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I also want to thank everyone for their support and encouragement.

25th Day of the 10th Moon, 299 AC (5 days later)

Arianne Martell, the Stormlands

Every king needed an heir, a strong son. Aegon was no exception, and as a queen, Arianne had to birth one for him. Only, it was proving to be quite the challenge.

It wasn't Aegon's endearing inexperience that was the problem. Her husband was a quick learner, and guiding him into discovering the joys of lovemaking was more than pleasurable. Neither he nor Arianne lacked enthusiasm. Nor was time the issue either. After that amusingly daring yet pesky attack that had slain Lord Walton Wyl, the army's pace slowed to a crawl as they dug ditches and basic fortifications each time they stopped to camp. Her husband's prestige had taken a hit, but his charisma had more than made up for it, especially since Wyl had been the one to neglect proper defences for his camp.

Aegon's decision to leave patches of sown garlic, sage, and turmeric behind slowed the army even further as the men began to grumble that they were warriors, not farmers. But they didn't grumble too loud, for they had all seen the trail of death and devastation left behind by the Black Death. If anyone showed any symptoms of the sickness, they were immediately relegated to a special fortified camp for the maesters to take care of them—including one of Ebrose's acolytes they had managed to recruit.

All of those tedious matters didn't bother her as much as her own woe.

Arianne had been wed for nearly three moons, but she had yet to miss her moonblood. She wanted to give Aegon a son, but his seed wasn't quickening. It was known that heirs couldn't be forced, and sometimes you were lucky, sometimes you were not, but the doubt gnawed at her mind. Was something wrong with her? Had drinking all that moon tea left her half-barren, as the maesters claimed it would?

She could do nothing but swallow her worries and continue trying. It was a pleasurable morning and evening, and at least her husband seemed an insatiable beast.

"You seem distressed," Aegon noted after their routine lurid wake-up.

"Things are going quite slow," she admitted, the musky smell of their coupling still tickling her nose. The air was still warm from the hot coals the servants had changed half an hour prior.

Her husband groaned, falling back into the fine cotton sheets.

"I know. I know. Seasons have finally turned, and winter has come if that rider from Thunderhall has any credence," Aegon whispered. There was a sliver of dejection in his voice, but Arianne always caught one when he spoke of his kin. House Stark was a sore topic for Aegon, not because he loathed them, but quite the opposite—he wanted to connect, yet the bonds of nobility and previous alliances forced them to clash at every turn. "The onset of cold won't go away anymore, and perhaps soon snow shall slow us down further."

But she knew her husband wasn't really worried about the logistics. They had many capable men dealing with such trivialities. What truly worried him was far more important.

"Your uncle and cousin shall see reason," Arianne promised.

"Will they?" His dreamy purple eyes aimlessly gazed at the ceiling of the pavilion. "As much as I wish it were so, Robb is wedded to a lioness' daughter. That union has born fruit already—a healthy boy named Edwyn, and my cousin has all the reason not to put her aside, more so now that the Westerlands have landed in his lap. Uncle Eddard is playing kingmaker for the young Tommen Baratheon, propping up a shattered cause on his lonesome. The more they stand against me so vehemently, the more people will whisper, the more they will doubt my claim."

"Let them doubt," she drawled. "Let them whisper. As you said it yourself, House Stark has no reason to support you, the fruit of Lyanna's defiance to her family. They can deny your parentage—or your mother's marriage with the Silver Prince all they want, but they lack any proof to the contrary, or they would not have merely sent words. You have the rightful claim to the Iron Throne and the fealty and spears to back it up."

The claim and the Dornish spears that would see her become Queen.

She fondly ran her fingers over his muscled chest. "Besides, Winterfell just might fall to Hightower, leaving you with one problem less. It would be even better if the siege cripples the zealots, victory or not."

"Hightower winning will gain momentum for his otherwise desperate cause," Aegon noted coldly, his usually soft voice lacking even a hint of amusement.

"But it would leave your cousin Robb unburdened by a lion wife or children. The very bonds that set him against you shall be severed. I know it is a terrible thing to wish misfortune upon your kin, but kings cannot afford to be softhearted. Compassion does not win thrones, Aegon, fire and blood and steel do!"

His face twisted in disgust.

"It's not merely about the misfortune," he bit back. "If Hightower captures Winterfell, the whole North will be within his grasp. Even if I win the Iron Throne, I will have a hard time dislodging him from there. I can meet Cousin Robb on the battlefield and win, but Hightower can hide behind Moat Cailin and the cold. Worse, we don't have any ships to attack the same way he did, and there's still the Ironborn!"

"Perhaps," Arianne conceded, kissing his chin to placate him. "Your Uncle is playing a dangerous game, sacking Plankytown and burning the Shadow City and reaving along the Dornish coast. Storms in winter might be rare, but they are the most vicious, and Lord Stark might find himself sinking in the dark waves, this time for real. If Cersei's little lion goes with him, it would be even better. House Stark is challenging you! Indecision and meekness are unbecoming of you, husband. You're a king and a dragon, Aegon, not some whimpering pup. *Act like it!*"

Riling up her husband was one of her few amusements on this dreary campaign. Despite making love each day for hours, he still felt closed off at times, and to this day, it was hard to see where his limits were. And his cool demeanour just rubbed Arianne the wrong way.

"You are not wrong." Aegon's face turned frosty as he pried himself away from her embrace. "Even if you're merely angry that your kin got attacked. That the prestige of Nymeros Martell has been struck

yet another crippling blow that will take decades to recover. But do not forget Arianne. It is I who propped up Sunspear when you would break and bow in humiliation. It is I who saved your snakeskins. You are the wife of a dragon. *Act like it!*"

Arianne could only swallow her rage at Aegon's mocking tone.

He stood up, donned a robe, and headed towards his tent. Doubtlessly to take a bath with that Volantene whore Maegyr, who claimed to be his personal healer and servant.

Usually, Arianne wouldn't deny her husband any lovers. But with her silver curls, sparkling lilac eyes, pale, swan-like skin, and lithe body, Talisa Maegyr was as beautiful as Arianne. Taller, too. She looked like a Targaryen of old, as did many of the Old Blood. Worse, the whore was smart and played the farce of the blushing demure maiden. She also somehow managed to avoid Arianne at all times.

But it didn't matter. While her brother commanded the three thousand tiger cloaks from Volantis, the Essosi silver-haired whore brought Aegon no lands and alliances, and Arianne had all the time in the world to deal with her, for Talisa Maegyr wouldn't avoid her forever. Aegon would soon grow bored of his toy, and if not... it might take her a year or ten, but Arianne would be rid of her.

Still feeling disgruntled, she rang the bell, summoning her handmaids. Soon enough, the small pavilion was cleaned up, and Arianne shivered at the cold gust of air coming from the open flap. But the thick carpets her father had gifted her blocked the cold from below. Rose incense was lit, filling the air with a relaxing scent. Within a few minutes, a hot bath was prepared for her in the favourite copper tub she had brought from Sunspear. Sylva and Obara, her ladies-in-waiting, joined her in the steaming wooden tubs.

"You look like a cat whose tail was pulled," her cousin pointed out with amusement. As the eldest of Uncle Oberyn's daughters, she had inherited his temper and was not one to mince words.

Arianne had been tempted to take Tyene as her lady-in-waiting and monopolise all of Aegon's attention together, but Obara served her better. Her mannish looks and prickly demeanour served both as threats to any unwed lords and knights and were also a fine pair of tools to expand Arianne's influence. Alas, her attempts to expand her influence and acquire more ladies-in-waiting from the Marcher lords were met with polite refusals, quite possibly because of Margaery and the fate of her companions. Even the Dornish Lords seemed unwilling to trust her with any daughters or sisters.

The humiliation at the Water Gardens and the loss of their children were still fresh in their minds. When would House Martell recover from that loss of prestige?

"I merely woke up on the wrong side of the bed," Arianne dismissed with a lazy wave.

"It's only normal," Sylva agreed with a sly smile. "The nightly chill is getting worse. The buckets of water left outside all freeze. Only, you have a dragon to warm you at night, whereas we have nought but some cold cover of fur."

"The dragon might be warm, but he has a dragon's temper," the naked queen quipped, sinking deeper into the steaming bathwater. "But he's still a man. Do you two have anything interesting for me?"

"The Yronwood heir has been sent to Dayne and Blackmont's army at Nightsong," Obara was the first to respond. "Though, I struggle to see why."

"As a messenger. Yronwood wants to wed his youngest daughter to the young Lord Dayne," Arianne hissed. "The man is wroth that a marriage with Quentyn was denied to his House and is scheming yet again! He keeps trying to endear himself to Aegon for a position on the small council, too."

"Most of the lords are," Sylva giggled. "Master of whispers, laws, ships, and coin are prestigious positions that can elevate any House out of the mundane."

That they were, but Arianne still remembered how Aegon had yet to agree to Quentyn's request to appoint him as a master of laws. Doubtlessly, her royal husband already considered House Martell as staunch allies and saw no need to bestow them with further honours than a royal marriage. Aegon was as cunning as he was handsome, and Arianne wasn't sure if she was irked or excited by it more.

"Sylva, do you have anything for me?"

"Nought but the usual rumours. Nobody doubts Aegon's legitimacy, at least not openly, and House Stark is seen as the dogs of the Usurper or barbaric heathens sacrificing innocents at their twisted weirwood trees," came the amused response.

"The Young Wolf didn't shy away from slaughtering every living soul around the Honeywine," Obara chuckled darkly. "Serves those over-righteous cunts right."

"As crass as always, cousin," Arianne tutted.

"But am I wrong?" The eldest Sand Snake yawned lazily. "I might not know much about the Great Game, but no lord likes zealots or the Faith Militant. The old Lord sitting in the Hightower will decry the savage, mindless deeds of his own sons while requesting protection against the wolf's wrath from Aegon."

"And Aegon is not fool enough to give him any," Arianne mused. "He says Robb Stark cannot siege Oldtown because he has to split his army to cover both sides of the Honeywine and needs a fleet. Storming the walls is impossible without siege weapons either, and Hightower has chopped down every tree thirty miles from his city."

"With Lady Waynwood raising two-thirds of the Vale for Aegon, they say the war will be over within half a year," Sylva pouted. "After Storm's End, only Edmure Tully and his Rivermen are the obstacle between Aegon and the crown. Even if Eddard Stark returns with Tommen, he has no means to raise any more swords. Even Essos is spent."

"Don't count your eggs before they hatch, dear Sylva. Storm's End has never fallen," Arianne reminded. "Though Renly has no choice but to accept the gracious terms of surrender my royal husband has offered. I bet he is just holding out to not seem too craven or weak to surrender to a message sent by raven. Terms of respectable surrender and all that."

"Winter has come, and the cold might see the army—all armies—season in one place for months until any warmth returns," Obara reminded, ever the killjoy.

"You are right." The queen deflated. "Even though victory is in sight, we must not grow lax like Renly did. But it's not like we can do something more. The die is cast, and we can merely watch where it falls."

"But is it?" Sylva stood out from her tub, revealing her perky assets, though they were just as spotted as her face was. "I've heard there is no High Septon in King's Landing just yet. Tommen is not merely a boy, but one who has yet to receive the Grace of the Seven."

"You're saying... we should try and muster legitimacy from the Faith?"

She giggled as she wrapped her curvy body in a towel. "Merely suggesting it. The Most Devout are gutted, and it has happened before for a Hand or royal advisors to appoint a High Septon."

"Dabbling in the Faith has shown to be a precarious endeavour as of late, so such things must be contemplated carefully. Thoughts for when we arrive in Felwood," Arianne allowed. "I'm getting tired of sleeping in tents."

"Your tent and bedding are more lavish than many could even dream of in their lifetime," Obara scowled. "I swear by the Seven that lugging that copper tub of yours slowed the army for days."

"A queen deserves only the finest accommodations," Arianne snarked.

3rd day of the 11th Moon, 299 AC (6 days later)

Davos Seaworth, The Broken Arm/Stepstones

Shireen had decided to follow Lord Stark's advice, but she moved to Dragonstone. Her command over the royal fleet was relinquished, but her aspirations and title of Mistress of Ships were not. In the end, she convinced Lord Stark to allow her to keep the title symbolically until the end of the war, if only so that it would be more humiliating for the foes who fell to the royal fleet. Despite her young age, the stern Eddard Stark even agreed to officially acknowledge that she was to rule Dragonstone in her name without needing a regent.

Thus, Davos was left with the command of thirteen ships to keep her informed on the happenings of the royal fleet and pillage, loot, and extort with the blessing and command of the Royal Regent. After much deliberation, he agreed, for he had a promise to Stannis to keep.

Davos considered himself a fair man if flawed. His service under Stannis had instilled in him a sense of justice and righteousness, yet here they were, acting like pirates under royal auspices. Even Shireen did not seem bothered. "It is their lot for supporting a Pretender."

But the smallfolk had no say in who Doran Martell supported. They had no choice but to obey. Davos was disgruntled, but he, too, could only obey.

But his remaining sons, Dale and Matthos, did not seem as bothered.

"Father, you are too kind for a smuggler," they pulled him aside, seeing his worry. "This is a chance to bring wealth to our families. For our children and brothers and mother."

"I prefer smuggling to war," he lamented. "It was far less bloody."

"Less risk, less reward," Matthos wisely nodded. His face bore the marks of war; half of his left ear was missing courtesy of an axe, and his broken right hand was bound by plaster.

But perhaps it was for the better. Shireen promised him a proper lordship so that his lineage could rise to nobility from landed knights, but Davos did not feel he could make for a proper lord. The stench of Fleabottom would never leave the old smuggler, no matter how many titles or honours were bestowed upon his balding head. Just like you couldn't turn a monkey into a warrior by giving it a sword, you couldn't turn an old smuggler into a lord by giving him a lordship.

However, Dale had the guts and ambition to make it far. He had the future makings of a knight, a lord, even. Even Matthos had the skills to become a landed knight in these times of war with some achievement and sufficient luck. At least his wife and the rest of his children were in Dragonstone and not at his estate in the war-torn lands of Cape Wrath, and thank the Seven for it.

And thus, Davos closed his eyes and followed the commands of Admiral Jason Melcolm.

Pillage and plunder for Shireen and for the future of his children. It was a foul thing, piracy, something he had told himself never to do in his youth, for pirates lived by the sword and, in turn, died by it. Yet fate loved its ironies, and here he was, acting like a brigand. Of course, they didn't call themselves brigands or pirates or outlaws but captains and commanders loyally serving the Lord Regent and his appointed admirals.

But why did it matter when the difference was a mere order?

Davos was no good at it. He was no good at this fighting and warfare and lording business. He loathed it. He was a smuggler, a sailor, but he only needed to give orders and the thirteen ships and their seasoned crews under his command would follow. Of course, being the future Queen's right-hand man allowed him to have a measure of independence. He could avoid the grisly parts of this whole mess. But his men yearned for spoils and plunder and glory.

But with every fishing village plundered, every home burnt, or smallfolk slain, Davos felt that the knife in his heart twisted little by little. When this was over, he would retire home to his wife and children and busy himself with something honest like fishing. Damn the highlords and their petty war!

Yet no matter how much he wanted to leave or to go back home, he couldn't. Not yet. It would implicate his sons and Shireen, and his children and family would be worse off for it. And worse, even if he took the chance to be recalled to Shireen's side and avoid all the bloodshed, his hotheaded sons would remain here, recklessly risking their lives for the promise of loot and glory.

Davos stood on the deck and watched as the dark, cold waves of the Narrow Sea mercilessly battered at the Black Bessa. In contrast, the sky above was cerulean blue, unblemished by clouds in every direction. Neither the sea nor the storm god seemed worried by pesky mortal affairs.

No matter how much Davos disliked war and the wanton death it wrought on all, it seemed they were winning. Morale was high, and everyone followed Lord Stark obediently, doubly so when he announced that he had received a vision from the old gods that the reavers and zealots plaguing the North had been broken.

Some were distrustful of fitful dreams, but the sheer conviction in Eddard Stark's words still assuaged many.

Thus, the second admiral, Ser Wylis Manderly, and over a hundred warships sailed with Lord Stark to deal with Pentos. There was no doubt in Davos's mind that they would succeed; the only question was how much time it would take.

A cry tore him from his musings.

"Two swan ships spotted to the northwest! "

Surely enough, Davos could spot two distant blotches on the horizon if he squinted enough.

Within a minute, one of the cabin boys brought him the far-eye, and half the sailors and mariners gathered around him, eager and anticipating.

"Your orders, captain?"

They were asking if Davos would ignore or extort them or even plunder if the ships were Dornish.

"Approach them," he commanded as he looked through the far eye.

"These look to be Summer Isles design," his first mate noted. "But Ynanna on their sails suggests they are Lyseni."

And Lord Stark had given explicit orders not to molest any ships flying under the Lyseni banners. Nearly all the trade through Myr and Tyrosh passed through Lys, and the magisters had agreed to respect Tommen Baratheon's claim to the Iron Throne.

"It wouldn't be the first Dornish traders trying to sneak through such tricks," Ser Aron Delen scoffed. A skilled knight from Shireen's loyal retinue, if overeager for plunder and glory.

"This is why I will inspect if they are who they seem to be," Davos reassured. "The wind is not in their favour, so we can easily catch them."

For a moment, it looked like the swan ships would try to escape, but they quickly slowed down and furled up their sails. An experienced eye such as his could see that they were moving rather slowly, which meant they were loaded to the brim.

Half an hour later, the ships under his command intercepted and surrounded the sleek but sizable swan ships. Up close, Davos could see the crews had skin as black as tar, and a few amongst their ranks were stringing up a dozen goldenheart bows, but they wouldn't help them. Thick, heavy shields would absorb the first arrows, and a volley of crossbowmen would easily take them down if it ever got to fighting.

But Davos didn't intend to fight, for neither the crew nor the ship looked remotely Dornish. Things grew tenser as Black Betha and the rest approached the ship. Davos shouted through a trumpet at the grouped-up Summer Islanders.

"Who is your captain?"

"I, Xallor Dala, captain the Swift Swan!" a muscled man, obviously from the Summer Isles, bellowed through his own trumpet in decent common. "We have no feud with the Iron Throne or House Baratheon!"

"Then surely, you wouldn't mind me inspecting your cargo?"

Xallor Dala paused for a moment with a heavy frown.

"My friend, I am willing to give you a gift as a sign of our friendship. There is no need for such things!"

"Name's Ser Davos Seaworth, Xallor Dala! A gift would be most welcome, but it wouldn't make me forget my orders, my good man," Davos pointed out. "Any ships carrying Dornishmen or Dornish goods are to be... dealt with."

"It is good we are coming from Weeping Town of the Stormlands, then!"

After ten minutes of tense haggling, the Summer Islander let Davos on board alone.

"Father, is this wise?" Dale asked with a fierce frown.

"Wise? If it's a trap, no," Davos shrugged.

"Then why?"

"My son, I'm old and weary, and my hands feel covered with more blood than I can wash off for a lifetime." The old smuggler sighed. "Aye, we can just attack them here, and no one would blame us for it, but I've had my fill of carnage. What if they are who they say they are?"

Matthos's knuckles were white from how hard he was gripping the hilt of his axe.

"What if they take you hostage? You're too important."

"Then I die for my conviction, Matthos," Davos stated firmly in his fatherly voice. "You are men grown, and you ought to know—there are some lines you must never cross lest you want to lose all self-respect for yourself. For me, this is it. Should I die here for my foolishness, I have two strong sons to avenge my old bones, do I not?"

"We can send someone else to check in your stead, Father," Dale said. His oldest had always been as daring as a lion and as stubborn as a mule.

"No. I shall be the one to do it."

"If you disappear for longer than a quarter of an hour, we're going to slaughter everyone abroad, Father. Or if they return you with even the tiniest hair missing from you! Don't hesitate to tell them that," Matthos threatened, face twisted into a savage scowl.

"I am gladdened, but remember Dale, Matthos. You are young and daring, but heed my words—never do anything you will not be able to live with. Do nothing that would make you ashamed to tell your children about. Live your lives well without resorting to acts that would fill your hearts with regrets."

Both of them nodded solemnly and returned to their ships, and for once, Davos felt his heart at ease. His shoulders were lighter than they had been since Stannis had fallen ill. He had raised two good sons. Hotheaded and headstrong, but good.

Perhaps it would be time to pass on his ship to someone worthy if he lived through this and devoted the rest of his life to his wife and children. Even Lady, no, Queen Shireen, should she need his services. But now that the shadow of the golden crown lingered upon her head with the betrothal to Tommen, Shireen did not lack for advisors and leal vassals who could advise her far better than Davos could ever dream to.

Gods, his old bones were weary.

Soon, he boarded the Quick Swan through a long plank and was greeted by the fretful Xallor, "Welcome abroad to my humble ship, Captain Seaworth. We're on a schedule, and our goods—"

"Schedules can wait," Davos interrupted. The crewmen looked like ordinary sailors from the Summer Isles, lacking the desperation many smugglers carried. And judging by the bright, colourful garments and swords, they were not strapped for coin. "Where is your cargo manifest?"

"A moment, one of my boys will bring it here," the man coughed.

Soon enough, a cabin boy brought over a roll of parchment, sealed and stamped by what looked to be the dockmaster of Weeping Town. Few of those who braved the seas could truly read, but the sailors had learned to recognise certain words or at least employ one well-read man abroad.

Thanks to Shireen's persistence, Davos could now read himself, albeit very slowly.

Stormwine, furs, high-quality timber, amber from the Rainwood, beeswax, and bronze ingots from the Red Watch. The timber and bronze ingots would definitely explain why the ships were going so slowly. These were the usual goods the Stormlands traded, and any trip from the Summer Isles or Lys bringing exotic fruits, wines, silks, and gems in return would see a hefty profit even after the dockmaster's customs and fees.

Davos looked up, "I'll need to inspect the holds myself."

"As you say, captain," Captain Xallor said, but the Onion Knight caught a trace of reluctance in his tone.

Davos tensed but tried to keep an open mind. No captain liked his ships being inspected, even more under the threat of violence and surrounded by armed to the teeth warships. It was laughably easy for mariners to extort trading vessels or even 'confiscate' their goods if they felt bold enough.

There was a chance this was a trap, but Davos would never forgive himself if it wasn't and more blood was on his hands.

"I'll let you know my sons have orders to storm the ships if they don't see me on the deck for longer than a quarter candle mark," he pointed out, not unkindly. "You may kill my old bones at your risk."

"You're a brave man, Captain Seaworth," Xallor grumbled underneath his nose and handed him over a lit oil lantern.

Davos descended the narrow wooden stairs into the hold. He was met with planks of timber stacked upon each other, with barrels of wine lined up on the sides, taking up most of the space. He could see piles of bronze ingots covered with furs of various sizes. Nothing caught his eye, but Davos was no fool. The hold was too shallow—there was a second compartment underneath. Surely enough, he found a wooden hatch underneath a pile of furs at the far end.

If he wasn't a seasoned smuggler, even Davos would have been fooled. Alas, now that he had found this place, he was obligated to check it.

Secret cargo holds like this were usually used to carry illegal goods or... slaves.

After a heartbeat of hesitation, he latched it open and descended an even narrower staircase. The first thing that greeted him was the acrid stench of sweaty men crammed into a small place, and the second was a sword pressed to his neck.

The sword was wielded by a man clad in steel from head to toe; only the visor of his helm was lifted. Behind him were at least scores of men armed to the teeth; over half a hundred of them emerged from the darkness, and they all glared at Davos with violence and bloodshed in their eyes.

And the warrior to the front had a golden rose proudly emblazoned on his breastplate.

"Not a step further," his voice was as soft as silk.

"You have my life in your hands, Ser Tyrell," Davos raised his hands in surrender. "Though I profess myself surprised to find a man such as you with armed retinue in a hidden slave-holding compartment."

"This is the Onion knight," one of the men spat. "Stannis' loyal pet smuggler."

"Lady Shireen Baratheon's loyal man," the old smuggler declared. "And proud of it. I would die for her."

"Aye, that can be arranged—"

"Androw," the Tyrell knight halted him with a single gesture, yet the sword remained steady on Davos' throat. His face was young, but his eyes were filled with madness and grief. "There is time and place for bloodshed. Ser Davos Seaworth is a man worthy of respect, who earned his spurs in a far more honourable way than many."

If the news coming from the Narrow Sea were correct, only one Tyrell knight was left alive outside Oldtown. *Ser Garlan the Grim*.

The Onion Knight swallowed heavily. "You seem like a decent man, Ser, so I must warn you if your Captain has not told you already. Thirteen ships filled with seasoned warriors eager for bloodshed and glory surround the Quick Swan and its twin ship. If my sons don't see my face on deck in a quarter candle mark, they will attack regardless."

The men started clamouring angrily, some even calling, "Kill him quickly!"

Yet the rose knight remained unmoving.

"You're not bargaining for your life, merely making a statement," Garlan Tyrell observed.

"Aye, for I have no quarrel with you and yours, lest you support Renly Baratheon or Aegon the Pretender?"

"We bow to neither of these false kings," an angry man shouted. "Fuck the crowns and the highlords and their Game of Thrones!"

"If you do not follow any kings, who do you serve, then?" Davos asked hoarsely, feeling beads of sweat pool on his brow as the cold tip of the sword still pressed to his throat.

"The Stranger." Garlan's soft response made his blood freeze. "We fight for vengeance. For my wife. For my sister. For all of her ladies-in-waiting. For vengeance."

"Then, you're going the wrong way," the former smuggler pointed out with a cough. Even he had heard rumours of the Wyl bastard's foul deeds. "Wyl is the opposite direction, Sers."

"Garlan has slain the Black Adder and his get!" the man named Androw proudly declared. "Now, we're going to save the maidens sold to slavery in Lys!"

"Fool, that's supposed to be a secret—"

"It is of no matter at this point," Garlan said, lowering his sword. "What good is lying now?"

"You're letting me go?" Davos asked, rubbing the place on his neck where the blade had rested.

"Just as you have no quarrel with us, we have none with you."

"What if I order my men to attack when you let me go?"

"You do not strike me as a vicious, bloodthirsty man," Garlan hummed. "Such a man wouldn't risk his hide to feed the starving men besieged in Storm's End, no matter the rewards. Stannis Baratheon is many things, but a poor judge of character, he is not. If he knighted you, then you have the qualities of a true knight, even if you lack the martial skills for it. But perhaps I am mistaken, and I shall pay with my life for it. A death in battle honouring the Stranger is a better way to go than most could dream of."

Davos stared at the man before him with wonder.

"What about your goals, then?" Davos asked. "Do you not want to find your wife and the other noble maidens?"

"If we run out of luck, it is because the Stranger has willed it so," was the amused response. "We are all dead men, living on borrowed time, and every next breath we take is a blessing."

Gods, this man... he yearned for death. He was a madman.

"Do any of you know anything of Lys?" he asked. "Can you even speak bastard Valyrian?"

"Nay," Garlan Tyrell bowed his head. "But we shall try regardless. We must, for honour compels us."

The bravest madman Davos had ever seen, even more daring than Stannis. And Davos knew the hearts of men. Some were good, some were bad, but the knight before him was a man of staunch character if broken by life. A broken man who welcomed death but was not afraid to forge on.

Local translators can be hired with coin, no matter how trustworthy. But these men... these men were truly ready to walk into their deaths. It was not just Garlan; all of his warriors had the glimmer of resolve in their eyes—the same glimmer Davos had seen in Stannis' eyes on his deathbed. They had lost faith in the crown, the throne and the cause of the righteous. This war had made them lose heart in kings and lieges. The only thing that was keeping them alive was duty.

Davos could understand their resolve and dislike. Gods, he could understand them all too well.

"Wait here," the former smuggler urged, deciding. "I need to speak with my sons."

He hastily ran up the narrow stairs, rushing out. And it was good that he did because his crews all looked eager to attack the Swan Ships.

Shireen, the future Queen, might not need a stupid old man like him or an old smuggler. But these men... Garlan Tyrell, they *needed* help. Not to kill and murder and pillage in the name of something they no longer believed in, but to save those who had been savaged by war. Those forgotten by the Iron Throne and by Renly.

And the Seven-Pointed Star said even the gods help the righteous.

"You're leaving, father?" Dale asked, aghast. "What did you see on that ship?"

A part of him wanted to be honest. But another part knew his sons were eager to rise, and Garlan Tyrell's head meant a noble title, a castle, and a hefty sum of gold, assuming the new king handed out his brother's promised rewards at the end.

Even if his sons resisted the temptation, could the other captains do so once the word spread?

"I'm not abandoning the campaign, just leaving you in command," Davos declared, deflecting the question. "Be cautious, my son. Lives depend on it."

His eldest swallowed heavily and nodded.

“But Father,” Matthos scratched his shaggy brown beard. “What exactly will you be doing? Leaving might be considered... desertion, if not treason.”

Indeed. He was no longer a lone smuggler with only his head and boat to lose and the world to gain. No, this had to be approached with caution.

“I’m not leaving Her Grace’s service,” Davos coughed abashedly. “The campaign here has been done, the Dornish have been savage, and only pillage and vigil remains. I shall... merely follow a trail—call it a hunch. My loyalty shall always lie with Lady Shireen. As soon as I finish, I shall return to King’s Landing to explain myself to her in person.”

The Seven forgive him, but he was tired of this senseless bloodshed. He could no longer figure out who was right or wrong. When had these words even lost meaning?

Was it when the war had spiralled out into something ruthless, something so savage that made his insides churn?

Or when the desperation was turned into ardour after the victories started piling up and even his own sons were eager to pillage as much as they could, whether from honest sailors, fishermen, or the unfortunate pirate that crossed their ways?

The old smuggler didn’t know. But what he knew was that Ser Davos Seaworth was not made for war and such senseless savagery. His good hand found the bones of his digits, still secured in a pouch around his neck. Hopefully, Lady Shireen would forgive him for being wilful just this once.

9th Day of the 11th Moon (6 days later)

Eddard Stark, the Bay of Pentos

He had not dared to sail until sufficient supplies to brew Ebrose’s cure were procured for his part of the fleet. Even broken by war, the power of a Free City stretched far.

The Bay of Pentos provided ample shelter from any coming storm. Thankfully, the sea had calmed, and the weather was good. It didn’t seem that the Pentoshi were eager to try and fight a naval battle, for all of their ships had retreated around their harbour. Ser Wylis Manderly was quite confident about the outcome of any such engagement, should it happen.

Ned never expected to return to Pentos, but needs must.

‘You should have sacked the city when I told you,’ Theon scoffed in his mind.

The city looked slightly more imposing from the sea than from land, but he wasn’t happy to return here. In fact, he would be content never to set foot in Essos ever again. Alas, fate had other plans.

Perhaps Robert had been right all along—they should have gotten rid of the damned Pentoshi Cheesemonger, if for an entirely different reason. How many ‘coincidences’ had Illyrio Mopatis orchestrated? How often had he stuck his grubby, fat fingers in the affairs of the Seven Kingdoms?

Was he the man who had tried to poison him and Tommen?

Was he the man who killed Jon Arryn?

A part of him wondered if they had always been so blind.

It doesn't matter. The hour of reckoning had come.

A small pleasure barge left Pentos' docks, heading their way under white sails. His glance turned to the board, where Tommen was practising with a weighted wooden sword while Winter and the still-nameless young lion sat lazily next to each other. The beasts liked seafaring as much as the Lord of Winterfell did, and that was to say not at all.

Ned had expected that Tommen would try to talk his way out of martial practice now that he was to be king like Joffrey had, but that had the opposite effect on Robert's son. He was now training with a redoubled effort to become "*The greatest swordsman ever!*"

"Tommen, what is the proper response to an assassination attempt?" Ned inquired.

The young king stared at the city with a slight frown.

"A declaration of war," he said slowly. "But we cannot afford another foe right now, can we?"

The boy had grown a lot in the half a year since they had last been here, in more ways than one. Ned could see it now—Tommen would be a fine king.

"You would be right," Ned nodded. "But while we cannot afford another war now, we can afford one later, and this is just as powerful a bargaining chip because then we will have the full might of the Seven Kingdoms behind us. But such threats only work from men with a proven record of boldness and victories."

"So, young and untested men will not be taken seriously," Tommen summarised, wiping his sweaty face with a rug. "But seasoned veteran commanders project power with their presence alone?"

"Quite. But not all men are suited for matters of diplomacy. It requires a cool head, finesse, and knowledge."

The small barge inched closer to their ship.

"Isn't this the same man who met us last time?"

"That he is," Ned agreed. "Observe closely now."

The barge arrived next to the Howling Winter, and the envoy quickly climbed atop the great galley.

"Nysaro Narratis of Pentos," the Lord of Winterfell greeted evenly. "We meet again."

"Well met, Lord Stark," the silver-haired man bowed deeply.

"Lord Regent now. I'm here in my capacity as the Royal Regent and Lord Protector of the Seven Kingdoms."

"Lord Regent it is, then. I am gladdened to see you have found the ships you were searching for. A grand success, even. A hundred and fifty of them, and warships, at that!"

"It was an interesting if overly lengthy journey," his voice thickened with amusement. "You see, the first group of Myrish sellswords we encountered attacked me and my retinue on sight. I thought it was folly at first, but it turned out they did it under orders."

"No wonder you broke the city of Myr," Nysaro smiled, but the erratic shuffling of his hands betrayed his unease.

"I was merely tired of wanting to return home and be denied at every turn," the Lord of Winterfell drawled, taking a small joy at the rivulets of sweat on the man's pale brow. "And some provocations cannot be left unpunished, lest people think you a weakling."

"Quite, Lord Regent. Even the most patient man would do the same in your place. As gladdened as I am to see you again, let us get down to business. How can the city of Pentos help the Iron Throne?"

"I heard a most interesting tale in Myr," Ned began. "About how a cheesemonger named Illyrio Mopatis paid a few sellsword companies to eliminate the Lord of Winterfell and the young heir of the Seven Kingdoms. Their spymaster was eager to inform me of it in the greatest detail in exchange for a pardon."

Nysarro Narratis paled.

"The Forty of Pentos knew nothing of such matters--"

"It doesn't matter," Ned coldly interrupted, though he noted the man was speaking the truth. "He is one of yours, and you denied me a swift return. How do I know you were not conspiring with him as enemies of the Iron Throne? I want Illyrio Mopatis delivered to me by the coming dawn. Furthermore, Pentos shall declare their support for Tommen Baratheon, the rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms."

"And what would such support entail?" The magister asked nervously.

"Fifteen thousand pounds of gold and twenty thousand bushels of foodstuffs each month for three years. Half to be sent to the North, and the other half to King's Landing or other harbours agreed upon later."

"This is a blatant robbery!" The Pentoshi roared with outrage. "Such threats will not work on us. You are at war, Lord Stark, and cannot afford to linger here. You overstep, my lord, and we can join this Aegon--"

"I will set all the ships in your harbour on fire. I will scour the Pentoshi flatlands, killing your cronies, looting your manses and estates, before freeing your slaves—or was it indentured servants? Nevertheless, you can do nothing to stop me," Ned promised darkly. "Then, I will inform Braavos how I saw your well-trained and well-armed militia of over five thousand citizens. Once I squash all the pretenders in Westeros, I shall return to lay waste to Pentos with the full might of the Seven Kingdoms. Each man, woman, and child shall be slain, and the lands shall be salted so even weeds do not grow here again."

"This..." Nysarro Narratis swallowed heavily, shaking. "You're bluffing!"

"Perhaps I am," the Lord of Winterfell acknowledged. "But can you risk it?"

"You will be fighting four pretender kings for years, Lord Stark! I shall not be threatened so blatantly--"

"The four have become two, Nysarro Narratis of Pentos. Hightower and Greyjoy's heads grace the gates of Winterfell as we speak, Renly stands alone in Storm's End, and this fool pretending to be my nephew shall be squashed sooner or later. As a Regent and Lord Protector of the Realm, it is my duty to deal with all threats to the Iron Throne, whether open or hidden. And Pentos is one such threat as long as it houses Magister Illyrio Mopatis. The king suffers no attempts on his life, and neither do I!"

"...I shall let the Forty know," the sweating envoy bowed deeply.

"One last thing," Ned grabbed his shoulder. "Tell your magisters that should they choose to ally with the Iron Throne in this hour of need, they shall receive support in kind should such a moment arrive."

"You promise to stand against Braavos for us, Lord Stark?" The man's demeanour changed completely, now looking at him with wonder and suspicion.

"So long as slavery remains forbidden, you will find the doors to trade with the Seven Kingdoms open and that House Stark and the Iron Throne treasure their allies," the Lord Regent of the Seven Kingdoms promised.

Just like that, the Pentoshi envoy left.

'Oh, you sly dog. Now they'll back you with everything they have, just to get rid of the Braavosi yoke!' Theon roared with laughter. *'That man Mopatis will be delivered to you on a silver platter, even.'*

For once, he agreed with Theon.

"Carrot and stick?" Tommen asked cautiously. "Will it work?"

"A man can be threatened to act on the pain of death; that much is true. But his actions will be reluctant, and he will remember the indignity you inflicted upon him for life. Where men fight for love, for family, and for honour, ambition, and glory, true alliances are forged by mutual benefit. Aye, I might be unhappy with Pentos, but that does not mean I cannot turn them to our side."

"But what if they conspired together with this cheesemonger Mopatis?" Howland Reed asked.

"They didn't." Ned smiled savagely. "The envoy wasn't lying. Besides, we found plenty about the cheesemonger. He rose too quickly—suspiciously so. For twenty years, from a destitute nameless Bravo to one of the richest men in Pentos? Such quick success attracts envy and enemies."

"That still means we might have to fight Braavos next," Tommen noted quietly. "Their fleets are the strongest in the world."

"Braavos might have a million people in its city and three more in the hilly hinterlands, but they lack trees. The arsenal of Braavos might assemble a single ship per day, but such capabilities are worthless after it runs out of wood—not to mention, I doubt the veracity of such claims in the first place. Light galleys, perhaps, but certainly not the heavier kind. Then, they would need to train sailors, mariners, and captains; with their meagre manpower compared to Westeros, Pentos, Tyrosh, and Myr, who combined have twenty times as many souls and enough forests to build over a hundred ships for each Braavosi one? Braavos might be a dangerous foe, but far from invincible."

"I think I understand. It's easy to forget how powerful a united Westeros is due to the current conflicts." Tommen had a pensive look as he squinted his eyes thoughtfully.

"What if the Iron Bank meddles?" Ser Wylis coughed. "They have the coin to hire many sellswords—"

"The sellswords are already with Aegon," Ned scoffed. "At least those who survived the Ashen Plains and the Fall of Volantis. The other Free Cities are either broken, with us or at war with each other, hiring all available companies. No. Braavos cannot win this fight, and the Sealord ought to know this."

"But... what if he doesn't?" Tommen asked. "What if he decides to fight us anyway?"

"Then we fight again. Braavosi arrogance can only go so far if they delude themselves that they're the main power in the Narrow Sea."

“BARATHEON!”

“STARK!”

The men continued roaring with excitement while Ned shook his head with amusement. He didn't need another war, but this was the easiest way to supply the funds and foodstuffs for the North, the exhausted King's Landing, and his continued campaign here.

“If things go smooth here, where do we go next?” Rogar Wull asked gruffly. “King's Landing? The North?”

“The Vale.”

If that duplicitous crone Wayne Wood thought she could spit on Jon Arryn's legacy and take control of his son while Eddard Stark lived, she was sorely mistaken.

It was said that the Rose Septon's decapitated head was placed on the burned husk of Barrowton's heart tree, and it began to regrow. It is said the Saltspear was choked with bodies and turned red after the Redwyne Fleet turned on the unprepared fleets of Hightower, Hewett, Serry, Grimm, Chester, Costayne, Bulwer, Blackbar, and Cuy, all of who had been busy fishing. Blackwood meticulously exterminated any band of zealots he met on his way through the Barrowlands, though he almost lost his life when meeting a band of two score heavily armoured reavers. Still, the Reach's campaign in the North had officially concluded just as the Crownbreaker marched down from Winterfell with nine thousand men.

Robb Stark's campaign to set everything south of the Mander's Mouth on fire continued unimpeded, and many of the landed knights and lords hastily started deserting Hightower and surrendering to Dustin the Blackhearted. Still, the scouring continued slowly but surely, and only those who surrendered unconditionally were spared.

Pentos handed over Illyrio Mopatis to Lord Stark and declared its full support for Tommen Baratheon. Braavos was in a whiplash over the declaration, but the Black Death had left the city paralysed to act and over half of the citizens had perished. Many called for supporting Aegon in the Sunset War, but none could find sellsails or sellswords to do our bidding. None of the Sunset lords answered the urging of the Iron Bank either. In the end, the matter was dropped in favour of punishing Pentos for acting without the Sealord's leave.

But there weren't many ways they could punish Pentos without directly pulling Braavos into the bloody Sunset War, and even the most confident of fools did not think it would be an easy or profitable war. No decision could be reached without the input of the Sealord, and the elections hastily began, but it would take moons before they finished.

Aegon's forces encroached on Storm's End, but Renly did not deign to leave his mighty castle. Ser Jason Melcolm was meticulously setting the Dornish coastline aflame, looting and burning everything he could while avoiding any armed forces, and the Lords of Dorne were powerless to retaliate without warships of their own.

While fighting had cooled off in the Sunset Lands, Lord Corbray and Lady Wayne Wood had managed to convince the Castellan of the Gates of the Moon to Surrender. Yet Ser Vardis Egen remained stubborn and did not acknowledge Wayne Wood as Robert Arryn's rightful regent. Ser Harrold Hardyng led eleven thousand men down the Highroad into the Riverlands but was met with stiff resistance from

Lords Stevron Frey and Jason Mallister, who hounded his forces at every step but refused to give battle-

Excerpt from 'Lazyro Zelyne's thoughts on the Sunset War'.

Author's Endnote: And so goes another chapter, even though irl tried to sabotage me a few times with it.

Starring: Eddard "This is how you legally extort people to become your allies" Stark, Arianne "war is boring, but I will do my best to make it interesting," Martell, and Davos "why am I such a sucker for lost causes?" Seaworth. And lastly, Garlan "I'm just a fool looking for death, why are more people lining up to follow me?" Tyrell.