply vanish, regardless of what transpires here at the Wall. Even if you somehow manage to kill the Night's King, Jaime, you will still have some explaining to do."

"Indubitably, Uncle," Jaime uttered irately. I saved King's Landing, and all that earned me was my moniker 'Kingslayer.' I would not be surprised at all if a similar outcome came about here, as well.

Two days after Jaime Lannister and his bannermen arrived at Castle Black, a raven had flown in from Moat Cailin. The missive it carried had been addressed to Jaime, and it had contained a most unsettling piece of news. The news involved a certain aspect of Jaime's past. My distant past, but the amount of time does not seem to matter here.
According to the missive, the Faith Militant had attempted to arrest Queen Cersei earlier that week when she went to pray in the Great Sept of Baelor. It was only by the timely intervention of Ser Boros Blount and Ser Preston Greenfield that she was not taken.

Initially, the Faith Militant had been revived in effort to maintain order in King's Landing and enforce justice. That arrangement had worked just fine for a while. Recently, however, the Faith Militant had been getting more and more ruthless in their methods. By now, their domain had spread throughout all of King's Landing. *It appears even the royal family is not safe from them now.* Even the Legion without Banners did not dare to assume that much authority.

The reason the Faith Militant had tried to apprehend Cersei was apparently due to an investigation of her past. There was now a rumor circulating throughout King's Landing that the Queen had once partaken in incestuous and adulterous relations with her twin brother. While incest may have been a regular practice for the Targaryens, the modern Seven Kingdoms condemned it. Furthermore, adultery was *always* treated as a serious offense.

Currently, the Faith Militant had no evidence to validate these claims. *They'll never find any, either.* Alas, as far as the Faith Militant was concerned, physical evidence was not required. To them, hearing a rumor was reason enough to suspect an individual's guilt. They were determined to hear the truth of this gossip from the lips of either the queen or her brother. *Since I'm up here, Cersei was their best bet.*

Luckily, Cersei had been quick to act upon this charge. She had retreated to the Red Keep, and she had banned the Faith Militant and any other religious figure from entering the building. As queen, she had the authority to enforce that policy. However, she could not expel the Faith Militant from King's Landing altogether; their influence was too great. In fact, there was nowhere else Cersei could go in King's Landing without encountering the Faith Militant. She could not even make it to the gates or the harbor. As a result, Cersei Lannister was essentially a prisoner in the Red Keep now.

That was when she wrote her husband and brother to inform them of her situation.

From what Jaime heard, King Robert was absolutely livid when he learned of this matter. But his anger was not directed at Jaime, Cersei, or any other member of House Lannister. He had given the order for the accusers to be arrested. Alas, even the Crown did not have the power to arrest servants of the Seven. Not unless those servants had committed a direct crime. *If harassing the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms is not a crime, what is?*

All that aside, it appeared Robert Baratheon was actually on their side; he did not seem to believe these claims of incest and adultery, even for a moment.

Unfortunately, Lord Eddard Stark and some others were not so certain. After all, it was known by many that before Jaime joined the Kingsguard, he and Cersei had always been close. In addition to that, back when Jaime was still a part of Robert's Kingsguard, several of the people in the king's court must have noted how protective he was of his sister. *Besides, I am the Kingslayer, so it's well-known that I love stabbing people in the back in more than just the literal sense,* Jaime thought crossly.

In spite of all that, more than a decade had elapsed since Jaime was dismissed from the Kingsguard. *I haven't even seen Cersei since the end of Greyjoy's Rebellion.* With that in mind, he wondered why these accusations were only just being made now.

In any case, Jaime and Cersei were the only ones who knew the true nature of their relationship. So, only they knew they had never done anything to warrant these outrageous claims of incest and
adultery. I just hope we can convince everyone else in the realm of that. Whatever else I have done, this is one crime I am not guilty of.

"Ser Kevan and I are not rushing ahead to any conclusions, Jaime," Ser Addam stated, "However, others may not be so objective. We believe it would work more in your favor if you spoke of this to someone else before the king."

"As such, we would like to hear your response to these allegations," Ser Kevan requested. "We will agree to keep an open mind. But in return, you must tell us everything."

"Suppose I refuse to tell you anything at all?" Jaime speculated.

"Well, then we couldn't do anything to sway your mind," Addam admitted bluntly, "However, that would not be the end of this problem. Sooner or later, you will have to account for yourself."

"Just so," stated Kevan, "You have two choices available to you, Jaime. You can either confide in us, your friend and your relative, or you can remain silent until you are summoned to the king's court. The latter will inevitably happen in any case, but if you choose the former, it may end better."

*There truly is no escaping this predicament. Actually, since I'll likely meet my death up here, I could have the perfect escape. But then again, if I die without telling anyone the truth, Cersei will be forced to confront these accusations all on her own.*

Ultimately, Jaime declared "Very well. I will tell you the full story. But I want you to swear to me that you will speak of this to no one until the next time I meet with King Robert. And should I fail to survive the upcoming battle, I want you to use what I'm about to tell you to defend Cersei."

"Our lips are sealed," Kevan asserted. Addam nodded in agreement. Their word was enough for Jaime. *Unlike me, these two never break their vows. Whether they survive or fight to the death when the Army of the Dead descends on the Wall, their fates can only work in my favor.*

Jaime then began his account with "Now, I will not deny that my sister and I are close. Or we used to be, at any rate. The last time I saw her was over ten years ago. Before then, however, we always looked out for one another. Before *then*, in our youth, we were nigh on inseparable."

"What of these accusations?" Ser Addam enquired. "Is there any truth to them? Or are they nothing but slanderous lies?"

Jaime took a moment to contemplate his words, and then he answered with "Somewhere in the middle. You see, when we were very young, we would often bathe together, dress each other, and sleep in the same bed."

"Well, there is nothing abnormal about any of that," Addam debated, "Siblings do such things all the time at that age. Especially twins."

"Indeed," Kevan conceded, "In fact, my boys Martyn and Willem still do those things from time to time."

*At their age?* Jaime would not mind if his daughters were still that close when they got to be that age. After all, girls were more affectionate than boys by nature. For boys to still be so close at that age, however, it would be quite strange. *On the other hand, if Martyn and Willem are anything like their spineless older brother Lancel, Uncle Kevan should have nothing to worry about. They wouldn't have the guts to do anything to daring and unorthodox.*
"Were you and Cersei ever more intimate than that?" Addam Marbrand queried.

Jaime Lannister grimaced at his best friend. *He just HAD to use that word.* Rather than provide a direct response, he turned to Kevan and stated "You watched us grow up, Uncle. You tell him."

Ser Kevan Lannister turned to the heir of Ashemark and stated "I never once got the impression there was anything impure in my niece and nephew's relationship. You must keep in mind, Addam; back then, their Father was serving as the Mad King's Hand and their mother was gone. The only people they really had for company were myself and my younger siblings. They both had plenty of friends, but they had no other relations who were close to their own age."

*Except Tyrion, but we all know Cersei wanted nothing to do with him.*

"Nevertheless," Uncle Kevan went on, "I couldn't keep an eye on Jaime and Cersei all the time. So, you must tell us, Jaime. Just how close have you gotten to your sister?"

Again, Jaime did not reply straightaway. He was tempted to disregard that question altogether. But he had sworn to his best friend and his uncle that he would not withhold anything from them. There was no going back on that now. Jaime sighed and pronounced "I will answer that question, but you should know that the only reason I am telling you this is because I agreed to share everything. I still expect you two to keep your promise not to reveal what I am about to say before Cersei and I can tell our story to the king first. If you break that promise... I may just forget our friendship and kinship."

That must have sounded like a threat. It was *meant* as a threat. If need be, he would execute that threat.

"We won't tell another soul," Ser Addam avowed. Ser Kevan nodded in acknowledgment.

Lord Jaime Lannister then professed "Around the time Cersei and I turned three and ten, we would kiss in private. I do not mean on the cheek or the forehead. We would kiss each other on the lips. To my knowledge, she was my first, and I was hers."

Addam Marbrand was clearly quite astounded. Kevan Lannister was more intrigued than astounded. The latter of them queried "What was the intent behind all this kissing?"

"It was never anything intimate," Jaime insisted, "Truth be told, those kisses were mostly experimental. You could call it the result of curiosity."

"I see," Ser Addam thought aloud, "You never went further that that?"

"We... contemplated doing the deed," Jaime confessed, "But we never went through with it. Before we could, my engagement to Lysa Tully was announced. That was why I joined the Kingsguard; to escape that commitment. The next time I saw Cersei was not until after I killed the Mad King. Soon after that, she married Robert, and she quickly lost all interest in me."

"And nothing happened between King Robert's Rebellion and Greyjoy's Rebellion?" Addam presumed.

"Nothing at all," Jaime affirmed, "A knight of the Kingsguard is supposed to seem invisible. I may as well have been, for all the acknowledgment Cersei gave me in those five long years. It was as though I was just another of the royal family's guards and nothing more."

"If that is true, those accusations are entirely groundless," Addam contended. Jaime resisted the urge to smile. *If he's already realized that, then it may be easier than I thought to get this fiasco to
"There's another sign that Jaime and Cersei's physical relationship never went beyond kissing," Uncle Kevan proclaimed.

"What's that, Uncle?" Jaime enquired in interest.

"Crown Prince Jasper was born black of hair, as were his brother and sisters," Kevan pointed out, "I have noticed that all Baratheons of the male line share that feature. Likewise, all Lannisters are born golden head. The Conclave believes that when hair color is concerned, the darker shade is the more dominant. Thus, there could be no question that the princes and princesses were all sired of Robert's seed. If Jaime had been the father of Cersei's children, they would have undoubtedly been blonde."

"That is an excellent argument, Ser Kevan," Addam Marbrand stated.

"It's also rather observant of you," Jaime murmured, perplexed by how much his uncle knew about bloodlines, "How is it you've noticed all this?"

"Did I give you the impression I was the only one who did?" Kevan assumed. Jaime merely shrugged, and the older blond knight smiled and claimed "I was not the first to correlate hair color with lineage. The first was Grand Maester Marwyn. He noticed it the moment Prince Jasper was born. Soon after, Jon Arryn, Stannis Baratheon, Varys, and Ser Barristan Selmy noticed it, as well. In fact, with the exception of Rodrik Greyjoy, I would say every member of the small council made that discovery before I did."

"Interesting," Jaime commented. He then scratched his temple and murmured "That is a rather unusual study, Uncle. May I ask what drew you and the others on the small council to it?"

"Actually, it was Gregor Clegane who brought it to our attention," Kevan Lannister recounted, "Near the beginning of Robert's reign, he wrote to each member of the small council and advised them to observe the characteristics of King Robert's children. I did not join the small council until after Greyjoy's Rebellion, so I was not aware of this study until after the other members had already been aware of it for a while. The Mountain never revealed the purpose of that study; he merely told us we'd be doing him, the royal family, and ourselves a favor by agreeing to do it."

Addam Marbrand rubbed his chin and hypothesized "Could it be this is why he asked that of you?"

"How do you mean?" Jaime Lannister asked his best friend.

"What if Lord Gregor foresaw that someone would accuse you and Cersei of incest and adultery?" Addam speculated. That gave Jaime pause. Now there's a thought. "If you were truly guilty, Lord Gregor could have learned of your affair through that source of his, and I am certain he would not have kept quiet about it. Even if he was unable to go to the King directly, he could still have told Eddard Stark, Jon Arryn, and his brother Stannis."

"He never mentioned anything such as that to us," Kevan Lannister disclosed, "As I recall, nothing of the sort was ever even implied in the Mountain's letters."

"Hence, my belief that he introduced this study as a precaution, if ever someone tried to frame Jaime and Cersei," Addam Marbrand argued.

"That… that actually makes sense," Kevan Lannister commented. Jaime found he had to agree with his uncle. If Clegane's visions showed him the true reason why I killed Aerys, there is no limit to what else they might have shown him. An unsettling thought then entered his mind. By that logic…"
he may have known of my and Cersei's relationship all along. That realization made him cringe.

"Even with all that said, there is one part I still do not understand," said Ser Addam.

"What might that be?" Jaime queried.

"Why are these accusations only being made now?" the heir to Ashemark retorted.

"I have wondered that myself," Lord Jaime Lannister admitted, "I have hardly even written to
Cersei since I regained my birthright to Casterly Rock. I'm quite confident neither she nor I have
done anything to suggest there is any form of intimate relationship between us anymore."

"Well, remember those accusations were originally made by Faith Militant," Kevan Lannister
pointed out, "The timing could be attributed to how their organization was only revived within the
past year."

"Yes, there is that," Addam disputed, "However, the Faith Militant has already been back in
existence for several months. Do you not find it the least bit curious that they waited until the king
was away from the capital to accuse Jaime and Cersei?"

"I must confess; I never looked at this matter from that perspective," Uncle Kevan stated.

"As it happens, I have," Jaime interjected, "The Faith Militant may claim to be a fearless, noble
bunch. Yet they did not approach the king or the small council about this matter directly. That
means they're either cowards or liars."

"I quite agree," Addam conceded, "What I'm most interested in, however, is how they found out
about your relationship with Cersei in the first place."

"I haven't a clue," Jaime claimed, "No one ever caught us kissing, and we never told anyone about
it."

Uncle Kevan's eyes suddenly lit up. "Could it be someone else told the Faith Militant?"

Jaime Lannister and Addam Marbrand were bewildered. "How so, Uncle?"

"Because of that red priestess and that novice from the Citadel, we know that there are indeed
others in the world who possess that 'source' of Lord Gregor's," Kevan Lannister contended.

"Do you think one of them may have spoken to the Faith Militant?" Ser Addam hypothesized.

"Unlikely," Ser Kevan countered, "Similarly to the Mountain, those two appear to be our allies.
However, who's to say they are the only ones with the source?"

Jaime quickly realized where his uncle was going with this. "You think there could be others still?"

"It is a possibility," Kevan Lannister debated, "And if it is true, I have an idea as to who might be
one."

"Who?" Jaime and Addam inquired in unison.

Kevan answered with a question: "How familiar are you two with the new High Septon?"

"Not very," Ser Addam replied.

"I probably could not distinguish him from the previous High Septon," Jaime blantly mumbled. Or
"Well, not much is known about him," Ser Kevan professed, "His name and background are a mystery. He does not even embrace the traditional title of his position. Instead, his followers have taken to calling him the 'High Sparrow.' You should know that his predecessor was forcibly removed from power, and the High Sparrow was unanimously selected to replace the man. His appointment directly coincided with the formation of the Faith Militant. Ever since then, the people of King's Landing have been kept under very tight scrutiny by those radical followers of the Seven. They are determined to have everyone, smallfolk and the nobility alike, repent for all their wrongdoings. As such, it appears that no one's sins – whether recent or old – can remain hidden from them."

Once more, Jaime was astonished. He assumed "So, you believe another person with the source could be supporting the Faith Militant from the shadows?"

"Even worse than that," Kevan uttered, "The High Sparrow himself is the one who decides when, where, and for what reason the 'sinners' are apprehended. Often, he orders the arrests without claiming to possess sufficient evidence. Despite that, the guilty parties always ends up confessing."

"Perhaps they are simply being coerced," Jaime conjectured. With the right amount of torture, anyone can be swayed into saying even the most ludicrous things.

"I do not think so," Kevan argued, "Whenever the 'sinners' are released, there is never any sign that they have been harmed in any way. No, the High Sparrow must be using other means to get to the truth."

"Then he has the source?" Addam Marbrand asked rhetorically.

"That's the most rational explanation," Kevan contended.

"Peculiar," Jaime commented. He folded his arms and leaned back against the cold, stone wall. "Have you told anyone else of this, Uncle?"

"Not yet," Kevan Lannister revealed, "This is still pure speculation. If I was to present this theory and it turned out I was incorrect, the High Sparrow would have grounds to apprehend me for questioning the integrity of the Faith Militant. I am not about to sacrifice my position as Master of Coin for an intuitive guess. Furthermore, as with the study of hair color and bloodlines, I am certain I am not the first who has developed this philosophy."

If it is correct, however, we would have ample reason to get the Faith Militant disbanded. And this time, we'll make sure it stays that way. Jaime sat up straight again and muttered "In any case, even if all the High Sparrow's other accusations are true, the one about myself and Cersei is a falsehood. I am not going to allow him to get away with such contemptible slander. House Lannister has much to be ashamed of and much to atone for, but incest and adultery are not among our offenses."

"I believe you, Jaime," said Addam Marbrand.

"I do, as well," said Kevan Lannister.

Jaime grinned at those words. Then he looked around at the other two men and stated, "I would like you both to promise me something."

"Anything," they said in unison.
"If I should fall in the next battle, I want you to tell the king everything we just discussed here," Jaime requested, "I know I could just tell him myself in a letter, but I've always believed words spoken are far more meaningful than words written. So, I will leave it to you to pass our conversation on to Robert."

"We shall do so, Jaime," Ser Addam assured him.

Ser Kevan nodded in agreement. "However… suppose we do not survive, either."

Jaime merely scoffed. "I doubt that will happen. Unlike me, you two are good men. Enough good men have died lately. Sooner or later, the gods are bound to spare a few. Aside from that, you two have much to live for."

The other two knights seemed baffled by that last statement.

"And you do not?" Addam countered.

"You are the Lord of Casterly Rock," Kevan pointed out, "As well as the Lord Paramount of the Westerlands and Warden of the West. You also have a wife and three daughters."

"I never asked for any of that," Jaime disclosed, "I never _wanted_ any of it, either. I was prepared to serve in the Kingsguard for the rest of my life. I only hung up my white cloak because all the people I most respected and cared about persuaded me to do so. As for my family… my marriage is a loveless one. Lynesse and I may as well be total strangers. She spends so much time doting on our girls that they barely even seem to notice me. I love them, of course, but I often wonder if they return those feelings."

Addam Marbrand and Kevan Lannister were taken aback. The former perceived "You sound as though you are ready to die, Jaime."

"I'm always ready to die, Addam," Jaime Lannister proclaimed, "In this day and age, we should all be ready to die. Death could come for us at any time."

"He is not incorrect," Uncle Kevan mumbled, "After all, all men must die."

"Just so, Uncle," Jaime Lannister concurred.

The three westermen sat together in relative quietness for a few minutes. The only notable sound to be heard was the soft whistling of the wind without their shelter. By now, their discussion seemed to have come to an end. Jaime was about to suggest they go somewhere brighter and warmer. However, before he could open his mouth, a thunderous noise broke through the quiet atmosphere.

"What is that?" he thought aloud.

The three men listened closely, and Ser Addam noted "It sounds like… a horn."

"Could it be reinforcements from the Royal Army?" Ser Kevan supposed.

"No, it sounds as though it is coming from the north," Ser Addam muttered, "By any chance, did the Watch send out a ranging party today?"

"I do not think so," Ser Kevan pronounced, "To my knowledge, no one has gone north of the Wall since the survivors of the Fist of the First Men returned to Castle Black."

_Then what could be making that noise?_ Jaime knew full well that the remaining Free Folk had
already been evacuated to the Gift. As of now, no one living was still in the lands beyond the Wall. He tried listening a little more closely to the horn. It sounded nothing like any horn he had ever heard before.

All of a sudden, Jaime Lannister felt as though he was shaking. A few moments later, he realized it was not he who was shaking; it was the ground. Soon enough, the walls of Hardin's Tower started to shake, as well. The shaking seemed to get more and more violent with each passing second. *What is this? A tremor?* Whatever it was, something was terribly amiss. Jaime hastily got to his feet, bracing himself against the nearest wall for support.

Less than a minute later, the screaming began. Jaime heard multiple screams of pure terror from without the building. Those were the types of screams men made when confronted with horrors infinitely worse than their greatest fears.

Soon, noises even more defeating filled the air. These noises gave off the sound a battering ram makes when it is slammed against a gate, or when a huge slab of marble is launched into a city from a catapult or a trebuchet. These noises seemed to be coming from all around Jaime. He desperately pressed his back against the interior wall of Hardin's Tower. It was all he could do to keep from collapsing or tumbling onto his arse.

These quakes and clamors felt as though they were going to last the whole night. In actuality, they lasted little more than a minute in total. After that, there was nothing. No sounds, no shakes, or anything. Just absolute stillness and absolute silence.

"Is it over?" Addam Marbrand queried anxiously. Somehow, he was still holding his torch.

"I believe so," Kevan Lannister muttered restlessly, "What in the Seven Hells was that?"

"I'm at a loss, Uncle," Jaime Lannister stated, "But we will not get answers by lingering in here. Let us go outside at once."

The three western knights hastily exited Hardin's Tower. To their vast surprise, they came out into a fog. A very thick, dense fog. Even with the illumination of the fire from Addam's torch, they could hardly see anything in their immediate surroundings.

"Where did all this fog come from?" Ser Kevan thought aloud.

"That is a good question," Jaime drily commented. He tried waving the fog away. That action had no effect whatsoever.

He heard voices a few dozen feet away. They sounded panicked and frantic. He cupped his hands, placed them over his mouth, and called out "Is anyone out there?"

He paused and waited for a response. When he got none, he turned "Come on. We'll accomplish nothing by just standing here. Let us see if we can find a way out of this fog."

"Lead the way, my lord," Uncle Kevan bade him, "We shall follow."

*I must go back to being their lord for now,* Jaime noted. Since there was no sunlight and no way to determine which way was north, Jaime decided to just head towards those agitated voices. "This way."

Jaime Lannister, Kevan Lannister, and Addam Marbrand cautiously made their way through the fog. Jaime was hoping that if he walked far enough, the fog would begin to let up. Alas, it did not. If anything, it just got even thicker the further he progressed.
However, the fog soon became the least of his worries. A couple minutes after they started navigating through the fog, Addam halted in his tracks. He then muttered very quietly "Where's the Wall?"

Jaime was confused. *Isn't it where it always is?* He was about to give voice to that thought when he gazed his eyes upward. The words never came out of his mouth.

In place of where there should have been a seven hundred-foot-tall structure made of solid ice… there was nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Now Jaime Lannister was downright baffled. However, it only took him a moment to realize what was going on.

Back at Moat Cailin, Gregor Clegane had mentioned an ancient artifact known as the Horn of Joramun. It was said to be one of the few things that could cause the Wall to crumble. However, it had reportedly been lost for eons.

Right then, Jaime understood why he did not recognize the sound of that horn he heard earlier, and why the Wall was no longer visible. The only explanation was that the Horn of Joramun had been recovered.

A multitude of questions ran through Jaime's mind at this time. Mainly, he wondered where the Horn of Joramun had been found, as well as who could have blown into it and why. At any rate, one thing was abundantly obvious right now: someone somewhere had blown into the horn, and as a result… the Wall had fallen.

Now there was nothing to stop the Others. *Nothing… except us.*

Despite this very sudden and most unfortunate loss of the Wall, Jaime Lannister was not about to lose all hope. He swiftly drew *Brightroar* from his sheath. He then turned to his two companions and told them "Get back to our forces. Have them rally here straightaway."

"But, my lord…" Addam countered, "We cannot simply leave you here o-"

"*That's an order!*" Jaime interjected heatedly. "*We could be overrun at any moment! The Others won't encounter a force large enough to challenge them again until they meet the king and the Royal Army at Winterfell! We are making our stand here! Is that understood?!!"

That outburst seemed to quell any defiance or resistance either man may have had. They reluctantly nodded in compliance. Ser Addam stated "*Very well, my lord. We will do as you command But please, take this. You will have more need of it than us.*"

He then held out his torch, which Jaime gladly accepted. Once he was holding the stick of fire in his left hand, he told his fellow Westerlords "*Now go. And hurry. The dead could get here at any moment.*"

Ser Addam Marbrand and Ser Kevan Lannister promptly turned around and rushed off to the south. Or what they believed was the south, at any rate. *In a fog this thick on a day this dark, all we can really do is guess which direction is which.*

Once his best friend and his uncle had safely retreated from the vicinity, Jaime Lannister returned his full attention to the area in front of him.

He turned around just in the nick of time. Less than five seconds later, something lunged at him. Jaime hastily dodged the assailant and swung his sword. He just barely managed to graze its side.
as it came flying past. However, that seemed to be enough. Before it even landed on its feet, the creature let out an agonized shriek. Almost immediately after, it collapsed onto its stomach and did not get up.

Jaime did not lower his guard. *It could just be playing dead.* Holding his torch aloft, he approached the fallen animal so that he could get a closer look. It turned out to be a bear. A solid white bear with blue eyes. Jaime was intrigued for a moment. Then he merely shrugged this discovery off. *No one ever said the Others have to all be human.* In a sense, they were not human to begin with.

Jaime Lannister soon heard approaching footsteps. They were soft, but many in number. He turned towards the north again, and he found himself faced with a crowd of wights. As the reports suggested, they really did look like little more than walking skeletons. Some men might have been filled with a sense of dread upon seeing them. It was the reverse in Jaime's case. They instead filled him with a sense of determination. *I am not about to fall in battle against a group of walking corpses. And if by some chance I do, I am still going to take as many of them with me as possible.*

"Well, do not just stand there," Jaime taunted them, "Come at me!"

That was all the coercion the wights needed. They flew at Jaime Lannister in full force. But even then, Jaime did not falter. He firmly held his ground, just as he always had.

He stood totally and perfectly still, right up until the first wight was within spitting distance. Then he thrust the torch forward, enveloping it in fire. As the first wight shrieked and caught afire, Jaime waved his Valyrian steel sword at the next wight. In one clean swing, he took off its head, as well as the head of the wight immediately behind that one.

The wights shied away from the fire, but they did not cease their advance on the young blond Lord of Casterly Rock. That proved to be a grave error on their part. Anytime one of them went anywhere close to Jaime, they got stabbed, slashed, or burned. They came on him in the dozens, and not a single one managed to so much as touch him.

As he fought, Jaime felt himself overcome with a familiar sensation, which he recognized as bloodlust. He had not experienced it since Greyjoy's Rebellion, when he fought atop the walls of Pyke. Some people detested this emotion, claiming it led to ruthlessness and savagery.

In this matter, Jaime Lannister was once again part of the unpopular minority. He did not shun or curse the feeling of bloodlust. He craved it. It made him feel so… alive. *How I've missed this!*

Jaime did not know how many wights and White Walkers he slayed over the next several minutes, but he was certain it had to be well over a hundred. Maybe over two hundred. They just kept coming, but no matter how many of them rushed at him, they could not gain the upper hand.

Finally, after around twenty minutes, the onslaught gradually came to a halt. By then, a huge pile of bones had amassed all around Jaime's feet. Jaime himself still had yet to suffer as much as a scratch at the hands of these undead adversaries.

"Is that the best you can do?" Jaime shouted mockingly. He was not expecting a response, nor did one come. Still, he felt queerly invigorating. He gazed around at the remains of the wights he had vanquished thus far. *To think the men who fought on the Fist of the First Men actually fell victim to this pitiful excuse of an army. Such an unfortunate yet laughable fate.*

Jaime found himself standing alone for the next couple minutes. After that, he heard a voice call out to him from behind. It shouted "My lord! Are you alright?"
Jaime Lannister knew that voice very well. It belonged to one of his oldest yet most faithful vassals. He was actually hoping to see that man again.

The young blond lord lowered his sword, but he kept his torch in the air. He then turned to face his longtime ally and friend, saying "I am glad you got here so quick-"

He was cut off a moment later, when a glint of metal flashed through the air without warning. All of a sudden, Jaime felt as though his neck was wet. After a few seconds, he discovered why. He was bleeding. His retainer had just sliced his throat open.

Instinctively, Jaime brought his left hand up to cover the wound. In the process, he dropped his torch. It fell into the snow and was immediately extinguished. Worse yet, the fog still had yet to lift. As such, Jaime was essentially staggering blind.

He could not even see the face of the man who had just attacked him. Nonetheless, his instincts told him he was staring into the face of a deranged killer. Aside from that, there was no mistaking that voice. He had known its owner for most of his life, if not all of it.

Jaime struggled to remain in control of his senses, but he was losing blood very quickly. There was no way he would be able to patch up this injury in time. Even at this point, there was no repudiating it; he was doomed to bleed out here.

As dismal as that prospect seemed, Jaime could accept it. He was never one to challenge or escape fate. Even so… he was hoping to get revenge on the one responsible for his predicament.

Alas, he was denied even that much. His supposed friend and ally came forward and thrust his own sword into Jaime's midsection. The effect was almost immediate. Jaime Lannister – a man long cherished as one of the most powerful and brilliant swordsmen of the Seven Kingdoms – lost the strength to even lift his blade. Right then, he dropped Brightroar. Shortly thereafter, he collapsed onto the ground.

By this point, Jaime did not even possess the capacity to stand back up. He just laid on the ground, sprawled out pathetically. The Gods are not just after all. If they were, they would have allowed me to die on my feet. The only thing Jaime could do now was stare up at the individual who had put him in this current situation. The traitor in question reached down, picked up Brightroar, and stated "I'll hold on to this. I'll tell everyone that you fought valiantly to the end, and this sword was the only thing I could recover. I feel that claim would sound feasible enough, if you ask me."

Jaime Lannister scowled up at the man, enraged at how condescendingly and dismissively he was speaking about something so treacherous.

The man then knelt on the ground and stated candidly "Now, hurry up and died already, Jaime. Don't worry about your body. Once you've passed on, I'll set fire to it. That way, you won't have to come back as one of these monstrosities. You should take comfort in knowing that much."

Truthfully, Jaime was slightly relieved by the knowledge that he would not become part of the Army of the Dead. Still, he had two regrets. One was that he would not be able to die fighting on his feet, but rather cowering on the ground. The other was that he had lowered his guard, and he had allowed himself to be attacked by a trusted comrade. Is this how Aerys felt, I wonder?

By this time, the Army of the Dead was beginning to send out its second wave. Their advance was no longer of any concern to Jaime Lannister, though. By the time the Others reached him, he would already be removed from both sides of the fray. I suppose it is just as well. Who would want the...
Kingslayer on his side, anyway? In Jaime's mind, he was meeting perhaps the most fitting end possible for a person with such a versatile yet disreputable background such as his.
"May I ask you a question, my lord?" the Ironborn requested.

"Of course, my boy," the Warden of the North replied, "You may ask anything of me."

Theon Greyjoy gazed up at the Northman who had been his caretaker for the last eleven years. *He's been a father to me longer than my true father.*

As of now, it appeared Eddard Stark was the only father he had left. His own father by blood, Balon Greyjoy, the former Lord of the Iron Islands, had been sent to the Wall for rebelling against the Seven Kingdoms in 289 A.C. His life had been sworn in service to the Night's Watch since then. The last Theon had heard of Balon Greyjoy, he had been given command of Woodswatch-by-the-Pool, one of the nineteen castles along the southern face of the Wall.

A fortnight ago, the Wall had crumbled, and the Army of the Dead had entered the realm. Half of the Watch's strength had perished at the Fist of the First Men a couple months ago. Most of the rest had been annihilated when the Others destroyed the Wall or in the ensuing battle. They had been vanquished fighting alongside the Westerlords commanded by Lord Jaime Lannister the Kingslayer.

Although they had managed to put up a good fight against the Army of the Dead and stall its advance, they had ultimately been forced to retreat, as they were hopelessly outnumbered. A little over a third of the westermen managed to make it back to Winterfell alive, including the Hound Lord Sandor Clegane and his wife Lady Obara. The Kingslayer, however, had been slain. *By one of his own men, if the reports are to be believed.*

Furthermore, only about one in every five or six of the remaining Watchmen had managed to retreat from the bedlam. A week earlier, Lord Commander Benjen Stark had shown up at his ancestral home with the bulk of the survivors.

In the time since then, the straggling survivors had turned up at random points in time. Their origins had varied from across the full length of the Wall, from Westwatch-by-the-Bridge all the way to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. Alas, none of the black brothers stationed at Woodswatch had returned thus far. *Anyone who hasn't made it here by now is almost certainly dead. Or worse than dead.*

Theon had accepted the very strong possibility that Lord Balon Greyjoy must have fallen either when the Wall did or when the White Walkers crossed over the border. *He was old, and the cold never agreed with him. How could one such as he have lived through that ordeal when so many younger, stronger Watchmen died at their posts?*

"Your question, lad?" Lord Eddard stated abruptly.

Theon Greyjoy had not realized he had been standing in silence, brooding over the loss of his father. He hastily shook his head to clear it and muttered "Oh, I apologize for letting my mind wander. My question is… have you ever thought about your death?"

Ned Stark raised an eyebrow. "I do not quite understand the question."
"Then I shall clarify my meaning," said Theon, "Have you ever wondered about when, where, and how you would die?"

"More often than I care to say," Lord Eddard admitted, "When brought up in an unforgiving land such as this, one learns very quickly that death could come for them at any time if they are not wary."

"That does not surprise me," Theon muttered bluntly. He then queried "Have you ever had a day when you did not believe you would live to see the next?"

"Yes, several," Ned Stark disclosed, "The vast majority were either during Robert's Rebellion or your lord father's rebellion. The last one, however, was only last year. It was the first day of that conference at Harrenhal."

Theon was perplexed. "What was so dangerous about that particular day, my lord?"

"It was the day the king found out I helped to ensure the survival of Rhaegar's children," Lord Eddard recounted, "I could not have predicted his reaction when he learned of my involvement in that scheme."

Now Theon was astonished. "And you suspected he might have had you arrested or punished? I find that difficult to fathom. You and King Robert have been friends since you were younger than I."

"No friendship is indestructible, Theon," Ned Stark contended, "Even the strongest and longest of friendships can be ruined by a single deed. That is especially the case when the deed is something dastardly such as betrayal."

"That is true," Theon remarked. Some would argue that betrayal is even worse than treason. I may be one of them. If I had to choose between Lord Eddard and King Robert, I would pick the wolves.

"What of you?" Lord Eddard inquired, "Have you ever had such a day?"

"Not since I first came here," Theon revealed, gazing around at his surroundings. They were standing in the courtyard of Winterfell. The Ironborn generally did not fear death as the greenlanders did. They firmly held the notion that "what is dead may never die." Still, they preferred to extend their lifespans for as long as possible. "I was brought here as a hostage, knowing that if my people acted against the realm again, it would have meant my head. But I only ever feared for my life once; on the day I arrived in the North."

"That could simply be attributed to how you were placed in an unfamiliar land without knowing what the future held for you," the wolf lord debated.

"That was exactly the case, my lord," Theon affirmed, "As time went by, however, I became more comfortable with living in the North. So much so that I came to prefer it to the Islands. That is why I chose not to return there even after my brothers and I were released from our wardships."

"I am pleased to know you've taken a liking to the Northern way of life after all," Ned Stark stated. A very small, almost unnoticeable grin graced his face. It faded a moment later and he added in "But would I be right to assume you may have come to regret your choice to remain here, in light of what's headed this way?"

"Not at all," Theon insisted, "I mean no disrespect by that, my lord, but strange as this may seem, I am actually glad I stayed in North. While I realize there is a strong likelihood that I will not survive the next confrontation with the Others, there is still a chance I may make a difference. Aside from
that, the Army of the Dead would eventually find a way across the water anyway. So even if I had
gone back to the Iron Islands, I would not have been safe there."

"You seem to have developed a rather somber mindset," Lord Stark noted.

"I suppose it's a product of my environment, my lord," Theon Greyjoy murmured cheekily,
smirking.

"Wouldn't surprise me, my boy," a gruff voice interjected suddenly. Theon and Lord Eddard turned
in the direction of the voice, and they saw a tall, black-haired bearded man approaching with a
warhammer on his shoulder. He was accompanied by three men clad in the white enameled armor
of the Kingsguard. They both bowed to the king as he neared, and when they stood back up
straight, he declared "As I'm sure you noticed, the Starks are a grim lot. That was one of the first
things I learnt when I met Ned. Some of the grimness may have even rubbed off on me when we
were fostered at the Eyrie."

"If so, it appears to have faded after a decade of separation, Your Grace," Lord Eddard japed,
making King Robert and Theon chuckle. 

So rare to hear Ned Stark of all people make a joke. We do live in unusual times.

Robert Baratheon had just come from the Great Hall. He had broken his fast in there with the
Northern lords and the officers of the Royal Army. Lord Eddard had started the meal with the king,
yet he and all the others had left earlier. It had taken Robert a little longer to finish his plate. I
suppose he wanted to savor breakfast. Seeing as how it might have been the last meal we ever had,
I cannot blame him.

"Are the civilians all out, Ned?" King Robert asked.

"Yes, Your Grace," the wolf lord answered him, "The last caravan left a half-hour ago. At present,
there is not a single noncombatant within a dozen leagues of Winterfell."

"Which is good," Theon commented, "This is no place for servants and other noncombatants."

"Indeed, my boy," the stag king agreed. He then turned back to his best friend and said inquiringly
"Cat and the boys?"

"They got away safely," Lord Eddard disclosed, "Along with my daughter-by-law and my unborn
grandchild. Theon saw to that personally."


Robb had wanted to stay behind and fight, as well, but Ned Stark's had adamantly refused.
Although Theon Greyjoy had long considered Robb Stark to be his closest friend, he had taken his
father's side this time. He's the heir to Winterfell, after all. If the people of the North are to have a
future beyond the Long Night, they'll need a Stark to lead them. Lord Eddard has three sons, but
Robb is the one who's been groomed to succeed him. Besides, he's got a child on the way now.
Which I'm partly to thank for.

An entire year had already elapsed since Robb's wedding to Lady Margaery Tyrell. The two of
them had been trying for a child almost since the day they were married. However, for the longest
time, their attempts to conceive had been unsuccessful. Even Maester Luwin could not explain
why. According to him, Robb and Margaery were both young, healthy, and fertile. By all accounts,
it should have been easy for them to sire a child.

Then about a turn of the moon ago, the true reason for their failures had been uncovered. Theon
had overheard a conversation between Lord Eddard, Lady Catelyn, and Maester Luwin. It had not been his intention to eavesdrop; it had simply happened. *I doubt they would have bought that excuse. It's a good thing I was never caught.* At any rate, Theon had heard some very interesting things.

Apparently, one of Margaery's handmaidens, Sera Durwell, had been secretly lacing her mistress's meals with essence of moon tea. She had been doing this at the order of Lord Roose Bolton, who somehow knew that Sera was actually a bastard. In exchange for poisoning Lady Margaery, the Lord of the Dreadfort was keeping the truth of her parentage hidden from the world. She was getting the ingredients for moon tea from Gryff of House Whitehill, whose hand she had seemingly been promised in return for her compliance.

Based on what Theon overheard, Lord and Lady Stark and the maester had received all that information from Lord Gregor Clegane and the secret council. They, in turn, had heard it from a man named Mollander, a novice of the Citadel and yet another individual who possessed the "source."

The three of them had spent a while discussing how to remedy this situation. Obviously, Sera Durwell would have to be dismissed from Margaery's service. The guilty Boltons and Whitehills would also have to be dealt with in a similar fashion. In ordinary times, they could have simply sent Gryff Whitehill and Roose Bolton to the Wall and Sera Durwell to the silent sisters.

These days, however, with the threat of an undead invasion from the north, they could not afford to generate any more civil unrest than there already was. *Exposing Bolton and Whitehill's plot to the world would have just worsened the problem.* As such, the perpetrators had to be confronted and chastised in a more discreet manner.

After spending over a decade in the wolves' protection, Theon had come to develop a type of kinship with them. As such, he felt obligated to somehow assist Lord Eddard in this matter. Of course, he had no authority to take action against Lord Roose or Gryff; it was Lord Eddard's duty and prerogative to punish his own vassals. Plus, they were both members of highborn houses.

Sera Durwell's circumstances were another story altogether. Even if she now served the wife of the heir to the North, she was still a citizen of the Reach. And a baseborn one, at that. Hypothetically, it would have been no cause for alarm if such a person went missing or turned up dead. Then again, with the presence of the Legion without Banners, sudden disappearances and mysterious deaths never went unresolved anymore, regardless of the victim's background.

In spite of that, Theon had taken it upon himself to remedy the problem Sera Durwell posed. Of course, he had to be subtler than killing her or making her vanish. In his mind, such drastic actions were unnecessary. All he really needed to do was incapacitate her somehow.

That had been simple enough to accomplish on his own. He had given Sera what Lord Gregor Clegane would call "a taste of her own medicine." Literally.

A few months ago, shortly before the Battle at the Fist of the First Men, Theon had borrowed some ingredients from the maester. Using basic knowledge of herblore, he had ground them up into a paste, masked its bitterness with a bit of honey, and fed it to Sera. Luckily for him, it had been easy to get close enough to her without drawing attention. After all, he had been flirting with her ever since she first came to Winterfell. One night, he had approached her during dinner and used his trademark charm on her. While she was distracted by his flattery, he had slipped the paste into the strawberry tart she had for dessert. He had stayed with her until he made sure she had eaten all of it.

The next day, Sera Durwell had become gravely ill. She was coughing up blood, vomiting
violently, and visiting the privy rather often. Soon after, a fever set in. Maester Luwin had examined her, and he had claimed he was uncertain what was troubling her. He had ultimately diagnosed her with some unusual Northern ailment, but Theon suspected he knew the truth all along and he simply did not disclose it. *He's the one who supplied me the herbs, after all. Even though I never told him what they were for, he knows their effects.*

The maester’s recommendation on how to treat Sera was very straightforward. He had proposed that Sera leave the North at once for a warmer and more familiar environment. Reluctant as Margaery was to part with one of her handmaidens, she had decided to follow his advice. Sera Durwell had weakly protested at first. Unfortunately for her, Lord and Lady Stark took advantage of this opportunity and voiced their support of their daughter-by-law’s decision.

A fortnight or so after Sera Durwell went back to the Reach, Lady Margaery announced that she was with child. This was cause for celebration for all of Winterfell, particularly Robb and his parents. Alas, their joy was short-lived. The very next day, they had received a raven from Castle Black, which carried news that the Fist of the First Men had fallen. Sooner or later, the Wall would be next.

In preparation for this inevitable catastrophe, Lord Eddard had issued a decree for all Northern civilians to be ready to evacuate south. That included the elderly members of the Night’s Watch and the Free Folk, such as Maester Aemon of Castle Black. The decree went into effect a couple days before the Wall came crashing down.

Currently, there were no maesters anywhere north of Moat Cailin. Nor were there any septons, septas, farmers, bakers, fishermen, villagers, nursemades, chambermaids, whores, children, suckling babes, or anyone else who had never brandished a sword in their lives. In other words, the entire population of the North – living and undead alike – was composed entirely of soldiers now. *Or it will be, once Robb gets his wife, his mother, his unborn child, and the rest of House Stark's retainers to the moat. If they make good time, they should be there in a day or two. By then, another battle would have been fought, and Theon knew either he’d be dead, or the Night's King would be.*

Although Sera Durwell – or rather, Sera Flowers – had been eliminated as a hazard to the continuation of the Stark family line, Lord Roose Bolton and Gryff Whitehill were still active threats. Theon would not have put it past either of them to somehow arrange for Lady Margaery to have a miscarriage or accident.

Fortunately, Lord Eddard had already devised a practical solution to that predicament on his own. When devising deployment strategies for the Northern forces and the Royal Army, he had deliberately placed the Boltons and the Whitehills at the very head of the vanguard. They would be the first to engage the Army of the Dead in combat. *So, regardless of the outcome of the coming battle, the Leech Lord will soon be out of the way, along with that tub of lard Ludd Whitehill and his arsehole fourthborn son.*

One of the things Theon most appreciated about the North was the sense of fraternity between the majority of the Northern houses. That feeling of community did not exist anywhere else in the realm, least of all the Iron Islands.

Nonetheless, even in the North, there were some families that stood apart like outcasts. House Bolton and House Whitehill were the two biggest examples. That was not due to ostracization or anything else on the part of the other houses; both families had managed to alienate themselves all on their own. The Boltons had historically been a cold, emotionless, unfriendly lot, and the Whitehills had always been pompous, disrespectful brutes.
Despite that, every now and then, a decent person was born into both families. As it happened, one member of each house's newest generation could be classified as such. Domeric Bolton and Torrhen Whitehill were considered to be admirable and trustworthy, unlike their self-important fathers. Ned Stark had even taken steps to ensure their survival.

Robb Stark was not the only heir that had been sent south to Moat Cailin. At his lord father's order, every hightborn Northman under the age of seven and ten had also been sent there sometime beforehand. Of course, there were some houses whose youngest members were older than that. Lord Eddard could not exclude them from the fighting, but he could place one son from each of those families in the rearguard. He had given them instructions to retreat if the bulk of their forces was overwhelmed. So even if their fathers and households were eradicated in the fight against the Others, there was a greater chance their houses would still endure beyond the aftermath. Domeric and Torrhen were among those who had been assigned to the rearguard.

Theon Greyjoy had been assigned to the mainguard, where most of the Northern lords and high-ranking Royal Army officers were stationed. King Robert would be at the center of the main column. His brother Lord Stannis Baratheon and his best friend Lord Eddard Stark would be on either side of him. As for Theon himself, he would stand at Lord Eddard's other side. I've earned the envy of every other Northerner because of that appointment, but I care not. I feel most worthy of that honor.

"Now then," King Robert stated, patting the head of his warhammer against the palm of his hand, "Shall we assume our posts?"

"So be it, Your Grace," Lord Eddard declared. Theon merely nodded in acknowledgment.

The stag king, the wolf lord, and the Ironborn proceeded to leave the grounds of Winterfell through the front gate. Ser Mandon Moore, Ser Meryn Trant and Ser Theo Frey followed them close behind. They were the only knights of the Kingsguard who had accompanied the king to Winterfell. Ser Arys Oakheart and Ser Barristan Selmy were with Crown Prince Jasper at Moat Cailin, and Ser Boros Blount and Ser Preston Greenfield were in King's Landing, protecting the queen and her other children.

Shortly after Theon first came to Winterfell, he had been the lord's squire. Even now, he balanced Ice, the Starks' ancestral sword, on his back. It was a large greatsword, but since it was made of Valyrian steel, it was not too heavy for him to carry.

The spikes on the king's hammer were made of the Valyrian steel, as well. He had had them fashioned specifically with the impending invasion in mind. Rather prudent of him. Whenever he strikes one of the White Walkers or their wights, they'll stay down now.

There were three things that could kill the Others: fire, obsidian, and Valyrian steel. Anyone with the most rudimentary understanding of flint rocks could create fire. The other two substances, however, were harder to come by.

There were said to be thousands of Valyrian steel weapons throughout the Known World, yet only a few hundred were in the Seven Kingdoms. All of which belonged to nobles, knights, or royals.

By comparison, obsidian weapons were fairly commonplace. There was an entire mountain of dragonglass on the Targaryen island stronghold of Dragonstone. From it, several thousand obsidian daggers, swords, spearheads, axes, and arrowheads had been manufactured. Most of them had been given to the Night's Watch and the Free Folk. The rest had originally been given to the Westerlords, but they were now in the possession of the Royal Army and the Northmen.
Some of that obsidian was sitting in Theon's quiver. Since he was better with a bow than a sword, he had been given a score of obsidian-tipped arrows. He also had twice as many arrows tipped with regular steel, which he would set aflame when he ran out the obsidian ones.

_Sixty arrows may not amount to much against an army of millions, but if I manage to hit a White Walker every single time, I could kill as many as a thousand wights with my bow alone. Perhaps even more..._ Maybe he would get especially lucky and the Night's King would come within range.

In any case, Theon planned to make every shot count. He had no intention of wasting any of his precious arrows. _The Drowned God take me if I miss even once._

Outside Winterfell, tens of thousands of soldiers were already in battle formation. Half of them bore the armor and standards of the Royal Army. The other half were equipped with the thicker armor and various sigils of the Northern houses. Everyone stood under some banner or other. _This is one conflict the Legion has no place in,_ Theon noted.

Of course, if the Northmen and the Royal Army failed, the Legion without Banners would likely be the realm's last hope. _At least they'll still have the Ironborn, the Reachmen, the Dornishmen, the Valemen, the Riverlords, the Stormlords, the Crownlords, and whatever's left of the Northmen and the Westerlords to assist them._ Meanwhile, _no one_ would be coming to this company's aid.

As Theon made his way over to the mass of armed Westerosi with Lord Eddard and King Robert, the latter of the two turned to him and remarked "I know you said you were staying behind, Greyjoy, but I am still a little surprised to see you're actually here."

"Do you take me for a craven or an oath breaker, Your Grace?" Theon retorted, a little more sharply than he intended. That was one flaw he still suffered from; speaking to his superiors with due courtesy.

Lord Eddard flashed the Ironborn an aggravated expression, but the king simply burst out laughing. He claimed "No, my boy; not at all. I am merely pointing out that you are neither a Northerner nor a soldier of the Royal Army, and thus, there is nothing keeping you here."

"Oh, but there is, Your Grace," Theon countered the king, speaking more respectfully this time, "My mother gave birth to me at Pyke. I spent my boyhood there. Seawater flows through my veins just as blood does, and I continue to pray to the Drowned God. For all intents and purposes, I am still very much an Ironborn at heart. Be that as it may... I have come to accept the North as my true home. I will defend my home with my life. That is every man's duty, as well as every man's right."

Ned Stark and King Robert seemed to be impressed by his answer. The former of them stated "That's rather admirable of you, Theon."

"Think nothing of it, my lord," the Ironman assured him, "You have been a gracious host to me these last eleven years. You can consider this my way of repaying your hospitality."

_To think there was once a time when my idea of 'repaying' Ned Stark's 'hospitality' would have been to shoot one of these arrows into his head._

"It's a commendable choice on your part, all the same," said the Warden of the North, "But should you change your mind-

"It won't come to that, my lord," Theon Greyjoy interjected.

"Permit me to finish my sentence before you voice your opposition," the wolf lord patiently yet sternly murmured. Theon nodded to show his acknowledgment, and Lord Eddard resumed with
"Should you change your mind at any time, even in the midst of battle, you have my leave to retreat to Moat Cailin."

Theon was perplexed. Did I hear him right? He shook his head and asked rhetorically "Correct me if I'm wrong, my lord, but isn't the penalty for desertion death?"

"Of course, it is," Ned Stark confirmed, "No one knows that better than I. I will always remember what became of Ser Waymar Royce and every other man of the Watch who forsook his vows. However, it is not desertion if you have your lord's blessing to fall back."

"That may be," Theon contended, "But suppose I was to retreat to Moat Cailin. What would you expect me to tell Lady Catelyn? What about Robb and his siblings? How could I possibly face them, knowing that I turned tail whilst you stayed behind to die? Would you expect me to live with such disgrace?"

"I would expect you to convey the final moments of my life to my family," Ned Stark professed, "Namely that my last thoughts were of them. I would also expect you to show the same fealty to Robb that you've shown to me."

"I would, of course, do just that," Theon asserted, "But I insist that I'm staying right here, my lord."

"Then what if I was to order you to flee?" Lord Eddard speculated.

It was here that Theon halted in his tracks. He turned to the Lord of Winterfell and observed "My lord, you seem strangely determined to get me to evacuate."

"Is it really that strange?" Ned Stark said inquisitively.

"Honestly… yes," Theon admitted, "I mean, when I was first brought to Winterfell, neither of us wanted me to be here. I felt like a prisoner; you regarded me as a burden. Then I was freed from my bondage, and I eventually came to view my 'prison' as my home. Even so, I always assumed you saw me as little more than an unwanted guest."

"Then you do not know me as well as you thought," Ned Stark countered, "It is true I may have seen you that way once. But as you said yourself, you have lived in Winterfell for over ten years. People's perceptions of one another change overtime."

"Then your perception of me is different than when I first came here, my lord?" Theon assumed.

"It is," Lord Eddard verified, "My lady wife has given me three sons. As of now, I believe you are the perhaps the closest I have to a fourth."

Theon was taken aback. Normally, whenever he talked to people, he would have three responses ready for any statement: a witty one, a sarcastic one, and a serious one. More often than not, he would resort to one of the first two. He could still be serious when the situation required it. All the same, when he heard Lord Eddard make that claim… he had no words.

"I… don't know what to say, my lord," he ultimately muttered. And I was just thinking that he's been more of a father to me than the Ironborn lord who died at Woodswatch ever was. Theon suddenly felt an odd desire to embrace Lord Eddard. If the two of them had been alone, he might have actually done that. Of course, with the Northern lords, the Royal Army, and the king all gathered in the immediate area, Theon was required to conduct himself in a professional manner.

"You needn't say much," Ned Stark proposed, "Just promise me that if I give you the order to withdraw, you will do so."
Theon hesitated a moment. Then he declared "Very well, my lord."

The three men then continued heading towards the assembled forces. On the way there, King Robert turned to Theon and told him "If you do survive this battle, lad, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Name it, Your Grace," the Ironborn said plainly.

"Jasper described you as being a good friend to him when he was being fostered under Lord Gregor," the stag king disclosed. *That's surprising. I was under the impression he thought I was an arse.* "If you make it back to the moat, I would like you to continue being his friend. Do you think you could do that?"

"I most certainly shall," Theon asserted. *Of course, there is no telling who will ultimately end up on the Iron Throne once all this is over. Will it be a Baratheon or a Targaryen? Only time will tell, I suppose.* At any rate, Theon felt obligated to fulfill the king's request. It was a reasonable one, after all. Besides, he had already made the same promise to Lord Stark that he would be there for Robb.

"I thank you for that, my boy," Robert Baratheon stated appreciatively, "After Jasper succeeds me, he'll need reliable people such as you. Heir to the Iron Throne or not, he will also need people who are willing to support him through the difficult times."

"I know," Theon conceded, "Especially with the current crisis going on in King's Landing."

King Robert grumbled a bit. Then he nodded his head and muttered "Just so."

"I apologize if I am overstepping my bounds, Your Grace," Theon stated sincerely, "But I would like to ask; what are your thoughts on the allegations being made by the Faith Militant?"

"Shameless lies; all of them," Robert spat venomously, "I don't believe for a single moment that Cersei was ever unfaithful to me, least of all with their twin brother."

"Neither do I," Lord Eddard pronounced, "It is almost as unfathomable as the concept that Catelyn would ever be disloyal to me. Furthermore, if there was any truth to those rumors, Lord Gregor would have known of it."

"And he most certainly would have told someone," Theon contended, "The Mountain may have some secrets of his own, but this does not seem like something he would have kept to himself. Or even to just the secret council."

"I suspect it is merely a brazen attempt to discredit the Royal Family," King Robert conjectured, "I knew it was a mistake to revive the Faith Militant. Even so, I suppose I have no one to blame other than myself. I should not have let Cersei sway my mind on the issue."

"There is no way you or she could have known it would have turned out like this, Your Grace," Theon Greyjoy debated.

"You may be right, lad," Robert muttered in agreement. "All the same, I plan to correct this mistake. I mean to have the Faith Militant dissolved as soon as possible. If I should die today, my successor shall see to its disbarment in my place. This time, it will stay disbanded."

"Excellent idea, Your Grace," the Ironborn said approvingly.

The stag king grinned at that. Then he frowned and sighed heavily. "If only Jaime had survived the
battle at the Wall. His testimony could have exonerated both him and his sister. Even if it did not, we could have at least heard his side of the story first."

Just then, a very random yet quite relevant and unsettling thought entered Theon's mind. "Lord Jaime was reportedly killed by one of his own vassals, correct?"

"Reportedly, yes," Lord Eddard affirmed, "Of course, even if it turns out to be true, we still have yet to establish a motive."

"Then could it be possible he was murdered to keep him from explaining the nature of his relationship with Queen Cersei?" Theon supposed.

Lord Eddard was intrigued. "Do you believe someone killed him to silence him?"

"It's a possibility," Theon argued, "The Faith Militant may be extreme, but there are some people who are just as devoted to the Seven as they are. It could be possible some fanatic took it upon himself to 'punish' the Kingslayer for his crimes. Or, alternatively, someone in the High Sparrow's employ eliminated him so that the truth of his relationship with the Queen could never be told."

"Either approach sounds feasible," Ned Stark thought aloud, "Be that as it may, I cannot help but wonder why the murderer would have killed him at such a critical time as when the Wall fell."

"Right now, I'm still wondering how the Wall fell in the first place," said Theon Greyjoy. Why is no one bothering to find that out?

"That is of no concern to us at present," Robert Baratheon interjected, "You can let the intellectuals like the Mountain wonder about such things. All we need to concern ourselves with is that the Wall has fallen, and because of that, the Night's King and his army will be here by sundown."

"Indeed, Your Grace," Theon concurred. Less than a minute later, they reached the combined host of the Northmen and the Royal Army. The units at the head of the rightmost column parted for Lord Eddard and King Robert. Theon and the three Kingsguard knights followed the two men as they made their way to the center of the mainguard. Had it been up to him entirely, the king would have positioned himself at the front of the column. However, his best friend and advisors had convinced him to stand farther back in the ranks. That way, everyone could be better assured of his safety, and he would be able to distribute orders to the entire army more effectively.

Lord Stannis Baratheon was already standing at his post in the middle of the host. He gave his elder brother a light nod of acknowledgment as he approached. King Robert Baratheon returned the gesture, and he assumed his spot to the right of his Master of Laws. Ser Theo Frey, Ser Meryn Trant, and Ser Mandon Moore all stood directly behind their king. Lord Eddard Stark stood at King Robert's right side, and Theon Greyjoy stood to the right of the Lord of Winterfell.

They were the last ones to report to their positions. As of now, every soldier who would partake in the ensuing battle on the side of the living was accounted for. Right now, there was nothing further they could do to prepare. They all simply stood facing towards the north, waiting for their inevitable doom.

Hours passed. In all that time, nothing particularly noteworthy happened. No one moved from their posts. In fact, other than to blink or breathe, there was barely any movement at all. The most exciting thing to happen was the occasional cough or sneeze from somewhere in the host. The silence was the worst part. There was no talking, no yelling, and hardly any whispering. It felt as if every single person there had already given up. You could cut the tension with a Valyrian steel knife.
Eventually, evening came around. Torches were lit to keep the area visible and to prepare against the enemy. Shortly after that, the foe finally arrived.

The Army of the Dead appeared very suddenly, almost out of nowhere and without warning. As soon as the Others and their wights were within sight of the living forces, the period of silence and inactivity ended. There was restless murmuring all throughout the ranks. Many soldiers began shifting unsteadily in their stances. Some even looked as though they would falter or step back.

"Stand your ground!" King Robert shouted, his strong voice booming throughout the vicinity. That single command from their king seemed to calm the restive units down. For now, at any rate. Their uneasiness would undoubtedly return soon enough.

"Theon, my sword," Lord Eddard said quietly.

Theon Greyjoy promptly removed *Ice* from around his back, and he held it out to Ned Stark, who slowly extracted the large Valyrian steel blade from its huge scabbard. The Ironborn then slung the scabbard back over his shoulder. At the same time, Stannis Baratheon drew a bastard sword made of obsidian.

"Archers, ready to fire!" The king announced.

As it happened, Theon's weapon of choice was a longbow. However, the Army of the Dead was still out of range. Aside from that, he knew the king was only addressing the archers in the vanguard. Even so, he went ahead and armed himself with his longbow.

Less than fifteen seconds after the king issued that order, all the archers in the vanguard had already notched their first arrows, pulled back the bowstrings, and taken aim. Three whole minutes elapsed before the Army of the Dead came within range. That was when the king exclaimed "Release!"

The first volley of arrows sailed through the air. Theon could not see where they landed or what they hit; his view of the ground was obstructed by the heads and backs of his fellow soldiers. Still, he was certain they managed to hit a great number of wights and even a few White Walkers, based on the cries of agony he heard afterwards. *Those are definitely not human shrieks I'm hearing.*

"Again!" the king shouted. In response, the vanguard archers drew their second arrows, notched them to their bowstrings, aimed, and fired.

"At your leisure!" King Robert proclaimed. Subsequently, the archers on the front lines proceeded to rearm their bows and release at their own paces.

Theon was the only archer who had been posted in the mainguard. The majority of the others were at the front of the vanguard. They were tasked with delaying the progress made by the Army of the Dead. The rest were in the back of the rearguard. Their job was to provide cover fire when or if King Robert or Lord Eddard gave the order to retreat.

It only took about ten minutes for the vanguard archers to completely exhaust their supply of arrows, obsidian and flaming alike. By the time they ran out of ammunition, the Army of the Dead was nearly upon them. King Robert shouted, "Draw weapons!"

Over the next several seconds, Theon heard the whistles of thousands of swords being pulled from their sheaths. Only about a quarter of those were obsidian. The rest were regular steel. Although the latter would be ineffective at slaying the White Walkers and their wights, they would at least be sufficient to sever the heads and limbs of the undead. The units armed with obsidian weapons
would be able to finish them off once they were on the ground.

Not long after everyone in the living host was properly armed, the much larger undead host had quickened the speed of its advance from a listless trudge to a swift jog. A minute or two later, the first wave of wights fell upon the vanguard.

The soldiers in the first couple of rows carried thick shields as big as their bodies and spears tipped with obsidian. The hope was that they would be able to keep the White Walkers at bay by aligning the shields together and constantly thrusting the spears through the slits. For a while, it seemed as though this technique would actually work. Alas, the line ultimately gave out.

At one point, the wights found an opening somewhere in the leftmost column. As Theon recalled, that was where the Whitehill men were stationed. If so, Theon was hardly surprised. Somehow, I anticipated they would be the first to falter.

Once the shield barrier was penetrated, the Army of the Dead easily broke through the front line. That was when the tide of battle started to turn against the living. It was also when the screaming began.

So far, Theon had been unable to witness much of the battle, as he was too far back in the company to see most of the action. It did not take very long for that to change. While the men in the vanguard managed to put up a valiant fight, the White Walkers and their wights were soon tearing through them. They were murderous, brutal, pitiless, savage. Just as Theon expected them to be. To him, it looked as though they were literally carving their own paths through walls of human flesh.

He turned to the three men standing to his immediate left. Lord Eddard and Lord Stannis both appeared as stoic as ever, but he could tell they were anxious. As for the king… he was grinning, as if he was enjoying all this carnage. I suppose there really are some men who feel more comfortable in a time of war than in a time of peace. Robert Baratheon then lifted his warhammer high up with both hands and announced "This is it, men! This may very well be the day we die! If so, I expect every last one of you to take down as many of these undead sons of whores as possible! Any who flee from the battlefield without my consent, I'll hunt them down and end them myself!"

He means what he says, Theon perceived. Robert Baratheon was a superb military leader. That was one aspect of his persona that even his opponents agreed on. Thus, he was not the kind of man who would tolerate insubordination or absconding.

Right then, something sailed through the air and landed near Theon's feet. It turned to be a head. When it rolled over, he saw the face. Roose Bolton's hollow eyes were now staring up at him.

Initially, Theon was inclined to gasp or retch. In the end, he simply smirked, spat into the Leech Lord's open mouth, and kicked the head away.

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Initially, Theon was inclined to gasp or retch. In the end, he simply smirked, spat into the Leech Lord's open mouth, and kicked the head away. I guess the Others aren't all bad, he observed humorously.

Once he got rid of Bolton's severed head, Theon turned to Ned Stark. The wolf lord did not seem to approve of his squire's action, but he neither said nor did anything to suggest he was appalled, either. I'm sure he's glad to be rid of the greatest threat to his house's longevity. Hopefully that whining shit Gryff Whitehill will soon follow.

Oddly enough, just thirty seconds later, Theon heard a high-pitched squeal from somewhere to the north. He looked over at the source, and he saw a young man with long, blond hair desperately attempting to push his way through the ranks. He seemed to be sobbing, and he was wailing things like "Let me through! I can't die here! Let me through; damn you!"
It was Gryff Whitehill, and he appeared to be showing his true colors. He enjoyed bullying and pestering people he believed to be inferior and weaker than him, but when he was up against a worthy opponent, he was nothing more than a sniveling coward. How pathetic.

Despite Gryff's unceasing efforts to flee, he proved too slow for the Others. Before long, wights were swarming all over him. One of them ended up planting an axe in his cranium, and his whining stopped at once. That just made Theon smirk again. Serves that bastard right.

Although Theon was pleased that Roose Bolton and Gryff Whitehill had paid for their subversive activities against House Stark, this was no time for him to be rejoicing. He had to remain focused on the real crisis at hand.

By now, the Others were close enough that he could fire at them without fear of missing. He swiftly reached back into his quiver, extracted one of the obsidian-tipped arrows, notched it, and concentrated on the closest White Walker. Once his aim was lined up, he let go of the bowstring. The arrow sailed through the air and struck the White Walker in its chest cavity. The effect was immediate. The White Walker shrieked and disintegrated into a mound of fragments. After that, somewhere between a dozen and a score wights collapsed onto the ground. Theon's usual cocky grin returned. Good shot, Greyjoy, he congratulated himself. And I'm just getting started.

Over the next several minutes, Theon repeatedly drew obsidian arrows from his quiver and fired each of them at the nearest Other. Every one hit its target perfectly. Every White Walker he destroyed seemed to eliminate a greater number of wights than the one fell before.

Before Theon knew it, he was down to his last obsidian arrow. He decided to save that one for later, just in case he actually managed to spot the Night's King. In all this mayhem, that's not very likely. But one never knows...

Before Theon could draw his first regular arrow, he noted how close the Others had gotten to his position. They were practically within spitting distance. The situation now seemed to call for melee weapons instead of ranged ones. As such, he fastened his longbow around his back and switched to his longsword, which was also made of obsidian.

Every man in Theon's row raised his weapon into the air as the wights drew closer. When the undead reached them, they collectively swung their weapons forward. Theon managed to take the head of a wight clean off. Lord Stannis cleaved another one down the middle. Lord Eddard cleaved three more in half. King Robert smashed a White Walker under the weight of his hammer.

The fighting continued in this fashion for a long while. Theon was very careful and heedful of every move he made, knowing full well that any one of them could have been his last.

He paid close attention to his allies, as well. Lord Eddard, Lord Stannis, and King Robert seemed to be handling themselves quite well. Alas, he could not say the same of some of the others. Men were dropping like flies left and right of him. Within fifteen minutes, most of the people in Theon's row had been slain. He, the king, and the few other survivors were forced to fall back into the next row.

Luckily, the men in that row were able to reinforce them. That included Ser Mandon Moore, Ser Theo Frey, and Ser Meryn Trant. Theon finally got to see what knights of the Kingsguard were capable of.

Ser Mandon was as deadly as the rumors claimed, and Ser Theo's blade moved so quickly that
Theon could hardly see it. At first, Ser Meryn seemed to be holding his own rather well. Then a wight armed with a spear lunged at him and impaled his throat.

He was only the first in his row to perish. Several others soon followed. Before long, the casualties were piling up. When enough of them collapsed, the survivors fell back yet again to the next row. This pattern went on for a time.

By the time Theon had some sense of where he was, he had been pushed all the way into the rearguard. Lord Eddard, Lord Stannis, King Robert, and Ser Mandon had also made it back that far. Ser Theo had been overwhelmed and butchered sometime before then.

Although Theon had kept his attention mostly on the undead that were within reach of him, he made an effort to keep track of the other White Walkers and wights in the immediate area. He also sneaked an occasional glimpse at the ones farther back in the Army of the Dead's ranks.

At one point, Theon spotted a tall, imposing figure surrounded by half a dozen Others armed with spears. The figure himself carried no weapon, but he was making gestures with his arms. Interestingly, wights seemed to follow those gestures as if they were directions. It was like he was guiding them.

It did not take Theon long to realize who that figure was. The enemy leader had finally shown himself. It's him. The Night's King.

A wiser or more serious man would have been intimidated. Theon was not such a man. He simply grinned like a fool, as he was oft one to do. He then moved further back into the rearguard until he was only surrounded by allies on all sides. Once he was safely among friends, he sheathed his obsidian longsword and exchanged it for his longbow once more.

He reached back into his quiver, took ahold of his final obsidian arrow, pulled it out, and notched it to the bowstring. He then raised the bow so that the shaft of the arrow was level with his eyes, and he gradually pulled it back.

Now all he had to do was shoot at the right moment. Unfortunately, that was not as straightforward as it should have been. The very instant he aimed his arrow at the Night's King, the six spear-wielding White Walkers formed a tight perimeter around their leader. It was as though they were protecting him.

Did they sense he was in danger? That appeared to be the case. Theon tried to spot a weakness in the Others' barricade, but they did not offer even the smallest opening. Maybe if I was closer, I would have a better chance. Unfortunately, that did not seem to be an option, either. The Night's King was keeping his distance, and if Theon moved even ten steps forward, he would be surrounded by wights.

If those fucking bodyguards would just get out of the way already...

"Come on," he muttered under his breath impatiently, keeping his aim focused, "Move, damnit. I just need one clear shot. Then this all ends. One well-placed arrow and I'll set you all free."

Alas, the Night's King's guards would not even give him an inch. Apparently, they did not want to be freed.

Eventually, Theon concluded that it was physically impossible for him to hit the Night's King with his obsidian arrow. He knew full well he could have just shot one of the bodyguards and then attempt to shoot the Night's King with a flaming regular arrow instead. But there were no fires
within arm's length of him, and by the time he managed to find a torch to ignite his steel arrows, another White Walker bodyguard could have simply taken the place of the one he shot down.

Theon was on the verge of giving up and lowering his bow, when something else caught his eye.

Another figure emerged from behind the Night's King. Like him, this one was not armed. It was shorter, thinner, and... more curvaceous. It soon occurred to Theon that he was staring at a female White Walker. He had enough experience with women that he could recognize one on sight even from this distance. *And even if she isn't breathing.*

He noticed that the female Other seemed particularly drawn to the Night's King. Even more so than his bodyguards and all the other White Walkers.

Theon remembered reading somewhere that the Night's King used to be a Brandon Stark. He was also the 13th Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. His tenure was around the time the Wall was erected. In those days, the Watch existed primarily to protect the realm from the children of the forest and the Free Folk.

Something else he remembered reading about this particular Brandon Stark was that he had been married. Back then, men of the Watch were allowed to take wives. However, Brandon Stark's wife had come from somewhere north of the Wall, and their union had never been officially sanctioned. She had been described as a cold woman with bright blue eyes. Supposedly, it had been because of her that the Brandon Stark had fallen from grace in the first place. She had been the one to lead him astray by getting him to bend his fellow black brothers to their will by performing human sacrifices. That was how he became the Night's King. *Then that would make her... the Night's Queen.*

Theon Greyjoy then got a brilliant idea. *If that truly is the Night's Queen, and she was the one who waylaid the Night's King... then perhaps she is the one I should be using my last obsidian arrow on.*

The Ironborn then redirected his aim at the female Other beside the Night's King and his bodyguards. After lining his shot up, he took in a deep breath and solemnly released.

The arrow flew straight through the air and struck the female Other in the chest, right in the middle of her bosom.

At first, nothing happened. The female Other just stood totally still with an arrow lodged between her tits. Then she abruptly let out a bone-chilling scream. That scream seemed to draw the attention of every wight and Walker Walker in the Army of the Dead. Including the Night's King himself.

A few seconds later, the female Other swayed back and forth, and then she collapsed onto her stomach. She did not shatter like the other White Walkers. She just keeled over the way a human corpse would.

After that, something extraordinary happened. Around half the wights and White Walkers in the immediate area dropped to the ground. That included two of the Night's King's bodyguards. The casualties did not stop there. All around the battlefield, the undead were falling in mass quantities.

By the end of all this, around one of every four members of the Army of the Dead had collapsed. Theon had no way of knowing the precise number, but it had to be somewhere between five and six million wights and White Walkers.

Theon stared at the scene in front of him, utterly astonished. Then he smirked again, and he burst
out laughing. I just took out a quarter of the Night's King's underlings with my last obsidian arrow.

Thanks to that arrow, he had managed to annihilate almost every White Walker and wight that had been in direct contact with the front line of the living army. By now, the few who remained had been beaten by the king and their allies. So, Theon had given them a respite from the fighting, albeit a brief one.

Many of the soldiers were now cheering. Some yelled out "Greyjoy! Greyjoy! Greyjoy!" A couple even patted Theon on the back. The feeling of intense satisfaction soon spread over him.

The feeling did not last very long, however. Up until now, whenever a wight or White Walker fell, the Night's King had paid it no mind. He did not even seem perturbed by the loss of millions of his warriors. When the Night's Queen was slain, however, her husband actually gave a reaction. And it was by no means a pleasant reaction.

The Night's King slowly looked away from his wife's remains, and he turned his head until he was staring directly in front of him. Theon soon saw his cold, blue eyes. It was as though they were somehow locked onto him. Is he staring at me?

All of a sudden, the Night's King extended his right arm. He seemed to be pointing at something. Theon quickly realized he was. The Night's King was pointing in his general direction.

"Are you fucking-" he whispered softly, taking a step backward.

The next thing Theon knew, hundreds of the undead were rushing forward faster than ever before. Most of them seemed to be running… at him! Oh, shit. Shit, shit, shit, SHIT!

This marked the exact instant when all the Seven Hells broke loose. The Army of the Dead may have been down to three-quarters its original size, but the remaining wights and White Walkers were more vicious and bloodthirsty than ever.

"Fall back!" Robert Baratheon shouted.

No one had to be told twice. Everyone swiftly turned around and started bolting from the area. They managed to flee before the wights reached them, but the undead were catching up.

"Ned, Stannis, to me!" Robert Baratheon shouted.

As they continued running to the south, the king's best friend and brother hurried over to him. "Your Grace?" they said in unison.

"The battle is lost," King Robert declared, "All we can do now is create a diversion, so the bulk of our remaining units can escape."

Lord Eddard and Lord Stannis nodded in acknowledgment. The latter asked, "Your orders, Robert?"

"The three of us will gather up the hundred units closest to the fighting and make for Winterfell posthaste," the stag kind pronounced, "It is my hope that by doing so, we will route as much of the Army of the Dead as possible in that direction, thus giving the majority an opportunity for a getaway."


That's a pretty good plan. One hand on his longbow and the other on the hilt of his longsword, he
scurried over to the three men and proclaimed, "I am ready whenever you are, Your Grace."

"Out of the question," Lord Eddard firmly retorted, "Theon, you are to leave at once."

The Ironborn was astounded. "What?"

"You've already done more than enough to contribute in this skirmish," the Lord of Winterfell contended, "There is no reason for you to endanger your own life any longer."

"My lord, there's every reason," Theon countered, "They're coming for me. If I go with the other survivors, I'll just put them in jeopardy."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Ned Stark shouted, "The undead do not hold grudges!"

*And, with all due respect, how the fuck would you know?* Theon firmly insisted "My lord, please-"

"This discussion is at an end!" Lord Eddard cut in, "You are to ride for the moat at once!"

Theon wanted to continue arguing, but he knew it would have been pointless to do so. He sighed and murmured in defeat "Yes, my lord."

Most of the Royal Army and Northern forces had come to Winterfell on horseback. Prior to the battle, all their horses had been grouped together at the very back of the rearguard. They were still banded there now, ready to head out at any time.

The company's remaining archers were already mounted and armed with their bows. They were able to provide cover fire while their colleagues withdrew from the battlefield, just as the king had ordered them to.

Theon, Lord Stannis, Lord Eddard, and King Robert were among the last to reach the horses. When they got there, the king told the lords "Stannis, you and I will gather our hundred men and head for Winterfell. Ned, I want you to ensure that the survivors get away first. Then rendezvous with us in your ancestral home."

The two men nodded in acknowledgment. As the two Baratheon men went to select the unlucky bastards who would stay behind, Lord Stark busied himself with evacuating everyone else. Theon followed the wolf lord into the group of horses.

"I want you gone from here, Theon," Eddard Stark said sternly, when he noticed the Ironborn was keeping close to him.

"I will leave soon, my lord," Theon Greyjoy claimed, "But at least let me help you get the others out of here first."

"Very well," Lord Eddard remarked, "But we must be quick about it."

"Aye, my lord," Theon acknowledged.

They spent the next several minutes aiding the majority of the survivors with the evacuation. Soon enough, King Robert, Lord Stannis, Ser Mandon, and a hundred others galloped towards Winterfell. As the king intended, most of the Army of the Dead was diverted towards the king and his party. The rest, however, were still fixated on the larger crowd who was retreating.

At this point, Theon was no longer certain whether the Night's King's minions were still after him or not. But he was quite unwilling to take the chance that they were. *There's only one surefire way*
I can keep the others safe. Unfortunately, Lord Eddard would never permit that. Unless…

In that moment, Theon knew precisely what needed to be done. He waited until Lord Eddard's back was turned to him, and then he checked to make certain that no one else was watching. Sure enough, there were only horses around them.

Theon then drew his longsword, casually approached Lord Eddard from behind, and lifted the blade high over his head.

"Forgive me, my lord," he murmured, almost inaudibly. He swung his sword through the air… and the hilt slammed against the back of Lord Eddard's head.

The Warden of the North froze in place momentarily, and then he staggered and fell backwards. Thankfully, Theon was able to catch him before he hit the ground. As he hoped, Ned Stark had been knocked unconscious.

"I need assistance over here!" Theon yelled, trying to sound frantic, "Lord Eddard's suffered a concussion! Someone, help me! Please!"

It only took about twenty seconds for his pleas to be heard and answered. Two mounted Northerners made their way over to him. One of them was a tall, middle-aged bearded man. The other was a younger, exotic, tan-skinned woman of Dornish origins. Both of them wore the bear of House Mormont on their surcoats.

Jon knew exactly who they were. They were Lord Jorah and Lady Nymeria Mormont. As it happened, they were the ones who beat his elder brother Rodrik at the Battle of Seagard. And now they're my salvation. Or rather, Lord Eddard's salvation.

"Give him here, lad," Lord Jorah urged Theon, extending his arms.

The Ironborn nodded and helped the Lord of Bear Island lift the Lord of Winterfell onto his horse. Once Ned Stark was secured in his saddle, Lord Jorah stated, "We'll take him back to Moat Cailin."

"Just a moment," Theon bade them. He then reached down and picked up Ice from the spot on the ground where Lord Eddard had discarded it. After that, he removed its scabbard from his back and slid the greatsword inside. He passed the sheathed weapon over to the Mormonts and told them "You mustn't forget this. Please see that it, too, gets back to the moat safely."

"It will be done," Lady Nymeria asserted, taking the Starks' ancestral weapon and holding onto it tightly with one arm.

"Thank you," Theon said appreciatively. He was quite pleased with himself. He had guaranteed the survival of the majority of his remaining comrades, including Lord Eddard Stark. "Now you'd best head south, before the Others are upon us."

"Are you not coming, lad?" Lord Jorah said in concern.

"I'll be right behind you," said Theon. That, of course, was a blatant lie. Luckily, the Lord of Bear Island and his wife seemed to swallow it. They nodded their heads, reined their horses towards the south, and galloped off in that direction.

By now, just about everyone else had gotten away safely. Since a much smaller number of riders would be leaving Winterfell than the number who originally came to it, there were a bunch of horses who would be left behind. Theon was essentially all alone with the remaining horses. Most
of them were in the process of bolting away from the approaching horde of undead. Fortunately, Theon managed to grab one by the halter and mount it. After calming the beast, he rode straight for Winterfell. By this point, none of the Others were bothering to pursue the evacuees.

Theon made it back to Winterfell well before the Army of the Dead did. When he got there, the portcullis was lowered, but they did not have time to raise the drawbridge. Theon hastily climbed off his mount, armed himself with his longbow, and drew two of his steel arrows.

"Does anyone have a torch?!" he shouted edgily.

A soldier of the Royal Army whose name Theon did not know came over with a torch. Theon placed the heads of the two arrows into the flames. He had wrapped the tips in kindling beforehand so that they would catch fire more easily.

As he notched, one of the flaming arrows to his bowstring, he was approached by King Robert, who asked him in concern "Where's Ned, my boy?"

"I'm afraid he was attacked, Your Grace," Theon claimed, "He's alive, but he passed out. You needn't worry, though. Lord Mormont was able to escort him off the battlefield."

"Well, at least Ned's out of danger," Robert commented in relief, "But tell me; who attacked him?"

"I couldn't say, Your Grace," Theon asserted, "However, I can promise you this much: the bastard responsible for Lord Stark's condition didn't go unpunished for his offense."

At least that much is true. The King dropped the issue at that, and he smirked and nodded in approval. "Good work, lad. But I predict you'll soon regret your decision to come in Ned's place."

"Oh, I regret it already, Your Grace," Theon professed. But I can live with that regret. Even though I won't be living much longer.

"Here they come!" someone shouted.

Theon turned towards the gate. The portcullis was still drawn, but it turned out to be insufficient to keep the Army of the Dead out. For a moment, it appeared as though the portcullis was somehow becoming lighter in color. Then he took a closer look, and he realized the metal was actually being turned into ice. What in fuck...?

When the portcullis had been completely made into ice, someone standing on the drawbridge gave it a lone sturdy punch. With that, the portcullis exploded into a huge mound of chipped ice shavings.

Once the portcullis was completely and utterly obliterated, the undead stormed the grounds of Winterfell.

Theon readied one of his flaming arrows and fired at the first Other he saw. He just barely managed to hit it in the shoulder. Without even bothering to see if that was adequate to kill the target, he drew another arrow, lit it with the other flaming arrow he had already drawn, and fired again. This time, he managed to shoot another Other in the head.

Theon Greyjoy repeated this procedure many times over the next several minutes. Since he was the only person there armed with a bow, he had an advantage over every other person there. Of course, if the distance between him and his foe was narrowed down...

He tried not to think on that. Instead, he concentrated on the onslaught of enemies charging through
the gate.

He was not even halfway through his supply of arrows before the Others reached him and his allies. What happened over the next few minutes was absolute pandemonium.

The Others practically tore through the living. Ser Mandon Moore was hacked to pieces by a myriad of blunt blades. Lord Stannis Baratheon had a spear thrust through his midsection. King Robert Baratheon was still crushing wights and White Walkers alike with his warhammer, but even the great stag king himself proved to be less than invulnerable. He met his end when three different Others thrust their swords into his body all at the same time.

Before Theon knew it, he was all alone. Every last one of his allies had been killed. For some reason, the wights were now keeping their distance from him. What in the hells are they doing?

Out of nowhere, Theon felt a sharp pain in his lower body. Two sharp pains, actually. He groaned and collapsed onto his knees. He quickly realized that was where the pain was coming from: his knees. He looked over his shoulders and saw the source of the pain. Each of his knees had a blade sticking out of the back of it. The Others must have flung them at me.

A moment later, four White Walkers approached Theon and seized him by the arms and shoulders. He struggled to shake them off, but their grip on him was tight. One of them held him down. The other three proceeded to strip him. They stripped him of his quiver, his cloak, his armor, his tunic, until he was down to his breeches. He was shivering by the time his entire upper body was exposed. However, it was not just the cold that made him tremble.

All around Theon, the undead were gathered. They seemed to be staring down at him, almost as though he was some peculiar exhibit.

"Just kill me already," Theon snapped heatedly, "What the fuck are you monsters even waiting for?"

He was not expecting an answer to that question. Nevertheless, he got one.

The wights and White Walkers standing before stepped aside, revealing the Night's King. He gazed down at Theon not with loathing, but with what appeared to be pity. I just killed his wife, and he's looking down on me?

Slowly, very slowly, the Night's King came closer to Theon. Every step seemed to take at least five minutes to accomplish, and Theon felt his breathing become a little more labored each time.

Eventually, the Night's King was standing directly in front of Theon. He extended his left arm and placed his hand on top of the Ironborn's head. He had a surprisingly gentle touch, like a father's.

However, the next thing the Night's King did was anything but fatherly. He reached behind himself and pulled out a black dagger. At a glance, it appeared to be made of obsidian. Then Theon saw it a second time, and it turned out to be something else entirely.

The Night's King brought the dagger to the center of Theon's chest, held it there for a minute, and plunged it directly into his heart. The Ironborn sputtered and convulsed violently. Then he was coughing up blood. He thought he was going to die of either heart trauma or blood loss. Before he could succumb to either, he was overcome with an even more unpleasant sensation: iciness.

It was like his entire body from his skin to his bones to his blood was freezing over. The very last thing to freeze were his eyes. Just before his vision gave out, Theon Greyjoy swore he saw a light shade of blue.
Note: I did not come up with the Night's Queen. I don't really know WHO came up with her, whether it was Martin or Benioff and Weiss. Either way, the lore about her is not something of my own creation. At least not entirely. Just wanted to make that clear.
Waiting For Doom

The elderly man used the remainder of his strength to lift his arm and brush a dry, wrinkled hand along the dragon's scaly hide. After he traced the length of the mighty beast's head, a toothless grin stretched across his countenance. He muttered weakly "They truly are magnificent."

Those were his last words. After them, he breathed his last breath. Aemon Targaryen was the only person in modern Westeros to have been born before the last century. Now, he was gone. He died surrounded by his brother's descendants and their friends with a smile on his face. At least he died at peace. None of us may be afforded the same luxury.

Rhaenys, Daenerys, Samwell, Talisa, and Sansa began to sob softly. Arya, Willas, Aegon, Lady Ashara, and Jon threatened to do the same. Jasper, Rickard, and Bran were fighting back tears of their own. Even Robb himself could not deny the emotional intensity of this scene. But he did not allow himself to cry. Sad as this loss is, more will soon follow. Weeping will have to wait until later.

After a minute or two of relative silence, Bran candidly remarked "We'll have to burn his body."

Robb flashed his younger brother an exasperated glare. I know he's the Three-Eyed Raven, and he may be in the right, but it would not hurt him to be a little more sensitive to the others' feelings. The maester's body is not even cold yet. Be that as it may, it was still plenty cold outside, and it was getting colder with every passing hour. For that reason, the dead would have to be burned. It is fortunate we even have an opportunity to burn him. Theon and so many others were not so fortunate. At least Theon had died honorably, even if he had disobeyed Father's explicit orders in the process. Still, he had managed to take out a quarter of the Army of the Dead at the same time. He deserves his own damn monument for his heroism. I'll ensure that he receives an appropriate service once this is all over. Provided I don't join him first, of course.

Another minute later, Robb Stark turned to his guards and ordered them "See to it that Maester Aemon's body is given a proper and respectful sendoff."

The men nodded their heads and hastened to obey the heir to the North. Or whatever's left of the North. We've already lost almost all of it, including our ancestral home. For the first time in millennia, there was no Stark in Winterfell. No living one, at any rate. The Night's King was a Brandon Stark before he fell from grace. But with the gods as my witness, he will not be the last Stark to reign over this land.

Robb said nothing as the guards carried away the lifeless body of the ancient black brother. He just stood watching them with his siblings and friends.

"Is it really that necessary that we burn him?" Rhaenys asked. She was clearly dismayed.

"Yes," Jon told his half-sister, not unkindly, "Otherwise he'll turn."

"Does it really matter if he does?" Arya debated, "After all, what possible harm could a wight of his stature present to us?"

"You would be surprised, dear niece," a grim voice interjected. Robb and the others turned to see Uncle Benjen standing before them. Father and Aunt Lyanna were there, as well. The latter was wearing her true face. Ever since the loss of King Robert, there was no need for her to hide behind a façade anymore.
Initially, Robb and his siblings had been astonished to discover that their cousin's maid had been his mother all along, as had everyone else. In hindsight, however, it made perfect sense. *Myrna never went to Winterfell. She was always at Jon's side. Lyarra took a liking to her.*

It had not taken Robb and the rest of the current inhabitants of Moat Cailin very long to become accustomed to this truth. Of course, when the truth first came out, there had been some controversy about how Gregor Clegane and the secret council of the Legion without Banners had purposefully misled the crown. Such a grave offense could not go overlooked, even when Westeros was already undergoing a terrible crisis.

Due to the death of King Robert, it had fallen to Prince Jasper to decide how to handle this matter. He had not yet been sworn in as the next king of the Seven Kingdoms, but he was still the heir to the Iron Throne. Thus, he had the authority to decide the fate of any who may have wronged his late father.

Fortunately, he had ultimately chosen to pardon Lyanna Stark and the Legion for their acts of deception. He claimed he understood their reasons for feigning her demise and withholding the truth of her whereabouts, and he did not fault them for doing so. If anything, he commended them for their boldness and ingenuity. Robb was pleased with his friend's ruling, albeit a little suspicious, as well. If he did not know better, he would have thought Jasper had already been aware of Myrna's true identity for a while now.

"Most wights have very little muscle to speak of," Benjen disclosed, "Unless it's reanimated from a freshly-dead corpse, it generally has none at all. It is basically a walking skeleton. Such an enemy may seem harmless. Nevertheless, these skeletons can prove to be fierce opponents. They are deadliest in swarms, but even just one of them alone is capable of killing you. That is the very fate that befell many of my comrades at the Fist of the First Men and the Wall."

"Therefore, we must burn every dead body," Father proclaimed, "Including those that were gentle and feeble when they were still alive."

"We understand, my lord," Daenerys said softly, drying her eyes, "And so would Maester Aemon, if it had been any of us who died in his place."

Several of the others murmured their agreement, including Robb. *I've no desire to join the ranks of the Army of the Dead. Should I perish during the battle, I pray that someone will manage to burn my body before it can rise back up.*

Needless to say, Robb was still holding out hope he would live past the upcoming battle. He was fully prepared to go down fighting like his late friend Theon Greyjoy. Even so, he felt he had much to live for. His parents had great expectations for him. His brothers, his sisters, and his retainers relied on him. His friends and his bannermen looked up to him. Most of all, he would soon be a father.

It had been less than a day since Robb had seen his wife Margaery off. For over a turn of the moon now, the two of them had been expecting a babe. When they parted ways at the south gate, she had been sobbing hysterically, and he had tried and failed to console her. *I am fortunate Mother was there to aid me. If she hadn't, Margaery might have drowned both of us in her tears.*

It was only after Robb had promised Margaery half a dozen times that he would survive this ordeal and come back to her afterwards that she finally calmed down. *I had best honor that promise. Otherwise, even the gods won't be able to protect me from her wrath.* With tears still in her eyes, Margaery had kissed her husband passionately, and then she had headed south. Mother, Rickon, Shaggydog, Lady Daliah Clegane, Rickard's siblings and cousins, and all the rest of the moat's
civilian population had gone with her.

All of Moat Cailin's current inhabitants would have a role to play in the encroaching battle. Around half of them would be fighting on the frontlines or somewhere else on the battlefield. Robb would be there with his father, Uncle Benjen, Jasper, Rickard, Willas, Lord Gregor Clegane, and many others. Most of the other half would be fighting from a distance atop the perimeter's concrete wall or the adjoining hills. That was where Jon, Daenerys, Aunt Lyanna, Bran, Arya, Aegon, and Rhaenys would be placed. The rest would be performing a variety of other duties from within the moat whilst the battle raged, which included giving aid to the wounded. That was where noncombatants such as Lady Ashara, Talisa, Sansa, Samwell, Mollander, and Lady Melisandre would be of use. In the event that the moat was breached by the enemy, they would also be the ones with the greatest chance of escaping with their lives.

However, an evacuation was not high on anyone's list of priorities. So far, the Seven Kingdoms had faced the Others in battle three times. Once at the Fist of the First Men, once at the Wall, and once at Winterfell. Although all three battles had resulted in substantially greater casualties for the side of the undead, they had still been crushing defeats for the side of the living.

This next battle against the Others would be the fourth one. By all accounts, it would also be the final one, regardless of the victor. At present, the combined might of both Westeros and Essos was stationed at Moat Cailin. This was also the final chokepoint where they could funnel the Army of the Dead in one particular location during their march south. Once the Army of the Dead was clear of the Neck, they would have free reign of the entire rest of the continent. Perhaps even the rest of the Known World.

Even if humanity put up a valiant struggle to the bitter end, they would never have another chance like the forces gathered at Moat Cailin would. So, if the fate of the world would be determined anywhere, it would have to be here. *This could very well be humanity's last stand.*

Robb knew full well that their odds were not very favorable. He was certain most of his comrades were not too optimistic of their chances, either. Nevertheless, the people in Moat Cailin were prepared to defend the future of humanity with their lives. Just about every single one of them would be fighting for the sake of all life.

In fact, there was only one individual in all of Moat Cailin who would not be contributing to the moat's defense in any way. That person was sitting in a cell in the Reproach Tower. That person used to be a trusted vassal and friend of House Stark. Then he had tried to hand Bran over to the Night's King. *Now he's just another common criminal.*

Actually, that was not quite the case. Hodor was much more than a common criminal. He was an extraordinarily dangerous one. He had managed to fool the entire world into believing he was a lackwit. He had also lied to House Stark for the last twenty years. He had deceived them far worse than Gregor Clegane had deceived everyone else into thinking Aunt Lyanna was dead. *I still wonder why we're keeping him here, especially since all the moat's other prisoners were already escorted south.*

Robb was certain Lord Gregor Clegane had his reasons for keeping Hodor close. *Maybe I could ask him what they are during today's meeting.* He suspected it was because Hodor was one of the few people who possessed the same source as the Mountain. But that was merely a theory, and there may have been more to it than that.

Once Maester Aemon's body was carried away, Bran looked around the area at large and proposed, "Shall we continue your training?"
Robb merely nodded down at him, saying "At once."

Even before Bran went north of the Wall, Robb had already known that his younger brother possessed the greensight, and that he was a warg. What Robb did not know was that he and the rest of his siblings were, as well. This could be attributed to the blood of the First Men in their veins. However, Jon was arguably the most powerful warg of them all, as he also had the blood of Old Valyria.

In the time since they hatched, Eliaxes, Draegar, and Ygrenyon had become very close to Rhaenys, Aegon, Daenerys, and even Maester Aemon in the final days of his life. Alas, none of them had the capacity to physically enter the dragons' minds. Thus, Jon was the only one who could ever hope to fully control the dragons.

According to Lord Gregor Clegane, Lady Melisandre, and Mollander, the dragons would have a pivotal part to play in the final conflict against the Others. That was mostly due to their abilities to fly, to effortlessly dodge attacks from the ground, and, of course, to breathe fire.

Bran seemed to share their faith. His hope was that they could get one of the dragons close enough to the Night's King and incinerate him. Any of the Targaryens could have attempted to accomplish this goal by riding one of the dragons over the Army of the Dead. But Bran believed the safest, most reliable, and most plausible approach was the one that involved managing the dragon's every movement.

Ever since he got to Moat Cailin, Bran had been spending much of his time with Robb, Sansa, Arya, Rickon, and Jon. One-by-one, he had awakened their own warging capabilities, and he had helped them improve upon those capabilities overtime.

The first few days had been extremely difficult for all of them. Bran had never been a teacher before, and his lessons were not anything that could have been acquired elsewhere. Fortunately, he was a patient and empathetic mentor, and they were attentive students. Besides, the topic was a most interesting one. Even the energetic Rickon could bring himself to sit still and listen to Bran's teachings.

Before Rickon left the moat with Mother, he gave Bran his word that he would continue to hone his warging, and he would use Shaggydog to do so. In the meantime, everyone else would be able to continue learning from Bran directly.

The biggest room in all of Moat Cailin was located in the Parish Tower. That single room encompassed the tower's entire first floor. The whole purpose of this particular tower's existence was to plan and oversee the development of the villages north of the moat. During winter, the villagers with the poorest housing would relocate to the Parish Tower. Of course, since all the villagers had already been evacuated, the tower was now being used to shelter others, such as Dothraki, sellswords, and men of the Night's Watch. I believe Maester Aemon is oldest person to have ever set foot in here.

The Parish Tower's single ground-level chamber was so large that even the dragons could fit inside. That very chamber was where Robb and the others were gathered at present.

"Then let us get started," Bran proposed, gesturing for his brother, sisters, and cousin to come forward.

Robb, Sansa, Arya, and Jon solemnly approached the Three-Eyed Raven. Grey Wind, Lady, Nymeria, and Ghost padded forth alongside their respective masters and mistresses. Likewise, Summer was seated next to his own master.
Eliaxes, Draegar, and Ygrenyon were all nearby, as well. Eliaxes was the one Aemon had petted in the final moments of his life. She belonged to Aegon, whereas Draegar belonged to Daenerys, and Ygrenyon belonged to Jon. Rhaenys was the only one with no dragon. However, she and the younger Targaryens had agreed that once the dragons started breeding, she would get the first egg.

At any rate, when Jon came forward with Ghost, Ygrenyon followed after him, as well. While Robb and his siblings were able to practice their warging on their direwolves, Jon was able to practice on both his direwolf and his dragon. He was arguably the strongest warg out of all of them, including Bran.

Bran waited until everyone was standing in a line before him. Then he folded his arms and proclaimed, "According to the most recent scout reports, the Army of the Dead will be upon us any day now. As such, this could be our last opportunity to test your powers before you are forced to use them in battle. Thus, today I will not be teaching you anything new. Instead, I want you to show me what you can already do. Prove to me that all the time I've invested in training you can yield some fruitful results."

"Gladly," Arya stated with a smirk. Robb, Sansa, and Jon said nothing; they merely nodded their heads.

Bran kept his arms folded, and he proclaimed "Father, Aunt Lyanna, Uncle Benjen, Jasper, Rickard, if you would…?"

Those individuals hastily stepped forward and stood behind Robb, Jon, Bran, Sansa, and Arya respectively. The former five were prepared to catch the latter five if they collapsed whilst they were warging.

As soon as everyone was in position, Bran declared "Begin!"

Robb closed his eyes and cleared his head of anything that did not pertain to the task at hand. That included his obligations to the North, what he would have for dinner that night, and all thoughts of his loved ones who had fled south. After his head was clear, he directed his mind downwards.

When Robb opened his eyes, he was twice as close to the ground, he was standing on four legs, and he felt naked yet a lot warmer at the same time. It was a queer feeling, but he had grown used to it. Once again, he had successfully entered Grey Wind's mind. Likewise, Sansa was inside Lady, Arya was inside Nymeria, Bran was inside Summer, and Jon was inside Ghost.

Robb arched his head a little and saw himself standing on his regular two human feet. Father was supporting him by the shoulders so that he remained upright. Even now, Robb could not get used to having what could only be classified as an out-of-body experience. The sensation was almost too surreal for words.

Robb then turned his attention towards his siblings and cousin. By now, they had adjusted to being in the bodies of their own direwolves, as well. However, they still lacked the means to speak with each other in this form. *If only we could somehow communicate with one another as wolves, too.* Certainly, they could convey their thoughts through grunts, expressions, and gestures, but actual words would have made interaction much easier.

Summer moved a few feet away from the other wolves. Then he bared his fangs and made a light growl, as though he was challenging his littermates.

*This must be how Bran wants us to prove ourselves,* Robb deduced. In addition to mastering how to enter the wolves and move about in them, he and the others had learned how to fight in them, too.
They had mostly been practicing against wooden dummies and Father's armed soldiers. No one had gotten hurt so far. However, this was the first time they would clash against each other.

Robb was confident he and his kin could pit the wolves against each other without actually hurting them. After all, the wolves would not have allowed the Starks into their minds if they felt doing so would pose a risk to their well-being. Furthermore, while the magnitude of the Starks' powers varied, they knew for a fact that the wolves did not allow anyone other than their respective owner into their heads. Robb, Sansa, Arya, and Rickon could only warg into their wolves. Jon could only warg into Ghost and the dragons. As the new Three-Eyed Raven, Bran could warg into just about any living animal, including men. Yet even Bran could not get inside any direwolf other than Summer and their father. Nor could he get inside the dragons. Jon alone possessed that ability.

Over the next hour, Summer engaged each of the other wolves in single combat. Ghost was the only one who managed to triumph over his brother, despite being the runt of the litter. That was likely due to how Jon was the best at warging. Be that as it may, he was only slightly better than Bran.

Arya was the next best after Bran. As Nymeria, she was very deft and spry. She was so quick that Robb had a difficult time monitoring her. Summer just barely managed to keep up with her.

Sansa was not too far behind her younger sister. She could do perform some rather graceful movements and attacks as Lady. She almost seemed to elegant to be a wolf. Still, Summer was able to stay one step ahead of her.

Loath as he was to admit it, Robb was the worst at warging. That was ironic, as he was destined to be the next head of the family, and Grey Wind was the pack leader. For man and wolf alike, their younger siblings looked up to them. Yet when their two minds were one, they formed the least efficient couple. Even Rickon and Shaggydog had a more symbiotic coupling than they. Robb would always emerge the victor in a swordfight with Bran, and Summer could never hope to get the best of Grey Wind when they wrestled. But when they fought as couples, the odds were clearly in the younger brothers' favor.

In spite of that, Robb and Grey Wind still made up a deadly pair. The average soldier could not hold his own against the heir of Winterfell and his loyal direwolf. Plus, he had improved a great deal since he began these lessons. If Grey Wind and I are forced to join our minds in battle against the Others, we should at least be able to take down a few scores of wights before either of us is harmed by the foe.

After an hour of this routine, Bran gave the signal to withdraw. In response, Robb promptly returned to his human body. Jon, Sansa, Arya, and Bran soon did the same. Once they were all seeing through their original human eyes, Bran grinned and declared "Good work, all of you. Each and every one of you has made extraordinary progress in the last several weeks. If ever you are in a situation that would necessitate warging into the direwolves, I've every confidence that you will all endure."

Bran did not have a habit of mincing his words. He was always very straightforward in his speech. If he felt their performance as wargs had been abysmal, he would have said so directly. At least he has faith in our ability. Even if Robb and Grey Wind were hopeless against the other pairs, they could still put up a decent fight against the undead.

"Bran, would you like me to…?" Jon remarked, gesturing to Ygrenyon. Robb was a little astonished by his cousin's hardiness. He was still a little fatigued from spending so much time in Grey Wind. Jon, on the other hand, was eager to keep going, even after an hour in Ghost. Doesn't he ever tire of warging?
"Not now, Jon," Bran replied, "It would be best if we did that outside, and I can still hear that blizzard raging. Perhaps we can do it later, if the storm dies down. Even if it does not, you needn't feel obligated to demonstrate that. After what I have already seen you do as Ygrenyon, I believe you and he truly are our best chance at defeating the Night's King."

Jon smiled at his cousin's praise. "I appreciate your vote of confidence. I only wish I shared it."

Aunt Lyanna tenderly patted her son on the back and told him "If there is one person who can save us with dragons, it would have to be you. You are the third head, after all."

Jon scoffed at his mother's remark, and he stated, "I suppose I cannot argue with that."

*Obviously not.* If not for Rhaegar Targaryen's prophecy, the late Silver Prince and Aunt Lyanna would never have formed their union. Then they would never have had a son, and there would have been no one alive with the blood of both the First Men and Old Valyria in their veins. In other words, if not for Jon, no one would have been able to fully dominate the dragons. He was the only one capable of doing so in the whole of the Known World. *This could ultimately turn out to be his destiny.*

"That was indeed impressive," Father pronounced with a note of approval, "However, now that you are finished with your warging exercises, I would advise that we all make for the Meeting Tower. The emergency summit Lord Gregor scheduled is to begin soon."

"Ah, that's right," Robb thought aloud, "The Mountain may be a patient man, but we'd best not have him wait on us."

Everyone else muttered their agreement in some form or other. Shortly after, they began heading up until now, most of the gatherings in the Meeting Tower had only asked for the attendance of the secret council, the officers of the Royal Army, the Lords Paramount, and anyone else of equal or similar status or importance. This time, however, the Mountain had also requested for certain other individuals to appear, as well. That included Robb's brother and sisters. *I can understand why he'd want Bran there, but why Sansa and Arya, too?*

The weather outside was still quite disagreeable, so the most practical means of traveling between towers was to use the outer wall and the catwalks. Robb and everyone else in his party headed for a stairwell in the northeastern corner of the Parish Tower's ground floor. Eliaxes, Draegar, and Ygrenyon stayed put as the Targaryens made their way out of the chamber. However, Grey Wind, Lady, Nymeria, Summer, Ghost and their still-unnamed father followed the Starks. *One of these days, we're going to have to come up with a name for him, too. I believe Father, Aunt Lyanna, and Uncle Benjen should be the ones to decide that.*

When they got to the stairwell, they climbed it to the top floor. The Parish Tower was in the southwestern corner of Moat Cailin. The Meeting Tower was near the center of the northern edge of the moat. To get there, they would have to pass through four other towers. They chose to take the one that followed the southern side of the most. They went from the Parish Tower to the Novice Tower to the Gatehouse Tower to the Armament Tower to the Lord's Tower, which finally brought them to the Meeting Tower.

When they crossed over the outer wall and the catwalks, they had to trudge through a foot of snow. The going was rough and difficult, but they managed to pull through.

The snow was still coming down. It was falling so hard that even torches could not be lit outdoors. Needless to say, the Sun could not be seen through the clouds, either.
"The days just keep getting shorter," Talisa Maegyr noted, "I can hardly even remember the last time we saw the Sun."

"I am sorry if that bothers you so, my love," Aegon Targaryen told his wife, wrapping an arm around her.

"You've nothing to apologize for," the Volantene noblewoman assured her husband, "Before I came to Westeros, my brother and I had never even seen snow. Even now, I still find it favorable to sand."

*I myself have never seen sand, so I have no means with which to compare the two.* Willas Tyrell remarked "Still, I would be more than happy to welcome the Sun back whenever it returns."

"We all would," Aunt Lyanna conceded, "I'm sure I speak for the lot of us."

"Most people do tend to prefer day to night," Bran pointed out, "Why do you suppose that is?"

"Likely because it is far easier to see during the day," Uncle Benjen contended, "After all, if one cannot see where their fears are, they have no way of knowing where to run, where to hide, or where the attack will come from."

"Well, in my mind, that is far worse than simply facing your fear head-on," Rhaenys Targaryen debated.

"That would also validate a certain theory of mine," Samwell Tarly remarked.

"What theory, Sam?" Jon asked his best friend.

The heir to Horn Hill answered with a question. He asked no one in particular: "Why do you think it is that in the old tales, most monsters are described as appearing at night or when it is dark?"

"I haven't an inkling," Jon replied. Robb and some of the others had a few ideas, but nothing concrete.

"I do not believe it is because monsters are said to be nocturnal or anything of the sort," Samwell professed, "I think the truth of the matter is that in the light of day, nearly all monsters are ridiculous to look upon. Consider this, if you would. When surrounded by darkness, it is more the monsters' presence itself that would intimidate you. Its appearance, however, is generally not so frightening. Sunlight illuminates it, and thus, allows you to acknowledge the monster for what it really is: an absurdity."

"That… actually makes perfect sense, Sam," Robb admitted. **Could that be why the Army of the Dead waited until winter to return?** "After all, the 'Long Day' does not sound intimidating at all."

"No, it does not," Father concurred, "Nevertheless, whether they appear in light or dark, the Others are a formidable foe. Sunlight would probably slow them down for a time, but only fire or something refined from it would vanquish them. Thus, the presence of the Sun would not matter all that greatly."

"Perhaps you're right, Father," Robb stated. **Still, the Sun would be useful in other ways. At the very least, we'd be able to see the Others coming before they got here.** The rest of the walk was spent in total quietness. Only the whistling of the wind and the crunching of snow beneath their feet could be heard.

When they arrived in the building's main meeting chamber, they were the last ones to arrive. The
secret council, the Lords Paramount, the remaining officers of the Royal Army, and everyone else of like prominence was already accounted for. Along with a few other characters.

There were not nearly enough chairs for everyone, so more than half of them would have to stand. The women and children were given priority for seating. People with physical disabilities, such as Lord Tyrion Lannister and Mollander, were also given seats. Some other chairs were vacated so that Sansa, Arya, Bran, Jasper, Rickard, Samwell, and Lady Ashara could sit down. Robb was content to stand.

Lord Gregor Clegane sat in his usual spot at the head of the circular table. He was one of the few able-bodied men who had a chair. Given how he was the Lord of Moat Cailin and the commander of the Legion without Banners, it would have been highly inappropriate to displace him.

His wife Lady Dacey Clegane was seated to his left. His sister Lady Ellyn Lannister was seated to his right. It was worth noting that Lady Ellyn was several months with child. Her family had attempted to convince her to evacuate south, but to no avail. She had, however, agreed to avoid doing anything that would compromise herself or her babe. As a result, she would not be fighting on the frontlines or the adjoining hillsides. Instead, she would be within the confines of the moat, assisting Mollander and the other healers. *Yet her brothers and their wives will all be on the frontlines.*

Lord Tyrion Lannister was on the other side of his pregnant wife. There was once a time when he only attended these meetings as the Mountain's brother-by-law. Now he attended them as the new Lord Paramount of the Westerlands, as well.

At this time, there were only three other Lords Paramount present. Father was one of them; he represented the North. The other two were Victarion Greyjoy of the Iron Islands and Mace Tyrell of the Reach. Essentially, they were the only ones who were able to come.

After the deaths of Lord Stannis Baratheon and King Robert Baratheon, the Stormlands and the Crownlands were currently without a Lord Paramount. *Unless Jasper and his cousin Shireen wish to assume that much responsibility before the Others are dealt with.* Lord Jon Arryn of the Vale was still comatose, though he was expected to recover any day now. Prince Doran Martell of Dorne had been unable to travel this far north due to his gout. Similarly, Lord Hoster Tully of the Riverlands, Robb's maternal grandfather, had been bedridden for over a year now, and thus, he too had been unable to venture to Moat Cailin. His son and heir, Ser Edmure, had come in his place. Uncle Edmure's lady wife Asha Greyjoy, Theon's older sister, had accompanied her husband.

Lady Asha had been deeply dismayed when she first learned what became of Theon. She had already lost her older brother Maron in the Pentoshi Bloodbath, and her father Lord Balon had died when the Wall collapsed. To lose her dear younger brother so soon after incurring those other losses… *She is handling herself much better than I would have in her position.*

Father had attempted to comfort Asha when she first heard the news of Theon's fate. He saw it as his duty both as her brother-by-law and as Theon's surrogate father. Initially, Asha had refused Father's consolation. She had blamed him for her brother's passing. Robb could understand why she would do so, but what happened had not been entirely in Father's control. *He did not ask Theon to knock him out and disregard his instructions.* After her grief had some time to settle, however, she had chosen to accept Father's support. In any case, Theon had died a hero.

Once everyone was gathered around the table, Lord Gregor sat up and stated "I thank you all for assembling here on such short notice. I realize that with the Others getting closer every day, this is hardly the most ideal time for us to convene. But I must ask you to bear with me and hear what I
have to say, even if it may seem a waste of our precious time."

"We know you would never waste our time, my lord," Robb commented, earning several mutters of agreement from around the chamber.

The Lord of Moat Cailin flashed a grin at the Young Wolf. Then he said "Before we begin, I would like to convey my sincerest condolences to Princes Aegon and Jon and Princesses Rhaenys and Daenerys. Their great-great-granduncle Aemon Targaryen died earlier today."

Over the next minute, several other people similar expressed their sympathies to the Targaryens. Robb stood behind Jon and placed a comforting hand on his cousin's shoulder. Both Jon and Aunt Lyanna seemed to appreciate the gesture.

"Now, let us move on to the meeting's chief topic of discussion," Lord Gregor proposed.

"I assume it has something to do with our forthcoming skirmish with the Others, my lord?" Samwell presumed.

"Not quite, Sam," the Mountain revealed, "The purpose of this meeting is not to discuss battle plans or battle tactics of any sort. We've already done plenty of that in the last few weeks. At this point, there is nothing further we could do to ready our units, other than advise them to pray to whatever gods they believe in."

*I cannot really argue with that. We've already done so much to prepare our soldiers for the last stand. Our preparations may still turn out to be insufficient, but at this point, I doubt there is anything more we can do. We'll just have to face off against the Others with our current strength."

"Then, with all due respect, my lord, why are we here?" Ser Wendel Manderly inquired.

It was Lady Melisandre who replied: "We are here to discuss a different kind of threat to the Known World. This threat is nowhere near as grand as the Army of the Dead, but it is not that far behind."

That gained the attention of every person in that chamber, including Robb. Lady Ellaria Sand asked nervously "What sort of threat?"

Lord Gregor Clegane folded his hands together and announced "When the Wall crumbled more than a month ago, no one could explain how it happened. Even now, no one knows for certain, but I believe that an ancient artifact known as the Horn of Joramun was used to do the deed. After taking in a great many reports of the survivors, I have concluded that the Horn of Joramun was indeed responsible for the destruction of the Wall."

"And you believe this horn is a threat?" Ser Lothor Brune conjectured.

"In the wrong hands, the horn could become a weapon," Lord Gregor professed, "But the horn itself is not the true danger. You see, I still have yet to determine who blew the horn or how it got to the Wall in the first place."

"Do you have any leads?" Mace Tyrell queried.

"A few," Mollander answered for the Mountain, "Lord Gregor, Lady Melisandre, and I have investigated this issue tirelessly. We have even consulted the source, but even that has only gotten us so far."

"What have you determined as of yet?" asked Allard Seaworth. Due to his limp, he was given a
chair. He was seated beside Lady Melisandre, whom Robb suspected he was romantically involved

"Based on the source, the Horn of Joramun could only have been in two possible places before it
was brought to the Wall," Lord Gregor explained, "First, we speculated that the Free Folk may
have had it. But we quickly ruled out that possibility."

"The horn wasn't ever in our possession," Tormund Giantsbane insisted, "If it was, Mance wouldn't
have bothered to keep it a secret."

"Unless he feared one of the more zealous or desperate members of the Free Folk would steal the
horn and use it to knock the Wall down prematurely," Dolorous Edd Tollett murmured glumly.

"The Free Folk may be lawless, but even they would not have dared to do something so rash and
foolhardy," Uncle Benjen claimed with a smirk.

"Alright, then we can rule out the Free Folk," Ser Danwell Frey commented. "What is the other
place the horn could have been?"

"In the possession of House Greyjoy," Mollander revealed.

Lord Victarion Greyjoy, Lady Asha Tully, and Lord Rodrik Greyjoy were bewildered. Lord
Victarion pronounced "I am sorry to disappoint you, Gregor, but the only horns we have in the
Islands are warhorns, same as the greenlanders."

"I know you never had the Horn of Joramun, Victarion," the Mountain told the former Legionnaire,
"Your late brother, on the other hand…"

The Lord Paramount of the Iron Islands raised an eyebrow. "Are you speaking of Euron?"

Lord Gregor nodded and declared "Based on the source, Euron found a horn matching the
description of the Horn of Joramun in his travels. He never explicitly referred to the horn by that
name, but it was believed to have the power to temporarily bend even dragons to one's will. The
person who blew into the horn would not even have to be a Targaryen for it to work."

"Can anything other than the Horn of Joramun do such a thing?" Aegon enquired.

"Not to our knowledge," Lady Melisandre responded, "We are still not certain when, where, or
how Euron Greyjoy found the Horn of Joramun. It is possible he did not even know what it was or
what it was capable of. But one thing we are certain of is that he was the last known person to have
it."

"Where was he storing it?" Prince Oberyn asked in interest.

"The same place he stored all his other plundered goods," Mollander disclosed, "On board his
ship."

"I wouldn't be too certain of that," Lady Obara countered, "I was there when we seized
the Silence during the sea battle off the coast of Fair Isle. After the battle, Sandor and I took
inventory of every bit of treasure aboard the ship ourselves. We never found a horn or anything
that could have been one."

"Someone could have removed it before you took inventory," Lord Gregor debated, "They could
even have removed it immediately after the sea battle."
"Is that even possible?" Sansa said inquisitively, "How big is the Horn of Joramun? Is it about as small as a regular horn?"

"No, it is huge," Lady Melisandre disclosed, "It's about the size of your direwolf, my dear."

"We certainly would have noticed if something that big was taken off the ship," Ser Gerion Lannister contended, "If the horn truly did switch hands, it must have happened sometime before the sea battle."

"I respectfully disagree," Rodrik Greyjoy argued, "Nuncle Euron was a notorious raider. And a damn good one, at that. Until Fair Isle, his ship was never commandeered or bested. So it could not have been stolen from him whilst he was alive. He did not have a habit of entrusting any of his prizes to anyone else, either. Not even his own kin."

"Could he have hidden it elsewhere?" Ser Davos Seaworth, Allard's father, hypothesized.

"Why would he?" Lady Asha disputed, "To him, it must have seemed like nothing more than an abnormally large and ancient horn. I can assure you that he would not have gone to the trouble of hiding such a thing."

"Then the horn could only have been taken off the Silence sometime during or after the sea battle," Tyrion Lannister thought aloud.

"Who could have done such a thing?" said Harren Botley, "The Silence was a rather difficult place to steal from, even when the Crow's Eye was away from it."

"A vessel is only as strong as her captain," Lord Victarion debated, "Euron's crew was composed entirely of mutes who were loyal to him alone. As I recall, when he died, they were thrown into disarray. That would have been the perfect opportunity for someone to sneak aboard the Silence and swipe a thing or two. Even if it was something as cumbersome as an antique horn."

"Yes, but how would the thief have gotten it off the Silence?" Lord Sandor remarked, "From the moment I killed the Crow's Eye to the moment Obara and I started to count up our spoils, no more than three or four hours could have elapsed. While that may have been plenty of time to steal the horn, there is no telling how long it would have taken the thief to find a suitable hiding place for it on the ship he moved it to. Furthermore, how could the thief have gotten the horn off his own ship when we returned to Lannisport?"

"We have found a way to account for that, as well," Lord Gregor told his younger brother, "We believe that someone must have made some arrangements well in advance, even before the sea battle took place."

"You mean the thief planned to steal it?" Aunt Lyanna assumed. She sounded intrigued.

"That is the most rational explanation," Mollander argued, "After all, if the thief was only after profit, he could have helped himself to anything in the lower decks of the Silence. But this was no ordinary heist, and the thief must have known what he was looking for."

"That still does not explain how the thief knew the horn was onboard the Silence in the first place," Victarion professed, "My second brother was hardly a modest man, but he did not have a habit of gloating about his accomplishments. Nor was he a subject of gossip, even on the Islands."

"Indeed," Harren Botley concurred, "So, how could the thief have even known Euron had the Horn of Joramun in his possession?"
"There is only one explanation," Lady Melisandre answered him, "He figured out it was there through the same means we used to figure out it was there."

That revelation brought an interval of silence to the room. Rickard was the one to break it. He remarked "Father, Lady Melisandre, Mollander… do you mean to tell us the thief had the source?"

"That is correct, my lord," Mollander claimed, "There is no other way he could have known about the Horn's whereabouts."

Robb scratched his temple in bewilderment. Just how many people with the source are there? He turned to his younger brother and asked "Bran, what do you have to say about all this?"

"I find myself in agreement with this theory," Bran pronounced, "At Lord Gregor's request, I looked back to the aftermath of the sea battle off the coast of Fair Isle, and I can neither confirm nor deny if the Horn of Joramun was ever stolen from the Silence. But that does not indicate that it was not stolen, or that it was never even onboard. While the horn was onboard the ship before the sea battle, I can assure you that it went missing soon afterwards."

"But if you can find no evidence that it was taken…" Arya pointed out.

"That simply means no evidence was left for me to find," Bran interjected, "Although I can now see everything that ever was, there are still some things I cannot see clearly. That mainly consists of anything that involves one or more of the source holders. Their power is one of the few in this world that can rival my own. Thus, the thief must be yet another source holder."

"Just how many people have the source?" Jasper asked the same question Robb had wondered earlier.

"Including the three in this room and the one in the Reproach Tower, there are currently five," Bran disclosed.

"Currently?" Aunt Lyanna noted.

"There used to be seven, but two of them died several years previously," Bran clarified, "The last one was born five and twenty years ago."

"How do you know that?" Ser Kevan Lannister queried.

"It would take too long to explain," Bran stated, "All you need to know is that I can sense the existence of anyone with the source, and that such individuals give off a much stronger presence alive than dead. That is how I know the last one is still breathing."

"And that is why I called this conference," Lord Gregor proclaimed, "In my mind, that individual is also the aforementioned second greatest threat to the Known World. You see, I believe he was responsible for the fall of the Wall."

That brought another round of silence to the meeting chamber. This one lasted much longer, and it was much tenser.

"Why do you think that, my love?" Lady Dacey asked her husband.

"According to Bran, the Horn of Joramun vanished from the Known World shortly after it was stolen," the Mountain informed is wife and everyone else, "It did not reappear until recently. When it did reappear, it was at the Wall. Since Bran cannot see how it got there, only someone with the source could have been responsible for getting it there."
"This is the farthest north I've ever been," said Mollander, "Lady Melisandre never visited Westeros until a few months ago. Hodor already had his own sinister agenda. Lord Gregor could have just used his authority to take custody of the horn when the Silence was seized. Two of the other three people with the source were killed long ago. Therefore, by process of elimination, the unknown seventh party is the only one who could have transported the Horn of Joramun without the Three-Eyed Raven noticing."

"Then this person was the one who blew into the horn?" Lady Ashara supposed.

"No," Lady Melisandre expounded, "No mortal man could have blown into the horn and lived. Undoubtedly, the last person with the source would have known that, too. Of course, it could be possible he bribed or tricked some unlucky fool into blowing into the horn in his place."

"It is equally possible that it was not a living man who blew into the horn," Lord Gregor debated, "Suppose the last person with the source managed to smuggle the horn north of the Wall and bury it in the snow. The Others could have excavated it when they emerged from the haunted forest. Any one of them could have blown into it without any repercussions."

"Either approach sounds feasible," Hollistor Maegyr, Talisa's older brother, remarked, "However, there is one important point we have yet to establish. Why would anyone, even someone with the source, want the Wall to collapse?"

"We still have yet to determine the culprit's motive," Lord Gregor confessed, "For now, we can only speculate as to what he hopes to accomplish. Perhaps he has an insatiable grudge against the North. Perhaps he thinks the Night's Watch is pointless. Perhaps he believes the same as Hodor, meaning he is laboring under the misguided belief that the Night's King is this world's hero. Perhaps he simply desires chaos. If so, he would not be the first in this world who did. Or even the first in this era."

"That is certainly true," Robb remarked. "After all, we have the likes of Jon Connington and Tywin Lannister out there, ruining people's lives for their own gain. "Maybe our time would be better spent on finding out who this person is, my lord."

"Well said, Robb," the Mountain muttered in agreement. He then removed a sheet of parchment from his doublet, unfolded it, and said, "You'll all be pleased to hear that we've made considerable progress in determining the thief's identity. Firstly, we know for a certainty that he could only have been someone who was present during the sea battle off the coast of Fair Isle. The crew of the Lady Jeyne may have been the ones to subjugate Euron's crew, but the Lady Jeyne was not the only ship that sent people aboard the Silence."

"That's true," the Hound affirmed, "To my knowledge, at least half a dozen other vessels also sent men aboard the Silence before Obara and I took charge of its cargo. I'm afraid I don't quite remember which ships those men belonged to."

"That's quite alright; neither do I," Lord Gregor admitted, "Fortunately, however, Melisandre, Mollander, and I have found another way to narrow down the list of suspects."

Bran then leaned forward and revealed "The Three-Eyed Raven can sense the existence of people with the source right from the moment they are born. As it happens, all but one of them were born after Ser Brynden Rivers became the Three-Eyed Raven. Only one was born before then. As it happens, he's the only one whose identity remains a mystery."

"How long ago did Bloodraven disappear?" Rhaenys wondered aloud.
"Eight and forty years," Uncle Benjen replied.

"Just so," Bran validated, "Thus, the oldest person with the source must be at least eight and forty years old. Likely even older."

*That alone would eliminate more than two-thirds of the people in the Seven Kingdoms. Including everyone in my family. Except Grandfather Hoster.* On the other hand, as many as every third Westerosi could still be a suspect.

Lord Gregor Clegane then held up the parchment in his hand and proclaimed, "By using certain other criteria, we have managed to reduce the pool of suspects down to less than a score of people."

"Are any of those suspects… in this room?" Robb inquired. That seemed to be the main question on everyone's mind.

"Perhaps," the Mountain stated cryptically, lowering the parchment, "But even if there are, I will not say, in case one of them actually is the final person with the source. Trust me when I say that the *last* thing we need is for him to realize we are on to him."

"I understand your logic, my lord," Robb claimed, "However, could you at least tell us how many of those suspects are currently here in Moat Cailin?"

"Yes, I suppose that much would be reasonable," Gregor Clegane remarked. He gazed down at his sheet of parchment for a minute, and then he announced, "There are a total of eighteen suspects. As of now, all but three are here in the moat. Keep in mind; some of them may even be in this room."

Several of the people in the room began gazing around at their neighbors suspiciously. Robb was compelled to do the same, but he managed to prevent himself.

"Now that we know all this, what should we do about it, my lord?" Robb asked.

"For now, I can only advise you to be cautious," Lord Gregor remarked, "Be mindful of anyone who appears to know more than they should. Such an individual could very well be the last holder of the source."

"You mean like the High Sparrow?" Tyrion Lannister conjectured. Robb noticed Jasper winced at the mention of that man. *I can hardly fault him. I would do the same if he started saying things about Mother and Uncle Edmure.*

"Actually, yes; that's a perfect example," the Mountain confirmed, "Those allegations the High Sparrow's been making about Queen Cersei and Ser Jaime are absolutely false. However, they would have been true if certain events had turned out differently. Only someone with the source could have known that."

"Then it seems to me we have sufficient evidence to label the High Sparrow as the source's final holder," Lady Ellyn contended.

"That's *one* possibility." Mollander argued, "However, it is equally probable that someone else has the source, and that person could have suggested it to the High Sparrow instead."

"In any case, the High Sparrow is still on our watchlist," Lord Gregor revealed, raising the parchment once more, "Until we find grounds to cross him off the list, we will closely monitor his activities. We will do the same for the other seventeen men on it, until such time as we correctly single one of them out as the final holder of the source."
"To stress the severity of this issue, I would remind you that the final holder was the one who allowed the Wall to fall," Lady Melisandre pointed out, "He could even have been the one who murdered Ser Jaime Lannister."

That's an unsettling thought. If even the Kingslayer could fall victim to this individual's schemes, then none of us can afford to lower our guard.

"In the meantime, Gregor, Melisandre, and I are doing what we can to narrow down the list even further," Mollander professed, "It is our hope that we will identify and apprehend the culprit before he can set any more of his heinous plots into motion."

"I wish you the best of luck in that pursuit," Father stated, "However, I would encourage you not to give it all your attention. Not until the greater issue at hand has been resolved."

"Of course, my lord," said Gregor Clegane, "I can assure you that we have our priorities in order. Our main concern is still the defeat of the Night's King and the Army of the Dead. It always has been. However, that does not mean we should disregard all other objectives until it has been achieved."

"I know just what you mean, and I respect your way of thinking," Father proclaimed, "Should we be unfortunate enough that this last source holder will try anything foul whilst we face the Others in battle, we will be relying on you three to keep him from inflicting even worse damage upon us."

"We will not fail you, my lord," the Mountain asserted. Lady Melisandre and Mollander nodded their heads in agreement.

The meeting ended not long after this. It ended just in time, too. Less than an hour later, the Legion's scouts returned from their rounds and submitted their hourly report. The news they brought was grave. The Army of the Dead was less than ten miles from Moat Cailin. At their current stride, they would reach the moat by nightfall. Or when nightfall should have been, if the Sun was still visible.

At any rate, the Others would be upon them in less than eight hours. Father and the other commanders gave the order for their forces to mobilize.

As he armored up for the impending encounter, Robb reflected on everything that had transpired in the last year, with an especial emphasis on the past turn of the moon. The world used to be so simple, he observed. Until the conference at Harrenhal, I always assumed the Others were the only enemies we ever needed to fear. As it turned out, that was not the case. Not by a longshot.

Our enemies aren't just the undead beings north of here, he realized. Some are still living, and two of them are in possession of a power even greater than Bran's. Fortunately, one of them is already here amongst us as a prisoner. But for all we know, the other is amongst us, too, and he is free as can be. If so... we'd best watch our backs when we meet the Others on the field of battle. Else we could end up getting stabbed in the back. Worst of all, that could happen at any time. It could even come when victory is imminent.
Lady Dacey Clegane sighed as she sat atop her garron at the head of the vanguard. The Army of the Dead was less than five miles to the north, and it was getting closer with every passing second. *We are fortunate the blizzard died down. Otherwise it'd be too foggy to see them.* Be that as it may, seeing the Others coming towards them was just as dreadful as not being able to see them at all.

*We've already faced them in battle three times. We've managed to kill millions of them. Yet even so... there's still so damn many. They may as well be endless.*

In the midst of her musing, Dacey felt a hand on her right shoulder. The touch was rough and tender at the same time. It was a touch she was very familiar with. She promptly turned to face the hand's owner, who was mounted on a huge brown destrier beside her. Even now, she had to look up to gaze into his piercing yet welcoming eyes. She had looked into those eyes almost every day for the last fifteen years. *Has it really been that long?*

"Stay strong, my love," Lord Gregor Clegane bade her.

"I am always strong, Gregor," Dacey Clegane reminded her husband, grinning at him.

"Yes, I know," said Gregor, grinning back.

After he removed his hand from her shoulder, Dacey sighed again and stated "Of course, strength alone will not be enough to get us through this. Nevertheless, I will not despair."

"Even though we are faced with an overwhelming force?" said a coarse voice from Dacey's other side. It belonged to her gruff mother, Lady Maege Mormont, who was atop a large gelding.

The Lady of Moat Cailin scoffed. Turning to the looming mass of the undead, she declared "Vast though that force may be, Mother, I would not call it overwhelming. There have only been two times in my life when I have felt genuinely overwhelmed. One was the day I wed Gregor, particularly during the bedding ceremony. The other was the day Rickard was born."

"I apologize for the latter, Mother," the heir to Moat Cailin called out in amusement. Rickard Clegane was mounted on his own garron to the right of his father. Dacey just snickered and flashed a smile at her firstborn. *That may have been a grueling experience, but the reward was very much worth it.*

"What about the Pentoshi Bloodbath?" Gregor contended. " Didn't you feel overwhelmed back then?"

"I'm certain I would've," Maege commented, "As I recall, the mere *news* of that fiasco was enough to overwhelm most of the realm. Especially those of us who had family among the fallen."

*That includes House Mormont.* Alysane Mormont, Dacey's sister and Lady Maege's second daughter, had suffered an ax to the head near the start of that infamous battle. She left behind a son and a daughter, who had been evacuated to the south with the rest of Dacey's sisters and second cousins.

"I simply couldn't *afford* to be overwhelmed," Dacey revealed, "After all, I was in command of our forces at the time, and it was my responsibility to keep them organized."
That was only mostly true. Dacey had not been present for the entirety of the Bloodbath. In the final stages of it, Marrigo the pit fighter had driven an axe into her lower chest. Luckily, the weapon had gotten stuck in her chainmail, so Marrigo had inflicted no grievous damage on her. But he had still been able to knock her out somehow. To this day, he's the only man other than Gregor who has successfully managed to take such advantage of me. If Prince Jon Targaryen had not come along and sliced the pit fighter in half, Marrigo might have finished Dacey off when she was unconscious.

In Dacey Clegane's mind, the true hero of the battle was Jon. After she was removed from the fighting, he had brought it upon himself to keep their few remaining leaders together until Lady Melisandre arrived with reinforcements. They had still suffered heavy losses, certainly, but those losses could have been even greater if Jon had not stepped up and taken charge.

Jon Targaryen had saved Dacey Clegane's life. He had also saved the lives of several others that night. He may end up saving a great many more today, provided he and Ygrenyon manage to get close enough to the Night's King.

"I understand just what you mean, Dacey," Gregor told his wife, "Even when confronted with dreary circumstances and virtually insurmountable odds, I have never once allowed myself to succumb to hopelessness. I am not about to make an exception today of all days."

Neither will I. But even though we've survived this long, there is no way any of us can ensure we will live beyond today's battle. Dacey was well-aware of the possibility that every person there would soon meet his or her end. She would likely meet her own. While she was fully prepared to die, she could not help but think of the ones she would leave behind.

Dacey glanced downward at her chest, and she placed her hand on the bear-shaped brooch which fastened her cloak in place. Her second son Alyver had bought that brooch with his own money when they were in Braavos. He had given it to her as a gift for her thirtieth nameday. He remembered even when his mother had forgotten.

Alyver had wanted to stay behind and join in the fighting. He had tried his hardest to sway his parents' minds. He argued that he was qualified to stand with them, as he had endured the hardships of the Free Cities and the Dothraki Sea, he had witnessed the horrors of the Pentoshi Bloodbath, and he had even killed one of the traitorous serjeants of the Golden Company. And I myself could attest to the truth of all of that. Alas, in the end, the only person under eleven years of age who was permitted to remain at Moat Cailin was Bran Stark. Alyver and everyone else of ten years or younger was evacuated south.

Dacey wondered if she would ever see Alyver again. Or Vallory. Or Larys. Or little Torrhen. Her niece and nephew had been devastated when they learned of Alysane's death. She would never forgive herself if she brought such grief to her own children. But she was willing to lay down her life if it meant she could help guarantee their survival. All the same, Dacey Clegane was determined not to let her children grow up without a mother. Even a horde of walking corpses will not keep a bear from her cubs.

When Dacey looked back up from her brooch, she discovered that the Army of the Dead had nearly halved their previous distance from the living host. Gregor closed the margin even more a few seconds later, when he urged his destrier forward. When he was about fifteen feet away, he swung around so that he was facing his wife, son, and comrades.

"Alright, this is it!" he announced, as he rode his horse along the foremost rank, "Stand hard and fast! Do not give in to fear!"
Those were simple words, but they were sufficient to hold the column together. I wonder if he'll give us one of his speeches, or if he'll spare us that monologue.

"Now, some of you may have been expecting a speech," Gregor proclaimed. Dacey resisted the desire to chuckle. It's as though he read my mind. I would have prepared a speech, if I thought it would actually do some amount of good. But I ultimately elected to forgo the speech. At this point, words will not make any more of a difference. It is time we chose to depend on actions instead. Therefore, I will only pass on a few pieces of practical wisdom: take down as many of the foe as you can, look out for the well-being of your allies, and do not give away any openings or weaknesses. Of course, we are almost certainly about to meet our doom. In spite of that… I implore you all not to lose faith, and I wish each and every one of you the best of luck in our impending struggle. For what we do here today will decide the future of the Known World."

At that, everyone raised their weapons and cheered. Dacey did likewise, her longsword Bearswrath in one hand, her Morningstar in the other. She smiled at her husband again. Speech or no speech, he always knows just what to say to keep the men motivated. No wonder Lord Eddard relinquished command of the vanguard in Gregor's favor. Even the wolves cannot deny the Mountain's supremacy on the field of battle.

Gregor smiled back at his wife. Then he turned in the direction of his brother Sandor, who was posted to the right of Rickard, and he called out "Bran, come forth, my boy."

Rickard and Sandor then inched away from each other so that Bran Stark could pass between them on his chestnut horse, Dancer. His direwolf companion Summer padded forward alongside his master. Once the second son of Lord Eddard Stark was beside Gregor, he declared "I await your order, my lord."

"Then begin," the Mountain commanded.

The Three-Eyed Raven nodded his head and leaned back in his saddle. Then his body went limp, and his eyes went white. Whiter than the freshly-fallen snow on the ground.

Dacey soon heard a shrill screeching sound overhead. She looked up and watched as a raven flew towards the approaching adversary. It did not take long for the bird to fade into the distance.

There was nothing to do but sit in relative silence for the next several minutes. All the while, the Army of the Dead continued its advance. Eventually, Bran's eyes regained their color, and he sat up straight in his saddle again.

"Did you see him?" Gregor inquired.

"No, my lord," Bran replied, "I searched the entire Army of the Dead, and I could not find the Night's King. It is almost as though he is absent from their ranks."

"Could he be elsewhere?" Dacey conjectured.

"I do not believe so, my lady," Bran contended, "I searched the surroundings, as well. Quite thoroughly, I might add. He was nowhere to be found there, either."

"Perhaps he is hiding," Sandor speculated.

"How, Uncle?" said Rickard, "There are no holdfasts, forests, caves, or other conventional hiding places between here and Castle Cerwyn. Just flat land, foothills, and a bunch of scattered trees are far as the eye can see."
"I believe he means the Night's King could be hiding in plain sight," Gregor illuminated.

"I do," Sandor affirmed. He looked to Bran and asked, "Do you suppose that could be the case?"

"That could very well be so, my lord," Bran remarked, "After what became of the Night's Queen, the Night's King must be less willing to expose himself."

"I would not be surprised," Gregor thought aloud, "Perhaps he's somehow made himself less conspicuous. He might've changed his raiment. Or maybe his bodyguards are standing close enough to him that he's been hidden from our view."

"Whatever the case, I am confident he's somewhere in there, my lord," Bran pronounced, gesturing to the immense crowd of White Walkers and wights. "I can feel his power issuing from within that horde."

"Then we'll just have to draw him out," Gregor muttered with a smirk. He then reached back, gripped the hilt of his greatsword Summit, and drew it from its massive scabbard. And thus, the end begins. As the Mountain held his Valyrian steel weapon aloft, he turned to the youngest person there and told him "Bran, send the signal to the Dothraki."

"Aye, my lord," the Three-Eyed Raven acknowledged. He proceeded to warg into two more ravens, which he sent in opposite directions. The first went to the east to alert half of the Dothraki, who were stationed along the White Knife. The second went to the west to alert the other half of the Dothraki, who were stationed at the edge of the Barrowlands. There goes the first wave.

A few minutes later, Dacey could faintly hear both hordes of Dothraki screamers getting closer. She smiled when she felt the ground beginning to shake. Normally, the Essosi would associate that yelling and that trembling sensation with an impending catastrophe. Today, we Westerosi associate them with our deliverance.

Soon, over a hundred thousand Dothraki were approaching the Army of the Dead; more than fifty thousand on either side. Up until now, the Others had been completely focused on the Cleganes and their allies assembled further down the Kingsroad. As the horselords came closer, more and more of the White Walkers and wights had their attention diverted. Dacey gave a wide grin when the space between the three forces was rapidly reduced. They may be undead, but even they aren't invulnerable against a raging stampede.

The Dothraki all but plowed through the first hundred rows of the Army of the Dead. A number of wights practically went flying when the horselords crashed against them. Many more were knocked down and trampled over. None of them were permanently disabled, of course, but most were so irreparably mangled that they would never stand back up again.

Imagine what we could have accomplished if we found a way to shoe the horses with obsidian or Valyrian steel. Dacey scoffed at the thought. Gregor and his notary, Samwell Tarly, had actually considered that at one point, but they had ultimately decided that the smelting and shoeing process for so many horses would have been too long, too costly, and too complicated. Furthermore, both substances were deemed too valuable to expend on something as trivial as horseshoes.

The Dothraki were not armed with very many obsidian or Valyrian steel weapons, either. In fact, they had none made of obsidian whatsoever, and the only Valyrian steel ones they had were those that had been in their possession before Dacey recruited them. Gregor and the rest of the secret council had offered the Dothraki a healthy supply of dragonglass weapons, but the horselords had insisted on using their own armaments. They were quick to accept the warmer leather armor we offered them, though.
The Dothraki may have been accustomed to the arid, sandy conditions of the Free Cities, but even here in the frigid, snowy conditions of the North, they were a force to be reckoned with. There was no known army that could best them mounted. The Unsullied could reportedly hold their own against the Dothraki, but even those stalwart and emotionless eunuchs could never truly defeat the horselords. *Some would say no one alive who could triumph over a Dothraki horde.*

Of course, the Others were not alive. For that reason alone, they were bound to pose the greatest challenge any khal had ever faced.

Over the next twenty minutes, the Dothraki managed to subdue several thousand wights and White Walkers without incurring any notable losses on their part. After that, their good fortune began to diminish, and the Others started fighting back earnestly. The horselords may have had the advantage of higher elevation and superior combat experience, but they were still outnumbered by a factor of approximately two hundred to one. Worse yet, most of their *arkhs* and their other weapons were ineffective against the undead.

Before very long, scores of Dothraki were quickly being surrounded and pulled down from their mounts, never to get up again. Luckily, however, the horselords had accomplished their intended objective by now. In that, they had managed to cut through the Army of the Dead's ranks and isolate a small portion of it from the majority.

That was when Gregor turned to Bran Stark and told him "It is time for your cousin to take to the skies."

"As you say, my lord," the wolf boy declared, leaning back once more. This time when he opened his third eye, he warged into Summer, who hastily retreated into their column. Dacey knew Bran was using Summer to locate his brother Ghost, who was with his own master. Prince Jon Targaryen was near the rear of the company with his half-siblings and aunt. Along with the embodiments of their house.

A couple minutes later, an earsplitting roar penetrated the already strained atmosphere. It came from behind. Dacey peered over her shoulder and saw three huge masses ascend into the air several hundred feet away. It was just bright enough that she could make out their color schemes. One was gold and cream. Another was bronze and green. The third was scarlet and black.

She could also make out the silhouettes of the figures seated on the backs of the dragons. There were four of them altogether. The one atop Eliaxes was her rider, Prince Aegon Targaryen. The one atop Draegar was her rider, Princess Daenerys Targaryen. There were two atop Ygrenyon. One was his rider, Prince Jon Targaryen. The other was the eldest of the dragons, Princess Rhaenys Targaryen.

Jon was just as capable of piloting his dragon as Aegon and Daenerys were with theirs. However, at certain instances, he would be warging into his dragon's mind. Because of that, he would not be in total control of his body for the full duration of the flight. That was why Rhaenys was riding with him. She would steer Ygrenyon and hold her younger half-brother in place to prevent him from falling off. *It's just their luck that Ygrenyon is the largest of the three. I doubt there's enough room on Eliaxes or Draegar's backs to support two people.*

Once the dragons carried out their initial ascent, their riders directed them forward towards the area where the Dothraki and the Others were exchanging blows. They soared through the air until they were directly over the northmost point of the two clashing armies. When they got there, Dacey could have sworn she heard the word "Dracarys" echoing in the distance. That marked the exact moment the dragons officially entered the fray.
All at once, the three dragons expelled a stream of fire down towards the ground. They enveloped well over a hundred wights, and the ground immediately below them practically burst into flame. Now there was a wall of flames splitting apart the Others engaged in combat with the Dothraki from the rest of their undead comrades. The first group was essentially caught off from the much larger second one.

The wall of fire would only last for as long as it took the grass beneath the snow to turn to cinders. Fortunately, that would still be more than enough time for it to fulfill its purpose.

Gregor gripped the reins of his mount with one hand, raised Summit high over his head with the other, and shouted "Vanguard, ahead full!"

The Mountain galloped forward on his enormous destrier. Dacey was the first to follow after her husband. Mother, Rickard, Sandor, Lord Eddard Stark, Benjen Stark, Robb Stark, Prince Jasper Baratheon, and almost every single other person in the vanguard joined the charge. In fact, Bran Stark was the only one who stayed behind.

Gregor was the first one to reach the Army of the Dead from the south. He gave a mighty swing of Summit when he neared them. In the frontal swing, he demolished ten wights and two White Walkers. He took out almost as many on the backswing, too.

When Dacey reached the undead host, she swung her Morningstar at the nearest White Walker to the right of her garron and took its head clean off. She then slashed Bearswrath to the left side and obliterated half a dozen wights in one stroke.

Within moments, the whole of the vanguard was upon the sequestered company of the Army of the Dead. In a flurry of hacking, slashing, thrusting, and swinging, the undead were soon dropping like flies.

With Dothraki to the east and west, a wall of fire to the north, and Westerosi soldiers to the south, one hundred thousand wights and White Walkers were effectively trapped. As such, their living opponents had them totally at their mercy. Not that we will be showing them any mercy. Indeed, every undead being caught between those four barriers was vanquished without hesitation.

This whole process was Gregor's plan for countering the Army of the Dead. They would whittle away at the undead forces by separating a hundred thousand of them from the main host at a time and defeating those units in turn. The wall of fire would keep the wights in the main host from reinforcing or going to the aid of the trapped wights.

Fundamentally, the idea was to continue utilizing this routine until one of two things happened: The Army of the Dead was annihilated, or the Night's King was destroyed. Hopefully the latter will be the case. If only we could find that elusive bastard…

There were a few difficulties to account for in this strategy. Namely, the wall of fire to the north would not last indefinitely, and grass that had already been singed once would not burn again. Therefore, the wall of fire would have to be relit often, and a fresh patch of grass would have to be used each time.

Gregor, Dacey, and their allies were not about to let the Army of the Dead get any closer to the moat if they could help it. As such, the only way this tactic would work was if the people fighting on the side of the living were constantly pushing forward.

Needless to say, this approach would not be as straightforward as it sounded, seeing as how they were up against a formidable opponent who was just as resolute on advancing in the opposite
direction. But I'll be damned if we let the Others gain even an inch over us.

Naturally, the biggest drawback pertained to the great difference in the size of their armies. The Cleganes and their allies were more than capable of eliminating a hundred thousand of the Army of the Dead's units. Theon Greyjoy managed to kill five or six million of them with a single arrow at Winterfell. Be that as it may, there were still around twenty million wights and White Walkers left. As such, they would possibly have to repeat this procedure as many as two hundred times. I pray we have the strength to accomplish such a deed.

Dacey continued swinging her Morningstar and Bearswrath at the nearest wights. Every time she caught sight of a White Walker, she concentrated on taking it down with her longsword. Sandor was just as deadly with Hound's Fang. Not a single undead warrior came within three feet of the Hound's garron. Whenever one got that close, he sliced it down. As for Gregor, he actually let the undead get within reach of his destrier, just so he could eliminate more of them with each swing of Summit.

Less than ten minutes after the Westerosi charged into battle, they and their Dothraki allies had utterly decimated the first one hundred thousand units of the Army of the Dead. Their timing was impeccable; just a few seconds later, the wall of fire burned out. Now there was nothing separating them from the rest of the Others.

Gregor then set the next phase of his plan into motion. He rode to the northern edge of the living forces and shouted "Dothraki, withdraw! Sellswords, engage!"

Even over the noise of the battlefield, his booming voice could be heard clearly. Gregor always did say that proper enunciation was important.

While the Dothraki were excellent fighters, even they did not have unlimited stamina. Gregor and the secret council knew they could not overburden the horselords. As such, whenever they blocked the Army of the Dead from veering off to the west or the east, they would alternate between sending in the Dothraki and sending in the sellswords.

At Gregor's behest, the Windblown, the Second Sons, the Stormcrows, the Golden Company, and all the other Essosi sellsword companies emerged from where they had been lingering in the White Knife and the Barrowlands. They, too, were on horseback, and they proceeded to gallop towards the Army of the Dead from both sides. Dacey observed them as they came charging in. They were not quite as impressive a mounted force as the Dothraki, but they were still remarkable.

While the sellswords were locked in combat with the Army of the Dead, the Dothraki fell back to the east and west. There they would regroup, and then they would ride a little farther north. After the sellswords served their purpose in trapping another hundred thousand wights and White Walkers, the two forces would switch off yet again. They would repeat this course of action until Gregor's plan arrived at one of its two possible aforementioned conclusions.

At any rate, the sellsword companies quickly cut another hundred thousand of the Army of the Dead off from the main host. That was when the dragons and their riders swooped in again. They put up another wall of fire between the isolated group and the main host. Gregor then reined his horse around and called out "Reform the column!"

Dacey and everyone else hastily got back into their ranks. They were lucky enough to have only suffered a few losses, so their lines were virtually the same as they were at the start of the battle.

As soon as the column was back together, Gregor raised Summit into the air again and announced "Alright, once more! Charge!"
Once again, the vanguard dashed forward towards the smaller company of the undead. They trampled over the first several hundred. Then they proceeded to put the rest to the sword. Although everyone was focused on staying alive and beating the adversary, the atmosphere was not especially tense. It was so finely structured and tame, in fact, that they could even hold a conversation in the midst of all the fighting. As it happened, they did.

"This is almost too easy," Rickard commented with a grin, removing his dragonglass sword from a wight's chest. Gregor had had that weapon made for him personally. He's as skilled with it as he is with any other blade.

"Don't get complacent, Rick," Dacey advised her firstborn, hacking at a nearby Other with Bearswrath.

"You needn't worry, Mother," the heir to Moat Cailin asserted, as he plunged his sword into another wight's throat.

"He's not incorrect, though," Sandor commented, reining his horse beside his nephew and clearing away a small group of wights. "These undead sons of proxi whores aren't nearly as troublesome as they were at the Wall."

"I agree," Obara Clegane declared, driving Swift Thrust through another White Walker's upper torso. After that Other shattered, she stated "Still, this could be even easier."

"How so, Aunt Obara?" Rickard inquired.

"We have dragons," the Dornishwoman pointed out, gesturing to the gargantuan reptilian beasts flying in the sky overhead, "Why don't we just use them to turn the Army of the Dead to ashes?"

It was Gregor who answered their sister-by-law. After slaying three White Walkers in the span of five seconds, he turned toward Obara and called out to her "It would not be wise to rely too heavily on the dragons. Believe me, Obara; I am sorely tempted to just unleash them on the Army of the Dead and smolder every last one of the Night's King's warriors. But I am unwilling to shoulder the risk."

"What risk, Father?" asked Rickard.

"The risk that the Night's King could bring the dragons down," Gregor answered their son.

"That is indeed a possibility," Benjen Stark concurred, fending off another White Walker and its party of wights, "The Night's King is deadly with throwing javelins. That was how we lost Mag the Mighty, Lord Beric Dondarrion, Mance Rayder, and Lord Commander Mormont."

"My source has not shown me the full extent of what the Night's King can defeat," Gregor admitted. Here he paused to slice another White Walker down the middle of its body. Then he continued with "However, both Lady Melisandre and Mollander have had more luck in this matter than I. Their sources have revealed to them that the Night's King is, in fact, quite capable of bringing down the dragons. What's more; he can reanimate them and incorporate them into his army, as well."

"Well, we certainly can't have that," Mother declared, swinging her spiked mace at a wight and smashing it into a pile of bones.

"Indeed not," Dacey remarked, driving Bearswrath into another wight's face. The Army of the Dead is already terrible and destructive enough with countless humans and animals in its ranks. I cannot imagine what type of untold damage the Others could cause with an undead dragon.
"I thought dragons were meant to be the embodiment of fire, my lord," Jasper called out, after finishing off half a dozen wights.

"They are," Gregor confirmed, cleaving another White Walker in half with Summit. "But only when alive. Once dead, all their flames are extinguished, and their carcasses become no different from those of any other creature."

"That makes perfect sense to me," Robb Stark remarked. He wielded his own dragonglass sword, and he was fighting alongside his father, Lord Eddard, who was armed with the Starks' ancestral Valyrian steel greatsword Ice. His faithful companion Grey Wind was sinking his fangs into the bones of any wight who came close to his master. "Still... an undead dragon? Just the thought chills my blood."

"Understandable," Gregor commented, sawing yet another wight in half with Summit, "Truthfully, I would not have believed it myself, had Mollander and Lady Melisandre not told me."

Neither would we, my love, if you had not told us. But seeing as this information was supplied by the source, what choice do we have but to trust in it? As Dacey continued attacking the undead foes on the ground, she found her mind drifting towards the source.

So far, the source had proven to be reliable every time it had been employed. Recently, however, Dacey had come to realize something critical. At the end of the day, the source itself was only as trustworthy as the individuals who possessed it. After all, there was a distinct possibility that the source holders were misinterpreting their knowledge, concealing truths, or giving out false information altogether. There was even a small yet irrefutable likelihood that they would use the source for malevolent intentions.

Not long ago, it was discovered that the Starks' stableboy possessed the source. He had gone to great lengths to keep his own source hidden from the world. He had fooled everyone into believing he was a lackwit for twenty years, he had turned against the noble family he had sworn to serve, and he had even attempted to use his source to assure victory for the Army of the Dead. He may as well have declared himself the enemy of all humanity.

Thankfully, Hodor was no longer any threat to anyone. Bran Stark and the direwolves had neutralized and captured him. Now, he was confined to the darkest, most secure cell in the Reproach Tower, where he was kept under heavy guard.

Dacey felt as though Gregor was still being much too lenient. She and the secret council had suggested that he simply take Hodor's head instead. The Mountain had confessed to them that he was not entirely opposed to the idea. However, he claimed he was not ready to kill Hodor just yet. He argued that the stableboy was still of use to them, as Hodor apparently had the most powerful source to date. Even now, Gregor was holding out hope that he, Lady Melisandre, and Mollander could somehow coerce Hodor into disclosing his source. Maybe he would even reveal a way to end the Night's King for good.

So much for that belief. Since Hodor still has not spoken a word of his source, I suspect he'll never talk.

Despite all this, Hodor was not their greatest problem, even as far as the source was concerned. According to Bran, there was still one more person with the source at large. This person was already responsible for several fiascos, including the collapse of the Wall.
Currently, this person's identity was a mystery. As luck would have it, Gregor, Lady Melisandre, and Mollander had already managed to narrow the list of suspects down to a mere eighteen people. They had also found some very particular criteria which linked all the suspects. Whoever the last person with the source was, it had to be someone who was male, someone who was at least eight and forty years old, someone whose mother had suffered a miscarriage the year before his birth, and someone who fought in Greyjoy's Rebellion, specifically the Sea Battle off the coast of Fair Isle.

Only three of those eighteen suspects – Lord Jon Arryn, Lord Hoster Tully, and the High Sparrow – were south of the Neck at this time. *Yet one's comatose, one's been bedridden for over a year, and one's lived most his life in a sept. Thus, it is unlikely that any of them is the guilty party.*

The remaining fifteen suspects were now at Moat Cailin. Alas, Gregor, Mollander, and Melisandre were keeping very quiet about their identities. Alas, Gregor, Mollander, and Melisandre were keeping very quiet about their identities. *Even I still don't know who they are.* Some women may have resented their husbands for keeping secrets from them, but Dacey was not such a woman. She had never been invasive of Gregor's privacy. She had always been a dutiful wife and respected it instead. *There are some things I am better off not knowing.* Aside from that, Gregor and the other two source holders had good reasons for not revealing the suspects' names. They claimed they did not wish to sow distrust amongst their own ranks, and they did not want to risk ostracizing the men who were innocent.

*Whoever he is, we'll find him,* Dacey reassured herself. *No criminal in the realm can ever evade the Legion without Banners. Not even one who's been blessed with the source.*

"In addition to that," Gregor remarked, swinging Summit again and beheading another White Walker, "It would be a bad idea to overuse the dragons' ability to breathe fire. Whatever gives them that ability, we cannot simply assume they have an inexhaustible supply of it. They may need time to replenish it."

"Well, it never hurts to be cautious, Father," Rickard conceded, impaling a wight through the neck with his obsidian sword.

"The less fire, the better, if you ask me," Sandor mumbled sullenly, striking down a White Walker with *Hound's Fang*. It had been eleven years since the Hound faced Euron Greyjoy in single combat at Fair Isle. He had emerged victorious from that duel, but not unscathed. Even now, he had not gotten over his fear of fire. *Who would have thought the bane of the Others would be my brother-by-law's, too?*

The entire time Dacey Clegane was having her earlier reverie, she and her allies had been continuously obliterating the foes on the ground. Shortly after her reverie ended, all one hundred thousand undead enemies had perished. Not one minute later, the second wall of fire dissipated. *Time for the next wave."

"Sellswords, withdraw!" Gregor bellowed, "Dothraki, engage!"

The sellswords promptly made their way back to the White Knife and the Barrowlands. As soon as they left the vicinity, the Dothraki returned to it. Once the horselords separated yet another hundred thousand wights and White Walkers, the Targaryens and their dragons put up another wall of fire between them and the rest of the undead horde. Lastly, Gregor ordered the vanguard to charge forward once more, and they overtook the grounded enemy.

They repeated this pattern many more times that day. The Dothraki and the sellswords took turns approaching from the east and the west, the Targaryens established a wall of fire to the north, and the vanguard closed in from the south. Roughly one hundred thousand of the Night's King's
soldiers fell every time, whereas the living side's fatalities were always in the low hundreds.

They're not so fearsome in smaller groups, Dacey noted. If we manage to keep our casualties to a minimum and remain orderly, we may actually have a chance of winning this battle. Dacey felt herself a fool for doubting the validity of Gregor's plan. I should know by now that the only plans he ever uses are those which he is confident will succeed.

However, the twenty-first or twenty-second time they went through this routine, something happened. Something absolutely unexpected and absolutely dreadful.

Dacey and her companions were nearly finished with the latest hundred thousand wights and White Walkers they had trapped, when the ground suddenly began to tremble. It was accompanied by a loud trumpeting sound. Dacey gave the tremor and the noise a bit of her attention, and both appeared to be coming from the northeast and the northwest. What could that be?

By this point, all throughout the battle, the dragons had only appeared to put up the walls of fire. Gregor had given the Targaryens explicit orders only to expose themselves whenever a new wall needed to be put up or whenever there was an emergency.

Just then, Ygrenyon emerged from the clouds to the north, and he flew close to the battlefield. He hovered above the piece of land where the Cleganes were gathered. Jon was leaning back with his eyes wide open, which indicated that he was presently warging into his dragon's mind. As Rhaenys held her half-brother by the shoulders, she frantically called down "Another wave of undead is coming! This one is worse than any before it!"

"What do you mean?" Gregor asked in bewilderment, "What's going on, Rhae?"

"Mammoths, my lord!" the eldest Targaryen answered him, "The Night's King is sending mammoths your way!"

At first, Gregor could only stare at the dragon princess in stunned silence. Then he said so quietly that only Dacey and Rhaenys could hear him "Are you certain?"

For our sakes, I pray she is mistaken. Alas, the trumpeting sound was getting louder, and the tremor was getting stronger. Both were coming progressively closer. Whatever's coming this way, it must be big.

"I am, my lord," was all Rhaenys said in response. She was trying to sound calm, but the desperation and panic in her voice was very much evident.

Despite that, Gregor did not lose his composure. He just calmly asked "How close are they?"

"They cannot be more than three miles away," Rhaenys informed him, "And they seem to be gaining speed. I do not know how long it'll be before they are upon you, but you have minutes at most."

"Can't you just use another wall of fire to halt their advance?" Dacey proposed.

"Dany and Egg already tried that, my lady," Rhaenys disclosed, "But the wall came to less than half the mammoths' height. They just charged right through the flames. Almost all of them emerged unharmed. Only a few succumbed to the fires, and those were the smallest ones in the entire herd."

"Did you try burning the mammoths themselves?" Sandor suggested.
"We did, my lord," Rhaenys answered the Hound, "Unfortunately, that is not as simple as we thought. There's hundreds of them, and despite their size, they're inexplicably fast. They are also being guarded by a group of giants. Whenever we fly too close to the mammoths, the giants try to knock us out of the skies."

"Well, we have to do something," Obara proclaimed.

"Indeed," Lord Eddard said softly. He looked to the tallest living person there and asked him "What say you, Gregor?"

"We must withdraw," Gregor promptly announced.

"You are certain?" the wolf lord said inquiringly. He sounded as though he already knew the answer.

Gregor solemnly nodded his head and stated, "We may be ahorse, but our ranks couldn't possibly withstand a stampede of that magnitude."

"Very well," Ned Stark declared, "If you say we must retreat, then we shall retreat."

Unsurprisingly, no one protested this decision. We all came out here prepared to die, but I'm certain most of us would prefer not to die by collision. Or worse yet, by flattening.

Gregor then gazed upward and called out "Rhaenys, I want you and your brothers and aunt to do everything you can to stall the mammoths! We'll need every second of time you can buy us!"

"It will be done, my lord!" Rhaenys acknowledged. Ygrenyon then ascended back into the air, and he flew off to the North.

Gregor then brought himself to the very center of the living forces, and he shouted "Fall back! Everyone, get back to the moat!"

"You heard him!" Dacey exclaimed, sheathing Bearswrath so she could free one hand for her horse's reins, "Fall back! Now!"

Sandor and several others added their own voices to those of the Lord and Lady of Moat Cailin. They all gave the order to retreat. All the while, the ground was shaking more violently, and the trumpeting noises became more boisterous. They're getting closer.

By now, the most recent wall of fire to the north had burnt out. As such, there were no obstructions between the Army of the Dead and the army of the living. The northernmost troops of the latter company were quickly overpowered.

Fortunately, the majority still managed to escape from the clutches of the wights and the White Walkers. But they were not out of danger just yet.

When Dacey began galloping south towards Moat Cailin with everyone else, she could just barely make out the outlines of the stampeding mammoths in the distance. Every now and then, she glimpsed over in their general direction out of the corner of her eye. The space between them got increasingly smaller every time she looked.

She could also see the dragons flying over the herd. The Targaryens were still trying to set the lead mammoths afire. They managed to bring down a handful, but not enough to make much of a difference.
When the riders were halfway back to their destination, the mammoths were upon them. Gregor shouted "Disperse! Quickly!"

At that, everyone broke their ranks, and they all rode in their own directions at their own paces. This made them much harder to hit, but the mammoths were still far too big for all of them to evade.

"Oh, fuck me," Sandor murmured bluntly. Just what I was thinking.

The undead beasts tore through the disorganized column. They trod over Dothraki, Essosi, and Westerosi alike. Scores were flung off their mounts. Scores more were crushed underfoot. Some were even thrown from their saddles by their spooked horses.

One mammoth came as close as within ten feet of Dacey. It trampled several of her fellow Northmen, including her friend Galbart Glover. A few seconds later, another mammoth passed her on the other side. This one took out even more people; one of whom was Dale Seaworth, Allard's older brother. Thirty or so feet away, Dacey saw yet another mammoth slaughter Ser Hosteen Frey and a number of his house's retainers. This is no longer a battle. It's godsdamn massacre.

"Mother, look out!" she heard a voice exclaim. She recognized it as Rickard's. In response, she cautiously gazed over her shoulder, and her eyes widened in shock. A mammoth larger than any she had seen so far was charging right at her.

Rickard's warning came a little too late for Dacey herself to do anything about it. By the time she decided whether she would veer her horse to the left or to the right, the mammoth would have already closed the gap between it and her.

For the briefest of moments, she honestly believed she was done for.

Then, all of a sudden, Gregor rode between his wife and the massive mammoth. He gripped Summit with both hands, raised it over his head, and swung it with all his strength. He sliced clean through the mammoth's gargantuan trunk and throat. The effect was almost immediate; the undead monstrosity ceased its charge, let out an anguished shriek, and collapsed onto its side.

Without either of them slowing their horses down even a little, Gregor turned to Dacey and asked her anxiously "Are you alright?"

"I am fine," she assured her husband, smiling at him. And I fucking love you.

By now, they were almost inside the perimeter of Moat Cailin. Once they got there, they would be safe. We're nearly there. Just a couple hundred more feet.

Right then, another mammoth broke through the crowd. This one's victims flew through the air and landed on the southern side of the edge of the moat's perimeter. Most of them were dead upon impact. The rest just barely managed to survive the fall. Hopefully, they'll be the last casualties of the day.

Once everyone was inside the perimeter, Gregor shouted "Thoros, light it up!"

All this time, the red priest had been standing on the Kingsroad, just inside the moat's perimeter. He held a lit torch in his hand. When he heard Gregor's order, he nodded his head and shouted. "As you command, my lord!"

He then tossed the torch forward. The instant it touched the ground, there was an explosion, and another wall of fire roared into existence. This one was much larger and more intense than any of
the ones the dragons had made. *It's not quite as hot, though. I guess it's true what they say: nothing's hotter than dragon fire.*

Sometime while Dacey was in Essos, Gregor had sent a team of Legionnaires led by Beric Dondarrion north of the Wall to reinforce the Night's Watch and the Free Folk at the Fist of the First Men. To better their chances, he had given them nineteen kegs of black powder, which was their entire stash of the substance. *Not that it ultimately did them much good.*

Only thirteen kegs had actually been used at the Fist. Thoros of Myr was the sole Legionnaire to survive that ill-fated battle, and he had managed to bring the remaining six kegs of black powder back south with him. Today, they were finally being used.

Earlier that morning, Gregor had taken those six kegs, and he had distributed their contents across a hundred barrels that had been filled with a compound composed primarily of oil and pitch. The resulting mixture was so flammable that a lone spark would have been enough to destroy the Red Keep's portcullis. *But, of course, destruction is not what he had in mind.*

After bringing the mixture together, Gregor had then ordered his retainers to pour that mixture onto the ground along the moat's northern perimeter. It had been spread from the Bite in the east all the way to the Saltspear in the west. By now, it must have seeped into the ground, soaking the grass beneath the snow. Gregor had done this as a precaution, in the event that they were forced to make a hasty retreat. *Thank the gods for Gregor's foresight.*

A few of the undead mammoths were still reckless enough to charge through this new, enormous wall of fire. The ones who did burst into flames almost immediately. In effect, they squealed in agony, slowed down, and dropped onto their sides or backs. None of the other mammoths dared to cross over it after that.

Dacey smiled. *As long as that wall burns, nothing – living or dead – will pass through it.* That was just what Gregor had intended.

Many of her allies began cheering again when they saw that the Army of the Dead was stuck on the other side of the wall of fire. *Some of our friends may be stranded out there, as well. But at least more than half of us made it back safely.*

None of the Cleganes partook in the cheering. They knew better than to celebrate prematurely.

"Settle down, all of you!" Gregor proclaimed. After everyone quieted down, he announced "It is still much too early to rejoice. That wall of fire will not last forever. I estimate it will only last twelve hours."

The battle had begun in the middle of the night. By now, it was near sunrise of the following day. In other words, the wall of fire would last until the late afternoon or the early evening.

"We should use this precious time to treat our wounds, recover our strength, and reinforce our defenses," Gregor declared, looking around at the survivors, "For the next time we face the Army of the Dead, we could be fighting them on the grounds of the moat, or even within the moat itself. You all fought well today, but the battle is not over yet."

*No, it has only just begun.*

Gregor continued gazing around the area, and he stated "Anyone who suffered any sort of injury out there, have it treated as soon as possible. I will *not* have any of you dying of infection or blood loss."
Yes, our numbers are already few enough as they are, Dacey thought in amusement.

"That is all for now," Gregor pronounced, "I will leave you with one more word of caution. Though we may have up to twelve hours' respite, the battle could restart at any time. So, be prepared for that possibility. The moment the Others catch us unawares, we are finished."

Oh, I have no intention of relaxing until either we've won or I'm dead.

Everyone then went their own ways. Dacey stayed with her husband and son. As they dismounted, the dragons descended to the ground beside them. Their riders did not climb off just yet.

"Good work out there," Gregor told the Targaryens approvingly.

"Thank you, my lord," Jon said appreciatively. He was no longer warging into Ygrenyon. Rhaenys still had her hands on his shoulders, though. Rather protective of her brother, isn't she? "Is there anything more you require of us?"

"Not at present," the Mountain replied, "However, sometime later, I would like you to take the dragons back out there and burn more of those undead mammoths. If possible, try to burn all of them. The giants, too. They're perhaps our second greatest menace after the Night's King himself."

"You can count on us, my lord," Aegon assured Gregor.

"It shall be done, my lord," Daenerys conceded. Jon and Rhaenys simply nodded in acknowledgment. Let us hope they succeed. The human and animal wights are bothersome enough. At least with the mammoths and giants out of the way, our odds of victory are much more favorable.

The Targaryens then climbed off their dragons. They were about to head back to the moat. Before they could take more than a few steps, however, Dacey felt someone tug on her sleeve.

She turned around and came face-to-face with one of her husband's oldest vassals, Rafford. One thing Dacey knew about Raff the Sweetling; he was almost always smiling, even in the direst of circumstances. So, when she saw the nervous expression currently across his countenance, she could be forgiven for feeling a little perturbed herself.

"Milady, you best come with me," Raff told her uneasily.

"What's wrong, Raff?" she asked, trying to sound collected.

"It's your lady mother," Rafford revealed, "She's gravely wounded."

At first, Dacey was flabbergasted. Then she composed herself and demanded "Take me to her at once."

Rafford nodded and guided her to a patch of land near the wall of fire. Without hesitating, Gregor and Rickard accompanied her there. Dacey quickly realized he was leading them to the place where the last casualties had fallen. Those were the ones who had been flung several yards into the air.

When they got there, Dacey discovered that Lady Maege Mormont was indeed one of the people who had been knocked off their horses by that last mammoth. To her vast relief, however, her mother was still alive. Dacey's cousin, Jorah, and his wife, Nymeria, were giving her a helping hand.
"Mother!" Dacey yelled in alarm, rushing over to her. Initially, Mother seemed unresponsive. She asked Jorah and Nymeria "How is she?"

"She suffered a blow to the head when she fell," Nymeria revealed. Sure enough, Mother's temple was bleeding profusely. "She appears to have broken a few ribs, as well."

"She needs a maester immediately," Jorah declared, "Otherwise, she could die from blood loss."

"Nonsense, Jorah," Mother interjected abruptly, making Nymeria jump a bit. She looked up, grinned, and uttered in her usual husky yet good-natured tone, "It would take much more than some huge, hairy, four-legged bastard to get the better of this bear."

Dacey could not help but laugh. "I think she'll be just fine, Jorah," she assured her cousin, "But go ahead and take her to the maesters. I'll check in on her later."

"Alright then, Dacey," Jorah avowed. He and his wife then headed south towards the moat.

While Mother was being led away, Gregor turned his attention to where the last mammoth's other victims were gathered. Several men were looking through the bodies. Gregor told them "Take the injured inside. If there's a chance they can be saved, we shall not squander it. Toss the dead into the wall of fire. I'll not have any wights this close to the moat before the wall burns out."

The men saluted the Mountain, and they went to execute his orders.

Not long after that, Dacey, Gregor, Rickard, and the four Targaryens headed back to Moat Cailin. Eliaxes, Draegar, and Ygrenyon stayed close to their masters and mistresses. Ghost came along, as well. He walked between Jon and Daenerys. Dany smiled down at her nephew's furry companion and scratched him behind his ears. A gesture which the albino direwolf quite enjoyed. If she does that for Ghost, I can only imagine what she does for his master behind closed doors. Dacey chuckled at the thought, though she would never dare to say it aloud.

"I'm glad to see your spirits have not been dampened, Mother," Rickard commented, giving her a gentle smile. "I'm sure Grandmother Maege will be alright."

Dacey smiled back at her firstborn, and she wrapped her arm around his shoulders and held him close to show her gratitude for his kind words. She told him "I am grateful for your confidence, sweetling. I happen to share it. Your grandmother is a tough one, after all."

"No arguing with that," Gregor contended humorously, "She's the only woman who's ever made me sweat. Other than you, of course."

Of course, Dacey thought, giggling a little. Even in the dead of winter, the bedchamber at the top of the Lord's Tower can get plenty hot.

Dacey truly was reasonably certain that her lady mother would survive her injuries. At the very least, she should live to see the conclusion of this battle. Still, they had had a close call. Hopefully, we won't have any more of those for a while.

About twenty seconds after she had that very thought, she and the others reached the moat's concrete wall. Once they passed through it, they encountered Bran Stark. Right after that, they were then accosted by the Tickler. He seemed out of breath. Then again, so did everyone who just came from the battlefield. However, she did not recall seeing this man on the field of battle. He's better suited for a torture chamber, anyway.

"Milord, are you busy right now?" the interrogator asked.
What kind of question is that? He's the Lord of Moat Cailin, the commanding officer of the Legion without Banners, and the Master of Order. As such, he is always busy. Based on the expression upon Gregor's face, he was considering giving a similar answer. But in the end, all he said was "Not at the moment. Why do you ask?"

"I must request that you accompany me to the Reproach Tower at once," the Tickler told his lord, "Less than an hour ago, Lady Melisandre, Ser Mollander, and I went there to conduct our daily interrogation on Hodor."

"And how did that go?" Gregor enquired.

"Put simply… it didn't," the Tickler responded.

Gregor raised an eyebrow in bewilderment. "Explain."

"When we got there, we found him dead," the Tickler said straightforwardly.

Gregor froze at that. As did Dacey and everyone else within earshot, including Bran. Dead? Did he just say the person with the most powerful source is dead? After a few seconds of unpleasant silence, Gregor softly muttered "What?"

"He's dead, milord," the Tickler repeated, "His guards are dead, too. Apparently, there was a fire in the cell block. But it was no accident. After we got the fire under control, I took a closer look at the bodies. All of them had been stabbed in the head. Except Hodor. His head was actually sliced open."

Gregor swore under his breath. "How could this have happened?"

"We don't know, milord," the Tickler confessed, "We were hoping you or Lord Bran might be able to reveal more."

"Now, there's a thought," Gregor thought aloud. He turned to the youngest person in the moat, and he queried "Bran, could you use your third eye to search for the murderer?"

"I'll certainly try, my lord," the wolf boy answered him, "But as you know, whenever the source holders are involved, there is only so much I can see. Nevertheless, I will still try."

"That is all I ask," Gregor assured him.

Bran leaned back in his saddle once again. This time when he opened his third eye, he kept it open for a full five minutes. After that, he sat back up and turned back to Gregor. He did not seem very pleased. He revealed in a somewhat morose tone "I'm afraid I cannot see a thing, my lord."

"What do you mean?" Gregor asked.

"It is as though one moment, Hodor is sitting in his cell under heavy guard," Bran elaborated, "The very next moment… he and all his guards are dead, and a fire has started out of nowhere."

"Could you see anyone enter or exit the Reproach Tower?" Dacey said inquiringly.

"No one, my lady," Bran glumly admitted, "The only people I saw going in or out of the building were the Tickler, Ser Mollander, Lady Melisandre, and a number of your household guards. Several of whom only went in."

"Then who could have been responsible?" Aegon wondered.
"I think I know," Gregor muttered grimly, folding his arms, "There's only one person who could have killed Hodor and his guards and escape everyone's notice, including that of the Three-Eyed Raven."

"Who might that be, my lord?" Dany enquired.

"Isn't it obvious?" Gregor asked rhetorically.

It may not have been so obvious to everyone else, but at the very least, it was obvious to Dacey. She knew precisely where her husband was going with this argument. So, it would seem the final person with the source is here, after all.
"Be safe out there," Ellyn beseeched him, kneeling to his level and looking him in the eyes.

"I promise you I have every intention of coming back, and the gods have mercy on me if I do not," Tyrion assured his wife. He told her true; he did not plan to die today. *The day I die will be a day when we're both well into our eighties, surrounded by our grandchildren and great-grandchildren.*

The beautiful giantess smiled at her dwarf husband and kissed him softly on both cheeks and the forehead, followed by a peck on the lips. *If by chance I do die, this instant will be in my last thoughts.*

"One more for good luck?" Tyrion proposed with a wry grin.

Ellyn indulged him and gave him a longer, more passionate kiss on the lips. *Now that is more like it.* When she finally pulled away, she gazed into his eyes and said "Hope that'll suffice. You'll need all the luck you can get."

*You do not jest, my dear.* He just continued grinning and commented "I have faith in your brother and his ability to lead. If there is one man who can get us through this fiasco, it is he."

Ellyn lightly nodded her head, saying "You are absolutely right. Even so… please take care of yourself."

"I shall," was all Tyrion said in response. *I am not the type to sacrifice himself, especially if that sacrifice ends up being in vain.*

Tyrion was not the only person there who was sharing a tender exchange with his significant other. All around them, other couples who were doing the same. *This may be their last opportunity.*

Tyrion's oldest nephew, Prince Jasper Baratheon, was affectionately embracing Sansa Stark at the gate. His next eldest nephew, Rickard Clegane, was nearby with the other Stark sister, Arya. The two of them appeared to have their lips touching. Tyrion smirked at the sight. *Princess Elia Martell may have given Rick his first kiss, but at least he was able to give Arya hers.*

On the subject of Elia Martell, her children and their half-brother and aunt were about to mount their dragons. Before that, however, they each had an intimate moment with their own lovers. Aegon was cooing sweetly into the ear of his new wife, Talisa Maegyr. Rhaenys was wrapped in a tight hug by her intended, Willas Tyrell. Just a few feet away, Jon and Daenerys were kissing furiously, as though their lives depended on that very act. Tyrion could only chuckle at the two of them.

As Tyrion gazed around the vicinity, he recognized several more pairings. He saw Allard Seaworth with Lady Melisandre. Prince Oberyn Martell with Ellaria Sand. Ser Edmure Tully with Lady Asha Tully. Ser Barristan Selmy with Lady Ashara Dayne.

There was also Lord Jorah Mormont, Lord Sandor Clegane, and Lord Gregor Clegane with their wives Lady Nymeria, Lady Obara, and Lady Dacey respectively. Of course, those ladies would actually be joining the battle alongside their husbands. Still, that did not mean they could not have a moment of their own. It could be regarded as a taste of what awaited them once the fighting was over. *Love is always a good incentive for guaranteeing one’s survival.*

Once everyone was finished with these exchanges of affection, they all went their separate ways.
The Targaryens climbed onto the backs of their dragons, and they hastily took to the sky. Everyone else either retreated behind the concrete wall along the northern border of Moat Cailin or mounted their horses and headed out the wall's gate. When the latter group was assembled in the lands north of the wall, the gate's portcullis was lowered and locked into place. *There will be no retreating, regrouping, or recovering this time*, he noted.

Several hundred feet to the north, the wall of fire continued to burn. Alas, the flames were considerably smaller than when they first began to rage. At a glance, Tyrion could tell it would not be very long before they were extinguished.

The Mountain had estimated that the wall of fire would bring them up to twelve hours of respite, but he had claimed it would almost certainly be less. It ultimately turned out to be ten and a-half hours. The Others had let them alone from dawn until past dusk. *Still ample time to heal our wounded, regain our strength, and ready ourselves for whatever fate has in store for us.* Tyrion had contemplated getting drunk at one point. He had treated himself to a few glasses of wine earlier that afternoon, but he was going into battle totally sober.

Tyrion and most of the Westerlords had not participated in the first round of the battle. Their numbers had been devastated at the Wall, whereas the Northmen and the Royal Army had suffered heavy losses at Winterfell. As such, the majority of the remnants of those three forces had remained in Moat Cailin in the event that the perimeter was breached by the Army of the Dead. That was not the case this time. This time, every able-bodied person able to wave a stick would be partaking in the battle.

Tyrion had waved loads of sticks in his life. He also had plenty of experience with swords, axes, and crossbows. Still, he was hardly what could be classified as "able-bodied." For that reason, he was somewhat reluctant to take up arms. Initially, he had not even wanted to join the fighting at all. That was not because he was a coward or anything of the sort; he had simply believed the presence of a dwarf would only deter the larger, stronger units.

His wife's brother had convinced him otherwise. Lord Gregor had argued that it would boost the morale of the Westerlords significantly if their Lord Paramount was among them. Tyrion could not deny the logic in his brother-by-law's words.

However, he did not believe he should be the one to lead the Westerlords. That was mainly due to his lack of field experience. *The only real battle I've ever been in is the Pentoshi Bloodbath, and there were hardly any horses there. Except for the ones who knocked Ellyn off her feet.* At any rate, the Mountain had agreed with the Imp on that point, and as such, he had given provisional command of the westermen's column to Tyrion's uncle, Ser Kevan Lannister.

Tyrion gripped his axe tightly in one hand, balancing it on his shoulder. He held onto his reins with his other hand as his horse trotted forward. He rode in-between his father's younger brothers, Ser Kevan and Ser Gerion. Tyrion's uncles had already engaged the Others in combat once before.

Uncle Kevan had fought them weeks ago at the Wall; Uncle Gerion had fought them all through last night. *Now it's my turn, at long last.* Tyrion did not know whether it was more appropriate to be excited or afraid.

Soon, they reached the wall of fire. By now, it was only a few feet high. That was just high enough to repel the White Walkers, the human-sized wights, and most of the animal ones. It would have been insufficient to keep away the reanimated giants and mammoths, though. Thankfully, those enormous beasts were no longer a threat. At Lord Gregor's behest, the Targaryens and their dragons had dealt with them hours ago. Now all the undead mammoths had been reduced to ash, and the only giants left were the ones on the side of the living, such as Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun.
And, some would argue, the Cleganes. *We are still outnumbered forty or fifty to one, but at least we needn't fear another stampede.*

The wall of fire ran from the Bite all the way to the Saltspear. Neither of those bodies of water had frozen over yet, so there was no way anyone could have gone around it. This space was a considerable distance to be sure, but from what Tyrion could see, the flames had not gone out anywhere between the lake and the river. *If it had, we would have known of it by now.* Nonetheless, the flames were rapidly becoming smaller and weaker. *Any minute now...*

The combined Westerosi and Essosi forces were large enough to spread across the whole of that distance. *At the very least, we can ensure none of them will get past us.* When Tyrion was almost within spitting distance of the wall of fire, he could vaguely see the foe standing on the other side. They were almost as close to the wall, and they seemed just as invested in watching it. *They're waiting for it to go out,* Tyrion realized. *Just as we are.*

Tyrion soon heard Gregor Clegane exclaim "Form ranks!"

"Form ranks!" Uncle Kevan and many others repeated the Mountain's command.

In response, Tyrion and all the other riders swiftly moved their horses into orderly rows. Once they were all in position, Gregor shouted "Long-range, at the ready!"

The entirety of the second and third rows was composed of archers, crossbowmen, longbowmen, and javelin-throwers. Every single one of them drew an arrow, a bolt, or a javelin. A few of those projectiles were tipped with Valyrian steel. A larger number of the projectiles were tipped with obsidian. The rest, which comprised the majority, were simply made of ordinary steel or iron. The wielders of those particular projectiles lit their tips afire with torches.

"Aim only for the White Walker!" Gregor called out. The long-range units acknowledged that order, but no one prepared to fire just yet. Right now, with the complete lack of sunlight and the small radius of visibility provided by the wall of fire, they could just barely differentiate the White Walkers from the wights. *Let us hope too many of them do not go for the same target.*

Before long, the wall of fire shrank in size to only about a foot tall. Soon the flames were barely even noticeable. That was when the Army of the Dead finally continued marching south. Tightening his grip on his axe, Tyrion took in a deep breath. *Steady,* he thought. *Do not lose your composure.*

"Release!" Gregor announced.

The long-range combatants fired a volley of projectiles into the approaching undead horde. Tyrion could only see where the ones in his immediate surroundings landed. For the most part, he was pleased by the results. More than half the projectiles hit the Others. Some of the White Walkers were hit by multiple projectiles, but most of them were only struck by one or two. In any case, all the projectiles ended up in something other than the ground.

By the end of the volley, well over ten thousand wights must have crumbled into piles of bones. This effectively destroyed the Army of the Dead's vanguard, and it left them severely disorganized. *This would be the ideal time for us to advance.*

Apparently, Lord Gregor thought the same. He raised his greatsword *Summit* into the air and yelled at the top of his voice "Charge!"

All along the lengthy column, thousands of soldiers held up their weapons and started yelling, as
well. Tyrion threw up his axe and added his own voice to theirs. *I always wanted to do this at least once before I died.* He found the experience as exhilarating as he believed it to be, but he was hoping he would never have to do it again after today. To him, once was enough.

A moment later, Lord Gregor Clegane galloped ahead on his massive destrier. Lady Dacey Clegane, Rickard Clegane, and the other Legionnaires promptly followed him. Lord Eddard Stark, Benjen Stark, Robb Stark, Lord Jorah Mormont, Lady Nymeria Mormont, and the other Northmen proceeded forward. After that, Lord Tyrion Lannister, his uncles, Lord Sandor Clegane, Lady Obara Clegane, and the other Westerlords made their way forward, as well.

Tyrion did not know who advanced after he and his bannermen did. He did not bother to look back to see. He was much more focused on what lay to his front than to his rear. *It's no concern of mine, anyway. Regardless of what order we advance in, there are only three ways this will end for us all.* In plainer terms, they would all be alive, dead, or somewhere in the middle. Needless to say, Tyrion preferred the first option, but if he had to choose between the second and third options, he firmly believed death was still better than undeath. *I'm sure we could all agree on that much.*

Lord Gregor was the first to reach the undead host. When he was upon them, he gave a mighty swing of *Summit.* He lopped off the heads of four wights and one White Walker. Another dozen wights collapsed as a result.

From the Saltspear to the Bite, thousands of horses broke through the front lines of the Army of the Dead. Over the next minute, countless wights were trampled underfoot. Of course, none of those ridden over were actually killed, but nearly all of them would not get up ever again. *With any luck, their king will reveal himself before they try to arise.*

The living forces managed to dash through about fifty or sixty rows into the undead forces. By the time they were that deep into the Army of the Dead, their horses no longer had the minimum momentum required to sustain the charge. Thus, they had to slow their pace to a trot and rely solely on the weapons they carried.

Tyrion made good use of his axe. It, too, was made of Valyrian steel. His wife's family had gifted it to him on his twentieth nameday. It had already tasted blood before today; Tyrion had used it during the Pentoshi Bloodbath. Thus, he knew how deadly it could be against the living. *Time to finally put this thing to use against its intended prey.*

He waved his axe at the closest wight, sinking the blade into the side of its head. Before the wight even had a chance to drop to the ground, Tyrion withdrew his axe and hastily swung around. He buried it in the chest of a nearby White Walker. Immediately, the Other gave a shrill shriek and shattered into a mound of fragments.

As he looked around for another target, Tyrion spotted the dragons flying overhead. At the moment, they and their riders were merely gliding through the sky and monitoring the activity below them. The Targaryens had orders to provide back-up from above if and when the Others threatened to overtake the grounded units. Luckily, the living were able to keep the undead at bay. *For now, at any rate.*

Tyrion was partly tempted to propose that they simply let the dragons loose on the Army of the Dead, but he knew the battle could not be won through such effortless and straightforward means. *It is never that easy.* According to Lord Gregor, Lady Melisandre, and Mollander, it was possible the dragon's ability to breathe fire was not inexhaustible. And even if it was, they argued, the dragons and their riders were still vulnerable to attacks from the ground. They claimed the Night's King was more than just a figurehead ruler. He also happened to be the deadliest individual
in the entirety of the undead host. He could bring down and reanimate anyone and anything, including dragons. Despite the fact those mythical creatures were supposedly fire incarnate.

*I suppose it's for the best that the Targaryens limit their involvement in this battle, anyway.* Tyrion debated in his mind, slicing down another wight with his axe. *If the four of them singlehandedly eliminate the Army of the Dead, the whole of Westeros will be in their debt. That would be painstakingly awkward, considering how the realm has treated the Targaryen name since Jaime killed the Mad King.*

"Dig into them!" Gregor Clegane called out, delivering an underhand swipe to another White Walker, "Don't let them gain any ground on us!"

Tyrion and the rest of his living allies were most eager to execute that command. *I, for one, refuse to give even an inch of land to these undead bastards.*

Tyrion was careful not to let his mind wander too much. If he ended up distracting himself, he would risk getting caught unawares. Therefore, he kept his focus principally on the present, and he split his attention equally between his allies and his enemies within about twenty feet of him.

"Disperse!" Uncle Kevan shouted very abruptly, "Quickly!"

Tyrion was somewhat bewildered by that order, as well as the abruptness of it. *Disperse? Why? The rank is holding just fine.*

In spite of that, the westermen hastened to comply with Ser Kevan's decree. They systematically spread out, putting a decent amount of space between themselves and their closest neighbors. Tyrion did the same, though he felt much less comfortable being so far apart from his fellow soldiers.

In addition to his Valyrian steel axe, Tyrion also carried a dagger made of obsidian on his belt. Holding onto his axe with his right hand, he swiftly drew the dragonglass weapon with his left so that he was doubly armed. He smirked and taunted the adjacent foes with "Come at me, you bloody pests!"

The Others were quick to respond. Quicker than Tyrion would have liked. *Oh, well. It's just as they say; we can't choose our enemies.* He plunged his dagger into the forehead of a wight to his left. At the exact same time, he sank his axe into the shoulder of a White Walker to his right. The former crumbled; the latter shattered. Before Tyrion could even catch his breath, he withdrew both his weapons and found them some new targets.

While he busied himself with dispatching the undead nearest to him, Tyrion took a moment to check up on his bannermen. He gazed around at his surroundings, and he soon noticed that almost all of them were having an easier time of keeping the enemy away than he.

*Of course, they are,* he thought bitterly. *They've got longer arms and, therefore, more reach than I.*

Most of Tyrion's bannermen ranged in height from five and a-half to six and a-half feet. The shortest one was just an inch or two over five feet. The Imp was only slightly closer to five feet than four. It was believed that a person's height was approximately equivalent to the span of their arms. Furthermore, Tyrion carried a dagger and an axe, whilst many of his vassals were armed with longer weapons, such as spears and longswords. *It appears I must allow these lifeless cretins to get much closer to me than my men do.* But he did not let that discourage him. If anything, he just viewed it as an extra challenge.
For a while, Tyrion was able to hold his own against the wights. At one point, he even felt as though he would be able to stand his ground against them for the foreseeable future. Before very long, however, he began to realize just how ferocious they could be. Especially when they crowded around a particular victim.

Soon, Tyrion found himself surrounded on all sides by an ever-increasing number of wights. He tried his hardest to keep track of them all, but there were more than even he could count. Before he knew what was going on, the undead were frenziedly clawing at his horse, who was so spooked that she was threatening to throw the dwarf off. *Shit! Shit! Shit!*

All of a sudden, Tyrion was grabbed from behind by a White Walker and pulled backward. He tumbled out of his saddle and fell to the ground. He landed roughly on his back, dropping his axe in the process. Thankfully, he still managed to keep a firm grip on his dagger. When the Other moved to seize him again, he thrust the obsidian blade into its midsection. The White Walker hollered in agony and broke apart. As a gust of wind carried its remains away, Tyrion slashed at an incoming wight. He practically took off its head.

Tyrion's next goal was to recover his axe. Luckily, he found it within arm's length of where he landed. After he recovered the Valyrian steel weapon, he focused on returning to his horse. Alas, that soon became impossible. Now that she was without her rider, she was utterly without direction. She was a smart mare, but she could not evade the undead indefinitely.

Tyrion Lannister watched in sadness as his horse was overwhelmed. But he had no time to grieve for her. Instead, he focused on preventing himself from meeting the same end. Laying here sprawled across the ground, someone as small as he was just as liable to be trodden over by horses as he was to be incapacitated by the undead.

Tyrion endeavored to put some space between himself and the wights. That was easier in theory than in practice; they were literally everywhere. Every time he looked in a different direction, more and more of them seemed to appear as if out of nowhere.

Amidst the turmoil, Tyrion managed to regain his feet. As soon as he was standing upright, a nearby Other came at him. He hastily dodged the attack and buried his axe in its chest, causing it to falter and collapse. He then slashed at the lower bodies of the surrounding wights. Several of them had their legs amputated, thus neutralizing them as a threat.

Over the next few minutes, Tyrion constantly hacked at any wight or White Walker that came anywhere close to him. For the most part, he was focused on staying alive. But whenever possible, he tried to push forward into the undead host. He had to show his men that even on his feet, he was a capable fighter, and that he could maintain the column's advance. *Unlike the Dothraki, I am not hopeless once I've dismounted.* Of course, it was very likely his men were too preoccupied with their own skirmishes to pay any attention to him. *If so, I'll simply continue the fight for my own sake.* While the Imp had his pride like the rest of the lions, his own survival was still of greatest importance to him.

Occasionally, the Targaryens dove down from the clouds, and Eliaxes, Draegar, and Ygrenyon each expelled a stream of fire onto the undead host below. Every time they did this, the dragons managed to put up a small wall of fire, which bought everyone on the ground enough time to deal with the wights and White Walkers in their immediate proximity. Once the flames subsided, they engaged the Army of the Dead in full strength once more. *We've managed to form some manner of routine from all this.*

Tyrion did not know how long he managed to resist the undead after he was knocked off his horse. *Has it been five minutes? Ten? Twenty? More?* In any case, he was fairly certain it had been
less than a half-hour. Unfortunately, soon after he had this thought, he inexplicably found himself a favored target of the Others. They were relentlessly swarming around him, as though they had taken a special interest in him. **Well, I am an interesting fellow. But this is hardly the type of mass I would wish to be affiliated with.**

Tyron wondered if the Others were intelligent enough to identify the highest-ranking nobles in the living army. Based on Benjen Stark and Thoros of Myr's account of the battle at the Fist of the First Men, the Night's King had managed to isolate Lord Beric Dondarrion, Mance Rayder, and Lord Commander Jeor Mormont as the leaders of that task force. That was how he was able to pick them off and eliminate each one of them in turn.

It was different in Tyrion's case, however. While he was the Lord Paramount of the Westerlords, he was not the one commanding the westermen forces. That was Uncle Kevan's responsibility. **So, why are they coming for me?**

Then a potential solution occurred to him. It was conjectured by Bran Stark and the source holders that the Army of the Dead functioned through a type of hive mind. In other words, everything each member knew, the horde knew, and everything the horde knew, each member knew.

Although the battle appeared to be going well so far, Tyrion did not doubt that at least some of his allies must have already fallen. He could quite clearly recall seeing a few other men getting pulled down from their horses. Unlike Tyrion, nearly all of them had not been lucky enough to get back up. In all likelihood, some of his own men were among the casualties. If so, his slain bannermen may have already gotten back up and joined the fighting on the enemy side. **They could have already told their new allies of my significance in the Westerlands,** he realized.

Whatever the case, Tyrion was not about to go down quietly. If the Others were so determined to slaughter him, he would put up a valiant fight. **They might be under the impression that just because I am small, I will go down easily. What fools. Then again, this is hardly the first time someone's underestimated me because of my size.** Even now, he enjoyed putting such individuals in their place.

Despite Tyrion's never-ending string of witty thoughts and optimism, there was still only so much he could do to repel the ever-growing wave of the undead. **There must be some end to them.** Indeed, there was an end to the horde, but it was far beyond his field of vision. Soon, their persistence was beginning to take a toll on his endurance.

Just when Tyrion felt he was on the verge of reaching his tolerance threshold, he felt someone grab him from behind. The next thing he knew, he was physically lifted into the air, and he was placed on a saddle. A rather large saddle, he quickly noted. It currently held another occupant, yet there was still adequate room for him.

Tyrion peered over his shoulder, and he promptly recognized the towering stature and benign countenance of his brother-by-law.

"Are you alright, Tyrion?" the Mountain asked in concern. **He sounds genuinely worried.**

The Imp merely grinned and nodded his head, saying "You got to me just in time, Gregor."

Lord Gregor Clegane grinned back and remarked "That's good. I won't have you dying on me. My sister would bludgeon me if I let that happen."

"I bet she would," Tyrion muttered in amusement. He was willing to wager Gregor was merely jesting. Tyrion certainly was. **I've never known Ellyn to be violent towards her family. Besides, as**
strong as she may be, if ever she did try to bludgeon her brother, the worst she could do is bruise him. Still, it never hurts to deflate a tense situation by inserting a little humor.

Once Tyrion regained his bearings, Gregor instructed them "Take the reins."

Tyrion nodded and sheathed his dagger so that his left hand was free. After grasping ahold of the reins to the Mountain's huge destrier, Lord Gregor lightly placed a hand on his shoulder and told him "Now, hold on tight. You and I are going to see the rest of this battle through together."

"Aye," Tyrion acknowledged. A dwarf and a giant sharing a mount? That's a rather fine idea. I would say he and I average out to two regular-sized men.

Tyrion steered the horse towards the vast horde of undead and urged him forward. As they reentered the fray, he announced to his saddle partner "I'll take the left side. The right is all yours."

"Very well," Gregor remarked. He then took summit by both hands and mightily waved it to the right of the horse. He sliced apart a dozen or so wights. He even sent a few of them flying; that's how powerful his blow was. Meanwhile, Tyrion slammed his axe into the head of a White Walker to the horse's left. He managed to annihilate even more wights with that one swing.

As the Imp and the Mountain searched for new targets, the dragons paid them another visit. Once again, Eliaxes, Draegar, and Ygrenyon launched another round of flames into the front lines of the Army of the Dead, transforming yet another row of the Night's King's warriors to scorched powder in a matter of seconds. This time, however, they did not leave a wall of fire behind. Could we have reached a patch of grass that was already burnt in last night's battle?

Tyrion anticipated that the loss of the walls of fire would turn out to be a detriment on the part of the living army. He soon realized just how much of a detriment it truly was. Now they were unable to separate smaller sections of wights and White Walkers from the bulk of the Army of the Dead. The most they could hope for now was for the dragon fire to give them a momentary breather.

In spite of this setback, Tyrion and Gregor were able to cope with the ongoing onslaught of the Others. Unfortunately, others in their ranks were not able to adjust so well.

The Riverlords' column was due west of the Westerlords'. The most prevalent banners were the ones which displayed the twin towers of House Frey. Tyrion could see Ser Aenys Frey fighting alongside his son Ser Rhaegar Frey. They're both weasels who are named after dragons. Let us see which animal's spirit they possess. It turned out the two Freys were not as formidable as their namesakes. Father and son were ultimately overtaken by a large group of Others and their subservient wights.

By now, the undead were threatening to surround Gregor and Tyrion's horse once again. Luckily, they managed to clear away these new adversaries. Tyrion then looked off in the opposite direction, wondering how that side was faring. Due east of the Northmen, the Reachmen were unremittingly tearing into the Army of the Dead. They were led by their Lord Paramount, Mace Tyrell, his sons Willas and Garlan, and his most fearless vassal, Lord Randyll Tarly of Horn Hill.

Lord Randyll made for an impressive sight, brandishing his house's ancestral greatsword, Heartsbane. He was almost as deadly and fearsome with his own Valyrian steel blade as Lord Gregor was with Summit. Whenever a White Walker or a wight came anywhere close to him, he cut it down swiftly and remorselessly. He hardly ever seemed to tire or hesitate. I can see why Samwell doesn't get along with his lord father. He doesn't strike me as the type of man who would make good company.
All the same, Tyrion was grateful to have robust and formidable warriors like Randyll Tarly fighting on his side. Alas, even the Lord of Horn Hill's defense was not unassailable. At one point, while Lord Randyll was occupied with a large party of wights, one Other armed with an abnormally long spear approached him from a blind spot. Tyrion would have attempted to warn him, but the Reachman was too far and there was too much noise for him to be heard. Once the Other got close enough to Lord Randyll's horse, it thrust its weapon upward. The spearhead disappeared into Lord Randyll's upper back and reappeared out the front side of his throat. The Lord of Horn Hill briefly froze in place. Then he released his grip on *Heartsbane* and toppled out of his saddle.

*There goes one of our strongest fighters,* Tyrion thought grimly. He hastily returned his attention to his immediate surroundings, as he and Gregor were in danger of being encircled yet again. While he was fending off this latest wave of the undead, he came to witness something just as terrible as what he just saw, if not more so.

Less than fifty feet ahead of him, he caught a glimpse of Lewys Lydden, the lord of Deep Den and the maternal grandfather of his wife and her brothers. Although Lord Lewys was by all accounts an elderly man, he was still capable of leading his retainers and wielding a sword. Up until now, he had managed to fight back the wights. But apparently, his age was finally surmounting his experience.

Right when Tyrion's gaze fell upon the old head of House Lydden, four wights simultaneously attacked Lord Lewys from different angles. One of them clubbed him in the back with a mace; the other three plunged blades of varying lengths into his torso. Lewys Lydden began convulsing erratically, and he slumped over in his seat. Even from this far away, Tyrion could tell he was gone before he even landed on the ground.

Tyrion had not exhausted his own stamina or fortitude just yet. Even so, he was beginning to lose hope. His allies were dropping like flies, and the only ones who ever got back up were those who displayed a pair of cold, blue eyes when they did. *We may need to rethink our strategy.*

"Gregor, I do not know how much longer we can carry on with this endeavor," Tyrion told his brother-by-law, pulling his axe from the neck of an Other, "Our units are being cut down too quickly. At this rate, we'll all be dead before we get anywhere close to the Night's King."

At first, Gregor Clegane gave no reply. Instead, he focused on pushing back the wights and White Walkers within reach of his greatsword. Once the Mountain and the Imp had some space to breathe again, the former looked down at the latter and stated "Oh, I wouldn't be too certain of that, Tyrion. Perhaps we're closer to the battle's end/accomplishing our objective than you thought."

The dwarf was perplexed. He turned to face the giant and asked, "How do you mean?"

Lord Gregor simply smirked and gestured to the north with *Summit*, saying "See for yourself."

Tyrion turned back around and followed the huge Valyrian steel weapon until he saw what its tip was pointing towards. It was then that he realized precisely what Gregor Clegane was talking about.

About half a mile to the north, there was a small group of Others. They were marching south alongside the rest of the Army of the Dead. However, there was about twenty feet of empty space around them in all directions. No wights or other White Walkers dared to set foot inside that area.

Tyrion soon discovered why. There was one individual who stood at the very center of that group. The other Others stood in very close proximity to that individual, as though they were protecting
Tyrion now shared Gregor's smirk. He drily commented "It would seem our rival is not hiding in plain sight anymore."

"Indeed," Gregor concurred, maintaining his smirk, "A huge mistake on his part."

The Mountain held onto Summit in one hand. With the other, he reached around his horse and pulled out a warhorn. He brought it up to his lips, took a deep breath, and blew into it once. It resounded loudly around the entire field. Tyrion knew that was the signal for the Targaryens to rally to Lord Gregor.

A few seconds later, the dragons emerged from the clouds and soared directly towards the horn's origin point. All three of them were soon in the air over Tyrion and Gregor's heads. Ygrenyon was the only one who could get close enough for the rider to talk to them, due to his master's ability to warg into his mind and control his actions. Aegon and Daenerys hovered about twice as high overhead atop Eliaxes and Draegar respectively.

As she held onto her younger brother to keep him secure, Rhaenys called out to Gregor "Have you seen him, my lord?"

"Yes, I have, Rhae," Gregor informed her candidly. Turning his head and pointing with Summit again, he pronounced "He's right over there."

Rhaenys looked in the direction he specified, and she squinted her eyes to get a better view of the land. A moment later, she declared "I see him."

"Good," Gregor remarked. He then grinned wickedly and told her "Torch him."

The eldest Targaryen gave an evil smile and said maliciously "With pleasure, my lord."

Ygrenyon took to the skies once more; Eliaxes and Draegar followed soon after. Together, the three dragons and the four Targaryens made their way towards the secluded group of Others. Once they were directly above the Night's King, they unleashed three streams of fire at him and his bodyguards.

Tyrion grunted in satisfaction when he saw the Night's King's entire party become engulfed in flames. Many of his allies began cheering at the welcoming sight. As for Gregor, he could just chuckle, as though he was amused.

Unfortunately, the Imp's pleasure was short-lived. He noticed the Army of the Dead was still coming south in full force, despite what the dragons were doing to their leader.

Tyrion muttered softly "Gregor, if the Night's King revived the entire Army of the Dead… shouldn't the rest of them be doubling over by now?"

"Yes, they should…” Gregor muttered in agreement. He sounded just as bewildered. "What is going on?"

Eventually, the dragons ceased their assault and withdrew. The flames on the ground continued to rage for another minute or so. When they finally went out, Tyrion was confronted with an extremely unsettling discovery.

Only half the Others had been turned to powder. The other half were still on their feet, whole and unharmed. The Night's King was in the latter.
"How in the Seven Hells is he still standing?" Tyrion snapped, "How are any of them?"

"I do not know," Gregor confessed drearily. Letting out a heavy sigh, he proclaimed "But this new development changes nothing. Our objective is the same; we simply need to employ a new tactic."

*Count on him to have a backup plan,* Tyrion thought. That alone made him feel a little better. He enquired "What do you propose?"

"We could try shooting the Night's King with a flaming arrow, or an arrow tipped with obsidian or Valyrian steel," Gregor thought aloud, "But he's too far away for a clear shot, and his remaining bodyguards will most definitely attempt to shield him. In addition to that, until we know how he survived the dragon fire, that approach may yield the same dismal result as before. Therefore, our only other choice is to face him directly."

Tyrion understood what Gregor was entailing. He did not like the idea, but as of now, it was their only feasible option. The dwarf resolutely declared "If we must take the fight to him, then so be it."

Gregor nodded in approval of that statement, and then he took up his horn again. This time, he blew twice. The first blow was like the one from earlier. The second blow was longer and lower in pitch. As Tyrion was well-aware, the latter was the signal for the cavalry to rally to him.

Although the blow could be heard all throughout the field, only about a hundred riders were able to heed it. Everyone else was too busy fending off the undead or preventing them from advancing any further south.

When the dragons were hovering over their heads and the hundred aforementioned riders were gathered around Tyrion and Gregor's horse, the Mountain announced, "Stand strong! The Night's King is within sight! The only thing between him and us is scores of undead! Concentrate all your efforts on breaking through their ranks and reaching him! We end him, and we end them all!"

The hundred riders collectively raised their weapons and yelled energetically. The Targaryens added their own voices to the din. Tyrion could sense their enthusiasm. *Well, why shouldn't they be excited? Victory is practically within their grasp already.* Of course, they would have to work for that victory first. *And we shall.*

Raising *Summit* up high, Gregor Clegane shouted "Forward all!"

The Mountain's massive destrier galloped forward, followed close behind by the hundred riders. They all but tore through the ranks of the Army of the Dead, crushing White Walker and wight alike in their venture to reach the party of Others.

Before the living were even halfway to the Night's King, they received some unexpected aid. Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun and his fellow giants sprinted ahead of Gregor. They appeared to be led by the father direwolf, whose eyes were a solid white. *That must be Bran's doing,* Tyrion supposed. The massive wolf and the giants then mowed down scores of the undead. Their rampage may have seemed impulsive and uncoordinated at first glance, but Tyrion looked again, and he realized the overgrown creatures were essentially clearing a path for him, Gregor, and the other riders.

The Targaryens and their dragons provided additional support by swiftly and decisively burning all other wights and White Walkers within fifty feet of the group of Others. This effectively left them without reinforcements. *For the time being, that is.*

Due to the intervention of the dragons, the giants, and the father direwolf, almost all the hundred
riders in Tyrion's present company lived to reach the Night's King's party. However, once they got to their destination, the situation escalated.

When the dragons were about to retreat back above the clouds, a spear abruptly jettisoned into the air. It just barely missed Ygrenyon's torso, but it managed to pierce his wing. The black and red dragon screeched in pain and flapped frantically in a desperate bid to remain in the air. By some miracle, Jon and Rhaenys managed to stay on his back.

"Oh, fuck, no," Gregor muttered heatedly, staring up at the wounded dragon. Tyrion shared his discomfort. *The source holders' fear of exposing the dragons to danger wasn't unfounded, after all. This must be the type of misfortune they were hoping to avoid.*

Less than a minute later, Ygrenyon reached the ground. He slammed against it quite hard. The force of his landing was so rough that Rhaenys and Jon were vaulted off his back. Jon managed to land on his chest unscathed, but Rhaenys hit her head when she touched ground. She lay very still after that.

"Rhae!" Jon yelled in worry and shock. He pulled himself off the ground and rushed to his sister's side. He shook her in effort to revive her. He was gentle with her at first, but then he was more forceful.

When Rhaenys did not respond, Jon could only stare at her. Then he slowly sat up and turned towards the group of Others. Tyrion saw the expression on his face. It was one of the utmost spite and loathing.

Jon swiftly got to his feet and drew *Dark Sister*. Tyrion half-expected him to charge blindly at the Night's King and his party. Thankfully, even when his mind was partially clouded by rage, he remained sensible enough not to do something so foolhardy. *At least he has more sense than his father.*

Gregor had already brought their horse to a halt. He gestured for their hundred companions to halt, as well. They stopped very close to where Ygrenyon had fallen. The black and red dragon groaned in pain as he examined his injured wing. Tyrion could hear Eliaxes and Draegar snarling overhead. They sounded furious and unhappy, as though they sympathized with their brother's pain and pitied him. He suspected they would have gone to Ygrenyon's aid if they could. Alas, Aegon and Daenerys would not allow them to approach him, lest the Night's King go after them next.

At any rate, there was still about sixty or seventy feet of empty space between Tyrion's company and the Night's King. Lady Dacey rode up beside her husband's destrier and asked him, "How shall we proceed, Gregor?"

"We shall dismount," the Mountain answered his wife. Tyrion was taken aback. *Did I hear him right?* Before the dwarf could ask such a question, Gregor provided an explanation for that command. He debated "Fighting on horseback only worked in our favor when the undead vastly outnumbered us. In order to fight a group of this size, we'll need to be on equal ground with them. Furthermore, if a stream of dragon fire didn't finish the Night's King off, another stampede certainly wouldn't, either."

"He has a point," Tyrion contended, glimpsing over at the Night's King's party, "From the look of things, our numbers appear to be about twice theirs. We may be able to fight them two-on-one."

"That is just what I had in mind," Gregor disclosed, "Now, come on. Dismount!"

The Mountain then climbed off the destrier. The other riders swiftly climbed off their own horses,
as well. However, Tyrion was loath to follow along. After the incident from earlier when he was thrown off his mare, he was somewhat reluctant to fight on the ground again. Aside from that, he now had more confidence in his ability to fight whist mounted. *If only I had my special saddle.*

"Gregor, it may be better if I remain mounted," Tyrion told his brother-by-law. *I'm as tall as any other man on a horse, anyway.*

Unsurprisingly, Lord Gregor Clegane was very understanding. "Very well, Tyrion. Just be mindful of the horse. He can get a little unruly when I'm not around."

"He'll be in good hands," Tyrion asserted.

When everyone else was on their feet, Gregor called out "Form up!"

They all hastily moved into rows of about ten each. Tyrion was in the first row, between Lord Gregor and Uncle Gerion. Jon Targaryen was also in that room. *He seems more determined than anyone else here.* Once they were properly organized, the Mountain shouted "Advance!"

Everyone then marched – or, in Tyrion's case, trotted – north towards the Night's King and his bodyguards. Tyrion felt his heart beat a little faster with every step.

When they halved the distance between them and the foe, Tyrion noted something interesting. These White Walkers looked more black than white. It did not take long for him to realize why. His nephews noticed at around the same time.

"Are they wearing… obsidian?" Rickard queried.

"It appears they are," Jasper commented. Indeed, the Night's King and his bodyguards had dozens of dragonglass weapons hanging from all over their bodies. So much obsidian would have weighed down a living person. Evidently, the same restrictions did not apply to the undead. *They could even be as strong as Lord Gregor.*

"Ah, so that's how they survived the barrage of dragon fire," Gregor Clegane thought aloud.

"I would have thought dragon fire would be enough to melt even obsidian," Uncle Kevan presumed.

"All we know is that obsidian is solid fire," Gregor pointed out, "But we have no way of knowing what type of fire. It could actually be solid dragon fire."

"That makes perfect sense to me," Oberyn Martell stated. *Me, as well.*

"But how are they able to tolerate it?" Gerion disputed, "I thought obsidian was the bane of the undead."

"That's right," Gregor confirmed, "However, it's only lethal to them if it physically penetrates their bodies. I never said anything about it doing them harm if it merely touches their flesh."

"Why in the Seven Hells didn't you?" Sandor mumbled irately.

"I never considered they'd actually be smart enough to clad themselves in it," the Mountain confessed, "I mean, I knew the Night's King was more than a mere mindless savage. I would never have suspected he'd be *this* cunning."

"Well, it seems he is," Tyrion stated flatly. *The brain may fail at death, but who's to say it cannot*
be restored, as well? He smirked and said cockily "Not that it matters very much in the long run. Is that not right, Gregor?"

"Quite so, Tyrion," the Mountain validated. "Regardless of how intelligent and clever the Night's King may be, he can still be killed, just like every other member of the Army of the Dead."

"Then let us do the realm a favor and rid it of him," Jon proposed through gritted teeth.

"Oh, we shall, Jon," Gregor assured his squire. After this, only one more word was spoken. It was uttered by the Mountain when they were less than thirty feet from the Others. He shouted "Attack!"

Everyone promptly raised their weapons and charged forward. Tyrion drove his heel into the side of Gregor's destrier and urged him forward. He held tightly to the reins so that he would not slide out of the saddle.

Up until now, the Night's King and his party had hardly done anything to acknowledge this new threat to their well-being. When Gregor and his party drew nearer, however, they finally reacted. Each Other brandished a weapon of his own, whereas the Night's King brought out two.

Unlike the White Walkers Tyrion had encountered thus far, these Others actually knew how to put up a decent fight. He discovered this when the two groups converged. When Gregor took a swing at the closest Other, his opponent almost effortlessly deflected the blow. His undead comrades proved just as adept with their own weapons.

But that was not the worst part. The worst part came when Tyrion came close enough to make out the faces of the Night's King's bodyguards. They were not the faces of strangers. They seemed familiar.

It soon dawned on him; he was looking at the faces of friends and allies who had died in battle against the Army of the Dead long ago.

He recognized several of them. Lord Jeor Mormont. Theon Greyjoy. Lord Stannis Baratheon. King Robert Baratheon. Ser-

"No," Tyrion whispered, when he saw a face he had known all his life, "Gods, please; don't let it be so."

But it was so. He was up against the very man who had taught him everything he knew about warfare. The very man who had always stood up for him. The very man who had comforted him when no one else would.

"Gods, Jaime, why?" Tyrion muttered in despair. For the first time in a very long while, Tyrion felt helpless. Even if he's already dead, how could I kill my own brother?

"They're not our comrades!" Gregor called out as he parried blows with a White Walker who had once been Mance Rayder. Jon Targaryen fought alongside the Mountain. "Not anymore! The Night's King's just using them to waylay us! But you mustn't give in! Show him we are not so easily dissuaded!"

That announcement may have saved Tyrion's life. It enabled him to straighten out his mind. Jaime isn't dead, he reminded himself. Right now, he's worse than dead. It's my responsibility to remedy that issue.

Tyrion was determined to put Jaime at peace. He would not have anyone else doing it in his place.
However, he did not believe he would be able to defeat Jaime. Tyrion could never have beaten Jaime in a duel in real life. Even though his brother was clumsier and less orderly in his current state, he was still a remarkable warrior.

Fortunately, he was able to think of a more practical solution. It was a longshot, but it was still a viable option. Tyrion cautiously rode closer to his undead brother. When he was within spitting distance of him, he steeled his nerves, and he flung his axe forward. It sank into the middle of Jaime's face.

Jaime Lannister faltered in his stance, and then he shattered into a mound of fragments. Tyrion did not know whether to be pleased or devastated by that outcome. *May he finally rest in peace.*

"Go for the faces!" Tyrion advised his companions, "That's their vulnerable spot!"

This information turned out to be quite useful. All around the Imp, his comrades were locked in their own duels. Thoros of Myr and Lady Dacey Clegane fought Lord Beric Dondarrion. Lord Jorah Mormont and Benjen Stark fought Lord Jeor Mormont. Robb Stark and Rickard Clegane fought Theon Greyjoy. Lord Eddard Stark and Prince Jasper Baratheon fought King Robert Baratheon. *Is it obligation or conscience that drove them to their own particular targets?*

For a while, the Night's King was without an opponent of his own. That changed when Lord Gregor Clegane managed to defeat Mance Rayder in single combat. Without even taking a moment to rest, he turned his attention toward the Night's King and moved against him. He was backed up by his squire.

Tyrion could only watch intently as Gregor Clegane and Jon Targaryen engaged the undead ruler. The Night's King was a surprisingly skilled swordsman. The obsidian dangling from his body protected him from their blows better than any conventional suit of armor would have.

*They're going to need some more support,* Tyrion decided. Unfortunately, everyone who could have helped was either dead, wounded, or preoccupied with their own skirmishes. Tyrion would have lent his own help, but he had discarded his axe, leaving him with only his dagger. *How much use could a dwarf possibly be?*

That was what he thought at first. That was what he had been told most of his life. But at that very moment, Tyrion came to a certain realization. *Dwarf or not, I am still a citizen of the Seven Kingdoms. As such, I still have a duty to defend the realm from those who would seek to destroy it.*

At that moment, Tyrion knew exactly what he needed to do. He took the reins of Gregor's destrier and cracked them once. The horse whinnied loudly, and then he broke into a gallop. Tyrion directed him straight towards the Night's King, who was too immersed in his duel with Gregor Clegane and Jon Targaryen to notice the Imp approaching.

The Mountain and his squire managed to get out of the destrier's path just in time, but by the time the Night's King noticed the charging horse, it was too late for him. The destrier rammed into the Night's King and sent him careening across the ground. He landed some fifteen or twenty feet away. For a moment, he laid flat on his back. However, he was quick to recover from the force of that impact. But someone else was even quicker.

Jon Targaryen took this opportunity to rush forward with *Dark Sister* in both hands. The moment the Night's King sat up and turned back towards the south, Rhaegar Targaryen's youngest child was upon him. Jon raised his Valyrian steel sword high over his head and thrust it forward with all his might.
Dark Sister sank directly into the center of the Night's King's face, right above his nose and between his eyes. The thrust of that blow was so powerful that half the blade reemerged out the backside of his head. Tyrion leaned forward when he saw this happen. He was very keen to see what would follow.

Initially, there was nothing. The Night's King gave off no movement, no sound, and no other sign of a sentient being. Then his mouth dropped open, and he produced the most dreadful noise Tyrion had ever heard in his life. It was like the death rattle of a banshee, only much, much shriller. Tyrion hastily covered his ears. Almost all his companions covered theirs, too. Including the ones who had still been in combat. Interestingly, the other White Walkers seemed to have lost all interest in fighting. They were merely standing idle at this time. The only person who did not cover his ears was Jon Targaryen. He kept both his hands clasped around the hilt of Dark Sister, which was still firmly planted in the Night's King's face.

Eventually, the Night's King stopped shrieked. He became totally silent then. A few seconds later, there was a bright flash of light. So bright that it threatened to blind everyone in the area. Tyrion moved his hands from his ears to his eyes, as did everyone else except Jon. What sorcery is this?

Tyrion did not know how long he kept his eyes covered, but he assumed it could not have been more than a minute or two. He then heard someone announce, "It's safe to look now."

The voice was Jon's. Tyrion tentatively removed his hands from his face. When he did, the Night's King was nowhere to be seen. It was like he had vanished without a trace. Moreover, all the remaining White Walkers in the vicinity were gone, as well.

That was not the extent of it. All around Tyrion, wights were falling apart, and White Walkers were turning to dust. It is as though the Others are systematically being erased from existence. He liked how he worded that thought. It sounded oddly poetic.

Ten minutes later, there was not a single wight or White Walker to be seen anywhere on the field. Just miles and miles of powder and bones.

"We did it," Tyrion muttered softly, "It's over."

By now, Jon Targaryen had finally lowered his sword. He was breathing very heavily. Despite the below-freezing temperatures, he was covered in sweat. He stared at Dark Sister for a while. He could hardly keep his hands steady. He ultimately turned to Tyrion, grinned, and stated "Yes, it is over, my lord. The Others are no more."

It took a while for those words to sink in. Once they finally did, though, that was when the cheering started in earnest. People were tossing their weapons into the air, hugging their comrades, slapping them on the back good-naturedly. Some were weeping in joy. As for Tyrion, he just smiled. It's done. Victory is ours.

Jon was soon surrounded by dozens of his friends and allies. Rickard and his mother lifted him into the air and placed him on their shoulders. Soon after, Tyrion found himself lifted from the saddle of the destrier and placed on somebody else's shoulder. It turned out to be Gregor Clegane himself, who bore the biggest grin Tyrion had ever seen.

"You made this victory possible, Tyrion," the Mountain contended, "Congratulations."

"Oh, don't make me blush, Gregor," the Imp murmured slyly. "But I find myself in a veritable mood for celebrating. So, what say we head back to the moat?"
"I would be glad to oblige," Gregor said in approval, returning Summit to its scabbard, "But first, we must check up on our casualties. Namely…"

The Mountain rushed over to Ygrenyon and Rhaenys and checked up on them. Ygrenyon's wing had not suffered any irreparable damage, and it should have been able to mend itself with time. As far as Rhaenys was concerned, Tyrion had feared the worst, but it turned out she was still breathing.

"She's alive," Gregor professed, "She has a concussion, but she should be alright."

Indeed, when she hit her head, it was not enough to deliver a fatal blow or knock her out, but it was sufficient to stun her. Willas Tyrell hurried over to his intended and picked her up in his arms. He was very gentle with her. At the same time, Gregor used his horn to summon the dragons one last time. In response, Aegon and Daenerys swiftly reappeared. When they saw what had become of the battlefield, they quickly gathered what had happened.

While Eliaxes and Draegar tended to their brother, Aegon and Daenerys walked with the Cleganes and their other companions back to Moat Cailin. It was a rather long walk, but no one complained. What's there to complain about now?

On the way to the moat, Uncle Kevan gazed up at Tyrion from where he saw on the Mountain's shoulder, and he stated "Good work, Tyrion. If your father was still alive, I'm sure he would be proud."

Tyrion wanted to spit. I doubt that. Even if I was the one to deliver the killing blow to the Night's King, he likely wouldn't have even bothered to acknowledge my accomplishment. Tyrion had long ago stopped caring about what his father thought of him. When the truth of his father's involvement in the Pentoshi Bloodbath came out, he just cared even less.

Despite that, he was thankful for the praise. He gazed down at the old blond knight and remarked "I suppose so, Uncle."

Uncle Gerion appeared at Gregor's other side and stated "Hopefully, this will finally gain you the respect you deserve."

"Maybe," said Tyrion with a dismissive shrug, "We'll just have to wait and see, Uncle."

A little more than a half-hour later, they were all back inside the perimeter of Moat Cailin. Mollander and Gregor Clegane's men-at-arms opened the gate, and several women were there to greet their husbands, lovers, and betrotheds. Naturally, Ellyn was right at the front of the pack.

Gregor set the Imp back on his feet so that his sister could embrace him. Tyrion took his wife in a firm hug, savoring her strong yet delicate touch.

"So, what happens now?" Jon inquired, as Rickard and Lady Dacey placed him back on his feet. That's a good question. I know we talked about celebrating, but where would we even begin with that?

It was Lord Gregor who supplied a response. He stated, "Before we do anything else, I must beg your forgiveness, Tyrion."

The Imp raised an eyebrow and asked, "Why do you say that, Gregor?"

"There are two things I've done today that require your forgiveness," the Mountain clarified, "Firstly, without your consent, I used you as bait."
"What do you mean?" Tyrion asked in bewilderment, "The Night's King never got anywhere close to me. As far as I recall, he didn't even seem to notice me until the moment I knocked him on his arse."

"No, I did not use you as bait to lure in the Night's King," Gregor illuminated, "I did so to draw out a different kind of foe."

At that moment, Lord Gregor drew Summit from its scabbard and swung it through the air. He stopped when the edge was a mere six inches from Uncle Kevan's neck.

"What is the meaning of this?" the old blonde knight demanded.

"My focus may have been on the battle, but I heard you when you gave your units the order to disperse," Gregor recounted, keeping his greatsword level with Ser Kevan's neck, "There was no need for it. When you gave that order, your rank all but fell apart. The Westerlords were left wide-open and vulnerable. Tyrion most of all."

"I admit that was a foolish mistake on my part," Kevan stated plainly.

"That was not a mistake," Gregor countered, "You deliberately bungled that order. Just as I was hoping you would."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about, Gregor," the blond knight claimed.

"Oh, I think you do," Greogr Clegane said cheekily, "Kevan Lannister is a renowned military officer. It is absolutely beneath him to allow his units to descend into such disarray. There is only one reason he would make such a careless error. He did so because he was counting on his dwarf nephew to be overwhelmed in the crossfire."

"Why would I ever wish for such a thing?" Ser Kevan asked.

"Simple," Gregor explicated, "As dysfunctional as House Lannister may be, I know for a fact that Kevan Lannister would never turn against his family. Unless, of course, he had reason to view them as obstacles to his own plans. Furthermore, since he is not a particularly ambitious individual by nature, there is only one reason he would even have any plans of his own."

Gregor Clegane slowly returned Summit to its scabbard. Once the greatsword was tucked away again, he gazied down at Tyrion and told him "Now, for the second thing I wish you to forgive me for."

The Mountain then looked back at Kevan Lannister, and he softly muttered "Seize him."

Polliver, Rafford, Shitmouth, Eggon, and the Tickler promptly stepped forward and grabbed ahold of the old blonde knight. He struggled in their grasp, but the younger men all had a firm grip on his arms, shoulders, and chest.

"Get your fucking hands off me!" he yelled angrily.

Tyrion was stunned by that outburst. I've never heard Uncle Kevan swear before. In fact, he was perhaps the one member of House Lannister who never uttered such coarse language. Even when Father died, and the Army of the Dead fell upon us, he did not resort to vulgarities. So, why, Tyrion wondered, was he making an exception now?

"Ser Kevan Lannister, you are under arrest," Gregor Clegane solemnly declared, folding his arms.
Uncle Kevan seemed indignant. As he had his hands bound behind his back, he sharply demanded "For what?"

"Where to begin?" Lord Gregor muttered sarcastically. He then scowled and spat "Arson, murder, conspiracy, destruction of Westerosi property, kinslaying… and, worst of all, exploiting your own prior knowledge of the World of Ice and Fire to accomplish those foul deeds."

*The World of Ice and Fire? Does he mean the Known World?* Tyrion had never heard it referred to by that name before. However, three other people there seemed to recognize the term. Those three were Lady Melisandre, Mollander, and Bran Stark.

"My lord…” Eddard Stark's second son said, gaping in astonishment, "Do you mean to say…?"

"Yes, Bran," the Mountain affirmed, giving a terse nod at the young boy. He slowly turned back to Uncle Kevan, and he proclaimed, "At long last, we have found the seventh one."
Are they ever going to quiet down? Some people are trying to sleep.

Of course, he could only speak for himself. He did not have much else to do, other than sleep. I doubt they’d supply me a book or any other form of entertainment, even if I asked for it politely. Not that there's enough light for reading or much anything else in here.

It had been over a week since the Night’s King was slain and the Army of the Dead destroyed. The celebration began less than an hour after the final battle, and he had hardly seen anyone else in all that time. Considering the circumstances, it would be understandable if the festivities went on for a while longer. It's not often that people literally save the whole fucking world.

Based on the noise, the whole of Moat Cailin was still fervently rejoicing the victory over the Others. Except for myself. And the men standing guard outside. The noise had hardly gone down at all since the partying started, and it did not seem as though it would die down anytime soon. They're going to have to stop eventually, though. After all, the undead may have been gone from this world forever, but the living still had other problems and hardships to overcome. Namely, winter was still going on.

Even if he had been able to partake in the celebration, he would not have done so. Instead, while everybody else was busy drinking, singing, and chortling in their euphoria, he would have spent his time calculating his next move, just as he always did. Alas, the damn Mountain threw a wrench into that plan.

Since he had been alone with his thoughts for most of his incarceration, he had spent much of his time wondering how the Mountain had singled him out as the last person from the real world. I know I gave myself up when I tried to have Tyrion killed in the final battle, but Gregor Clegane must have had his suspicions sometime before then. The main question is: how long was I the main suspect?

Then a possibility occurred to him. Perhaps he did not cover up his tracks as well as he thought he had. That at least made the most sense of all the theories he could come up with thus far. In plain terms, he had fucked up. Again.

At the start of his imprisonment, he wondered if the Mountain was just going to lock him in a cell in the Reproach Tower and leave him there to rot. But that was not the case. Four times a day, someone came to his cell. Once to replace his chamber pot, and thrice to give him breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Even more surprising was that they did not limit his nourishment to bread and water. They gave him meat, potatoes, greens, eggs, and sometimes even wine or ale.

While he enjoyed the meals, he had mixed feelings over the fact that they were keeping him so well-fed. It suggested that they were keeping him alive for a specific reason. Had they only given him the most basic of sustenance, it would have been a sign that they only intended to hold him in the Reproach Tower for an indefinite amount of time. The Cleganes of Moat Cailin may be rich, but even they wouldn't waste such fine cuisine on a perpetual prisoner.

Finally, after about ten days of solitary confinement, he received his first visitors. They would probably be his last, as well. He would do everything in his power to ensure that that would not be
There were five individuals who came to see him. Three were just like him: Lord Gregor Clegane, Lady Melisandre, and Mollander. The other two were Bran Stark and the massive direwolf who sired Summer and his siblings.

"I see you brought the Big Bad Direwolf," he commented drily when Mollander closed the cell door behind them. Once it was shut, he heard the lock being bolted on the other side. *They're taking no chances, it seems.*

"Ha ha fucking ha," Mollander mumbled sarcastically, "Did you spend all week coming up with that?"

"Oh, I've got plenty more witty retorts," he claimed, "I've had enough time to come up with an entire arsenal of them."

"Then you've all but wasted these last several days," Melisandre contended, hands at her hips.

"How would you have spent it?" he disputed, "Would you have tried to find a way to justify doing what I did? The thought occurred to me, but I sobered up and realized how pointless that would have been. It's obvious nothing I say will change my fate."

"You are quite right about that," Gregor Clegane confirmed. Didn't even blink, just like the original Mountain. "The three of us have already decided what to do with you. Long story short, you will not live to see tomorrow. You won't even get a trial. There's already more than enough proof to confirm your guilt. Nothing will change that; no matter how hard you plead for your life."

"You honestly believe I would bother with empty words?" he stated, "Well, I won't. If you were hoping to see me snivel and grovel like Littlefinger in the season seven finale, you're going to be mighty disappointed. I've already made my peace with my current predicament. The least I can do now is die with the little dignity I have left."

Melisandre raised an eyebrow at that. "I may not respect you, but I can respect your conviction. I don't think I would be so prepared to die."

"It's not the first time I've had to make my peace," he disclosed, "I'm sure you all know what I'm talking about."

"Indeed, we do," Mollander affirmed, "However, death came very suddenly for each of us in our first lives. Mine was an accident from electrocution."

"Mine was an accident, too," Melisandre added in, "But from a car crash."

"I see," he remarked. Turning to the tallest person there, he asked "And you?"

"I was the victim of a murder," Gregor Clegane answered straightforwardly, "I took a bullet to the back."

*Oh, so you do know suffering.* "Those deaths do not sound pleasant. Even so, I would have preferred any of them to the one I had. My death was slow. Painfully slow, in fact."

"What was the cause?" Melisandre asked.

"Brain tumor," he answered, placing his finger on a particular spot on the top of his head, "I had it right here for seven years, including the entirety of my high school life. I succumbed to it not long
Gregor Clegane seemed perplexed. "So, you were only eighteen when you died?"

"Twenty, actually," he illuminated, "I had to repeat two grades, due to all the unexcused absences incurred from my illness. Less than a month after I got my diploma, I kicked the bucket."

"Talk about wasted effort," Mollander commented. He almost sounded sympathetic. *Oh, spare me.*

"Not really," he countered, "Despite having a cancer eating away at my cranium, I was always regarded by my friends and family as a genius of sorts. I took more than few college-level courses while I was working towards my compulsory education. Some I took simply for the fun of it. I'm sure you may think that's a rather esoteric definition of 'fun.'"

"Oh, not at all," Gregor Clegane revealed, "Even after I graduated from college, I was always eager to learn more."

"I can relate," said Melisandre.

"So can I," said Mollander, "Knowledge is a delight. One most people never truly take advantage of."

"I know just what you mean, Roger," Bran Stark observed, "Ever since I became the Three-Eyed Raven, I've had the knowledge of the entire history of the Known World at my disposal. While it can be a burden at times, it can also be a pleasure."

"You do know what I mean," the Citadel novice remarked, nodding his head to agree.

"'Roger?'" Ser Kevan Lannister noted.

"That's my real name," Mollander explained, "Roger Dunn from Savannah, Georgia."

"Oh, I see," Ser Kevan acknowledged. Looking to the Red Woman and the Mountain, he inquired "What about you two?"


"Gregory Welch from Seattle, Washington," Lord Gregor expounded. He then leaned in closer and queried "And what of you? Are you going to indulge us with your real name?"

"If you insist," the blonde man stated candidly. He paused for a moment, and then he declared "My name is Alejandro Fernandez."

The others said nothing at first; they merely gazed at him in silence after he said that. Then, without any warning whatsoever, Gregory, Melanie, and Roger all burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter. *I saw this coming. In their position, I would probably laugh, as well.*

They continued guffawing for a couple minutes. Eventually, they relented.

"Seriously?" said Melanie, as though she did not believe him.

"Yes, seriously," Alejandro insisted, "For simplicity's sake, just call me 'Alex.' And despite my Spanish ancestry, I assure you I'm just as American as the three of you."

"Is that right?" Mollander murmured. He sounded somewhat skeptical.
"Well, I was originally born in Buenos Aires," Alex confessed, "But when I was three, my family immigrated from Argentina to the United States. For the duration of my first life, I held citizenship in both countries."

"Wait, you said you were Spanish?" Bran Stark pointed out.

"That's correct," Alex verified, "Spanish is the language of my ancestors. It was just my luck that Gregory here knew Spanish, as well, and that he chose to make it the secret language of the Legion without Banners. That gave me the ability to understand any conversation I happened to intercept or overhear between Legionnaires."

Gregory just folded his arms and spat "Un montón de bien que te hizo a la larga." (A fat lot of good it did you in the long run.)

Alex chuckled and retorted with "Se cree listo, ¿no? Bueno, noticia de última hora: Siempre hay alguien más astuto que usted." (You think yourself clever, don't you? Well, news flash; there's always someone more cunning than you.)

At that, the tallest man there smirked and muttered "Y en mi caso, ¿cree que 'alguien' es usted? ¿Necesito recordarse cuál de nosotros es prisionero del otro?" (And in my case, you think 'someone' is you? Need I remind you which of us is a prisoner of the other?)

Alex calmly stared Gregory in the eye and told him "Oh, estoy muy consciente de eso. Pero algún día, alguien con un ingenio aún más agudo de lo que usted aparecerá. Lo único que lamento es que no estaré cerca cuando eso suceda." (Oh, I'm well-aware of that. But someday, someone with even sharper wits than you will show up. My only regret is that I won't be around when that happens.)

"Alright, enough with the Spanish," Roger uttered flatly, "Could we go back to speaking in a dialect we all understand?"

"Certainly," Gregory conceded. He then turned back to the oldest person there, and he said, "On that note, let us get back to the purpose of this visit, too. As we were saying, your death is at hand."

"Naturally," Alex commented, "However, before you send me to the block or the gallows or whatever, I have one final request."

"Very well," Gregory remarked, "If it's reasonable, I shall grant it."

"Oh, it's quite reasonable," Alex assured him, "I simply wish to know how you managed to deduce that I was from the real world."

Gregory, Melanie, and Roger looked around at each other for a minute, as though they were communicating with one another through their eyes. Ultimately, they looked back over at Alex, and Gregory said "We will tell you. But in return, I want you to tell us what you were hoping to accomplish by doing the things you did."

"Sounds like a fair exchange," Alex thought aloud.

Gregory then began pacing around the cell, but he kept his gaze locked on Alex. He pronounced "Now, before we get started, you should know that I worked for the Central Intelligence Agency in my first life. I was assigned to field ops most of the time, but I conducted a fair share of investigations, as well. You could say I have a gift for distinguishing the guilty from the innocent. That gift is what enabled me to form and command the Legion without Banners."
"That explains quite a bit," Alex commented, "But the fact that you're a crack detective is insufficient clarification. There must be more to how you reached your conclusions than that."

"Oh, there is," Gregory asserted. He then turned to the only female person in the room, and he revealed "I myself did not know there were others from the real world until Melanie here first contacted me. That was about a year ago. In the back of my mind, I always suspected, but had she not reached out to the Legion, I would have continued to assume I was the only one."

"We used to believe the same," Roger confessed, gesturing to himself and Melanie, "But when Gregor Clegane started deviating from his canon behavior and mannerisms, that was when I realized there were indeed others like me."

"Whereas in my case, I came to that realization a while before I even heard of the Mountain's contradictory actions," Melanie expounded, "There were two others like us in Essos. One was a Canadian named Herman Lewis who was reborn as Hizdahr zo Loraq, and the other was a Welsh-born American named Eugene Quinn who was reborn as Yezzan zo Qaggaz. The two of them met up long before any of us were in communication with one another, and they took it upon themselves to systematically search the World of Ice and Fire for others from our world. Eventually, they came to Asshai by the Shadow."

"Fascinating," Alex remarked, "On that note, I must say you seem to be doing well for someone who's been in this world for over a hundred years."

Initially, Melanie seemed bewildered. Then she caught on to what Alex was implying. "Are you referring to the last moments of the season six premiere, when it was revealed that Melisandre's age is much greater than we were led to believe?"

"Yes, I am," Alex affirmed, "So tell me; just how ancient is Melisandre?"

"Hell, if I know," Melanie said drily, "As it happens, I wasn't actually reborn as Melisandre."

Before Alex could ask for elaboration, the Red Woman brought her right hand up to the pendant around her throat, and she pressed down on the ruby. Straightaway, her appearance changed. Her hair grew and turned a solid black, her face became less wrinkly, and she increased in height a little.

"I recognize you," Alex proclaimed, after taking a moment to study her features, "Your character's name is Kinvara, right?"

"Correct," Melanie responded, "I am not the real Melisandre. But I did know the real Melisandre; she was my mentor. When Herman and Eugene wished to take me with them, she refused to allow me to leave Asshai. But I was determined to go, one way or another. When it became evident that reasoning with her was pointless, I killed her and took her place."

Alex was stunned at how casually she said that last sentence. Then again, one could argue that Melisandre did do more harm than good, even if she did resurrect Jon and bring him and Daenerys together. "I take it Herman and Eugene are no longer with us?"

"You assume rightly," Melanie revealed, "They both died a few years ago."

That was not an assumption; I've known about their demise for a while now. He was not ready to reveal that tidbit of information just yet, however. "How did you find out they were from the real world?"
"I first suspected when I noticed they spoke Ghiscari in a somewhat broken manner, despite the fact it was supposed to be their native tongue," Melanie recounted, "To confirm my theory, I casually made a reference to George R.R. Martin himself. That was when they dropped the charade and revealed to me that they were in the same situation as I."

"Interesting," Alex commented, "What happened after that?"

"The three of us spent the next few years searching the rest of the World of Ice and Fire for others like us," Melanie revealed, "We ultimately searched everywhere except Westeros, and we had no luck. That was when we first heard tales of how Gregor Clegane was diverging from canon, and we knew he had to have been from the real world, too. But before we could book passage to the Seven Kingdoms, Herman and Eugene both met an early death. As a result, I was travelling on my own for another year or two, until I met the Targaryens at Pentos."

"Fast forward a few months, and we get to when Melanie arrived here in the moat," Gregory stated, "She was the one who brought the existence of others from the real world to my attention. We logically concluded that if there were others still out there, they could only have been reborn as characters who were actually given names in the original series."

That makes sense, Alex supposed. "So, how did you conduct your investigation?"

"Well, at the time, I had already been in touch with Sarella Sand at the Citadel," Gregory recalled, "You remember the attempt to destroy my printing press which happened several months ago? It turns out the Conclave was behind it. I was having Sarella investigate the incident and the Archmaesters' motives regarding me. When Roger found out she was digging around on my behalf, he sought her out in effort to reach out to me."

"Having already spent five years at the Citadel, I managed to do plenty investigating of my own," Roger cut in, "I had picked up on something rather intriguing. All the people who were reborn into this world; their mothers suffered a miscarriage shortly before giving birth to them."

"Is that so?" Alex muttered in interest.

"Yes, it is," Roger confirmed, "By combining that with Gregory and Melanie's belief that we could only be reborn as canonically named characters, we were able to narrow the list of prospects down significantly. We managed to get it down to less than a hundred."

"When Bran arrived, he helped us narrow it even further," Melanie stated, "As you may recall from that meeting we had just before the Army of the Dead reached Moat Cailin, the Three-Eyed Raven is able to sense whenever someone from the real world is reborn in this one, but he is not able to identify them. He can only verify their existence."

"However, if a person with the source shares it to someone who does not, the Three-Eyed Raven is able to determine his or her identity," Bran Stark expounded, "That is how Ser Brynden Rivers managed to learn that Yezzan zo Qaggaz, Hizdahr zo Loraq, Gregor Clegane, Kinvara, Mollander, and Hodor all carried the source."

"Then it is a good thing I always kept the 'source' to myself," Alex commented. How foolish do you have to be to give away the secret to your power so willingly? "I wouldn't have thought the rest of you would be so careless."

"That 'carelessness' is what got us to where we are now," Gregory debated, "At any rate, of the seven people who crossed over into this world, you were the only one who was born before Bloodraven became the Three-Eyed Raven. Because of that, we were unable to determine the year
of the last source holder's birth."

"But thanks to Bran, we at least had some grasp of the person's age," Melanie contended, "Because of that, we were able to cut the list of suspects in half. Soon after, we learned from Bran that the source holder was responsible for stealing the Horn of Joramun from the Silence, and thus, he must have been present during the sea battle of the coast of Fair Isle. That brought the total number of suspects down to just eighteen."

"Three of them – Lord Hoster Tully, Lord Jon Arryn, and the High Sparrow – all had extenuating circumstances at the time," Gregory pointed out, "Moreover, they were south of the Neck when the Others advanced on the Seven Kingdoms."

"The remaining fifteen, however, were all in Moat Cailin or somewhere north of it," Roger went on, "However, Lord Damon Marbrand, Ser Aenys Frey, Lord Gorold Goodbrother, and Lem Lemoncloak all fell during the first battle. Furthermore, Lord Gylbert Farwynd, Ser Barristan Selmy, Lord Randyll Tarly, Lord Mace Tyrell, and Lord Yohn Royce also participated in that battle. While all this was going on, the final person with the source was in this building, murdering Stephen Ward and his guards. That eliminated the nine aforementioned men as suspects."

"The remaining six were Lord Wyman Manderly, Lord Sawane Botley, Ser Jared Frey, Arnolf Karstark, Lord Anders Yronwood… and you," Roger professed, "In the ten-hour interval between the moat's first battle and the second one, we did a few background checks. As it happens, you were the only one of those six whose retainers could not account for his whereabouts in the aftermath of the sea battle."

"And that's what led you to suspect me?" Alex presumed.

"Not quite," Gregory disclosed, "But something more we discovered did. Let us go back in time to about ten years ago. The beginning of the Great Summer, just after the end of Greyjoy's Rebellion. King Robert had just issued a decree that for any man who voluntarily joined the Night's Watch, his family would receive enough coin to last them for three years. That effectively increased enlistment in the Watch dramatically. Everybody was sending reinforcements to the Wall."

"I am well-aware of that," Alex muttered, "But what does it have to do with me?"

"Tyrion was one of the people we spoke to," Melanie elucidated, "He informed us that House Lannister sent a bunch of volunteers to the Night's Watch once. Interestingly, he told us that most of those men were loyal to you, not Tywin. He also recalled that when they were packing up for the journey north, they loaded a large chest onto a cart. He did not know what was in that chest, but he was certain it was not food or other provisions."

"Only two of those men managed to safely retreat to the south after the Wall collapsed," Roger recounted, "We managed to track them down, and when we brought them in for interrogation, they told us that they had been given orders to take that chest and bury it immediately north of the Wall in the haunted forest. They did so without question, and without anyone else finding out."

"We also spoke to the other survivors from Castle Black," said Gregory, "According to them, when they heard that horn blowing, the sound had come from somewhere north of Hardin's Tower. To go any further north than that, you'd either have had to have been standing on top of the Wall or in the lands beyond it. I don't have to tell you which of the two possibilities seems more likely."

"By putting all those details together, there was only one logical explanation," Bran Stark declared, "The Horn of Joramun was in that chest, and you had your men bury it for the Night's King to find."
Alex could see the logic in their reasoning. He smiled lightly and muttered "If only you figured this out a few months ago. Fortune would have gone in your favor instead of mine."

"Then you do not deny these allegations?" Gregory assumed.

"No, I do not deny them," Alex pronounced, "I did give the Horn of Joramun over to the Night's King."

"Why in hell's name would you even consider doing something so insane?" Roger spat heatedly.

"The three of you had your own agendas," Alex answered simply, "I had my own."

"What was yours?" asked Melanie, "To let the Others destroy the World of Ice and Fire, along with everyone and everything in it?"

"No, that was our late friend Stephen's objective," Alex stated, "I, on the other hand, had every confidence that the living would ultimately emerge victorious over the Army of the Dead, regardless of how strong or immense the Army of the Dead may have been."

"That does not justify your decision to aid and abet the Night's King," Gregory argued.

"Is that what you think I was doing?" Alex muttered exasperatedly, "While you are under no obligation to believe anything I say, I assure you I never once sided with the Night's King. I only gave him the Horn of Joramun to speed up our final confrontation with him. After all, one way or another, the Others would have found a way to get past the Wall. But make no mistake; I always believed in humanity and that it would triumph over its undead foe. Can any of you say the same?"

"I admit I had moments of doubt, but I never lost faith," Roger proclaimed.

"Neither did I," Gregory murmured, "Even though the odds were always stacked highly against us."

"Truthfully, I've often speculated that we were brought here to ensure that pointless struggles – such as the War of the Five Kings – would be averted, and casualties would be kept to a minimum," Melanie contended, "Naturally, we were going to suffer heavy losses during the Long Night in any case, but they're considerably lower in this world than they would have been in the series' original timeline."

"All because of the four of us," Alex debated.

"I would say you did more harm than good," Bran Stark countered, "And unlike these other three, your route was far more selfish, greedy, and malicious in nature. After all, your final act before you were apprehended was to arrange the death of your own nephew."

"I cannot deny that," Alex admitted. Even if I hadn't fucked that up, I would have ended up here anyway. Instead, I walked right into Gregory's trap.

"What were you hoping to accomplish by murdering Tyrion?" Roger queried.

"I'd have thought that be obvious," Alex pronounced, "With him dead, the only thing that would have stood between me and the lordship of Casterly Rock was his son. But that was only a minor setback. Soon enough, I would have found a way to do away with Duncan and his mother, as well."

"So, you were hoping to become the head of House Lannister?" Melanie conjectured.
"Well, of course," Alex affirmed, "That was always my ultimate goal. That's also why I did everything else I did. I wished to become the Lord Paramount of the Westerlands and the Warden of the West. That was all I ever wanted."

"I see," Gregory muttered, "You're like a less ambitious yet more cautious version of Littlefinger."

"Thank you; I'll take that as a compliment," said Alex, "He was always one of my favorite characters. Up until the point of his demise, that is. Unlike me, he didn't know how to accept his fate when his time had finally come."

"So, power was all desired," Roger noted.

"That's correct," Alex remarked, scowling a bit, "You three still don't understand, do you? This is all just a game. A test, if you would. Whoever or whatever brought us to the World of Ice of Fire, it must have done so for a reason. I say that reason is simply to determine what people from the real world would do if they were thrust into an abnormal situation such as this one."

"You think we're nothing more than guinea pigs?" said Melanie.

"Or test subjects?" Roger commented.

"Either's equally possible," Alex contended.

"He may have a point," said Bran Stark, "After all, having prior knowledge of this world is what enabled the four of you to endure it for as long as you have. It was also what allowed Stephen Ward to pass himself off as Hodor. Most of all, it was how you were able to affect changes in this world's story. Whether or not those changes were ultimately for the betterment of the Known World, it would not be outlandish to assume that the gods are studying you."

"I can see why you would be led to that conclusion," said Gregory, "Be that as it may, I'm not too partial to the concept that we were brought here as part of an experiment. While it may explain a few things, it would still leave a lot of unanswered questions. Plus, I've never been fond of the idea that I'm not in control of my own fate."

"Well, in the end, I suppose it doesn't even matter," Alex pronounced, "There are only a few things I know for certain. One is that nothing in this franchise will ever be the same as it was in canon."

"Indeed not," Roger conceded, "While we're on that subject, I don't suppose you know how the series actually ended? The three of us all died sometime before the show's final season aired and the last two books were published."

"Nope," Alex confessed, "Only Stephen knew that. I was tempted to satisfy my curiosity just before I killed him. Alas, he was about as cooperative with me as he was with you."

"That's one thing I still don't understand," Melanie uttered, "Why did you kill him?"

"The same reason I killed your friends Herman and Eugene," Alex responded bluntly.

That statement succeeded in bringing a look of utter bewilderment onto the faces of the other four people in the cell.

"Excuse me?" Roger murmured, astonishment evident in his voice.

"Allow me to explain," Alex stated calmly, "Since I have been alive in this world the longest, there was once a time when I believed I was the only person that had crossed over from the real world.
Back then, I thought this whole place was all for me. Then, a little less than two decades past, Gregor Clegane did something extremely inconsistent to his character. When the Sack of King's Landing transpired, he did not kill Elia and her children. He saved her. I suspected he may have saved Rhaenys and Aegon, as well, even though I had no way to confirm that. Regardless, that was when I realized I was not alone."

"That doesn't explain why you killed the others," Melanie snapped crossly.

"I'm getting to that," Alex insisted, "You three may have no issue with the fact that there are others from the real world. As for me, I couldn't abide the notion that there were others like me out there. I wanted to be the only person with the source."

"Why?" Gregory enquired softly.

"It was the only way I could reassert my dominance over the rest of the World of Ice and Fire," Alex responded.

Gregory, Melanie, Roger, and Bran Stark just stared at him in complete silence for about a minute.

"You are mad," Bran Stark solemnly announced. "Mad I may be, but that can be seen as another word for 'ingenious.'"

"I can actually see why he would be led to think that," Gregor confessed. When he saw the looks Melanie, Roger, and Bran gave him, he hastily added "That does not mean I approve of his actions. I most certainly do not. In fact, if you were so determined to remove everyone else who had been reborn into this world, why didn't you ever make a move against me?"

"Oh, I would have eventually," Alex asserted, "Ever since you formed the Legion, you were always too high profile. Any attempt on your life would have attracted too much negative attention. Aside from that, in order to get anywhere close to you, I would have had to make my way through your private little army. Thus, I chose to bide my time and wait for the best opportunity to strike. Yet it never came. I was hoping you might perish during the final battle with the Others, but I was not so lucky."

"How fortunate for me," Gregory uttered drily. He then leaned closer, narrowed his eyes, and said "Are you truly responsible for the deaths of Hizdahr zo Loraq and Yezzan zo Qaggaz? Or are you just making empty boasts?"

"I never take credit for things I did not accomplish on my own," Alex claimed, "You see, ever since Robert's Rebellion, I've had a number of my retainers scouring the Known World, keeping an eye out for others who have been reborn. Needless to say, I couldn't tell them about the real world. Instead, I simply instructed them to look for anyone who behaved in a manner contradictory to others of their standing or background. Most of their findings resulted in dead-end leads. However, one of the parties who travelled all the way to Slaver's Bay turned up a promising lead."

"What do you say to that, Bran?" Roger interjected, turning to the youngest person in the cell, "Were there actually Lannister retainers in Slaver's Bay when Hizdahr zo Loraz and Yezzan zo Qaggaz died?"

The Three-Eyed Raven leaned against the massive direwolf, and he opened his third eye. Everyone watched him as his pale eyes stared into empty space for a while. When he returned to his body a few minutes later, he announced "Because both of them had the source, I cannot see the exact conditions of their deaths. But yes; there were in fact House Lannister retainers in Slaver's Bay at the times of their deaths. I saw half of them paying one of Yezzan's servants to lace his food with a
compound that would accelerate his disease. I saw the other half paying off an assassin to deal with Hizdahr."

"I did advise my men to be discreet," Alex said smugly.

"If that's all true, why did they spare me?" Melanie inquired.

"They weren't going to," Alex informed him, "You simply managed to slip through their fingers."

The woman in red clenched her fists and stepped closer to him. "You bastard…"

Roger gently seized Melanie from behind and urged her "Don't let him get to you. He's not worth it."

"Oh, I'm not worth it, am I?" Alex mumbled angrily, "Well then, since I'm about to be led to my death anyway, I'm going to go ahead and let all the truths come forward. The scandal of Jaime and Cersei's supposedly incestuous relationship? That was my doing. I had one of my men pass the rumor on to the High Sparrow in effort to draw a wedge between the Faith Militant and the royal family. Jaime's death? Also my doing. I told Flement Brax that Jaime had been having an affair with his wife, Morya Frey, and I gave him some very compelling evidence to support this claim. The evidence was fabricated, of course, but it was credible enough that Flement bought it. That ultimately drove him to cut Jaime's throat right after the Wall fell. To keep Flement from talking, I made sure he didn't come back alive, either."

"Is that supposed to shock us?" Gregory muttered, as though he could not care less, "Even before we came to this cell, we already knew you were somehow involved in those fiascos. It makes little difference to us that you were actually the mastermind behind them."

"Oh, I was the mastermind behind much more than that," Alex announced, "You remember the Pentoshi Bloodbath? Tywin may have been the one who orchestrated it, but you do you think was the one who gave him the idea for it in the first place?"

Everyone froze at that. Alex could not help but smirk when he saw the dumbfounded expressions across their faces. "That's right. The Bloodbath was all my doing. I consider it my proudest achievement. Not because of all the people who died, but because of the damage it dealt to Tywin's reputation. You see, I spent the first five decades of this life playing the part of the dutiful younger brother. I always supported and respected Tywin's decisions. I gave him good counsel whenever he asked for it, and I never disobeyed his commands. He may have never fully trusted anyone in his whole life, but I was probably the one who gained his trust the most. He had no idea that I was secretly plotting against him the entire time. As such, when I proposed the Bloodbath to him, he never once suspected that he was actually helping me arrange his own downfall. Better yet, he was all too eager to go along with the Bloodbath."

"Then the Pentoshi Bloodbath really was doomed to fail from the start," Roger thought aloud.

"Of course, it was," Alex confirmed, "At times, Tywin had his own doubts of its success, but all it took was a few compelling counterarguments from me to sway his mind."

"You mean you massacred dozens of innocent people just to discredit Tywin Lannister?" Gregory muttered in a disgusted tone.

"That's right," Alex answered plainly, "In hindsight, I would say my plan worked out wonderfully."

Again, an interval of unpleasant quietness came over the cell. While it lasted, Alex noted the
different expressions on the others’ countenances. Bran was baffled, Roger was appalled, Melanie was horrified, and Gregory was outraged.

Eventually, Gregory stomped forward with his arm outstretched. He seized Alex by the throat and lifted him into the air. Alex struggled to break free of his grip, but the taller man was much too strong. The most he could do was claw at his gauntleted hand and kick at his armored chest.

"Put me the fuck down!" Alex shouted demandingly.

"Oh, I'll put you down, alright," Gregory mumbled through gritted teeth, "We are done here. You've overstayed your welcome in this world. To allow you to remain alive in it any longer would be an insult to the rest of its inhabitants."

He then roughly set Alex back down on his feet. Alex coughed violently and gasped rapidly to catch his breath and regain his bearings.

Before he had a chance to compose himself, Gregory seized him again, this time by the arms. He then signaled for Roger to approach. The novice from the Citadel did so, removing a pair of shackles from his robes in the process.

Gregory held Alex's hands behind his back, and Roger fastened the shackles around his wrists. The latter of them claimed "Originally, we were going to allow you to go to your death unbound, provided we deemed you stable and docile enough to comply with us. But it's evident now that you are far too dangerous for us to let you go about unrestrained, even if you are under heavy guard."

"How wise of you," Alex commented disinterestedly.

Once the shackles were secure, Melanie brought her hand up to her pendant and pressed down on it again. Straightaway, she transformed back into Melisandre.

Likewise, Roger became Mollander, Gregory became Gregor Clegane, and Alex became Kevan Lannister. Bran Stark walked over to the door of the cell and knocked on it four times. That must have been the sign for the guards to open it up, as Kevan heard the bolt being turned.

"Let's go," the Mountain muttered tersely, giving the blond knight a good shove.

Bran Stark and the massive direwolf left the cell first. They were followed by Melisandre. Mollander and Lord Gregor Clegane stood on either side of Ser Kevan Lannister, and they forced him out of the cell. He went along without putting up any resistance, but their handling of him was still rather rough.

A few minutes later, Ser Kevan found himself outside the Reproach Tower. This was his first glimpse of the outside for the first time in eleven days. And, apparently, it'll be my last.

He was ushered to the main courtyard of Moat Cailin. On the way there, a great many people flashed him dirty glares. Many hurled harsh profanities his way. Some even threw rocks at him. But he gave no reaction to any of these attacks on his person. I won't let them see me break. They shall not have that satisfaction.

When they reached the courtyard, a large crowd was already assembled. Ser Kevan recognized many of the faces. He saw several of his house's bannermen, including Lord Andros Brax, Lord Gawen Westerling, Lord Antario Jast, Ser – now Lord – Addam Marbrand, and Lord Sandor Clegane and his wife Lady Obara. His younger brother Ser Gerion Lannister was there, as well. But he stood apart from the other Westerlords. Instead, he stood with Willas Tyrell, Prince Oberyn Martell, Allard Seaworth, Ser Lothor Brune, and all the other members of the Legion's secret
Quite a crowd, it appears my execution is to be made a spectacle of.

Ser Kevan gazed around the vicinity, and everywhere he looked, he saw nothing but hatred, disdain, and wrath. That did not bother him in the slightest. He had expected to be received this way. Besides, my first death wasn't the end. Who's to say this one will be, either? For all he or anyone else knew, there was yet another life waiting for him after this. If so, I wonder which franchise I'd be reborn into next. I was always quite partial to SPN and TWD.

At any rate, Gregor Clegane, Melisandre, and Mollander led Kevan Lannister to the very center of the courtyard. There they left him, and then they went to join the assemblage. Mollander stood with some of his fellow maesters. Melisandre stood beside Allard. The Mountain stood with his mother Lady Daliah Clegane, his wife Lady Dacey, their five children, and his sister Ellyn, along with her husband and son.

Even Lord Tyrion Lannister, who had admired Kevan all his life, clearly held nothing but contempt for him now. A shame, really. I always liked Tyrion. But alas, he was an obstacle to my plans, and he had to be dealt with. He's just lucky I failed.

On the other side of the courtyard, the Targaryens were gathered together. Rhaenys, Aegon, Jon, and Daenerys all stood in front of Eliaxes, Draegar, and Ygrenyon, whose wing appeared to have recovered. Next to them were Eddard Stark, Lyanna Stark, Benjen Stark, Catelyn Stark, the other four Stark children, and the house's six pet direwolves. It appears the pack is now whole at last.

After Bran Stark and the father direwolf rejoined the rest of House Stark, Lord Gregor announced "Kevan Lannister, you have been found guilty of numerous crimes against the people of Westeros, including – but not limited to – murder, conspiracy, arson, theft, destruction of the Wall, kinslaying, treason, and manipulation of your position for your own selfish gain."

Like you are in any position to judge me. Surely you don't expect me to believe you never used your own abilities to get what you wanted. Although he had those thoughts, Kevan said nothing. He just stood there and waited for his end to come.

However, he quickly noticed something was amiss. There was no headsman in the courtyard. Nor were there some gallows with a readied noose. In fact, as far as he could tell, there was not a drawn sword or rope to be seen anywhere in the area. What are they waiting for?

Then Lord Eddard Stark stepped forward. The father direwolf paddled forth alongside the Warden of the North, who then declared "The bulk of Ser Kevan's crimes were committed here in the North. Thus, while it is Lord Gregor's directive to apprehend criminals, it falls to House Stark to punish those that are caught in the North."

"Then you'll be the one to end my life?" Kevan Lannister assumed.

"Not I," Lord Eddard announced, "I have always said that the man who gives the sentence should swing the sword. That has not changed; I still very much believe and practice that myself. Be that as it may, the whole of the North was affected by your transgressions. No one man can take it upon himself to reprove you for what you have done. Therefore, I will not be the one to deliver your execution. Instead, that task goes to the embodiment of my house."

The embodiment? What the hell does that-?

Ser Kevan promptly got his answer. Right then, the father direwolf bared his fangs and stepped closer to the father of his children's masters and mistresses. That was when it dawned on Kevan Lannister just what method of execution they had in mind for him. Oh, fuck, no…
Lord Eddard calmly turned to the father direwolf, and he told him quietly "Deliver my justice, Great Frost."

The father direwolf gave a slight nod, as though he actually understood the Lord Paramount of the North. Then he focused all his attention on Kevan Lannister. Without any warning whatsoever, he charged forward and lunged at the blond knight.

The last moments of Ser Kevan Lannister's second life were filled with blood, intestines, the crunching of bones, the gashing of teeth, and a plethora of gut-wrenching screaming. All he felt was pain. Terrible, inexplicable, unfathomable pain.

Chapter End Notes

Note: And we're rapidly coming to an end. I hope this chapter was able to give most – if not all of you – some closure. If not, you needn't fear. There's still one chapter left, and that will be the story's epilogue. I plan to have it up sometime before Thanksgiving. For those of you who live outside the United States, that'll be the twenty-second of this month. In other words, you can expect to hear from me sometime in the next eighteen days. Until then, take care!
The countryside in the Seven Kingdoms was wondrous, particularly during the summertime. South of the Neck and north of the Red Mountains, one could always see lush meadows, vast forests full of strong trees, and flora and fauna aplenty wherever they looked.

*I never really took the time to appreciate the countryside in my first life. Hell, I was always so busy preparing for the war with the Army of the Dead and other dilemmas that I never really appreciated it in *this* life, either.*

Nonetheless, at this time, Lord Gregor Clegane was most certainly savoring his surroundings as he rode along the Kingsroad atop his massive black destrier. *The view… Just look at that view. It’s absolutely breath-taking.* Normally, the Mountain was not one to get sentimental over something as commonplace and plain such as land. But considering all the sacrifices that had been made to preserve this land, he was compelled to glorify it and its beauty. *After all, had fate been against us, this land would have been eternally buried beneath billions of snowflakes.*

"Lovely day, isn't it, Father?" a feminine voice interrupted his broodings.

Gregor turned to his left side and saw two tall women atop sturdy brown garrons. One of them was his wife Dacey, who had been by his side for almost thirty years and had never once left it. She would likely never leave it before her time or her husband’s. The other was his daughter-by-law, who had been at his son's side for the last eight years. *I expect she’ll never leave his side before their times, either. Hopefully, those won't come for a very long time.*

She was also the one who had just called out to him. He merely grinned at her and nodded in agreement, saying "Yes, Arya; the day is exceptionally stunning."

In response, she just grinned back.

Arya Stark may have had a diminutive stature in the original series, but that was likely due to how she mostly grew up on the run without proper nutrition or sleep. Whereas in *this* version of the World of Ice and Fire, she had always had proper sustenance and rest whilst maintaining a regular exercise routine. As a result, she had grown at a much steadier rate. It was worth noting she also had a much more… rounded appearance. She bore a strong resemblance to her Aunt Lyanna Stark in womanhood, just as she had in girlhood.

In some ways, she was still the rebellious female and the rigid warrior Gregory Welch had known Arya Stark to be. But in others, she had changed and developed dramatically. Now, she was also an adoring daughter-by-law, a caring wife, and even a doting mother.

Arya was not riding her horse by herself. Instead, she shared her saddle with her younger son Brandon, who had just celebrated his third nameday. He sat in front of his mother, secured between her and the reins. He giggled merrily as he bounced up and down occasionally.

"I see you've finally become accustomed to addressing me as 'Father,'" Gregor noted, still grinning.

"Well, Rick insisted that you were not overly fond of your kin referring to you as 'my lord,'" Arya claimed, somewhat drily.
"Did he, now?" Gregor said humorously, raising an eyebrow. *He's not wrong, though. Formality is critical when upholding discipline in an army, but no families – not even military families – should be brought up the same way as armies.* He then turned to his right to see what his heir had to say in his defense.

"I *did* tell her that, Father," Rickard admitted straightforwardly, as he rode on his own black destrier, "In my own subtle way, that is. She understood the message easily enough. I suppose she just needed some time to adjust from viewing you as her commander to viewing you as the head of her new family."

"That sounds about right," Gregor commented, gazing back at Arya, "Still, even before you wed my son, Arya, my home was already your home. Surely you knew that."

"Of course, I did," Eddard Stark's younger daughter proclaimed, smiling at him again. *It's always nice to see her smile due to something other than tormenting or killing her adversaries.*

"*All Are Welcome,*" a high masculine voice declared from the right, "Is that not so, Grandfather?"

Rickard was not riding by himself, either. His elder son Theo was sitting between him and his own reins. Theo was halfway between his sixth and seventh namedays, and already, he was displaying some fine intellect and combat prowess at his young age. It was he who had just recited the house words of the Cleganes of Moat Cailin.

"Yes, it is, my boy," Gregor affirmed, gazing down at his grandson. He reached over and patted him on the back affectionately. Theo chuckled a little in response.

"By the way, there's something your mother and I have been meaning to ask," the Mountain announced, casually glimpsing over at Dacey. She narrowed her eyes and smirked. *As always, she knows what I'm talking about.*

"What might that be?" Rickard inquired.

Dacey answered for her husband: "We were wondering when you are going to give us another one."

Initially, Rickard was confused. Then he quickly caught on. He presumed "Another grandchild?"

"That's right," Dacey responded, "After all, it's been three years since you had Brandon. Another three since Theo. Isn't it about time you thought about a third?"

"Maybe," Arya remarked, shrugging a bit and wrapping an arm around Brandon, "But do you mean to tell us Theo and Brand aren't enough?"

"Certainly, they're enough," Gregor assured the mother of his grandsons, "But there's always room for more at the moat."

"That's a fair argument," Rickard admitted, "However, I would ask you to consider our feelings, as well. I mean, Arya and I might be satisfied with two boys."

"That's what your father and I thought when it was just you and Al," Dacey claimed, "Then we had your sister, and we realized just how wrong we were."

"Indeed," Gregor conceded, "And you cannot honestly tell me either of you wouldn't like to have a daughter of your own. I'm certain both of you are at least slightly curious."
"That could be," Rickard supposed, "But what makes you so certain our next child would even be a girl?"

"Just look at your own lineage," Gregor apprised his eldest son, "To have a female child after two males would follow the history of our bloodline. In my generation, I came first, then your Uncle Sandor, and then your Aunt Ellyn. Then there's your generation, which was you first, followed by Alyver and then Vallory. And Larys and Torrhen, but that's beside the point. Going by that pattern, I would bet half the wealth of our house that your next child – should you choose to have one – would be a girl."

"He makes a fairly compelling case," Arya told her husband.

"Yes, he does," Rickard concurred. He looked over at his parents, and he said, "I will admit; I've often wondered what it would be like to sire a daughter."

"I'd like a little sister, Father," Theo announced, gazing up at Rickard, "I'm sure Brand would, too."

Little Brandon raised his head at the mention of his name, but he did not say anything to verify or deny his older brother's claim.

Rickard and Arya chuckled at that a little, and then the latter of them proposed "Give us some time to talk this over amongst ourselves later, Father. We'll give you our answer soon enough."

She spoke as though she was negotiating a treaty or a business deal. I suppose this whole affair could be seen as one or both of those subjects. In any case, he was just glad that his son and his wife were willing to at least consider giving him a granddaughter. He was certain Dacey was just as glad. These days, that's my biggest concern. Or one of them, at any rate.

They had already been riding for about three weeks. Their destination was King's Landing. They could always have just travelled there by boat, but in the long run, that would not have taken them much less time. Furthermore, more than a few people in Gregor's company had wished to take the more scenic route. Including me.

Fortunately, today would be the last day of riding. Less than a half-hour later, Gregor could see the capital city in the distance. It looks different somehow. Could it have changed on me since my last visit? It had been five years since Gregor last saw King's Landing. So, in all likelihood, it had changed on him. If so, he was looking forward to seeing how.

"I wonder if we'll be the first to arrive," Arya commented.

"From the North, perhaps," Dacey contended, "But at least some of the lords from the rest of the Seven Kingdoms definitely got there ahead of us."

"Well, geographically speaking, only the Riverlands, the Crownlands, and the Stormlands are closer than we are," Gerion Lannister professed, reigning up beside his old friend. "So, there's a chance we could get there in front of those from the Vale, the Iron Islands, the Westerlands, the Reach, and Dorne, too."

"That's true," Gregor admitted, looking to the Legion's longest-serving member and nodding. "I guess we will simply have to wait and see for ourselves when we finally get there."

"Just so," Ser Gerion remarked bluntly.

Within another hour, the Mountain's company reached the walls of King's Landing. The kingsroad brought them straight to the Dragon Gate at the northern edge of the city. The gate's portcullis was
promptly drawn upward, allowing them entry.

"Theo, Brand, welcome to the capital," Rickard announced to his boys, speaking with a modicum of both drama and pride. This was Brandon's first time visiting King's Landing. Theo had visited it once before, but he had been less than two years old at the time. He indubitably did not remember the experience.

A few minutes after they entered the city through the Dragon Gate, Gregor and his party came upon the Dragonpit. From the reign of Aegon Dragonbane to the reign of Robert Baratheon, the building had been closed off. It had actually been rotting and crumbling due to disuse. Thankfully, it had been repaired in recent years. Now, it looked as though it had never fallen into disarray. The walls had been rebuilt, and the foundation had been reinforced. Even the great dome had been repaired. That was fortunate, as the Dragonpit was now being utilized for its intended purpose once more. I just hope they found and removed all that wildfire that had been stored beneath the pit. Otherwise, Rhaenys's Hill might have gone up in green flames at any time.

As they drew closer to the Dragonpit, Gregor's ears picked up a shriek from within. It sounded much too shrill to belong to Eliaxes, Draegar, or Ygrenyon. With that in mind, the sound was likely produced by one of the dragonlings. That was most likely the case.

It was common knowledge in Westeros that Eliaxes and Draegar had each lain a few eggs within the last several years, and that not too long ago, some of those eggs had hatched. Everyone's having babies these days, Gregor noted. Even the dragons. Of course, given how the Long Night had passed and there were no wars or other conflicts going on, this was the most ideal period for people to have children.

Gregor Clegane swiftly led his procession past the Dragonpit and through Rhaenys's Hill. Just as he had on the ride south, he closely studied his surroundings. Everywhere he looked, he saw confirmation of his theory that King's Landing had indeed changed since his last visit. As far as he could tell, all those changes were improvements in some form or other.

It was not very long before they were upon Flea Bottom. Despite its name and reputation, even the poorest section of King's Landing was doing quite well. For the first time in a very long while, the smallfolk in that district seemed healthy, well-fed, and in high spirits. Many of them even saluted Gregor or bade him a good day as he rode through. He returned each of those cordial gestures thusly. I wonder if any of them still remember me from the Sack? Some probably did. Although the Sack had been nearly thirty-three years ago, Gregor had yet to meet a single person who failed to recall meeting him. It does help to have a distinguishing characteristic such as height.

Once they were past Flea Bottom, they came to the Street of the Sisters. That soon brought them to the Guildhall of the Alchemists and the base of Visenya's Hill. There they turned east and headed along the adjoining road. That took them directly towards Aegon's High Hill and the Red Keep.

As soon as they were on the Keep's grounds, a number of stableboys approached them to take charge of their horses. Gregor hastily disembarked his destrier and set down on the ground. He then helped his wife, daughter-by-law, and grandsons down off their own horses. He did not help Rickard, as his son did not need his father holding his hand. Besides, Rickard would have turned the offer down out of pride and respect. Meanwhile, their retainers and fellow Legionnaires dismounted all around them.

As the stableboys brought the horses over to the stables, a steward came forward. He bowed when he reached the Mountain, and he stated "Good day, Lord Gregor. His Grace and the Lord Hand are expecting you. They are both in the throne room at present. Should you wish it, I will take you and your company there right now."
"Then lead the way, my good man," Gregor beckoned the steward.

"Aye, milord," the steward acknowledged, flushing at the formal way he had been addressed.

The Mountain and his companions were then escorted through several corridors of Maegor's Holdfast, eventually arriving at the throne room. From the look of things, court had just been adjourned, and the King, the Hand, and their wives were in the process of leaving.

The King was the first one to come face-to-face with Gregor. A smile crept across his normally stoic countenance, and he extended a hand, saying "So good of you to honor us with your presence, my lord."

"Thank you, Your Grace," the Mountain proclaimed, accepting the hand and shaking it firmly, "I'm not the last to arrive, am I?"

"No, you're among the first, as usual," the Queen interjected, stepping forward to shake Gregor's hand, as well. He kissed the back of her dainty hand first, and then he shook it.

"You're not too early, though," the Hand stated, as he, too, shook Gregor's hand, "Only three of the Great Families got in ahead of you, in fact. Two of which already reside here."

"Everyone else is due to arrive within the next few days," the Hand's wife added in, as she had her own hand kissed and shaken, "Based on the missives they sent us in advance, we estimate they'll all be here inside of a week at most."

"Excellent," Gregor muttered in approval, "Then they'll all be here in time for the anniversary."

"That's what we're all hoping for," the King disclosed, "Until then, what say you all go ahead and get comfortable?"

"That would be delightful," Gregor replied candidly. Especially since we just spent most of the last three weeks with our asses firmly planted in our saddles. I'm not yet too old for these overlong trips on the road, but I feel as though I may be getting there.

The King then turned to the steward who had led Gregor and his party to the throne room, and he ordered the man "Escort our venerable Master of Order and those in his company to the chambers that have been prepared for them."

"As you command it, Your Grace," the steward proclaimed, bowing his head in reverence.

Up until this point, Rickard had been carrying Theo in his arms, and Arya had been carrying Brandon. Right then, the two of them stepped up to Gregor, and his son discreetly whispered into his ear "Father, would you and Mother mind terribly if we left Theo and Brandon in your care for the next few hours? Arya and I have much to catch up on with the King, the Queen, and the Hands."

By the tone of Rickard's voice, Gregor could tell it was a request and not a demand. After all, Rickard knew better than to demand anything of his father. In any case, Gregor was under no obligation to grant his heir's requests, even if they were reasonable and selfless. However, he was not the type of man to refuse his children a favor. Aside from that, he quite enjoyed spending time with his grandchildren.

"They will be in good hands," he assured Rickard, taking Theo off his hands. At the same time, Dacey took Brandon from Arya.
"Thank you," Rickard and Arya said in unison, their gratitude evident in their voices. Once the boys were securely in the arms of their grandparents, their parents went to join Jon, Daenerys, Jasper, and Sansa. As the six younger adults went off in one direction, Gregor, Dacey, their retainers, and the Legionnaire captains were led off in the other towards the residential area of the Red Keep.

On the way to the guest quarters, Theo let out a loud yawn. Gregor scoffed and observed "You sound as though you could use a good nap, Theo."

"I'm not tired, Grandfather," the young boy claimed, struggling not to yawn again.

Gregor scoffed once more and stated, "Well, we'll see about that."

Sure enough, by the time they reached the chambers set aside for the Cleganes of Moat Cailin, Theo had begun to nod off. As for Brandon, he had already drifted off to sleep himself. He looked so peaceful that even an earthquake could not have roused him. Then again, we don't ever seem to have earthquakes in this world. Or hurricanes or tornadoes or much of anything else, for that matter. Worst we ever have are blizzards and the occasional erupting volcano.

"Your intuition never ceases to amaze me," Dacey drily commented as she and her husband tucked Theo and Brandon into the bed of their chamber.

Gregor snickered at his wife's remark. Once Theo and Brandon were securely and snugly under the covers, he claimed, "It is not intuition so much as logical and deductive reasoning."

"As you say," Dacey murmured plainly, rolling her eyes. She then smiled at her husband. Gregor returned the smile. Then he looked down at their grandsons, and he affectionately stroked their foreheads. They looked so precious and innocent when they slept. Soon enough, they'll be grown men, just as their father is. Gregor was not one to lament over losses or the past. Even so, a part of him still felt as though it was only last month when he first held Rickard in his arms. It would seem the theory of relativity applies in any world.

Although it was generally customary for maids and servants to see to the upbringing of the children of nobles, Gregor and Dacey had always had an active hand in the rearing of their own children. Rickard and Arya had chosen to assume the same responsibility. So far, they had raised their sons with great fervor. Gregor would not have expected such a thing of Arya Stark he once knew. Yet the wolf girl who used to only enjoy the company of swords and horses had matured into a proud and loving mother.

"Knowing them, they'll be out for a good long while," Gregor debated, "Rick and Arya probably won't be back anytime soon, either."

"Well, it has been a while since they last saw Jon, Dany, Jasper, and Sansa," Dacey noted.

"That's just my point," said Gregor, nodding his head, "At any rate, it seems we'll have at least the next few hours to ourselves."

"Quite so," said Dacey, looking up at her husband. "Any suggestions for how we might pass the time?"

"Well, obviously, we can't indulge each other," Gregor stated humorously.

"Obviously," Dacey agreed, getting a laugh at the implication of that statement. Theo and Brandon were heavy sleepers, but if by chance they woke up and caught their grandparents in the act, there
would be grim consequences. Worst case scenario, the experience would scar the boys for life. And even if it did not, Rickard and Arya would almost certainly find out about the incident later on. Once they did, they would likely never leave their boys alone with Gregor and Dacey ever again.

"How about we just sit out on the balcony for now?" Gregor proposed.

"That would be nice," Dacey thought aloud, "But first, let's shed a layer or two."

"Good idea," Gregor uttered approvingly. *Now that we're within the walls of the Red Keep, there is no longer any need for us to have arms or armor. At least not until the festivities begin.*

Gregor and Dacey proceeded to remove their cloaks, their breastplates, their gauntlets, their greaves, their boots, their doublets, and their belts. Once they were in just their tunics and breeches, they stepped out onto the balcony.

They set themselves down in a pair of large, cushioned chairs on the balcony. Dacey's was large enough to comfortably seat two regular-sized women. Gregor's could have held two full-grown men. Whereas for the Lord and Lady of Moat Cailin, they were perfect fits.

Once Gregor and Dacey were comfortably settled, they sat in silence for a few minutes. Since their chamber faced the east, they were given a gorgeous view of the Narrow Sea. It was still early in the day, so the Sun was not bearing down on them just yet. Instead, they were well-shaded.

Gregor took a few moments to admire yet another pleasant view. The calmness of the surface of Blackwater Bay and the fresh air were quite soothing. The weather was nice and warm, just as it had been ever since they cleared the Neck.

There was not much of a breeze at this altitude. While Gregor did not mind that, it did not sit well with Dacey. She got out a paper fan which she had purchased from the Free Cities, and she waved it rapidly in her general direction. *How uncharacteristically ladylike of her,* Gregor thought in amusement.

When Gregor got a closer look at his wife, he noted she was sweating heavily, despite being immersed in shadow. He said inquiringly "It's not too hot, is it?"

"Just a little," she claimed, continuing to fan herself. She leaned back a little and added in "Bears weren't bred for warm climates."

"Neither were wolves," Gregor debated, "Yet Jon and Sansa seem to be thriving down here."

"Jon is only half-wolf," Dacey disputed, "He's also half-dragon."

"And Sansa is half-trout," Gregor mumbled wittily.

Dacey stopped fanning herself for a moment and glared at her husband. "You know what I mean."

"Of course, I do," Gregor stated, chuckling at her reaction. Gazing back at the bay, he pronounced "You are quite correct. Due to the two very different backgrounds of Jon's parents, he is well-suited to just about any type of environment. He was born in a desert, he grew up in a tundra, and now he lives in a temperate grassland."

"That is precisely the point I was trying to make," Dacey professed, "Jon has done rather well for himself these last five and ten years."
"So has the realm," Dacey perceived, as she resumed fanning herself, "As it happened, he really was the savior of his father's prophecy. He also turned out to be the monarch everyone in the Seven Kingdoms needed, as well as the one they deserved."

"Indeed," Gregor agreed, interlacing his fingers together, "Still, to think he once refused the crown so vehemently when it was first offered to him."

"Well, to his credit, no one could have predicted that the Targaryens would ever return to the Iron Throne," Dacey argued, "Least of all the Targaryens themselves. After all, Rhaenys, Aegon, Jon, and Dany seemed perfectly content with being Lady of Highgarden, Prince of Sumerhall, and Prince and Princess of Dragonstone respectively."

"I suspect they were content," Gregor hypothesized, "Until Jasper came along and convinced them that the Targaryens were the rightful rulers of the Seven Kingdoms, that is."

"I'm still amazed he managed to convince them of such," Dacey commented bluntly, "I still wonder what compelled him to give up the crown so willingly."

"Strictly speaking, he didn't just give it up," Gregor reminded his wife, "Technically, he gambled it away."

"If so, he gambled knowing full well he would lose," Dacey stated, "I mean, surely when he challenged Jon to a duel with swords, he knew he could not win. Jon was always the better swordsman. If Jasper actually cared even an inkling about winning, he would have challenged Jon to something they were equally adept at, such as archery, jousting, or riding."

Gregor shrugged and stated, "He could have suggested something like that, but that wasn't the original arrangement. After all, you know as well as I do that the duel wasn't even Jasper's idea. It was Jon's. It was his intention that they would work together to defeat the Others, and after that, they would hold a duel to determine which family would rule the realm. Furthermore, when he first propositioned the duel, he expected he would face someone else in the ring."

"I'm well-aware of that," Dacey asserted, "Alas, Robert died before he and Jon could settle their families' dispute."

"Suffice to say, he did," Gregor murmured, "Thankfully, his son was still able to do that in his place."

"Yes, he was," Dacey recounted, "However, I imagine the outcome was not quite what Jon had been expecting when he first presented the proposal to Robert."

"I should say not," Gregor concurred, "After all, Robert Baratheon's skill in melee was legendary. To my knowledge, I'm the only person who ever beat him. Jon's ability with a blade may have been extraordinary, but a duel between him and Robert would have been very one-sided."

"Then why do you suppose he even suggested the duel in the first place?" Dacey wondered aloud.

Gregor lightly shrugged and professed "Although he'd never admit it, I would wager that Jon was actually hoping to lose."

Dacey was intrigued. "How so?"

Gregor explained with "My guess is he simply wanted the conflict between the Targaryens and the Baratheons to be resolved once and for all, and he thought that a duel would be the quickest and
most definitive way of doing so. Seven Hells, he might not have even cared about the results, as long as they ensured the safety and the endurance of both families."

"Knowing Jon, that wouldn't surprise me," Dacey stated frankly, "He never cared much for power. He always seemed much more at ease with a humbler, less responsible existence. In fact, I would go so far as to say he was happiest when he was an official member of the Legion. That was before he stopped serving as your squire, but after he learned the truth of his heritage."

"That sounds about right," Gregor muttered candidly. *Jon's tenure as a full-fledged Legionnaire was short, but he certainly made the most of his time in our ranks.* He let out a low sigh and said "In any case, it was probably for the best that Jon triumphed over Jasper in their duel. Had he lost, I would have been left worrying in the back of my mind that one of his descendants might've someday wished to reclaim the crown, and he or she might have done so through any means necessary."

"That is certainly an understandable qualm to have," Dacey conceded, "However, that apprehension would work the other way around, as well. Suppose that someday, Jasper's descendants decide that their ancestor was robbed or cheated out of what was rightfully his."

"Oh, I considered that, as well," Gregor disclosed, "But I decided not to fret on that possibility. After all, what is the main difference between House Targaryen and House Baratheon?"

"One has dragons and the other doesn't?" Dacey assumed.

"Correct," Gregor affirmed, "Baratheon men may favor muscle over intelligence, and no one could ever accuse the stags of cowardice, but even they wouldn't *dare* antagonize a family with actual dragons in its possession."

*The last time *that happened, the Field of Fire took place.*

"And if the dragons were to go extinct again?" Dacey argued.

"There is a chance of that," Gregor admitted, "Albeit a miniscule one. Even then, I am reasonably confident that they will not die off. Keep in mind; it was the Conclave who was responsible for their extinction over a hundred year ago. Thankfully, that faction of the Archmaesters has been eradicated."

"I know; we saw to that ourselves," Dacey stated, giving a wry grin. *Yes, and wasn't *that a glorious day? I never would have thought it would be so satisfying to lock all the corrupt members of the Citadel in a room with me and my most loyal Legionnaires and dish out their appropriate punishment personally. I particularly enjoyed the moment when I shoved Summit through Archmaester Ebrose's torso.* "But are you certain they will not reform?"

"Mollander assured me that they will not," Gregor enlightened her, "He will see to that himself. I know I can take him at his word; he's never let me down before."

"I suppose he hasn't," Dacey concurred, staring back at the bay, "After all, it was because of him that you were able to catch and expose Ser Kevan."

"Quite so," Gregor stated. *I'll never forget that, either. When Great Frost feasted on that backstabbing bastard from Argentina, I was strangely tempted to laugh.* He was glad he had restrained himself. Otherwise everyone else in attendance of that execution might have thought the Mountain was slowly yet surely becoming psychotic. "So, we can both agree that Jon was the rightful victor of that duel?"
"Yes, we can," Dacey concurred, turning back to her husband, "The duel was well fought, after all. I mean, when one considers all the rematches they fought at Jon's behest..."

Gregor laughed at the memory. "Yes, there is that. The duel was only supposed to last one round. I nearly lost count of how many rounds it actually lasted. Jon must've been seriously determined to lose."

"If he was, why didn't he?" Dacey queried in interest.

"Well, the only real rule of their bout was that neither of them was allowed to hold back," Gregor informed his wife, "That was why they had me stand as witness to their skirmish. I trained those lads myself; I knew precisely what each of them was capable of. Therefore, if either or both were not employing the most of his swordsmanship, I would have noticed right away, and the match would have ended then and there without a champion."

"That makes plenty of sense," Dacey contended, "But if that was the case, why did he insist on so many rematches when he knew he could not lose? Could it have been possible he was secretly planning to degrade or humiliate Jasper?"

"Just the opposite, actually," Gregor disclosed, "In spite of that rule, Jon gave Jasper every permissible handicap he could think of within the rule's boundaries. Yet even then, he always emerged the victor. It ultimately ended when both of them were too exhausted to carry on. That was when they finally brought the duel to an end, and they declared Jon the winner."

"I suppose that was also when Jon started thinking more about the happiness of others than his own," Dacey speculated.

"I believe you are correct, my dear," Gregor conceded, "Although he may have hoped that he would not end up on the Iron Throne, once the crown was on his head, he put his all into the role. I doubt anyone in the world could ever claim otherwise."

"I very much agree," Dacey remarked, "However, if Robert was afforded a replacement in the duel, why wasn't Jon? Why couldn't Aegon have fought in his stead?"

"Apparently, Jon did attempt to get Aegon to take his place," Gregor illuminated, "I was there when he suggested it to him. He argued that as their father's first son, Aegon had a bigger claim to the crown, and therefore, a greater reason to fight for the Targaryens. But Aegon adamantly refused. However much Jon disliked the Iron Throne, Aegon liked it even less. In fact, he utterly abhorred it. That aside, he and Talisa had already gotten settled into Summerhall."

"I see," said Dacey, sitting up a bit and shifting her position. She then scoffed and said, "Perhaps if Jasper had asked to have Rick fight in his place, his side would have had an actual chance at winning."

"His side definitely would have won then," the Mountain wryly debated, "Jon wouldn't have stood a chance against Rick. To my knowledge, there are only two people alive who could actually best him in single combat."

"You and I?" Dacey asked rhetorically.

"Exactly," Gregor confirmed, "Besides, it was not Rick's conflict. Jasper may be his best friend, but Jon is not far behind. It would not have been fair to force him to choose a side."

"Especially since Cleganes tend to take everyone's sides," Dacey slyly uttered.
Gregor merely nodded and smiled. Indeed, we do. That's how the Targaryens and the Baratheons are now able to peacefully coexist with one another. If not for the efforts of myself and the Legion, one or both of those houses might now be extinct.

Gregor then closed his eyes, laid his head back, and cherished the peace and quiet. Dacey did the same, though she kept fanning herself.

About fifteen minutes later, there was a knock on the entrance to the bedchamber. Without even bothering to look over his shoulder, Gregor called out "Enter!"

He then heard the door creaking open, followed by the sound of footsteps approaching him. When they reached the balcony, they stopped. Gregor then felt a pair of huge yet delicate hands on his biceps. That was when he and his wife peered over their shoulders. They saw not one, but two figures standing over them. Both were tall and blonde. One was a boy of around seventeen years of age. The other was his sister, who was about to see her fifteenth nameday.

"Good morning, Uncle Gregor, Aunt Dacey," the girl said gleefully.

Gregor and Dacey smiled, rose from their chairs, and enveloped both of the visitors in a warm embrace, which they promptly returned. The hug lasted over a minute. After that, they all pulled apart, and Dacey stated "Duncan, Jeyne, it's wonderful to see you again."

"Likewise, Auntie," Jeyne said merrily, "When did you get in?"

"About two hours ago," Gregor replied, "And you?"

"Just now," Duncan revealed, "Mother and Father went to get settled in their quarters. We were going to do the same, but we thought we'd pay you two a visit first."

"Well, it's always nice to see you," Dacey proclaimed, "Both of you."

"We feel the same," Jeyne pronounced, "Uncle Sandor and Aunt Obara just got here, too. You see, Father was hoping to have all the Westerlords arrive at the same time. Overall, they did."

"So why didn't Mors and Dermot accompany you?" Dacey enquired.

"They did," Duncan slyly claimed, "They're just not as quick or as eager as we are."

"Are we now?" a dry voice called out from within the bedchamber.

At that, Gregor, his wife, their niece, and their nephew turned around, and they saw two young men standing in the doorframe of the room's main entrance. They both had similar builds to the other four adults, but their hair was black, and their skin was slightly darker and more exotic. The elder of the two had a thin beard and mustache. It was he who had just spoken.

They both had their arms folded, and at a glance, they looked quite stern. Even so, their tough appearance did not fool Gregor. It certainly did not fool Dacey, either. She lowered her fan and extended her arms, and she bade them "Come here, you two."

Immediately, Mors and Dermot dropped their grimaces and replaced them with grins. They swiftly made their way across the room and hugged Dacey firmly. Gregor soon joined the embrace, holding his wife and his brother's sons close.

When that embrace ended, Gregor asked "How was the ride over?"
"Long and uneventful," Dermot drily answered him. He then smirked and added in "Just the way we prefer it."

"Indeed," Mors said in amusement, scoffing, "It's a good thing when the trip is dull. Too much excitement on the way over could spoil the events which come after."

"One could argue such," Gregor thought aloud, "However, a wise man once said, 'Getting there is half the fun.'"

"Who said that, Uncle?" Dermot inquired.

_I honestly have no idea. I doubt anyone in the real world knows. But whoever that person was, he or she doesn't exist in this universe. Thus, credit for its conception is open for grabs._ Gregor smirked, folded his arms, and declared "I did."

That succeeded in inciting a good laugh out of his wife, niece, and nephews. After about five seconds, Gregor decided to partake in the laughter. _It's funny because they have no reason to doubt me. So, as far as they're concerned, I did patent that expression._

The laughter eventually subsided. When it did, Gregor looked around at the five younger adults and announced, "According to the King and the Hand, it could be several days before the other Great Families and their vassals arrive."

"Then we'll have plenty of time to discuss all that's happened since our last meeting," said Jeyne.

Gregor grinned at his niece and proclaimed, "That's just what we were hoping to do."

Indeed, Gregor and Dacey spent most of the following week in the company of their family. They also bonded with King Jon, Queen Daenerys, Crown Prince Aemon, Princess Rhaella, and Prince Eddard, as well as Lord Jasper, Lady Sansa, and their children Jonquil, Cerelle, and Steffon.

Just as Jasper had said, only three of the Great Families had been present in King's Landing before Gregor's entourage arrived. And just as Sansa had said, two of them – House Targaryen and House Baratheon – already lived there, for the most part. The other, unsurprisingly, was House Tully. _That figures, seeing as the Riverlands are between here and the North._ Lord Edmure, Lady Asha, and their twins Urrigon and Minisa had sailed into Blackwater not two days beforehand. Most of the Trident's vassals had arrived shortly thereafter by way of land, including the still oversized House Frey, which was now led by Lord Edwyn Frey.

As the week went by, more and more familiar faces began to appear. The rest of the Northmen got in first. Lord Eddard Stark and his wife Lady Catelyn arrived with their other three children. Robb and Margaery came with their daughters Wylla and Rhea and their sons Cregan and Loras. Bran Stark came with his new wife, Lyanna of House Mormont. Rickon was there, and he was still unwed. _Happily_ unwed, based on what Gregor had heard. According to rumors, Eddard Stark's youngest had turned out to be quite popular with the ladies. _Who would have thought?_

The next to arrive were the Valemen. Lady Lysa Arryn was making her first public appearance since the end of the Long Night. _At least she looks healthy, mentally and physically,_ Gregor noted. Her son, Lord Robin, was currently the youngest Lord Paramount in the realm. Fortunately, unlike his canon counterpart, he did not turn out to be a scrawny, halfwit weakling. Instead, he had grown up to be a tall, able-bodied, and intelligent man. He entered the Red Keep with the symbol of his house, a gyrfalcon, on his shoulder. His sisters Alyssa and Donella proudly entered alongside him.

The Reachmen showed up next. Lord Willas Tyrell and Lady Rhaenys were doing as well as ever,
as were his mother Lady Alerie and their children Leo, Margaret, and Daemon. They also arrived with Prince Aegon, Princess Talisa, their children Qavo, Shaena, and Baela, and the bulk of the household of Summerhall. Willas had left the Legion shortly after the Army of the Dead perished, but he and his wife had remained in constant contact with Gregor. Even now, the Mountain regarded the Lord Paramount of the Reach as one of the Legion's greatest friends, as well as one of his.

The Dornishmen got in shortly after the Reachmen. Princess Arianne Martell rode at the head of a hardy column alongside her husband, Prince Garlan. In typical Dornish fashion, they were both well-armed. So were their son Myles and their daughter Aliandra. At first glance, the Dornishmen looked as though they had come in preparation for battle. But they had no such intentions. Most of those weapons were actually meant for the upcoming merriment.

The last to appear were the Ironborn. Six days after the Mountain and his company reached King's Landing, Lord Victarion Greyjoy, his family, and his vassals all sailed into Blackwater Bay. Gregor Clegane accompanied Rodrik and Asha Greyjoy to the harbor so that he could help them greet their uncle. As it happened, there was actually a reason why the Ironmen had been the last to arrive. Evidently, Victarion had made a couple detours during the lengthy voyage from Pyke. In addition to the usual passengers and crew, the *Iron Victory* was also carrying some unexpected guests.

Victarion brought the Seneschal of the Citadel, Gregor's old accomplice and friend, Mollander. He was accompanied by his wife, Maester Sarella, and their two children. He also brought Lord Allard Seaworth and his wife Kinvara. They and their own three children had just gotten back from a Legion-related mission to the Nine Free Cities. Interestingly, there not the only individuals who had just come from the Free Cities. There were also Daario Naharis, Caggo, Denzo D'han, Brown Ben Plumm, various Essosi nobles, and even a few Dothraki khals.

There were two particular passengers whom Gregor was surprised yet delighted to see. Those were his son and niece. *Even they made it. This truly IS a joyous occasion.* Ever since Alyver and Tyta came of age, they had spent most of their time travelling around the Known World together. Recently, they had also grown much closer. *They're fortunate Sandor and I approve of their union. Then again, I doubt that would've stopped them.* Interestingly, Tyta appeared to have a slight protrusion along her abdomen. *Soon enough, Dacey and I just may get that granddaughter we were hoping for, anyway.*

By happy coincidence, the day the Ironborn arrived in King's Landing was also the day before the celebration was scheduled to begin. In other words, everyone who had been invited or summoned to the capital city was now accounted for. Thus, they did not have to wait on anyone any longer. *Let the good times commence.*

The following day, the festival was well underway. There was a tourney, a feast, a hunt with the direwolves, and several other events all took place concurrently. All were intended to last for the good part of a week, if not longer. Between the gorging, the drinking, the friendly competing, the reminiscing and everything else, Gregor could not tell what his favorite part was.

However, it was fairly easy for him to decide which part he was most grateful for. At the end of the first night, King Jon gave a toast. After calling for silence and standing up at the head of the royal dais, he picked up his goblet and he announced: "To the day, it has been five years since the end of the Long Night. Fifteen since the Night's King and his forces were defeated. Much has changed since then. Most of it for the better. For the first time in documented history, an era of pure prosperity and serenity is now upon Westeros. We've come a long way and sacrificed much to come this far. Even after the Army of the Dead fell, we lost many good people during the

He paused there for a moment of silence to honor the names and all the others whose names went unsaid. *They're unsaid, but never forgotten.* Jon then continued with "But those noble men and women have already been mourned. Let us not grieve those losses any longer. Instead, let us respect their memory by enjoying this celebration in their honor. And let us rejoice in this peace which they could not have lived to see. For this peace will not be eternal. It will inevitably meet its end in the near or far future. Nevertheless, this peace is now, and it is for us to appreciate."

Jon then lifted his goblet into the air, and he finished his toast with "Many of you know me as your ruler. Some know me as their savior. There may be a few in attendance who think me a stranger. But here and now, I merely stand before you as a friend to all. As your friend, I ask you to drink with me. Let us drink to this peace."

Lord Gregor Clegane, Lady Dacey Clegane, Queen Daenerys Targaryen, and everyone else in the vicinity raised his or her own goblet, tankard, mug, or cup, and they all drank long and heartily to peace. *A very good speech. Jon's certainly gotten better at speaking in public since last I saw him.*

After the toast, Gregor spent most of the rest of the evening talking. For a while, he talked with his mother Lady Daliah. Despite being well into her sixties, she was as strong and robust as ever. She was delighted to have all her descendants gathered together for the first time since the Night's King's defeat. She confessed to Gregor that she never would have thought she would live to be a great-grandmother. Yet she had. Twice. *Soon to be thrice. Maybe even more than that, depending on what Rick and Arya choose to do.*

He talked with King Jon, Queen Daenerys, and Princess Lyanna. They discussed a great many subjects, such as the plan to have Rickard eventually replace him as the Master of Order. Gregor was already planning to appoint Rickard to the position of Commander of the Legion without Banners in a few years. *As long as I am still able to make these trips, I have no intention of renouncing my authority any time soon.* Of course, even the Legion's commander would not have absolute authority over its ranks, unless he or she was also the Master of Order. Gregor just happened to be both. *Rickard is more than ready to take my place, but I do not wish to impose that much responsibility upon him just yet. For now, he should simply enjoy the early years of fatherhood.*

He talked with the Legion's secret council. In the last fifteen years, only the representatives from the Reach and the Free Folk had changed. Samwell Tarly had replaced Willas Tyrell after the latter returned to Highgarden, and Val had replaced Tormund Giantsbane after he moved to Evenfall Hall with Brienne Tarth. All the other captains were still the same: Gerion Lannister from the Westerlands, Oberyn Martell from Dorne, Allard Seaworth from the Stormlands, Lothor Brune from the Crownlands, Wendel Manderly from the North, Eddison Tollett from the Vale, Harren Botley from the Iron Islands, Danwell Frey from the Riverlands, and Dacey. Nearly all of them now had families of their own, if they had not had one before the Long Night. *Yet they haven't really settled down. I suppose I shouldn't be shocked.*

At the very end of the night, he had one final talk with two more people. Those two people were the same two people he could be most open with about any topic. Those were not his mother, his siblings, his children, his grandchildren, or even his wife. He did not even share blood with either of those people. They did, however, have in common something just as intimate with him.

In preparation for their private rendezvous, Gregor had taken the time to scout out a secure
chamber. He managed to find one such chamber in the top level of Maegor's Holdfast. It was so secure that even Varys' little birds could not have eavesdropped on them. Just before midnight, Gregor Clegane, Kinvara, and Mollander headed up to that room. After closing and locking the door, they settled down around a fireplace. Gregor had brought something for them to enjoy whilst they conversed.

He had a pitcher full of an unknown beverage. He filled three mugs with it, and then he gave two to his companions and kept the third for himself.

"What's this?" Roger inquired curiously, gazing down at the opaque liquid.

"My latest contribution to this world," Gregory answered him, "Go ahead; taste it."

Melanie and Roger were uncertain at first, but they decided to give the drink a try. I guess they figured that if I was scheming to poison them, I would have done so long ago, and in a more discreet fashion, he thought in amusement.

After her first sip, Melanie's eyes widened in amazement. She turned to Gregory and asked him "Is this… eggnog?"

"That's right," Gregory confirmed, taking a swig from his own mug, "Whipped it up myself. I didn't trust the cooks to get the recipe right."

"I would say you did an excellent job," Roger announced, licking his lips, "Very thick, rich, and creamy. Just the way I like it."

"I agree," Melanie declared, smiling and wiping her mouth, "It's delicious, Gregory."

"I'm glad you approve," Gregory commented, already refilling his mug, "Dacey and some of the other Legionnaires have already tried it. They all enjoyed it, but they had nothing to compare it to. I wouldn't know if my eggnog really was good until someone who had tried it once before gave me their verdict."

"Well, I think it's spectacular," Roger proclaimed.

"As do I," said Melanie, taking another long sip, "I'm surprised it took you this long to come up with it."

"I've had a lot of time on my hands lately," Gregory explained, "The eggs, milk, cream, and sugar were all easy enough to find. The real difficulty was the nutmeg. While pre-grated nutmeg is commercially available just about anywhere in the Seven Kingdoms, I wouldn't settle for anything less than a whole nut, so I could grate it myself. Luckily, I managed to acquire some whole nutmegs imported directly from the Summer Isles."

"I would say it was worth the hassle," Roger contended, reaching for the pitcher to refill his mug.

"Indeed," Melanie concurred, gazing down at her own mug, "However, I don't taste any booze."

"Because there isn't any," Gregory elucidated, "I know there's a long debate over whether alcoholic or non-alcoholic eggnog is superior. I will be the first to admit that both have their perks. Be that as it may, there is one undeniable advantage in keeping alcohol out of eggnog. If you do that, you can literally drink it all day without fearing for your liver."

"That's definitely a plus," Roger thought aloud, settling back down in his chair, "Then again, too much heavy cream can still be problematic for one's heart."
"Which is why I still drink it in moderation," Gregory remarked, "As you can imagine, a man of my stature has a very resilient constitution."

"Well, that figures," Melanie and Roger said in unison. They then chuckled at their perfect synchronization.

Soon, Gregory refilled his mug for the third time. He waited until Melanie and Roger did the same, and then he stated, "I propose a toast."

"Very well," said Melanie, as she and Roger raised their own mugs, "What should we drink to?"

"To the World of Ice and Fire," Gregory declared. "And to how by cooperating with one another and with the inhabitants, the three of us gave it a better ending than whatever Benioff, Weiss, and Martin had in mind for it."

"I'll definitely drink to that," Roger muttered, raising his mug.

"Me, too," Melanie conceded, raising hers.

The three of them swiftly took another long drink. They downed half the contents of their mugs before they relented. A glass of nog by a lit hearth at the end of a long day. What could be more relaxing?

"Good toast, Gregory," Roger commented.

Melanie nodded her head. "I'd say it was just as good as Jon's toast."

"I think it was even better," Roger professed, "Jon is a good king, and he gave a good speech, but part of his toast was a little off-putting."

"Which part?" Gregory inquired.

"The part when he mentioned how this peace we worked so hard to attain will not last forever," Roger clarified, "I thought that was just a little bit of a mood-killer."

"I can see why you might think that," Gregory muttered, "He was not wrong, though. We may be at peace now, but sooner or later, that peace will cease to be."

"How can you be so sure of that?" Melanie asked.

"Because I know people," Gregory debated, "They may be sympathetic, gracious, and good-natured beings at the best of times. But take away just a few certain things and see how they react. You'd be astounded at just how little it takes to change their behavior."

"I'm sure we can imagine," Roger said bluntly, "While I understand your reasoning, Gregory, you're probably just being paranoid."

"Maybe I am," Gregory supposed, "But that does not change one of the fundamental truths of the world."

"And what truth would that be?" Melanie enquired.

"There is no such thing as a permanent peace," Gregory replied, "Someone from our world once said that war and taxes are the only things that could always be counted on. Being in a different universe does not alter the reality of that saying. One way or another, peace always comes to an end. Always."
"You could be right," Roger murmured, "But how would you see *this* peace ending?"

"I do not know," Gregory confessed, "But it will. Someday, somehow, it will. Just about everybody in Westeros has everything they'd ever want or need right now. How long do you think that will last?"

"I haven't a clue," Melanie confessed.

"Neither do I," Roger remarked, "How long do *you* think?"

"If we are lucky, it could last until everyone living is long dead," Gregory conjectured, "But at some point, some people will decide they are not satisfied with what they have. Those individuals will desire more. They will *seek* more. And let me ask you; when – in all of human history – did one person acting on a selfish desire ever not result in misfortune for at least one other person?"

Melanie and Roger thought on that for a couple minutes. When they were unable to come up with a sufficient response, Gregory murmured "I rest my case. And even if all the people of this world do end up being content with their possessions, nature may be compelled to screw them over as it always does. It could bring about famine, drought, pestilence, and all manner of natural disasters. Incidents such as those would succeed in devastating the land and its resources."

"Then the survivors of those hardships would undoubtedly end up fighting amongst themselves for control over whatever resources remain," Roger thought aloud.

"That's just my point," Gregory pronounced, "Moreover, it might not even take a tragedy of that magnitude to upset the order and balance of this world. Sometimes, a single foul deed or misinterpreted action can generate such friction."

"Indeed," Melanie commented, "Just look at our own world's history. It may have been more civilized than this one, but even simple acts of violence were still enough to bring out the absolute worst in humanity. I mean, Honduras and El Salvador once went to war over a game of soccer. A civil war once broke out in Italy over a literal bucket. There was a church in Jerusalem that was occupied by six different religious sects, and whenever anything in that building was moved even an inch without the permission of all six sects, a huge fist-fight or worse always broke out. Gavrilo Princip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in effort to free his fellow Serbians from Austro-Hungarian rule, and that's how we got World War I."

"Those are all very fine examples," Gregory uttered, "We should use our own history as a guideline for how to prevent such needless bloodshed and hostility in this world."

Roger sighed and nodded his head slightly, saying "I suppose you are correct. But how do you suggest we do that?"

"We should just keep doing what we've been doing," Gregory recommended, "Mainly, we must be ready to avoid any struggle that could yield grave repercussions for the realm or its inhabitants."

"Basically, we should be ready for this peace to end at any time?" Melanie assumed.

"Indeed, as there is no telling when it will," Gregory debated, "For all we know, war could be declared tomorrow against a new foe.

"Do you think it will?" Roger said inquisitively.

"Of course not," Gregory responded plainly, "But I'm always ready to confront the possibility of war or any other potential hardship."
"Well, then what would you advise us to do right now?" Melanie inquired.

"For now…" Gregory began. He paused, and then he reached for the pitcher. After picking it up, he gestured for Melanie and Roger to come closer. After they leaned in a bit, the Mountain smiled at both of them and proclaimed "For now, we can afford to enjoy this hard-earned peace. Let us worry no more on when it will end. Instead, we should cherish it for however long it lasts."

Melanie and Roger just grinned widely and nodded their heads to show their agreement. Evidently, both of them were quite pleased with that proposal. They held their mugs out to Gregory, and he filled them up once again. He then refilled his own mug and set aside the pitcher.

As he started on his fourth cup of eggnog, Gregory decided to change the subject to something more pleasant. "So, how has parenthood been treating the two of you in this world?"

Melanie and Roger just grinned again. Apparently, this was an issue they were both more than willing to converse on. *I bet they'd be elated to divulge that kind of information.* Roger asked rhetorically, "Where should we begin?"

"Tell me everything," Gregory insisted, sitting back in his chair and holding his mug of eggnog in both hands.

Chapter End Notes

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Note: And there we go. After more than two years and eight hundred thousand words, my own epic retelling of the Song of Ice and Fire series is finally complete. I would like to thank those of you who have been around with me since the beginning, those of you who picked it up along the way, and even those of you who started reading, then dropped it, and came back later. Needless to say, I found this final update to be quite rewarding.

I'm not really sure what I'll do now. Maybe I'll write another Ice and Fire fanfic. If ever I do, I promise you it will be heavily centered around the Jon/Dany pairing. That was one of the biggest complaints I've gotten most recently: not enough Jon/Dany content, despite the fact that they were designated as this fanfic's second biggest pairing after Gregor/Dacey. Originally, there was going to be many more Jon/Dany moments, but, as you can plainly see, the story ended up being a LOT longer than I originally intended. So, incorporating some such moments would only have made it even longer. And I'm sure even the people who adored this story wouldn't have wanted THAT.

Before I write my next Ice and Fire fanfic, I may write a fanfic on some other franchise first. It'll depend on certain factors, of course. But in any case, I'm definitely going to take a LONG hiatus from fanfiction. So, at the very least, you shouldn't expect me to produce anything new before New Year's or later.

I also have plans to start a movie blog soon. For those of you who are hardcore movie buffs such as myself, feel free to check it out. Once I get the blog up and running, I'll post a link to it on my profile page so that anybody on this site can find it.

Well, that's about all I have to tell you. Thank you again for reading this far, and Happy Holidays!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!