

Forum of Thrones: Interlude I

Seven Letters – Spring Forth

Mern

The king had to admit, when he first laid eyes upon Raylansfair, he was surprised by its state. From the reports, he had expected a smouldering ruin, just barely avoiding complete destruction at the hands of the Ironborn. The lighthouse, or what was left of it, fulfilled his expectations, a mere stump left of the ancient building, charred stone and blackened dirt. Yet the walls he saw in the distance looked surprisingly clean and though smoke was rising from the city, it was the usual that was produced by hundreds of houses so close to each other. Though pleased by this discovery, Mern's anger remained. Black Harren had sent his raiders to raze one of his cities. He had thought the Iron King a smarter man. It was true, his kingdom had suffered from the war against Argilac the Arrogant. His own father had died and Mern still felt the shame of having to kneel to the Storm King to gain the ceasefire he was seeking for. But this had been a decade ago. A new generation of men had grown up. Half the men of his kingdom had not survived Durrandon's fury, but that was under his father's rule. Mern was proud of what his kingdom had become since then. His men were the knights of summer and they stood stronger than ever before.

A hundred of these knights were with him right now. His entourage, as he made the way from Highgarden to Raylansfair, to inspect the damage that had been done to the proud city. Robert Raylan was dead. Mern himself had barely known the solitary lord, but his father had spoken fondly of him, back in the day. Beyond that, it pained him to see an old, loyal house fading away like this, to be replaced by a vassal he felt uncertainty about.

"It looks peaceful", Edmund remarked next to him and Mern glanced at his son. In his mind, Edmund would always remain a boy, in a certain way, even if this boy, his son, had long since grown up to be a father himself, both of his sons serving as squires. At forty years of age, Edmund had full auburn hair. Mern's used to be the same, though his age had left him almost completely grey by now, his beard growing thinner each day, though his back was still straight. A warrior, like his sons, hopefully like his grandsons one day.

"Oddly so", Mern answered and Edmund raised an eyebrow. "Are you displeased about this?", he asked and the king shook his head. "Distrustful", he admitted. "There have been a number of odd coincidences surrounding Petyr Vyrwel and it's up to him to explain them to me"

"Lord Vyrwel can be trusted", the man to his left said. Devrin Oakheart had offered to accompany him from Highgarden to Raylansfair, before moving home to his seat at Old Oak. The lord was one of his oldest supporters and one whose judgement he usually trusted.

"He left quite an impression on you", Mern replied and Devrin smirked, moving a finger through his long, bushy beard. Though only a few years younger than Mern himself, age hadn't left much of a mark on him, his hair still having the chestnut colour of his youth. "I always had a good eye for people", he spoke.

Mern nodded in agreement, though a shimmer of doubt remained. "Your son is going to marry Petyr's younger sister", he brought up. "I trust you, but your judgement might be clouded in this situation" Calmly, Devrin nodded. "If you think so, your grace", he replied. "Though what do you suggest? House Raylan is gone and young Petyr proved himself by saving the city"

"Devrin has a point", Edmund admitted. "I say he deserves a chance" Mern sighed. "He does", he agreed. "But I still have questions. Let's see if he can answer them to my satisfaction. I know what I want to do, but my next move might depend on his own" "A reasonable approach, your grace", Devrin spoke up and Mern smiled beneath his beard. "It is the man by his side that worries me", he admitted. "Maron Mullendore... I have been sternly warned about him, from his cousin at Uplands nonetheless. What good is a man who doesn't even have the support of his own family?"

Oakheart thought about this for a moment. "The question is not, can you trust Maron, but can you trust Cregan Mullendore?", he brought up and Mern had to raise an eyebrow at a thought that actually seemed sensible. "You think he would lie about his own cousin?", he asked and Devrin shrugged. "I think Cregan is a harsh man, capable of harsh things. Perhaps he does not want his cousin to rise to prominence"

"Or perhaps he's telling the truth", Edmund mumbled and Devrin nodded. "Perhaps he is", he agreed. "I don't know Maron very well. Whatever happens, know that I trust your judgement" Mern sighed at this statement. "Whatever happens", he replied quietly, clapping the spurs to his white destrier.

And so they rode towards the city. Eight men of the royal vanguard first, lesser nobles and courtiers who wanted to earn Mern's favour, they rode in pairs of two, the first four holding horns, the following four the royal banners. The king himself followed, Prince Edmund by his side. Lord Oakheart and Edmund's squire Garlan, Mern's youngest nephew. Another eight knights of the vanguard followed, two of them carrying the personal banners of Edmund, another two holding up Oakheart's colours.

In pairs of two, the long royal convoy approached the gates of Raylansfair. Of course, Mern had informed Vyrwel and his new right-hand man of their coming arrival. As such, the gates were widely opened. The first four men blew into their horns, a loud sound that echoed from the walls and the houses behind them. A sound that filled Mern with pride. For ten thousand years, his family had ruled over these lands. And for ten thousand years after him, they would.

This knowledge, it was happiness of a sort. Yet Mern was an old man, he had seen death and had suffered losses. And the letter young Garlan was carrying in his satchel, the one he had received just hours before leaving Highgarden for Raylansfair, it was a source of worry. He knew, Argilac the Arrogant would not take it seriously. He knew, Black Harren would laugh at its contents. Yet Mern, ninth of his name, King of the Reach, Defender of the Marches, Protector of the Mander and Stalwart Hand of the South, he knew better. This was a threat to be taken seriously. He'd rather overestimate that man than underestimate him. Aegon, this king of cinder and smoke, of fire and blood.

Mern noticed the faces. These men and women, the smallfolk of Raylansfair, they were surprised by his arrival. There was hope in their gaze and awe. For a moment, he allowed himself to bathe in their reverence like a far younger man would have done. Just as he had done hundreds of times before, he raised his hand and waved, smiling down at his subjects. A simple gesture. And they loved him for it.

Slowly, the royal procession made their way through the city, from the eastern gate to the centre. They had not yet removed the crude arena in full, source of one of Mern's worries, one of the things he wanted to discuss with Lord Vyrwel. The rumours that had reached him from Raylansfair had been almost as concerning as those coming from the east.

The riders slowed down even further as they rode up the path that led to the castle. Mern spotted the banners. A wyvern on black and red, next to six orange butterflies on white. Vyrwel and Mullendore, side by side. Guards stared down at them, though in contrast to what the equal amount of banners might imply, Mern noticed that they wore exclusively Vyrwel's colours.

Petyr Vyrwel and Maron Mullendore awaited them in the courtyard. The Lord of Darkdell was young, perhaps just barely older than Mern's oldest grandson. His blond hair was carefully combed back and one hand moved through his beard, as he was lost in thought. His other hand rested on the shoulders of a young girl, probably not older than ten years. Her hair, tied in a braid, sported a pretty colour, dark and soft, while her eyes were undeniably the same as Petyr's. Both were clad in black, with a hint of red.

Maron next to him was a stark contrast. He was the sort some saw as an ugly brute. Others saw a seasoned warrior. For Mern, it was a mixture of both. With a bandage still covering a gruesome facial wound, his heavy weight and greying red hair, the man was no looker, that much was for sure. At the same time, he had the build of a fighter beneath the beginning belly and the one eye that was visible was sharp and attentive. He was leaning on a thick cane, the kind that blurred the line between a walking aid and a blunt weapon.

The vanguard split up, four men riding to each of Mern's sides, leaving their king in the centre. He brought his horse to a full stop, with Edmund and Devrin doing the same. The old king sighed as he descended from the horse, cursing the thin chainmail he wore, not because he feared he might need it, but for ornamental purposes. Paired with the heavy white coat and the broad, green cloak, adorned by a collar of ermine fur, he knew he was an impressive sight, even at over sixty years of age. Yet the weight was tremendous.

As he approached, Petyr knelt down, his daughter doing the same before him. Maron hesitated, a pained expression flashing over his face, before he slowly, clumsily, managed to kneel down as well. The knights and courtiers that had gathered behind them did the same. Mern smiled benevolently. "Rise, mylords!", he ordered with a booming voice.

"Your grace, it is an honour!", Petyr said. "May I introduce my daughter, Edith Flowers" The young girl gulped as the king's mild gaze fell upon her, though she managed a smile, followed by a curtsy, surely a gesture she had practised for hours. "And here we have my trusted advisor and friend, Ser Maron Mullendore"

The wounded knight lifted himself up, a deed that cost him quite some effort, as he limped closer. "I have looked forward for this meeting, your grace", he said in a friendly tone. "It's a special occasion. This city never got much attention from royalty"

"Nor from House Mullendore", Mern answered, as he extended his hand. Maron shook it and the king was pleasantly surprised by the firm, strong handshake he received. "But these are special times. An old house has died out and an old enemy has all but declared war on us" He glanced at his companions. "Mylords, this is my son and heir, Prince Edmund", he said and Petyr bowed, as Mern pointed at the other man. "And here is Devrin Oakheart, Lord of Old Oak" Devrin put a hand onto his heart, giving their hosts a nod. "An honour to meet you", he said and a smile appeared on Petyr's face.

"Elusive company visits us today", he said. "Splendid. Your grace, my prince, Lord Oakheart, I would like to invite you to my hall. A great feast will be hosted to your honour!" Mern and his son exchanged a glance, before the king shook his head. "I am afraid the feast has to wait. There is something more urgent we have to speak about"

His announcement seemed to catch both, Petyr and Maron, by surprise. Even Devrin gave him a curious look. "Is there any place where we can speak in private?", the king asked and Petyr nodded. "Of course, your grace", he assured him. "Follow me at once"

He raised his hand and one of his knights approached, a plain man in Edmund's age. "Hugo, bring my daughter to her room", he said, as he smiled at the girl. "Edith, I'll come and fetch you soon. Be good, go with Hugo and when I return, you'll sit at the table of honour"

The girl's face lit up, as she hugged her father. The lord wrapped his arms around her for a moment, before they separated. Edith grabbed the knight's outstretched hand, as he led her away. Mern noticed that his son had a mild frown on his face. "A bastard at the table of honour?", Edmund asked.

Instantly, Petyr's smile faded. "You are an honoured guest, Prince Edmund", he said. "But a guest regardless. I do not mean to insult you or your high father, my king, but I will not let my daughter feast with the dregs at the lower end of my hall"

Edmund raised an eyebrow. "Is it your hall?", he asked, at which point Mern decided to put an end to this. He rested a hand on his son's shoulder. "This is one of the aspects we need to discuss today", he said. "Lead the way, mylord" He looked around his followers. "Edmund and Garlan, you will come with me", he ordered. "As well as Devrin Oakheart and Kasyn Luck"

The Lord of Old Oak nodded, while a knight slightly behind them saluted. Ser Kasyn was one of the newer knights at court, a handsome, young man with tanned skin and brown hair, as well as eyes as green as the sea in contrast. Mern had already thought about his role in the events to come. Young, ambitious and very eager to prove his loyalty, Kasyn would make a perfect candidate for the position he had in mind.

The seven men, now led by Petyr, marched across the courtyard, into the building itself.

Though being here for only a short few weeks now, the new lord found his way around quite well. He looked at Mern as the king fastened his pace to keep up with him.

"There have been concerning reports reaching my ears", the king said and Petyr raised an eyebrow. "What about?", he asked and Mern sighed. "They say you killed your own brother" Petyr's expression darkened. "A vile lie", he spoke. "And not true at all. My half-brother is dead, yes, but not at my hand"

"The bastard died in a trial by combat", Maron explained, his words showing the hatred he had for the late Lucas Flowers. "Before that, he confessed to a number of crimes he committed during a brief stay in Oldtown. Rape. Murder. Things that sicken me"

"You're easily sickened then, Ser", Edmund spoke up. "Do you know why he did it?" Petyr shook his head, mournfully. "I wanted to ask him. Begged him to explain. He did not. To spite me, he chose a trial by combat, to either live and escape justice, or to die without ever explaining himself"

It sounded convincing, yet Mern remained doubtful. The Storm Princess had told a different story during her stay in Highgarden, just a fortnight ago, when they spoke in private, away even from his own family. She sounded equally convincing, yet when pressed, Mern would rather like to believe one of his lords than the daughter of the man that killed his father. And some of Argella's claims sounded outright fabricated, if by herself or by the knight she had grown so fond of, he could not tell. Still, Mern knew better than to confront Maron about these claims. This was not the time for such quarrels. Yet what she had told him, it only further moved him to the decision he had come to.

"A tragedy", he said and Petyr nodded. "That it is", he sighed, as he opened a door to his right. "After you, your grace" Mern entered a large room, able to hold an entire war council, with a sturdy, round table in its centre. Sitting down on the chair closest to the fireplace, he gave Edmund a sign to sit down to his right, whereas Devrin took seat to his left. Petyr and Maron placed themselves at the opposite, while Garlan and Kasyn remained standing.

"I will be frank with you, Lord Petyr", Mern spoke up. "I do not know if I can trust your word. I knew your father, but last time I've seen you, you were a babe, barely able to crawl around" He noticed how Petyr's confident smile grew a bit weaker. "Your grace, I have saved this city", he brought up. "If there is any man more suited for this position, I would like to meet him"

Mern shook his head. "No man", he assured him. "At least none I can think of at the moment. In fact, there are more pressing matters, which might make this discussion moot" He raised his hand, waving Garlan closer. His nephew smiled as he approached the lords at their table. Despite his young years, his confidence was clear to see and Mern couldn't wait to see the day he would be knighted. He still had a way to go though, as Edmund once revealed. Reaching into his satchel, the boy pulled out the letter. Though broken, the sigil was still recognizable. There was but one house in all of Westeros that sported a three-headed dragon on their banners. "There you go, mylord", Garlan spoke, as he gave it straight to Petyr.

Narrowing his eyes as he spotted the sigil, Petyr began to read, while Maron glanced onto the letter. Unlike his lord, the brutish knight had less control over his emotions, as his hands clenched visibly. "He declared war on us?", he growled and Mern gave him a nod. "To all Westeros", he replied. "I know King Loren received a similar letter, a few days before I did. No doubt Aegon sent seven of these" Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Devrin Oakheart, leaning back in his chair, a baffled look on his face. Mern felt pity with his old friend. Perhaps it would have been better to tell him right away, but aside from Edmund and Garlan, no one else in this room had learned about this letter before now.

"Is he quite mad?", Petyr spat. "He cannot hope to win against one kingdom, much less all seven. Two houses, both of them small in power, are following his house" Mern shook his head. "More followed quickly", he answered. "House Massey and Bar Emmon broke their ties with the Storm King in favour of King Aegon. At Blackwater Bay, House Rosby and Stokeworth followed"

"They submitted without a fight?", Maron growled. This time, Edmund spoke up. "Stokeworth put up a mild fight. Fired some archers at the pretender-queen Visenya", he said. "In return, she had her beast set fire to the roof of their castle. Now, Stokeworth marches under a new king"

"It matters not", Petyr assured him. "Even if he wins allies quickly, how powerful could he possibly grow? To the north, he marches into the Riverlands, where Harren Hoare will crush him. To the south, he can only face the Storm King. Either is a foe he cannot defeat"

"And neither will take him seriously, not until it is too late", Mern argued. "I know both men well, mylord. We cannot rely on them to take care of this Valyrian madman" He shook his head. "No, the Reach has to be prepared. More than ever, we need to stand strong"

Petyr dared a slight smile, as Mern reciprocated the gesture. The king had thought about this for a long time now. If he had any more time, he'd appoint another lord, or leave it vacant, governed by Harlen Tyrell until a subject would prove his worth. But he was out of time and had to risk trusting this man, in some capacity at least.

"Mylord, I grant you this city and the surrounding lands as your seat", he declared and Petyr breathed in relief. "I name you head of House Vyrwel of Raylansfair. Your brother Otho will follow as the Lord of Darkdell and your vassal" Petyr and Maron exchanged a proud, victorious look and a smile appeared on Devrin's face.

However, before either of them could say a word, Mern continued. "For the first time, to ensure that everything goes to my liking, I will deploy a garrison of my own men though, fifty soldiers, led by my trusted knight, Ser Kasyn Luck. Consider them extensions of my will, which they will enforce until I see what kind of a lord you are"

The knight saluted, while Petyr's smile faded. Maron opened his mouth to say something, yet the new lord cut him off. "If this is your will, I obey", he promised. "You will find my work here to be to your full satisfaction"

Now, Mern allowed himself a triumphant smile. "Good, Lord Vyrwel", he spoke. "Then build this city up again. Make it strong, more than ever before. And when the time comes, spring forth on my command" He leant forwards, mustering this man, whom he needed more than he was comfortable with. "I have no illusions about what we are about to face. Fire and blood, a black dread. And so, mylord, I believe your men will be required in the war to come"

End of Interlude I – Spring Forth

Seven Letters – The Fledgling and his Mother

Sharra

The Queen Regent looked up from the letter in her hands, at the baffled faces of her council. She herself was not sure if she should be amused by this audacious claim, or concerned. Baffled probably described it best, as her blue eyes wandered down to the short piece of parchment again.

"Those who bend the knee will keep their lands and titles, serving as my vassals from now on", she read. "Those that refuse, I will destroy" A bemused smile found its way onto her face, though she was the only one sporting such an expression in the entire room. "Signed, Aegon of House Targaryen, First of His Name, King of All Westeros and Shield of His People"

As Sharra looked at her council again, she once again sighed at its sorry state. That's what happened when men had nothing better to do than to die in some pointless war. It was up to those left behind to lead, widows and orphans. It had been a mere year since her husband died and in moments like this, she missed him the most. Alester Arryn, the Falcon King, he would know how to react here. Sharra herself, she had to admit that she was just getting the hang of it.

To her right sat her cousin-in-law, Alester's first cousin. In this room, none understood the Queen Regent as much as Helen Arryn. A widow herself, her husband, Jasper of House Egen, had been murdered by the same Mountain Men that had killed the king only months before. Now she was an Arryn again, her son the third in line to inherit, after Sharra's boys. A decade younger than her, Helen stood out in the room for her height and her pale, silvery hair, a trait neither her late brother, nor her son shared with her.

Most of the other attendees were women as well, considering that King Alester had lost most of his trusted council as well during his ill-fated war against the Mountain Men. Sharra still felt a sting in her heart, thinking about her tears, how she pleaded him not to go, not to leave her and the children. He had kissed her, for the last time, calling her his flower of the

mountain, before leaving, never to return. He left her only grief, a broken kingdom and a son too young, too innocent to rule for himself.

Both, Sharra and Helen had their handmaidens with them. In Sharra's case, it was Myranda of House Moore. Prim and demure, Myranda was pretty, yet easy to overlook, unable to shine next to her queen or Lady Helen, with her long, black hair tied into a proper braid. Unlike Sharra, who had started to wear white and blue again after a period of mourning, she still wore black. And there was a troubled expression on her face, something that grew beyond concern and came close to actual, open fear.

In contrast, Helen's lady-in-waiting was a more exotic sight. There was something about Rhonda Upcliff that caused uneasiness in Sharra. If she'd be even a slight bit superstitious, she'd buy into the rumours, mostly spread by Myranda, about the dark rituals the young woman conducted in her chambers, how she seduced men with dark magic, a true witch of the aptly named Witch Isle.

Yet Sharra was not a young, naïve girl anymore. She knew Rhonda was no witch, yet it didn't make her any more trustworthy. A cold beauty, her pale skin contrasting with her pitch black hair and the piercing blue eyes, a petite body clad in black and green. And cold, that's the first word that went through Sharra's mind whenever she thought of Rhonda. Cold, quiet and always observant. Not a very trustworthy combination of traits.

"So...", she said, smiling at her council. "Any thoughts?" The first to speak up was the only man in the room. Ryman Redfort, captain of the guard and only member of Alester's inner council to have returned alive from the Mountains of the Moon. He was a tall man, the tallest person in the room, with short, black hair and an even, clean-shaven face, with a pair of blue eyes, cold, but in a different way than the unsettling harshness Sharra spotted in Rhonda's eyes. Though his armour was red, as the sigil of the house he belonged to, Ryman wore a cloak of white and blue, to show his status and allegiance.

"It is preposterous", he growled. "The Vale cannot be conquered. No army can cross the mountains, especially not the tiny force this... pretender" Sharra gave him a nod, while the woman next to him only raised an eyebrow. Eudoxia Tournebulle, the final attendee of this meeting, was an exceptional woman. It was certainly not her looks that were outstanding. Her hair, as red as Sharra's, was tied into a bun at the moment, her face plain, her skin surprisingly fair for someone who spent much time outside the cool walls of the Eyrie. No, what made her so special, as well as invaluable to Sharra was her position as the one responsible for gathering intel on their enemies of both, inner and outer nature.

"Maybe he doesn't have to cross the mountains", she brought up. "It's true, he cannot hope for a victory on the field. But we are not as safe as you might think, Ser" She gave Ryman a long look, until the captain sighed, nodding in return. With a calm look on her face, Eudoxia continued. "His army is small in numbers. So far, only a handful of houses have declared for him and none of them is worth a mention on their own. In response, the lords Darklyn and Mooton are gathering their forces, possibly enough to beat him on land"

Now, a sharp look appeared in her brown eyes. She leant forwards, bending her wiry body slightly over the table, to point at the map at its centre. Her finger rested on Gulltown. "But what should concern us is the location of his fleet. What they lack in numbers on land, they make more than up for at sea. House Velaryon, Celtigar, Bar Emmon and Massey can gather an impressive number of warships"

"Ships...", Sharra sighed. "I have told Alester time and again that we need a fleet. Now... how many do we have?" Eudoxia shrugged. "It depends on whom is going to support us,

because on your own, your grace, you have none. Gulltown can gather a few, but far less than what Targaryen could bring, if he were to attack us. The isles to the north hold most of our naval strength, technically at least”

This last part of her sentence caused Sharra to grow more concerned. “Technically?”, she asked, before she glanced at Rhonda Upcliff, noting that the woman's dark gaze was already resting on hers. She shivered slightly, though managed a smile. “Will Witch Isle support us in this time of need?”

Rhonda's lips twitched, not quite a smile, but something much more unsettling. “It depends”, she admitted, her voice smooth and surprisingly warm. “House Upcliff can gather half a dozen ships of note to defend Gulltown if needed. That said, we might have to deal with problems of our own, if I am not mistaken”

She looked towards Eudoxia and not for the first time, Sharra had the feeling that this young woman knew more than she was willing to share. Well, Eudoxia's whole position revolved around knowing more, but Rhonda? Sharra considered herself as having an open mind when it came to such things, but she preferred handmaidens such as Myranda, who at least kept no secret of note from their superiors.

Now, the spymaster sighed. “I am afraid this is one of the two things I wanted to bring up”, she admitted. “If the Targaryen army attacks us, they will strike at Gulltown. However, there might be a certain problem with the ships we can gather” Sharra raised an eyebrow. “How so?”, she asked.

“It's the Sisters”, Eudoxia revealed. “So far, we could still count on them, but it seems, they somehow learned of King Aegon's declaration of war” Her finger moved across the map, before resting on the Three Sisters, the northernmost lands belonging to House Arryn. Three islands, not particularly wealthy, but always with a concerning sense of independence. “I have reason to believe that they won't follow your call, should the Targaryen fleet approach Gulltown. Worse than that, they could use the chaos to renounce their oaths to your family” Sharra frowned. Alester would know how to deal with this. Sharra herself knew, at least in less troubled times. The Sisters on their own would never dare not to obey. Too easily could they be crushed by the Arryn knights. But who knew what they would be willing to do when the very same knights were fighting a foreign invader. She trusted Eudoxia's judgement. And it filled her with anger. “Will they truly dare to rebel?”, she asked.

“If they do, we have to be prepared”, Rhonda replied. “They will launch attacks on our northern coast. Witch Isle will be a target, at least if we send our fleet to defend Gulltown” Her gaze rested on Sharra and the Queen Regent nodded, if hesitantly. “Perhaps it won't come to a war”, she brought up.

It was a desperate move, yet worth a shot. Sharra knew of her beauty. For years, it had been all she needed. Red locks, pale skin, the hint of freckles and eyes of a piercing blue, paired with a grace that won Alester Arryn's heart. Long since, Sharra had outgrown such vanity. The death of her husband had proved this to her more than anything else. The people of the Vale, they did not need a pretty girl to fancy, they needed a ruler to lead them and until Ronnel would come of age, Sharra was the only one they had. The most beautiful woman in Westeros, that's what Alester once called her and the years had been kind to her. It might be worth a try, if it would mean that lives would be spared.

“Perhaps there is another way”, she explained. “A war is the last thing we want. If anything, we should focus on securing the loyalty of the Sisters, not on some Valyrian who wishes to

restore their lost empire” The smile on her face was sweet, as she looked around her council. “Helen, inform the Maester. Send word to Dragonstone, an offer”

Her cousin-in-law looked up, curiosity in her eyes. “We can avoid a costly war for both sides. The Vale will fully support King Aegon. In return, I offer myself. It's been a year since Alester's death and if necessary, I am willing to marry once again. I am to become his wife and Ronnel his heir”, she explained. “Send a portrait with the letter”

Helen raised an eyebrow. “You are ten years his senior, my dear”, she spoke. “And he already has two wives” Sharra sighed. “I don't expect him to accept outright”, she admitted. “But what do we have to lose? Perhaps he will be more willing to find a solution without bloodshed. Let him know that we are open for any kind of negotiation. In turn, I wish to see how receptive he is when it comes to such a solution”

“It could be worth the try”, Ryman admitted. “You are a woman of considerable charms, my queen. If King Aegon accepts, the Vale keeps its full strength. We can become conquerors ourselves, falcon and dragon marching as one. Many would be tempted by the offer”

“Yet King Aegon is not like others”, Eudoxia disagreed. “To make matters worse, one of his sister-queens, Rhaenys, was pregnant not too long ago. She should have given birth by now” As Sharra raised an eyebrow, the other woman shrugged. “Boy or girl, I do not know”, she answered.

“The child will be weak and sickly”, Rhonda said ominously, something that sounded more like a prophecy than an assumption. “Perhaps the Dragon King will see the benefits of having an heir as healthy as King Ronnel” Behind her, Myranda took a sharp breath, though remained silent.

Sharra gulped, before she noticed something in Eudoxia's eyes. “There's more, isn't it?”, she asked and the spymaster nodded. “There always is”, she said glumly. “To make matters worse, I have been informed that Lord Royce has started to show some odd interest in the affairs of House Shett. His own spies are in Gulltown as we speak, though what for, I do not know”

“Royce and Shett...”, Sharra mumbled. “There's a lot of bad blood between them, but Orson struck me as above such petty quarrels. And right as Gulltown itself might be threatened by Aegon and the Targaryen fleet. A coincidence?” Eudoxia shook her head. “I will find out”, she promised. “But knowing Royce, nothing is a coincidence with him”

“Good”, Sharra said. “I want you to travel to Runestone. Offer your help to Lord Orson. Find out what he plans. If it helps us, support him. If not, stop him” Eudoxia remained silent, a short salute was all the confirmation Sharra needed. “Now...”, she started.

Just in this moment, a knock on the door cut her off. A moment later, it was pushed open, revealing a young woman. Identical to Myranda in terms of facial features, Meredith Moore wore her hair far shorter, perhaps even too short for a lady of high birth, in Sharra's eyes at least. Yet somehow, it put more emphasis onto her features, gave her a beauty that shined brighter than her sister's. Wearing clothing befitting of a man, she was a far cry from the proper handmaiden her twin sister was, yet Sharra had full trust in her regardless. More importantly, she was to watch the children while Sharra conversed with her council, so her presence here was immediately alarming.

“My queen...”, she gasped and Sharra already rose from her seat. “What is it?”, she said impatiently and Meredith took a deep breath. “I'm afraid there is a... situation. The king and his brother...” She didn't need to say more. With a sigh, Sharra stepped away from the table. “I am afraid we have to postpone this meeting. I will be with you again once I have dealt with

this", she said, before she gave her cousin a nod. "Helen, I trust you with the reply for King Aegon"

She was already half through the hall, Myranda struggling to keep up with her, as she stopped. This was a new situation for her, all of it, yet she knew that something else had to be done as well. "Captain Ryman, I want you to send word to the lords of the Vale, just in case", she ordered, as she briefly glanced at her loyal soldier. "If King Aegon refuses to talk things out, we must be ready. We need an army and a fleet"

"I will try to secure the latter", Eudoxia offered. "Surely Lord Royce can be convinced to help. If we lack the time to build warships, we have to hire some, from the Free Cities, or the Stepstones" Sharra allowed herself the hint of a grateful smile, as she continued her way out of the room, accompanied by her handmaidens.

She had no illusions that this would be the great test of her reign. Sharra was not born to rule. A Corbray by birth, an Arryn by marriage, she had been a maiden, a wife, then a mother, for all her life and never had she thought to be anything more, never had she aspired. Alester had been the king, her dashing, reckless falcon, gone too soon. She knew him, loved him, missed him, and yet she was not sure if even he would know how to react properly in this situation. Nobody was taught how to act when a foreign king threatened with war, while a rebellion was about to break out on the northern isles and the most powerful lord of the Vale was plotting... something. Sharra knew, born ruler or not, she was the one that had to lead her people through the coming days, for the better or the worse. And yet, her duty was always to the king first, her little fledgling.

"What happened?", she asked, walking next to Meredith, while Myranda marched behind them. Meredith sighed. "I have prepared a meal for the king and his brother, when I heard the commotion", she explained. "I believe Prince Jonos started and by the time I had separated them, the king suffered a bruise. He's crying, the young prince is crying, it's terrible. I had to place a guard between them to keep them from each other's throats" Sharra rolled her eyes. It was not the first time that her sons were fighting. Boys in a certain age were like this. Her brothers had been no different. Lyndon, Regis and worse than both, her half-brother Rodrik, as much as it pained to think of him. Yet Ronnel and Jonos were arguably even more concerning in the intensity of their rivalry.

The King of Mountain and Vale was sitting on the floor, tears streaming down his face. His hair, a shade of auburn, darker than Sharra's red, yet not quite his father's black, he looked at her out of large, tear-filled blue eyes. His pale skin showed a serious bruise. On the other side of the room, sulking and angry, Jonos. Though two years younger, he was taller than Ronnel, with dark hair and blue eyes, a boy that would grow up to be a spitting image of his father.

A guard stood between them, visibly uncomfortable with his task. He stood straight as Sharra and her handmaidens entered and she released him with a sign of her hand. A brief salute followed, as the man rushed out of the room. "Leave us", Sharra said and the twins followed.

With a sigh, she approached Jonos first. "Jonos...", she said, softly, yet with a certain sharpness behind. He sat on a chair and as she came closer, she saw what he held in his hand. A wooden toy, a falcon, one wing broken in half. "He broke it", the prince complained. "Have you hit your brother?", Sharra asked sternly and Jonos gave her the glare of an angry child. "He broke it!", he repeated, raising the wooden falcon. "Father gave it to me before he left us and now it's gone as well" He glared at his brother. "All because of him!"

Sharra knelt down next to her son, placing her hands on his shoulders. "We can fix it", she promised. "But you mustn't hit Ronnel for this. He is your king and your brother. Be good to him and he will be good to you" She gave him a kiss onto the forehead and he clenched his fists around the broken toy. She saw a sadness in his gaze, and the anger of a child too young to truly understand why his father would never return. "Go to your room now", she said softly. "I will come later and we fix your toy"

Nodding quickly, to hide his own tears, her younger son raised from his chair, approaching the door that led to his quarters. "He should be punished, not me", he complained, already at the doorstep. "It's not fair!" With this, he entered his room. A troublesome boy he might be, but Sharra loved him nonetheless.

Finally, Ronnel. Her son, her king, looked up from the ground as she knelt down next to him. Unlike Jonos, he was crying freely. The way he looked, the way he acted, Sharra recognized so much of her younger self in him. Her heart broke for him, the boy king too young for his crown. Wordlessly, she pulled him into a hug, and he cried into her shoulder.

"I didn't want to do it...", he sobbed. "It... just fell and then it was broken. I didn't want to" He looked up and Sharra moved a hand through his hair. "Father will be disappointed" His words sent a sting through her chest, as she shook her head, holding back tears of her own now. "Your father loves you", she whispered and Ronnel narrowed his eyes. "Then why did he leave?", he asked.

She had no answer to this. It was a question she had asked herself. Why? A king's duty was with his people, a husband's duty with his wife, a father's duty with his sons and yet, Alester had left them all. Sharra was not her husband. She knew her duties.

"I don't know", she admitted. "But I will never leave you" She smiled at him, sweetly and full of love, as she held him in a tight embrace. The words she was going to say, they were more than a promise, more than mere duty. Sharra did not know what was going to happen in the dark times to come. Perhaps there would be war, perhaps she'd find a way to avoid it. The only thing she knew for sure was that she meant every word she said to him. His crown, his legacy, but more than anything else, his life, that was what truly mattered. The only thing in the whole world. Slowly, his tears stopped. "You are my little falcon", she whispered. "And no matter what comes, I will keep you safe"

End of Interlude II – The Fledgling and his Mother

Seven Letters – Black of Heart

Harren

One step. Another one. Then, a pained expression, as Harlan put too much weight onto his wounded leg. With a groan, he fell onto the stone floor, face first, just barely avoiding smashing his nose. He remained lying there, sighing with frustration.

Just a few feet away from his son, Harren shook his head. "Disappointing", he growled. "You moan like a Greenlander cunt getting it in the backside. You're a Hoare, so act the part! Now up on your feet!" Harlan frowned, though he reached for his crutches once more. And by now, he was at least able to pull himself back up again. "I'm s-sorry", he stuttered. "I will try! I can do it. I made progress already"

That was true, Harren had to admit it, but even then, he had expected more. Perhaps it was his mistake, for expecting anything of Harlan. At this point, after how the boy had been fooled by Breaker, he started to consider even Harndon more worthy than his halfwit secondborn. And yet, he tried, undeniably. Maybe he'd get back to where he was, in time.

"Then stop talking and fucking show me!", Harren barked. "Get up. Walk into my direction" Harlan had struggled by now, leaning onto his crutches, as he began limping towards his father. Harren started at him, with black eyes, devoid of warmth. There was one thing he was proud of when it came to Harlan. The boy had grown up without being spoiled. Though not a warrior, like Harmund, or a scholar, like Harrick, he had survived a wound that would have killed most other men. There was some iron in him after all.

And he did. One step. Another one. Yet another one. A fourth. And then he stood in front of his father, a wide smile on his face. "I did it!", he exclaimed and Harren patted him on the back, once. "I fucking did it!" As a giggle came out of the young man's throat, Harren was quick to curb his enthusiasm. "You've done shit", he reminded him. "Crossing a room at the fifth try, you expect a reward for that?"

Harlan's proud smile faded. "No, I...", Harren gave him a nod. "Exactly", he growled. "It's a beginning, but not more. Continue to practice. I'll check up on you later, first I'll see how Murph is doing" He turned around, as Harlan stood straight, at least as much as he could with the injuries he suffered from Breaker's failed attempt on their lives. "Yes, father", he said and Harren shot him a dark glare. The young prince gulped. "S-Ser", he stuttered. "Your grace" Satisfied, Harren turned away from him again and left the room, without another word. He had done his part, now it was up to Harlan to prove his worth, as little as he might have.

As the King of the Isles and Rivers marched down the dark hallway, he felt strangely hollow. Earlier this day, he had found Breaker's bitch in one of Harmund's rooms. Disgust at his firstborn's actions was the wrong word, yet Harren felt unusually agitated at the thought. At least he himself made such things quick, unless they happened in public. And that has been his order, to cut her throat after her traitor lover left for Raylansfair. He had thought her dead for a month, but Harmund... Harmund had done things his own way. Disrespecting his orders like that, it made the king livid with anger just thinking about it. Of course, any help for the girl came too late. Only thing he could do was to put her out of her misery and that's what he did. Another dead body, another argument against Harmund, King Hoare. The boy had every bit the potential to become a king worse than Harren's weak-willed father and the thought filled the old king with dread.

Harren took a deep breath as he stopped in front of the familiar door. Those were dark thoughts and he had enough of them. More would follow, dark and sorrowful. And without knocking, he entered. The room behind was small, yet well-lit. The air was stale, the stench of disease tainting it. And Harren noticed that his friend had visitors.

"Your grace!", the young man exclaimed. In better days, Harden Murphey would have pleasantly reminded Harren of his father, the man he wanted to visit here. His hair was black, flowing down his back, just like the beard covering most of his lower face and upper chest. An intimidating figure, the young raider was a welcome sight on any longship, clad in black, almost a Hoare himself. And considering that his father was more a brother to him than Harrigon has even been, this was even partially true.

There was a woman as well, of the sort whose age he always struggled to determine. Vibrant red hair, not the hint of grey, yet slight wrinkles on her face. A firm, ample chest. Scared blue eyes. A salt wife? It would be a first for Harden and Haragard himself was in no shape to have a woman at the time.

Finally, Haragard. The king sighed as he spotted his old friend, lying on the bed. Though he was only a few years older, the sickly man looked at least two decades Harren's senior. His

hair was grey, thin and he was losing it rapidly. Once Harren's equal in stature, he was now a shrivelled shell of his former self. Thin, frail and bedridden, his eyes nearly a milky white, revealing his near-blindness.

"Harren", he said and managed a weak smile, which Harren reciprocated, for once genuine.

"Hello, old friend", he replied, before he gave the man's son a nod. "Harden" Harden saluted in front of his king. "Your grace, we weren't expecting you", he replied.

To this, Harren smirked. "Or else you would have hidden your new girl, huh?", he chuckled, as he inspected the woman. A salt wife, no doubt. Appropriately fearful, yet her presence was odd nonetheless. Quickly, Harden shook his head. "Your grace, this is Darla. She's... my father's healer"

The king raised an eyebrow. "You found a new one?", he said. "Is she any good?" On his bed, Haragard grinned weakly. "Harden told me she looks splendid", he said. "Even if she cannot help me, the thought of her bosom keeps me warmer than any fur they can wrap me in"

Narrowing his eyes, Harren approached the woman. Up close, he saw that she was older than Harden, notably so, but definitely younger than him or Haragard. "Your name?", he barked and she shivered. "Darla", she answered. "Darla Vega"

"Darla Vega...", Harren mumbled. "I see..." Without warning, he had grabbed her chin, the metal of the gauntlet digging into her flesh and only barely did she suppress a scream of fear. "If he dies under your care, you will share his fate, a ten times worse", he whispered coldly. "But if you cure him, you will be rewarded. Do you have family?"

The woman gulped, before she gave him a nod. "A daughter", she revealed and Harren let go of her. "Heal him and you shall return to her, a rich woman", he offered. "Right now however, I wish some time with him. Leave us" She nodded quickly and like this, she rushed out of the door. Harren waited a moment, before he sent a glare towards Harden. "I said, leave us", he repeated.

Harden hesitated only a moment, before he followed the order with a quick nod, leaving the two men alone. Haragard smiled. "You shouldn't be so hard on the woman", he said. "She's doing her best, but I'm beyond a healer's work. What I need is a damn miracle"

Harren clenched his fist, a grim frown on his face. "Don't say this", he spoke. "You've lived with this ailment for so long. You'll carry through this" Haragard's smile grew more joyful, though the look in his almost blind eyes showed Harren that he was in a state of concerning bliss, the sort his condition put him at times, when he drifted off, not fully conscious anymore. "Will we sail again?", he asked and Harren smiled, though he knew his friend was barely able to see it. "We will", he promised. "To distant shores, raiding, reaving, a dozen women waiting for us in every port from Bear Island to Volantis" He knelt down, putting a hand onto Haragard's shoulder.

"I can see it", Haragard gasped, his voice shaky and half-broken. "With fire and axe upon the Greenlanders. They look to the shores, see our sails and scream 'The Sons of Orkmont are coming'" He looked away, his gaze set at the ceiling and beyond. "The Sons of Orkmont are coming...", he gasped, before his gaze cleared again, as a violent fit of coughs cut him off. Harren reacted quickly, as Haragard's thin hand reached for the cup standing on the desk next to him. "Allow me", he said, as he gently moved the cup to the sick man's lips. A look of relief formed on Haragard's face, as he drank the water. "Thank you", he mumbled, though it was clear how much strength this coughing just cost him.

Averting his eyes from his deathly ill friend, Harren pushed himself up from the kneeling position. "You should rest for a bit", he mumbled. "I will check up on you tomorrow" He patted Haragard's shoulder. "Don't die on me, brother", he added warmly. Then, he left the room, leaving the half-conscious man to rest.

Harden and the healer stood in the hallway. Harren glared at both of them. "He is tired", he replied. "Let him rest for a bit" Harden saluted in front of his king, after which Harren looked at the woman. Though as afraid of him as anyone would, she seemed to feel oddly comfortable in her position and he was not sure if he liked that or not. "I meant what I said", he assured her. "His fate will decide yours"

"I will heal him", Darla promised, to which the king sighed. Too many of his friends had died over the years. Haragard was perhaps the only one he had known for his entire life, the one man still left from his raiding days. Quietly, Harren gave her a nod. "You better do", he replied, though he lacked the will to back up his statement with a threat. She knew what fate would await her if she failed him. Forty years on the throne had given Harren enough of a reputation, after all.

Without another word, he left Harden and Darla, as he walked down the hallway. Harmund wanted to speak to him and though he himself barely wanted to speak to Harmund, his son had sounded serious as he had sent word earlier. And in most cases, this meant that he had fucked up once again.

As Harren approached the royal quarters, he heard a familiar, bright laughter. Narrowing his eyes, he glanced around the corner to his right. As expected, Greyjoy stood there, leaning against a wall. She had been the one to laugh and even now, a sly smirk was seen on her face. What surprised him marginally more was that Harrick, standing in front of her, was smiling as well.

It was Kyra who noticed him first. Pulling herself together, she saluted firmly, the good soldier that she was. "Your grace!", she said and Harrick winced as he spotted his father. Harren raised an eyebrow. "Captain Greyjoy", he growled, before he looked at the other end of the hallway. Through the open door, he could see Harmund, sitting on a chair, drinking wine and glaring at them.

"He called for you earlier", Harrick said. "Do you require my presence?" Harren shook his head. "I can deal with him on my own", he assured him. "But I might need a word with you later on. When I call for you, I expect you to follow at once, have I made myself clear?" Harrick stood straight as a reply. "Of course, father", he said. Almost cautiously, he glanced at Kyra. "I believe you were saying...?" Kyra chuckled sweetly. "I was saying what a shame it is that your father expects you to remain attentive", she said, her tone having gotten slightly mocking. "Perhaps another time, Prince" She gave Harren a nod. "Your grace", she added, as she walked down the hallway, with Harrick staring after her.

A grin formed on Harren's face. "Another time, boy", he chuckled. "You're welcome" And with this, he left him standing as well, approaching the far less pleasant company of his eldest son. His depraved son. The one even Harren felt concerned about, if mostly because Harmund could cast down any sort of legacy he'd leave behind. His mighty castle in ruins, his name forgotten, his line ended... Harren could not imagine a fate more cruel.

Harmund was not alone. Harren's embarrassment of a squire was there and the king frowned. Adrew Frey... there had never been a more useless creature in these halls. "More wine", Harmund growled as Harren approached. The boy came closer to the table, but

Harren raised a hand. "Give me the carafe", he ordered sharply and Adrew followed the order at once.

Sniffing at the wine, Harren frowned. "You won't give us that piss", he barked, loudly and with glee, he noticed how timid, how scared the boy was. Pushing the carafe into his direction, enough to make him tumble backwards, Harren pointed at the door. "Get the Arbor Red, now!", he ordered. "You have ten minutes"

Never in his life had he seen a person running as quickly as Adrew Frey did in this very moment. Some much needed amusement to dispel Harren's dark thoughts. Finally, he looked at Harmund and his burst of a good mood was gone as quick as it came. "What have you done again, boy?", he growled.

Harmund's smile was cold and cutting. "Why do you always assume that?", he asked and Harren sighed. "I found the Pyke girl in your chambers. Breaker's bitch", he revealed and Harmund's smile widened. "What's with her?", he asked.

"I ordered her death a month ago!", Harren growled in a low tone and to add to his anger, Harmund just shrugged. "So what?", he asked. "She's dead now, isn't she?" Harren sighed. He wasn't a godly man, but if anything, he hoped the Drowned God would grant him more years. Harmund was anything but ready to be king.

"What is it you wanted to talk about?", he asked, unwilling to discuss this any further.

Harmund leant back on his chair, finishing the cup of wine he still held. "Why are you tolerating this?", he snarled and the king raised an eyebrow. "You?", he asked in return.

Harmund narrowed his eyes, his smile fading. "Greyjoy", he snarled. "That bitch is a sight for sore eyes, I give her that, but the way she's acting... she's ordering us around!" Harren rolled his eyes. "That's her job", he reminded him. "And she's bloody good at it"

"She's a woman", Harmund said. "At best, she should hope to be someone's rock wife. The only thing she's good for is spreading her legs" To this, Harren grinned. "Not for you though", he reminded him. "That's what's bothering you so much, huh?" In a serious tone, he continued. "She is better than you, in any aspect"

"Careful", Harmund spat, but Harren ignored him. "She's the best for this post. When she was fifteen, she raided Bear Island", he continued. "When you were fifteen, you did things to Donny, because it made you feel less of a failure. The only reason you're sitting here is because of me, because you are my son" *Black of heart*, he thought bitterly.

Harmund sighed. "The best, you say?", he chuckled. "So, that is why you keep a squire as pathetic as Adrew, huh?" He shouldn't have said that. Harren clenched his fists as he glared at him. "I keep him to make a man out of him. Lousy he might be, but my squire will leave my service as a true warrior", he explained. "And I keep him because he is the son of Bloody Brandon. Do I have to remind you what you did to that man's daughter?"

The dark smile returned to Harmund's face. "A lay as piss-poor as these lands. Why do you care for these people?", he spat. "They are Greenlanders. Fishcunts and nothing more"

Harren gave him a nod. "Lords of yellow mud", he confirmed. "But together, they can overthrow an empire. Frey, he's going to be your enemy, he will hate you more than any man living for the rest of his days"

Once again, Harmund proved his short-sightedness by merely shrugging. "And why is that a bad thing?", he asked. "It's not as if you try to be loved by them" Harren sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. "They will never love me", he said. "Nor you. Not even Harrick and he's trying. One day, he has to realize that no matter what, they will never see him as anything but a conqueror. An invader, a tyrant"

"So you've decided to become one", Harmund mocked him. "And now you're acting all high and mighty about this" The two men glared at each other, until Harren looked away first, a fact that caused rage to rise up in him. "I have seen what it achieves", he explained. "Trying to win their love, the fucking ingrates. Your grandfather tried it. He travelled through these lands, visited their castles, listened to their concerns and treated them better than he treated true Ironborn"

Now, he shook his head. "I have travelled with him. And unlike him, I heard how they spoke when he wasn't listening", he explained. "How they called him. Usurper, they said.

Black-eyed monster. His own people resented him and the Riverlanders did the same. He died, alone and hated, with me being the only one by his side" Bitter anger in his eyes, he stared at his clenched fists. "My own brother rather guarded a wall of ice instead of spending some time with his dying father. That's what happens when you try to make them love you"

"So, what do you suggest?", Harmund asked. "Share your wisdom with me, old man" Harren ignored the insult, as he spoke. "These lands cannot be ruled through love. They must fear you, or they will never obey", he replied. "They must fear you more than anyone else, but there must always be someone whom they hate more than you"

Harmund shrugged. "I get the fear part right", he said. "That is good enough" Feeling a sudden burst of rage at his impertinent son, Harren jumped up from his chair. "Careful, boy", he growled. "I will not allow you to ruin Hardhand's legacy. Learn what that means, or I shall find someone who does"

To this, Harmund just chuckled. "You're the one that should be careful", he said. "You need me in the war to come" This sentence was alarming to Harren, who glared at the younger man. "What have you done?", he barked.

Slowly, Harmund pulled a piece of parchment from his coat. "Nothing", he replied. "But someone did. Read" He handed him the parchment, a letter as Harren now saw. And he recognized the sigil, the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen.

"To Harren of House Hoare", he began to read, loudly. "For too long, Westeros has suffered from being divided. For too long, petty kings have fought their wars, killing countless on the entire continent. My own people have bled at the hands of one of these petty kings. No longer..." He read, silently now, his hands clenched around the parchment.

As he lowered the letter again, he stared at Harmund, speechless at first. Then, a cruel smile formed on his face. He began to chuckle. "Is he... is he for real?", he gasped. "He threatens us? This tiny lord of worms!" His chuckle grew into a full, dark laughter. "This bloody, stupid cunt! What power does he have?"

"Rosby and Stokeworth have declared for him", Harmund said, now grinning as well.

Harren's eyes widened. "Have they all lost their fucking minds?", he barked. "Send word to the banners, from Harlaw to Maidenpool. A common enemy has entered our lands" A vicious look appeared on his face. "And let them know that Rosby and Stokeworth are traitors to the crown. Their lives are forfeit, every single last one of them"

"We are marching to war", Harmund concluded. "And you will need a commander for the coming battles" Cautiously, Harren gave him a nod. "One chance", he agreed. "Show this worm who owns these lands. We took them, with might and cunning. We hold them with chains of iron" He leant forwards, glaring at his son. "You want to be king one day? Then show me! Show me you can lead them, isles and rivers alike!"

The king's heart was beating heavily, as excitement rose in him. A war it would be, short, but much needed. A glorious slaughter. The Drowned God smiled at him today. And Harren the Black would spill a dragon's blood in his name.

End of Interlude III – Black of Heart

Seven Letters – Fur and Frost

Torrhen

It was a cold day, even for an autumn that was unusually short and harsh. The ground was frozen, the air chilling, coats of warm fur mandatory when stepping outside and yet, the courtyard of Winterfell was busy as always, save for a spot in its centre, where two men were fighting with wooden swords.

The wild Skagosi struck down onto the prince's shield. Beren just barely managed to block the fierce strike. Being four years younger, he had a natural disadvantage, something Torrhen had tried to convince him of. Yet if anything, his prideful son had only felt challenged. He insisted on fighting the man, the 'barbarian' as he had called him.

That being said, Mace Crowl was not a barbarian, not less than most of his fellow Northerners, at least not in the eyes of Torrhen Stark. Sure, the Skagosi looked wild, with his stocky build, wild beard and the short, black hair tied into numerous thick braids. Yet he has been a ward at Winterfell for most of his life and Torrhen considered him no less cultured than any other warrior at his court.

Beren saw things differently, of course. Coming into a certain age, he saw everything differently, and right now, as he grew increasingly hectic with his blocks, avoiding a rough beating by the wooden sword of his sparring partner, he paid the price for his arrogance. Torrhen had warned him once, told him that Crowl was too skilled an opponent, but after his son continued to insist, he just let him. The boy had to learn, even if that meant making his own mistakes.

Sure enough, Mace found an opening soon afterwards. Striking past the shield, he hit the northern prince at the cheek, heavily so. Knocking Beren to the ground, the Skagosi glared down at him with his cold, blue eyes, pointing the sword at him. "Do you yield?", he growled. Rolling his eyes, Beren sighed, putting a hand onto his bruised cheek. "Yeah", he mumbled. Instead of helping his sparring partner up, Mace just turned around, nodding at the King in the North. Torrhen was watching them from his position, leaning against the wall right next to the Great Hall. A slight smile formed on his face, as he watched his son staggering back on his feet.

"He's getting better", he spoke to his companions. Two of his warriors were accompanying him today, Eon Dustin and Harrold Hornwood. Both a decade younger than him, they were amongst the finest fighters in his kingdom. Harrold was a tall man, with green eyes and black hair, the hint of a beard covering his chin, his trusty axe always dangling at his belt. In

contrast, his friend Eon was even taller, yet not quite as broad-shouldered, with lighter hair, a short moustache covering his upper lip.

Right now, Harrold merely chuckled. "If you say so, my king", he said, his voice louder than it had to be at the brief distance it had to cover. "Truth be told, the only one he was able to beat this month has been Mormont and that hardly counts" Eon gave him a slight nod. "He's aiming too high", he replied calmly. "There is talent in him, but he's seeking out opponents way out of his league. The Skagosi is better than most of us"

"Not me", Harrold clarified. "But eh, you're right. Give him an easy opponent and he might learn something beyond losing" He shrugged. "Guess one of the stableboys would suffice. Torrhen raised an eyebrow at his companion. "He was able to beat Jorn Mormont", he reminded him, to which Harrold flashed him a bold grin. "Yeah, and that's why he should pick a better opponent next time. A stableboy should be an improvement"

"Harrold", Eon hissed, pointing at the gate. Just in this case, horn signals from up on the walls announced the arrival of a new visitor. Torrhen spotted the banner and a satisfied smile formed on his face. A white sun on a field of black. Karstark had finally arrived. Though many of his bannermen were still missing, perhaps today he could hear the first opinions on the letter he received.

It had been an audacious piece of writing. Easy to dismiss. Yet Torrhen Stark, the King of Winter, was above such arrogance. Before deciding on action, he'd hear some opinions. So he had called for them and like winter, they came. Roffe Umber. Harald Degore. Now, Brogar Karstark. Others would follow. Chett Bolton. Lanard Reed. Maybe even Worland Mormont, from far Bear Island.

Brogar had already ascended to lordship before Torrhen was born. At nearly seventy years of age, his fighting days were long over and he travelled in a carriage, instead of going by horseback. Having expected his arrival, Torrhen had sent another of his warriors, Jorn, the heir to Bear Island, to fetch the old lord and escort him to Winterfell.

Sure enough, the young Mormont was riding in front of them. With curly, slightly longer hair, a tall, yet lean build and his lack of both, skill or motivation for a true fight, Jorn was far from the ideal picture of a Northerner, yet Torrhen had grown to appreciate other traits in him. As much fun as Harrold, or even Beren would make of the man, he was undeniably smarter than both. With Brandon still not having returned, Torrhen considered him the smartest man in Winterfell. In the decision to come, his word would hold great importance.

"Your grace!", Jorn exclaimed, as he descended from his horse. "As you have ordered, Lord Brogar Karstark" He pointed at the door to the carriage, which got opened just then. Instead of the old Lord of Karhold, a young woman climbed out of it though. She was a beauty, the wind gently playing with her long, black hair, despite wearing a hooded cloak. Raising an eyebrow in an impressed way, Harrold gave his friend a nudge with his elbow, to which Eon merely rolled his eyes with a sigh.

Her blue eyes met Torrhen's grey, as Jorn's face turned a shade of red. "I... uh, I mean, Lord Brogar's niece, Lady Malina", he stuttered, as the woman turned around, extending her hand. The old man from inside the carriage refused the gesture though. With a groan, he pulled himself out of the cart. At nearly seventy years of age, Brogar Karstark was completely grey, with wrinkled skin, not even his short, bushy beard hiding the decline of his youth. He was still one of the tallest men Torrhen had ever seen though. His face, cold and sharp, turned to Torrhen, as he and his niece approached the men.

"Your grace!", he said and bowed, clumsily. His niece did the same, though with an elegance her old uncle likely never had. "Your grace", she said softly. Her gaze met Harrold's as she rose again and the young warrior grinned widely.

"Brogar, my friend", Torrhen greeted him, as he patted the lord onto the shoulder, noting that Karstark's dour frown remained. "And Lady Malina, it is an honour" To this, she smiled slightly. As she opened her mouth to say something, her uncle cut her off. "Yes, yes, of course", he said. "We've come a long way to follow your call. Just go ahead, tell us what this is all about"

While Eon gave the lord a surprised look, Torrhen had expected such a reaction. If anything, Brogar Karstark was not known for his polite tongue. That being said, the lack of manners was something Torrhen was willing to endure, if it meant getting the support of the most powerful of his bannermen.

"Of course, mylord", he replied calmly. The smile on his face was cold though. "Please, accompany me to the Great Hall, it will all be explained" He gave Eon a nod. "Gather everyone", he ordered. "They have waited long enough. It's time for us the North to come together"

It did not take very long until Torrhen's bannermen were gathered, the few that had already found their way to Winterfell. The king himself stepped into the Great Hall, wrapped in a new cloak, adorned by the grey fur of a wolf Brandon had hunted for him before he left to the south. He was wearing his crown, an open circlet of hammered bronze, incised with ancient runes, surmounted by nine iron spikes, shaped like longswords. As he entered, tall, calm and prideful, the hall went silent.

With Jorn to his right and Harrold to his left, the king marched towards his throne, glancing at his gathered lords. It did not surprise him that Roffe Umber was the first to arrive. As much a giant as the one on his banners, Roffe was towering above each of them and if anything, he looked more a barbarian than Mace Crowl ever could. Wrapped in a bear's fur, he had thick, black hair and a wild monstrosity of a beard.

The man to his left, though looking similar, was more unusual. Ser Dag Umber, one of the few true knights north of the Neck, shared most of his brothers size and his black hair, though his beard was carefully cropped, same as his hair. Clad in a fine tunic, his clothing was merely adorned by black fur.

"THE KING IN THE NORTH!", Roffe screamed at the top of his considerable lungs, pointing his double-edged battleaxe at his liege. "The King in the North!", the remainder of the lords and ladies chimed in, while Torrhen's gaze wandered to the lord on the other side of the hall. It was a surprise that Harald Degore had followed the call so early. Far from a principal bannerman, the Lord of Degore's Cliff has only brought one of his followers, a woman in her late forties, like the lord himself. She was not his wife, as Harald had assured him, but his castellan, Aryana Tavner. Whereas Harald was a harsh sight, scarred and blinded in one eye, his companion was quite pretty, especially for her age and despite missing a notable part of her right ear, with full, auburn hair and an evenly structured face. Taller than most men in the room, she wore armour of boiled leather and a thin, green cloak.

That being said, the most beautiful sight, making even fair Lady Malina pale, was Torrhen's queen. Lysa Stark, born a Hornwood and cousin to Harrold's father, was sweet, if perhaps not the greatest beauty in these frozen lands. In Torrhen's eyes though, he could not imagine

a sight more perfect. Dark-haired like him, she had pale, blue eyes and a soft smile. Her belly was visibly swollen, as the advanced pregnancy forced her to remain seated. And finally, their daughter, Princess Lyra. Half as old as Beren, she was merely a girl and one that has not yet grown into her looks, with a long, plain face, yet her smile was bright and perhaps the most pretty feature about her. "Father!", she said, as she rushed into his arms, before he had even reached his throne. "Hello, my little princess", he spoke gently, as he briefly lifted her up from her feet, much to her joy, carrying her next to her mother. "My queen", he said, as she actually brought a genuine smile onto his face and a warmth that contrasted this frosty day quite notably. "My king", she greeted him in return, as he pulled her into a swift kiss, before turning to his son, who stood at the other side of the throne. "Have you learned something today, Beren?", he asked.

The prince sighed, putting a hand onto his aching cheek. "Don't fight against the Skagosi", he growled, glaring at Mace, who stood next to Eon a few feet away. "Or perhaps fight him a bit more often", Torrhen replied, to which Mace glanced at them. "Always ready when you are, my prince", he spoke, politely, yet with a certain distance, despite both having grown up next to each other for all the sixteen years of Beren's life.

"Careful, Skagosi", Beren replied. "One of these days, I might throw you into the mud you crawled from" To this, Mace raised an eyebrow. "You can certainly try, your prince", he replied calmly. "It's only fair for a man of your status to... reach for the stars, as the saying goes"

Eon just barely managed to hide his chuckle as a cough, sharing an amused smirk with his king. Torrhen himself looked at his gathered lords. "Mylords!", he said and Roffe slammed a fist onto his own chest. "Aye!", he snarled. "We have gathered, your most loyal. Umber, Karstark and..." He paused, as Dag whispered something in his ear. "And Degore, following your call", Roffe continued quickly. "For what purpose, I can already guess. Just tell me, shall we march upon the ploughing wildlings that plague our lands, or those Ironborn cunts?"

For his brute mannerisms, Torrhen had to admit that he was once more impressed by the surprising amount of insight the Lord of the Last Hearth had shown with his statement. He gave him a nod. "Indeed, war it is", he said. "Or perhaps one we may sit out. It is a matter for your counsel" He glanced at Jorn. "Do you have the letter?"

With a nod, Jorn handed him the parchment, with the broken seal of the three-headed dragon. "This has arrived a month ago!", Torrhen proclaimed. "And it is the reason I called for your immediate gathering. A letter, written by the Lord of Dragonstone. King Aegon, as he calls himself, has proclaimed himself 'King of All Westeros'. He seeks to conquer every piece of land from the Last Hearth to Sunspear and threatens to burn those that do not bend the knee"

After his sentence, he had to wait a bit until the laughter calmed down. Roffe was visibly amused by this, not even his calmer brother could contain a smile, whereas Harrold Hornwood laughed brightly. Even Brogar Karstark's cackling was audible and it was the last to die down. "A southron, silver-haired girl threatens us?", he barked. "I say, let him try. In ten thousand years, no army dared to march past the Neck"

His niece put a hand onto his shoulder and the old lord glanced at her, with a sigh. "Go ahead, speak", he allowed her. "You're too clever for your own good, girl" Malina gave him a smile, before she spoke up. "My uncle speaks the truth. No army has dared to march past the Neck, for good reason. No army can, not without significant losses. Lord Reed and his crannogmen stand loyal to the throne and won't let them pass", she explained.

As she continued, her gaze grew harder and Torrhen saw something behind her beautiful face. It was a cold, calculating look. "Yet they do not call him the dragonlord for nothing. My brother could tell you vivid stories of a dragon's fire and though I am less of a storyteller, I have heard enough to assure you, three of them are a force of nature. You'd be wise not to underestimate them"

"What do you suggest then, Lady Malina?", Torrhen asked, genuine curiosity in his tone. The young lady smiled at him. "Gather your troops, your grace", she advised him. "But march not yet. Wait until he is forced to split up his army. He will land, or has landed, somewhere at the Blackwater, meaning he will fight Hoare and Durrandon at once. We are far away, a distant enemy and when he comes, make sure we are ready. If he takes Harrenhal, prepare to march"

"You believe he will take that castle?", Roffe asked and Malina nodded. "Once the Riverlords have declared for him, yes", she confirmed. Umber grinned. "Those muddy fishes lack the spine to fight back", he claimed, though she shook her head, decidedly so. "They are proud and stubborn. Given the opportunity, they will take their revenge on Harren the Black" She turned back to the king. "And if this happens, you must be ready"

Torrhen gave her a nod. She had confirmed some of his own thoughts. He would not kneel, so a war was inevitable, sooner or later. And it was foolish for him to hope for Black Harren to fight off this invader. The man had sent his raiders to the Stony Shore since the days of Torrhen's father. A grim, cold smile appeared on his face.

"Harren Hoare will fight alone", he declared. "Either he's doing us a favour for once, fighting off this Dragon King, or he's getting his comeuppance. One way or the other, the outcome is good for us" His lords nodded to this, murmuring their agreements. "However, if Hoare fails, Targaryen will eventually march north. You may see this as foolish, but this letter is oozing confidence. He won't back down. Maybe Hoare will be the one to kill him. Maybe Durrandon or Gardener", he continued and took a deep breath. "Or maybe we have to. Mylords, when we march to war, will you march with me?"

"Aye!", Brogar Karstark exclaimed. "I wouldn't have come if I'd refused your call" He gave his king an approving nod. "We're kin, you and I, your grace. Karstark will march with Stark, now and always" His eagerness was only surpassed by Umber's, though Torrhen saw hesitation in Lord Roffe's eyes.

The lord gave his brother a nod, followed by a long sigh. The knight rose from his chair.

"Your grace, none will be prouder to fight for you than House Umber", he said. "Yet you know of our problem. Neither me nor Roffe can march south with you until it is solved"

Torrhen gave him a nod. "I am aware of this, Ser", he spoke. "And I might know a way. Brandon's latest letter was sent a fortnight ago, from Tumbleton. He should be close to the Neck by now and I expect him here in a few weeks. The way he made it sound, he found someone to solve all your problems"

This seemed to satisfy both Roffe and Dag, so Torrhen turned his attention to the last lord in this small council. "Lord Degore", he said and the lord rose from his chair, approaching the throne. "You wouldn't have come this quickly if not for a concern of your own. Speak now, mylord"

Harald gave him a nod, looking almost guilty as he spoke. "Your grace, my house is nothing if not faithful", he said. "When I received your letter, I knew war would come, so I hurried to Winterfell, to speak to you before all others" He glanced at his castellan, Lady Aryana, who

gave him a brief, encouraging smile. "Yet I am an old man and the last of my line. I have no trueborn sons, nor do I expect to sire another"

"Eh, you swore an oath to the king, Degore", Brogar growled. "You should have cared for an heir long ago. Myself, I fathered three to make sure and two live to this day. It's not the king's problem that you haven't done your duty to House Degore"

"But I have a son", Harald growled. "A bastard he is, but nonetheless my son" He looked back to his king. "Your grace, I do not refuse your call. I have answered before anyone else to assure you, House Degore will march with you when you face the dragons. But I cannot lead them myself until I have found my son and made him my heir"

He took a step forwards, going down on one knee. "With your permission, me and Aryana will leave the North. We will travel to the Reach, where my son has last been seen. I'll bring him home and if there's still time, I will lead my men personally", he offered. "And if you require them before I return, I have sent word to my friend, Esbern of House Forrester. He will lead my men on your call"

Torrhen exchanged a look with his wife. Queen Lysa smiled quickly, before giving him a nod. This was all the confirmation he needed. "Then you are excused, Lord Degore", he said.

"Bring your son home and I will make him your heir. But bring him quickly. I accept your offer for this war, but might need you for the ones to come"

A thankful expression formed on Harald's face, as he hurried back in line, next to his castellan. "And make no mistake, mylords, this is only the beginning", Torrhen spoke. "Lady Malina speaks truly, a dragon is a cruel opponent. We will need the North at full strength for this"

He glanced at Jorn. "Once again, send word to the banners, every last one of them, from White Harbour to the northern clans. I wish to summon them here at once", he commanded and Jorn saluted firmly. "Winter is coming, literally. King Aegon has spent his life in the south and has yet to learn what this means. He has never felt the cold, but by the old gods and the new, if he dares to face us, he will" Grimly, the King of Winter looked around his allies.

"When the frost comes, we will march against him", he declared. "And no fire in this world may save him"

End of Interlude IV – Fur and Frost

Seven Letters – A Hard Place

Loren

The King of the Rock slowed his destrier, as he overlooked the army that had gathered in the small valley below him. Hundreds, thousands likely, doomed fathers, brothers and sons. Behind them, in the light of dawn, the Golden Tooth, the fortress they had been besieging for months now. It would end today. Loren and the three thousand behind him would make sure of this.

He spotted the banners. Blacktyde. Greyjoy. Tully. Bracken. Some of them followed by their own choice, others had none. It did not matter for Loren Lannister. They entered his lands, they slaughtered his people, they waged war on his kingdom. There were many things he could forgive, but this was none of them. Having surrounded their main force in the early hours of the night, having taken out scouts and having prevented any chance for them to escape, Loren was determined to end this.

"What do you say?", Darren asked, moving his horse next to the king's. The Lord of Castamere had been by his side for this entire campaign, from the day they left his castle,

for over a dozen skirmishes, right until this very moment. He and Marbrand had given a bulk of their troops and their banners were the most prominent, aside from the golden lion of Lannister. Swyft had come as well. And Turnberry, having sent his heir to lead their small force.

“Rock and a hard place”, Loren replied with a thin smirk. Darren's smile was a bit wider, a rare sight on his bearded face. “Only if I get to lead the cavalry”, he replied. Loren slightly rolled his eyes. “Fine”, he said, though he raised a finger. “This time”

Since the Ironborn and their slave soldiers had already spotted them, Loren did not bother with remaining secretive. He gave Darren a nod and the lord pulled a horn from his belt. Blowing into it, twice, he moved his horse to the western flank of the army. The riders followed, a thousand men on heavy horses.

Loren himself rode to the eastern flank and on his sign, the remaining men followed.

Blocking the only entrance out of the valley, as they had been ordered, the soldiers formed a wall of shields and spears, swiftly and with brutal precision. They were men of the Rock and like that, they would not yield.

In the meantime, Loren watched how Darren and his riders, slowly began to ride to the other side of the valley. The Ironborn surely knew what would happen, yet without riders of their own, or any sort of defensive position against cavalry, they were powerless to stop anything about their impending doom. Loren would have felt pity, if not for the fact that he hated these people more than anything in the world.

Behind the shield wall, Loren towered above his soldiers, sitting high on his horse. The king knew, he was not quite the sight one would imagine from a Lannister. Compared to his father and even his own son, he'd describe himself as plain, with an almost plump face, in spite of the golden hair that still proved him to be a member of his family. Yet right now, clad in an armour painted gold and red, a cloak of the latter colour draped around his shoulders and the crown of his ancestors, a golden wreath, on his head, Loren knew he was at least a sight to behold.

Only a few feet away from him stood his young cousin, Damion. The superstitious lot would advise against being close to the boy they called 'The Cursed Lion', but Loren made sure not to spend time with such people. Damion was a cousin and despite the horrible luck he seemed to bring those around him, despite the three knights that had already died after he entered their service, family ties meant something to King Loren. At less than half of his age, Damion was younger than Prince Lucion, shorter, yet still handsome in spite of the faint scars on his youthful face, with blonde hair and green eyes.

Right now, Damion gave him a nod and Loren took a deep breath. Oh, how he hated such moments. Speeches... what else was there to do for a king? With one quick move, he drew his sword and feeling the metal in his hand made him at least somewhat more at ease.

“Men!”, he yelled and he knew, they were listening to him, even if none glanced over their shoulder. Each and every one of them was focussing on the Ironborn, yet they listened regardless. “When they come, I expect you to slaughter them!”, the king growled. Letting his anger drive his words, the Lion of Lannister roared, furious at the lives stolen by the men down in the valley. “This won't be the time for mercy. They do not yield and you will not let them. This is a time for vengeance!”, he shouted. “Cut them down, with ire, with fell blades! Let your roars be the last thing they hear in life, for the Rock, for all of us!”

He glanced at Damion and the boy blew his horn, a loud, deep sound that resonated within Loren. The knights of his personal guard joined in, each with their own, two dozen, the noise echoing across the valley. And from the other side, Darren Reyne answered.

The cavalry began their charge. Heavily armoured soldiers in the centre, light and nimble riders on the edges. They made their way down the hill, towards the invaders. At first, the Ironborn were petrified, an appropriate reaction to a thousand men on horseback charging. The ground was shaking from their hooves, the noise alone almost deafening.

As expected, the enemies began to flee, yet another appropriate reaction. Sure, the Ironborn commanders managed to rally quite a number of them, urging them to form a shield wall. Though besieging the castle for months now, they had failed to prepare for such a massive counter-attack. Most likely, they had expected a quick victory after killing the old Lord Lefferd. His son Mandon though, he had proven to be every bit the lord he had to be, holding them off until now, until Loren and his men had come to their aid.

The riders tore through the camp, the massive horses crashing through tents, knocking away the tiny shield wall and the fleeing defenders as if they were mere children and not grown raiders. On two sides, those that tried to escape were cut down by the lighter cavalry, which quickly convinced the utmost majority of men to flee up the hill, where Loren's infantry was already waiting.

In a heartbeat, the battle turned from fight to slaughter. Loren and his generals had planned this assault, surely, but the swiftness with which their dreaded enemies were dispatched left him in awe. Were those truly the Ironborn that had plagued his kingdom since the Age of Heroes? Or maybe there was little iron among them. If those were Riverlanders, then today, Loren and his host were the fishers.

The force that crashed into his infantry still outnumbered them, while a few unlucky remained behind to buy them time, binding the cavalry in close combat. And with the desperate ferocity of the doomed, the enemy ran into Loren's shield wall.

Being so close to the bloodshed, the king felt his heart beating faster. Excitement and slight dread rose up in him, as he watched the Ironborn trying to hack their way through his own soldiers. They failed, of course they did, but it was a sight to behold. Not fond of bloodshed, at least usually, Loren nonetheless found it relieving to see the death of these men. They got what was coming to them. Never again would they harm his people.

Among his soldiers, there was one Loren found particularly fascinating to watch. Someone had knocked away the man's helmet, yet he continued to fight. He was tall, quite likely a match for the tallest men at the court of Casterly Rock, in terms of sheer size at least, even if he was a rather skinny lad. He made up for it with clear ferocity, the look on his face quite terrifying as he cleaved at the men. Loren decided to keep this man in mind.

Finally, the riders had broken through the ranks of the remaining Ironborn in the camp.

Tearing through their defences, they encircled them from three sides, they forced them to run into the direction of Loren's infantry, who was making short work of the Ironborn. Those that fell to the ground or tried to surrender were trampled by a thousand hooves.

The king let out a sigh of relief, as the Ironborn, now surrounded from every side, finally gave up. They had caused some final losses to Loren's army, but compared to their own, it was nothing. A couple dozen riders and maybe two or three times as many infantrymen were scattered across the valley, but in return, only few Ironborn remained. A hundred, maybe two and they were quick to throw down their weapons, before sinking onto the ground.

As Loren rode closer, he saw the tears of defeat on their faces, but he felt no pity. When it came to these men, he was like the rock that gave his kingdom its name. Wordlessly Darren Reyne and his vanguard joined the king on their horses, as they approached the surviving enemies. Stevron Marbrand and half a dozen of his riders came as well. The red-haired Lord of Ashemark seemed exhausted from the brief, but intense fight and Loren saw that he had problems remaining in his saddle.

"Who speaks for you?", he growled coldly, as he glared at the Ironborn and their Riverlander allies. No one answered at first, so Loren gave one of the riders a nod. The man raised his spear, throwing it into the captured host and impaling one unlucky man who wore the colours of House Bracken.

"I ask again", Loren repeated, while the next of his men raised his spear. This was enough to break their spirit. "I do!", a man replied, with a shaky voice. The others quickly made way for him, so that Loren was able to get a better look at him. He was a young man, probably younger than Lucion, with blonde hair and the beginnings of a beard. A deep, fresh cut was running along his cheek and he held his ribs in pain, yet the tabard he wore showed a sigil Loren was quite familiar with.

"You're a Darry", he said and the man gave him a tired nod. "Ser Lothor Darry", he introduced himself. "Thirdborn son of Lord Nestor" He looked around at his remaining men and from the way they looked at him, it was clear to Loren whom of them was Ironborn and whom was a fellow Riverlander. "I... I presume I lead them. Lord Botley did, but you killed him. And... and all of his captains too. Sunderly and Kenning and Myre"

Loren gave him a nod. "And what do you think I should do with you and yours?", he asked, clenching his fists. Lothor gulped. "We... we were forced to fight for them", he claimed. "Our country is occupied. Please, we hate the Ironborn as much as you do"

This statement gave him even more hateful glares from the surviving Ironborn, but Lothor did not stop. "I hold no loyalties to them beyond forced servitude. If you spare us, your grace, we shall fight for you" His bold offer was met with mixed reactions, even among his own people. Another one, an older man who wore the colours of House Vance shook his head. "Coward", he growled. "If we turn on them, they'd put our families to the sword!" He turned to the king. "Your grace, we are your prisoners. Our houses will pay for our freedom"

"Will they?", Loren asked calmly. "I understand few of you had a choice. Yet I have a question for you" He leant forwards, glaring from the Darry boy to the proud Vance soldier. "Are you trying to fool me?", he growled. "You might have been forced to fight, but you did things beyond that. You slaughtered my people, even the children, you raped women from here to our eastern borders, you plundered and reaved. None of you is an ounce better than the masters you served"

As the Riverlanders started to protest, Loren stopped listening. He had been merciful in the past, but a decade as the king, waging war against these men, had beaten this streak out of him. If he'd let them go, in any way, they would return, forced or not, to continue the fight. They were enemies and murderers and there was only one punishment for that.

"Lord Marbrand!", he barked and the lord gave him a tired nod. "Separate the Riverlanders from their Ironborn masters. The former you kill swiftly. A warrior's death" At these command, the Riverlanders fell to the ground, begging for mercy, not seeing that this was, in fact, the only mercy Loren was willing to grant them. "The Ironborn I want you to crucify. Bring them to the eastern border and leave them there to die and rot!"

Marbrand saluted and without looking at his prisoners again, the king turned away. Hard as a rock. Loren knew, not all of his lords agreed with this, but in their current situation, they had to show strength, even if it seemed brutal. No mercy for his enemies, so that his people could live in peace.

As he rode up on the hill again, Darren joined him. The Lord of Castamere was quiet, as they rode side by side back to the camp. Finally, Loren broke the silence. "You think I did wrong?", he asked and Darren shook his head. "I think there is no wrong in this situation. Nor is there a right", he replied. "You chose what's best for the Rock. A king's choice" Loren smiled thinly. "Thank you for saying that", he replied. "Truth be told, I'd love to spare them. But what could I do? They'd never stop fighting us, never stop hating us" Darren sighed. "And actions like these won't make things any easier. The war has brought nothing good, but as it is, I don't see it ever ending. A deadly stalemate for the rest of our lives and a thousand years beyond"

The red and golden banners of the Lannister camp were visible in the distance and they filled Loren with pride, as he fastened his pace. Damion had caught up with them by now and he grinned. "A good fight, your grace!", he exclaimed, to which Loren chuckled. "You and I, we have not been the ones to do the fighting, squire", he said. "Pray that we never have to. There's honour in leading, as much as there's in fighting"

Darren gave the boy a reassuring smile. "See, your king still lives", he spoke. "Not so much of a cursed lion after all, are you?" Damion frowned, though finally nodded. "I... I think so", he replied, as the three riders reached the camp way before their vanguard

As they descended from their horses, the soldiers saluted. "King!", they greeted him, putting a closed fist onto their chests. Loren smiled at them, as he approached the largest of the tents, where he had installed his makeshift war council. With Marbrand remaining behind to do his bloody work, only two men were inside the tent as Loren entered.

Tyson Turnberry was there, heir to Maybros, a boy of sixteen years, with cherry blonde hair, green eyes and a notably freckled face. He sat in his chair, visibly unhappy about something and Loren had to ask himself if word of his decision had already reached him. Surely enough, Tyson would have disagreed. He was like Loren used to be, not as hard and perhaps a bit naïve. Yet the king overlooked this generously, knowing of his young age. The other man was Bognard Swyft, Lord of Cornfield. Being the same age as Loren and Darren, he was a more heavy-set man, ever since his crippling injury ended his career as a tourney knight. Straight black hair, falling down to his jaw, a short beard and a moustache, as well as pale skin and a grim face. His right hand was shaking even more notably than usual, a sight that still induced pity in Loren.

Once, Bognard had been a warrior, the best of them all, but his own temper had been his undoing. During a tourney, a careless insult from a Foote knight had sent him into a rage. Not caring for the helmet the knight wore, Bognard had tackled him to the ground and covered him in punches, only stopping as the man was close to death and his own hand ruined from slamming it onto the metal of his armour for so long. And yet, he was one of the men Loren would trust above all others.

"Your grace", Swyft greeted him, while Tyson remained silent. The young boy was staring at a letter in his hands, clenched around the parchment, as Loren noticed. "I presume the battle is won?" To this, Loren gave him a nod. "A glorious victory. The Golden Tooth is save once more. Send word to Lord Lefferd, I wish to speak to him"

Bognard saluted slowly. "I will arrange it", he promised. "Yet... your grace, there has been a situation" He glanced at Tyson, who looked up. "Maybros has been attacked, by Durren Stallhart", the boy revealed. "My family is save, but many of the people have been slaughtered. Baelor Bloodbane is dead and half of our soldiers. The city has been saved by a band of sellsword... led by Leonard Hill"

Loren raised an eyebrow. "The bastard of Lannisport has entered our lands once more?", he asked and Tyson gave him a nod. "Ser Tythan has sent a letter", he revealed. "Apparently, they will leave Maybros soon, to travel to Castamere"

Darren took a deep breath. "Hill's men on my lands?", he growled. "What is he planning?" To this, Tyson shrugged. "Tythan plans to accompany them to find out" This was a relief for Loren, who nodded. "I allow it", he spoke. "Yet I want to be informed over Leonard's whereabouts at all time. He's too dangerous to be left without supervision"

"I'm afraid this is not all", Bognard spoke, as his good hand reached for a scroll on the table. Wordlessly, he tossed it to his king. "This arrived at the same time", he answered. "A letter from Aegon Targaryen. I dared to read it and... I am afraid Harren the Black might not be our only problem.

And so, Loren read it as well. It wasn't a very long letter, yet the words were outrageous. He had heard tales of the Dragonlord, yet they have been nothing more, tales from the other end of the continent, from a tiny island, three kingdoms apart. He had heard rumours of Targaryen's ambition, but paid them no mind. This had been a mistake.

"A new enemy arises in the east", he sighed, as he lowered the letter. "And one that should not be underestimated" Bognard gave him a nod, as the king passed the letter towards Lord Reyne. "Though perhaps he could be an ally as well", he brought up. "Sent word to Dragonstone, your grace. Let him know you have a mutual enemy in Harren Hoare.

Together, you can take the Riverlands and split them between you. What happens to the rest of Westeros is none of our concern"

"To me, it seems more like we and Hoare have a mutual enemy", Darren spoke. "You have read the letter. He wishes to be the only king in these lands. Not even Harren is this audacious" Loren raised an eyebrow. "Surely you do not intend to ally with the Black Blood, do you?", he asked in disbelief.

Darren shook his head. "Nay", he declined. "But neither do I think we should fight against him right now. Ignore both. Hoare is forced to turn his attention east and with a bit of luck, both of our enemies will wear each other down. Then, we strike"

Loren and Bognard exchanged a glance and the crippled lord of Cornfield finally gave in.

"Might be an even better idea", he admitted. "To be honest, I wouldn't feel good fighting side by side with the Dragonlord. Let them fight against each other"

A slight smile of approval formed on Tyson Turnberry's face and with this, it was decided upon. Yet, Loren had something else to add. "Mylords, I appreciate your counsel", he told them. "And this is what we will do. Until one of them stands at our borders once more, we will not fight them" He took a deep breath. "Yet I will not ignore the last dragon of Valyria. The history books are full with men who made the same mistake", he brought up. "No, we will wait. We will gather our troops" He looked at Bognard. "And we will not do it alone", he spoke. "Send word to Highgarden. King Mern has received the same letter without a doubt. Let him know I wish to meet him" He paused, glancing around his council. "Let him know, we stand together"

End of Interlude V – A Hard Place

Seven Letters – No King Above

Meria

Being old was commonly accepted to be a bad thing, yet the younglings had no idea what they were truly talking about. As a very old woman, Meria knew the plight her parents had to go through before her. Admittedly, having grown fat with age meant that she had to go through a couple additional problems.

Opening her eyes was more a reflex by now, not something that gave her an actual benefit. It was all a grey blur, with her only being able to guess when she saw a shadow, spots that were slightly darker than the rest of her surroundings.

One of these spots was working on her right now, trying to get her into her overcoat. Cira, her handmaiden and one of the few she actually trusted. Pleasant, yet far too quiet for Meria's taste. "Bah, girl", she said, her hoarse voice causing the young handmaiden to gasp in surprise, which in return caused the dornish princess to chuckle. "Don't be like that!", she ordered her, as she leant forwards in her wheelchair, so that Cira was able to fully put the coat on her. "Say something!"

The girl waited for a moment. "What... what would you like to talk about, my princess?", she asked and Meria smiled. "How's the palace looking?", she asked in return. "Is my good-for-nothing son keeping an eye on the details?"

Cira gulped. "It's looking splendid", she said. "The most beautiful palace in Westeros" Meria raised an eyebrow. "And to how many palaces have you been that you can say such a thing?", she asked. "Besides, is Nymor doing it himself, or is that yet another job he burdens my sweet granddaughter with?"

This time, Cira hesitated to answer. "Princess Deria is doing most of the work", she admitted in a sheepish voice and a triumphant grin formed on Meria's face. "Ha!", she exclaimed, leaning back in her wheelchair. "Now, you can tell Allaryn he can come in. Let's not waste further time here"

Relieved at not being tormented with questions any further, Cira quickly stepped away from the wheelchair, her careful feet making almost no sound as she rushed over to the door.

"Allaryn, the princess requires your service now", she spoke.

Her own, soft steps were drowned out by Allaryn's, who made no attempt at being quiet. He had been in Meria's service for longer than Cira, back when she was still able to see and he knew that ever since her sight started to fail her, she preferred her servants to make some noise, to announce their presence. Gentle Cira had more traditional views on the topic and more than once, she had actually startled the princess with her silence. Still, she preferred her over the Dalt girl. At least with Cira, she was sure that she had never stolen anything from her.

"My princess", Allaryn greeted her and Meria gave him a nod. "Allaryn, my dear, I think I am ready", she spoke, feeling him grabbing the wheelchair behind her. "Bring me to the council meeting. Seven behold if they started without me again"

"I doubt they will", Allaryn replied. "Prince Nymor is attending today. You know how he is"

Meria smiled. "Sadly, I do", she said. "But for once, it might be a good thing. Must be important though if he is attending. Do you know whom else will come?"

"I don't", Allaryn admitted. "But Cira has spoken to Maester Cliff" Meria looked into the direction she expected Cira to be. "Then come with us, child", she ordered her. "You can tell me on the way"

The three made their way out of Meria's quarters, Allaryn pushing the wheelchair and Cira walking next to her. It was colder than usual in the halls of Sunspear, a gentle breeze the dornish princess welcomed quite thankfully. She smiled slightly. "So...?", she asked.

"Cliff has asked for a lot of attendees to discuss... something", Cira began. "The Maester was unwilling to tell me more about what exactly it is. But Prince Nymor and Princess Deria will both attend" This was not a surprise. Deria had all the ambition her father was lacking and where Nymor was a kind spirit, unwilling to deal with conflict, Deria actively sought them out. Nymor was a good administrator, Meria was willing to give him that, but Deria, she was more. One day, she'd make a fine ruler. Part of Meria's unwillingness to just drop down and die was the prospect of Nymor being Prince of Dorne. It would be inevitable, but the longer she lived, the shorter his reign would be.

And a long live, that's what she had. Eighty years, fifty-five of them as the Princess of Dorne. The yellow toad, that's what her enemies called her, but Meria Nymeros Martell was too old to listen to their slander. She actually took pride in it even. Lesser rulers wouldn't receive such insults, ever. That being said, she was also too old to just let it pass. Eighty years and she hadn't forgotten a thing, neither a service well done, nor an insult.

"Ser Lyonel will be there as well, Captain Razek and Lady Absidee. I believe Landon Jordayne and Vinicus Flowers have been called as well", Cira continued. Allaryn sighed. "I wouldn't count on that bastard showing up", he growled. "He's not exactly the most reliable sort" Meria glanced over her shoulder, at the broad, blurry shadow behind her. "Aren't you two friends?", she asked. "I thought you'd argue in favour of him"

"I don't mince my words, not even for a friend", Allaryn explained, as he continued to push the princess down the hallway. "Vinic went out drinking last night. Knowing him, he ended the night passed out in some godsforsaken hole in the shadow city"

There was something else in his voice and Meria picked up on it at once. "Is that anger I hear, Allaryn?", she asked and he confirmed her suspicion with a sigh. "Vinicus did promise to send someone to cover for my shift last night... I kinda wanted to join him, but he left me hanging", he revealed. "You know me, princess. I hold my grudges for as long as I must"

"You do have an excellent memory", Meria confirmed with a sly smile. "That's what makes you such a good guard" She turned her head into Cira's direction, hopefully. "And whom else will join us today?", she asked. "And Sarina Manwoody has requested to attend too", the girl continued. "Maester Cliff believes she somehow learned about the importance of this meeting"

Meria raised an eyebrow. "The heiress to Kingsgrave?", she asked. "She's a clever one, I give her that, but she's not part of the council" Cira sighed. "Prince Nymor already allowed her to take part of this meeting", she mumbled. To this, Meria rolled her blind eyes. "Oh, that boy", she muttered. "Who knows what pressure Sarina put upon him"

"Shall I throw her out, my princess?", Allaryn asked and Meria shook her head. "That won't be necessary", she replied. "The girl could consider it an insult. Let her hear what Maester Cliff has to say. If she got my son to grant her permission, she earned it"

Any further conversation was cut off from another one, taking place down the hallway, beyond a corner. Two voices, female, one of them sharp and agitated, the other one soft, yet with an underlying harshness to it that made it only sound more pleasant in Meria's ears. The princess never forgot a voice, so she knew whom these two women were right as they spoke.

"Oh, poor little bastard", the sharp voice hissed. It reminded Meria of the snake on the woman's sigil. Elia Aspys, younger sister of Lady Vyria of Snakestone. Meria had no fondness for either, nor for that scheming, petty family of theirs. Poisoners and killers, every last one of them. "Doesn't your daddy grant you enough clothes to cover your body with?" "At least I have a body to show off, Elia", the second voice said and Meria grinned. Ysilla Sand, Allyrion's bastard and a new guest at court. She didn't know her very well, but was quite fond of her father. Lord Alester was an old friend of Nymor and unlike her son, he was actually a capable man, the best Lord of Godsgrace Meria could have hoped for. And from what she knew about Ysilla's presence at court, it was quite important for her family. "It's Lady Elia", Elia replied sharply and Ysilla chuckled softly. "You really need that, don't you... Elia?", she said slyly. The other woman groaned in frustration. "Bastard!", she spat. "No manners. It's a wonder your daddy even tolerates you"

"My father loves me", Ysilla replied. "I doubt you can say the same. Come to think of it, I doubt anyone loves you" Elia chuckled coldly. "Oh, and that's where you're wrong, you little bitch" It was in this moment that Allaryn pushed Meria's wheelchair around the corner.

"Language, Mylady Elia", the princess reminded her.

"My Princess!", Elia exclaimed. "... I had no idea you were listening" Meria smiled. "And I had no idea you were getting into a quarrel with my honoured guest" Elia tried to stutter something else, but the princess cut her off. "No need for justifications. I hold no grudge and I doubt Lady Ysilla does", she assured her. "Just crawl back to your brother, little snake, I'm sure he misses you terribly"

This time, Elia suppressed a gasp, if barely. "... of course, my princess", she mumbled, as she rushed past her. Allaryn leaned closer to her ear. "She got red as a beet as you said this", he whispered and she could almost hear his grin.

"Lady Sand", she greeted her guest, pointing onto the free side of her wheelchair. "Why don't you walk with me for a moment" Ysilla followed the order at once. "Princess Meria, how are you feeling today?", she asked and the princess groaned. "Like an old, fat sack of mouldy potatoes", she complained. "Why is everyone asking me that? Seriously, you're smarter than that, girl. How's your brother doing?"

"Theodan is still in the city", Ysilla replied. "Undoubtedly seeing some whore. Not the kind of activity I want to disturb him by. I walked in on him and some woman once. Not an impressive sight, so not one I need to see again"

Meria's laughter was hoarse, but booming. "I like you, girl", she admitted. "Say, we're heading for a council meeting. Why don't you accompany us? You could represent the interests of your family there" Behind her, Allaryn sighed sharply. "Is that wise, my princess?", he asked. "She's a mere bastard"

"I do not remember asking for your opinion, Allaryn", Meria told him. "Besides, if Nymor can bring the Manwoody girl, I can bring my own guest. Maybe that'll teach him about the importance of having a council" She glanced towards Ysilla, spotting her slim shadow right next to her. "If he makes any trouble, comment on his hair", she advised her, as she moved a hand across the remains of her own. "Getting bald is not all bad, but I assure you, he hates it"

With this, they stopped in front of the doors that led to Meria's war room. She still remembered the way it used to look, an impressive room, round, with a table located in its centre, surrounded by high columns, large windows above them that allowed it to be brightly

lit during daylight hours. Of course, the only thing Meria noticed about this was the warmth on her skin.

"Cira", she said and the girl put a hand onto hers, which the old princess squeeze briefly. "I want you to go back to my rooms. If you see Bronwen somewhere, tell her to get her hands off my jewelry" Cira pulled her hand back. "Of course, my princess", she said. And with this, her soft steps began to move away from the wheelchair, as Allaryn pushed the door open. Loud chatter met Meria's ears and she clearly heard a couple voices. Landon Jordayne, her Master of Law, a man with the smoothest, most pleasant voice Meria had ever heard. She heard Lyonel Sand, her grand admiral, a man not much younger than her, but much louder. Between them, Nymor's soft voice and Deria's sharp additions. They all quickly lowered their voices as Allaryn pushed the princess into the room.

There was no need for an introduction. Meria merely gave her servant a smile and he moved out of the room, closing the doors behind him. "Ysilla, child, tell me whom we have here today", she spoke and the young woman began to speak. "Prince Nymor and Princess Deria", she explained. "Ser Lyonel Sand and Landon Jordayne. Maester Cliff and Captain Razek um Daar" She paused for a moment. "And Lady Sarina Manwoody"

"Always a pleasure, Ysilla", Sarina's voice came. A woman such as Elia would have meant it as a slight, but Sarina wasn't petty. Meria had no illusions that she was quite a bit a schemer, but at least her friendliness wasn't an act here. "Lady Sarina", she greeted her. "I have already heard you're here with us today"

Sarina hesitated to answer. "If my presence is not wanted...", she began, speaking from the other side of the table, but Meria raised her hand. "It is unexpected, but not unwelcome", she spoke, before she looked around. "Now, where is Nymor?"

"I am here, mother", Nymor's gentle voice sounded and Meria gave him a cold smile. "Next time you invite a guest, I wish to be informed about it", she told him, before turning to her council. "Lady Ysilla is *my* guest for today"

"As a fellow bastard, I can only welcome you, mylady", Lyonel spoke. "I suppose there's no objection?" Ysilla quickly sat down, even before anyone was able to say anything. "None", Captain Razek replied, unquestionably loyal as always. It had taken her years to make a true person out of the former Unsullied, but even now, he was without a doubt the most loyal at her council.

"Where is Vinicus Flowers? And Lady Absidee", Meria asked and Landon Jordayne cleared his throat. "Flowers did not follow the call for today, my princess. I do not know of his whereabouts", he replied smoothly. "Lady Absidee is meeting an acquaintance in the shadow city. Myriah Watermont, the... madam"

"An informant?", Meria asked. "Dear Absidee is excused then. Her work is of highest importance. But Flowers... I need to have a word with him. This is quite disappointing. Maester Cliff, don't keep us waiting any longer. Why have you called us here?"

Cliff sighed. "I admit, I am surprised by Lady Absidee's absence", he revealed. "I believe she could... should have warned us about this months ago!" He pulled out a piece of paper, Meria clearly hearing the sound of parchment being unfurled. "A raven arrived earlier", he said. "From Dragonstone"

"Give this to me", Nymor spoke, sitting right next to the maester. He grabbed the parchment and began to read, as Meria heard from his mumblings. "What... this... this cannot be!", he gasped. "Aegon Targaryen has declared war on Westeros. He demands our fealty, or he threatens to unleash his dragons upon Dorne"

Dragons... for a moment, Meria tensed up, while her council erupted into loud murmuring. Deria argued harshly with her father, Ser Lyonel interjected, even Landon said something, too much for her to listen to them all. She put a hand onto Ysilla's shoulder and the girl understood. Stronger than she would have expected, the bastard slammed a fist onto the table, silencing them.

"Enough with that!", Meria spoke. "Cliff, this is a serious matter. Thank you for bringing this to our attention. My friends, what are your thoughts on this?" It was Nymor who spoke first. "He is a Dragonlord of Valyria", he replied. "We know what happens when we choose to fight" "So, you would want us to flee again?", Deria replied coldly. "Maybe back to Mother Rhoyme? Last time, we bowed to hundreds of dragons. This Aegon, he has only three and he will not risk them for Dorne" Landon cleared his throat. "I would not be so sure about it, mylady", he replied. "Targaryen is an ambitious man. He wants all of Westeros, not just most of it" "He has three thousand men at most", Lyonel brought up. "What danger can he be to us?" Meria smiled thinly, as Nymor cleared his throat. "It's the dragons, Ser", he reminded him. "Your family has never faced them before, but mine has suffered greatly under them. And though it's true that Aegon has only three, our numbers are significantly fewer than what we used to have during the Spice Wars. The secrets of the water wizards have long since faded from our memories. The dragons are weaker than they used to be, but make no mistake, so are we"

"So what is it we shall do in your opinion, father?", Deria asked and Nymor sighed. "I say we should seek an alliance instead", he offered. "What good is Dorne for him? A dry, hot land, hard to conquer, even harder to hold. We have a common enemy in Argilac the Arrogant and I propose we seek to crush him together"

Meria gave her son a nod. "I would even agree with this", she admitted. "If he wishes to fight alongside us against the Stag King, then we shall. But what if he does not accept this?"

Nymor sighed. "I don't know if we can win against three dragons", he admitted. "He says if we kneel, we keep lands and titles. Would it truly be that bad, preventing a costly war?"

"A smart idea", Landon admitted. "In case a war breaks out, I must admit, I cannot promise that the entire population stands behind you" Lyonel chuckled at these words. "Is this about the Sandstorm?", he asked. "A band of insurgents, one that should have been crushed by now, Master of Laws"

"The Sandstorm is a serious threat", Razek intervened. "I find it hard to agree with Landon's course of action, but he is correct when it comes to them" Meria raised an eyebrow at Landon, who sighed. "Razek's support is as unexpected as it is genuine, my princess", he explained. "I am afraid, despite all my efforts, the Sandstorm is only getting stronger. By now, I suspect lords, or maybe someone even closer to you, to support them at least in some capacity"

"So, we should not march to war?", Meria asked. "At least until the Sandstorm rebels have been dealt with", Landon answered. "It would be foolish to fight without the entire kingdom behind you. We're few as it is"

"It would be cowardly", Sarina Manwoody intervened. "My princess, I trust Jordayne when it comes to the Sandstorm, but you have to ask yourself how much you'd lose if you do not fight. My house has never been ruled by kings not from our line, nor will we ever. When we knelt to your ancestor, this has been promised to us"

Meria looked into Sarina's direction, giving her a short nod. "And I won't break this promise", she replied. "I am no Nymeria though. Not a young warrior queen. I will lead you, but not in

the way you might expect” She looked around her council. “I have no intention of kneeling to the dragon. But neither will we fight. Let him burn, slaughter and conquer the rest of Westeros. He will not do the same with us”

Slamming her heavy hand onto the table, she knew she had their attention. “If he tries, he will learn a costly lesson. This is Dorne. There is no king above us”, she said and smiled at Sarina. “Your words, my lady. They meant something else once, but more than anything, they are a promise in these days, Nymeria's promise and mine”

It was in this moment that the door got pushed open. Nymeria heard the deep gasp of Allaryn. “My princess!”, he exclaimed and she knew something had happened. Something bad. “There has been an attack at the Planky Town! One of Ser Emilian's patrols has been ambushed. The Sandstorm, we believe. There are no survivors”

“So close!”, Deria exclaimed, while Meria clenched her fists in shock. “That means Sunspear might be in danger. The shadow city...” Next to her, Meria heard Ysilla gasping. “Theodan is still out there...”, the girl mumbled and Meria put a hand onto her shoulder, feeling the thin fabric of her dress. “Girl, go and find your brother”, she ordered. “Razek, send two guards with them. Once they are back, put the castle on lockdown until your men secured the city!”

With a sigh, Meria leant back in her chair, as her council around her erupted into loud chatter over the string of bad news. Enemies from the inside, enemies from the outside. Meria Nymeros Martell was no Nymeria, never has been. For all her strength, these were moments where she truly felt her age. She did not know what would come, with the Sandstorm, with Aegon. She only knew, she would never bow before them, never bend, never break. She was Dorne and there was no king above her.

End of Interlude VI – No King Above

Seven Letters – The Scion's Fury

Argilac

A storm was raging outside of the castle and in the mind of its king. Once more, the gods of wind and sea tried to bring down his line. Over the years, they nearly succeeded. And today, Argilac Durrandon stood amid the remains of their fury, in the crypts beneath Storm's End. It was a harsh duty, carrying two wives and three sons to their graves. An even harsher duty was to live on. Yet nothing was harder for the Storm King than going down here, remembering them as they used to be. His first wife, Leona, resting together with Mors, the son he never knew. It seemed only fitting for them to share a grave, embedded in the same stone, mother and son.

With a heavy sigh, Argilac put a hand onto the cold stone, as he remembered her. Leona had never won his heart, neither had he won hers. Estermont's daughter had been a kind woman, smart, yet frail of health. His attempt to bind Greenstone closer to the throne again, an attempt that resulted in a marriage made of duty, built on respect, but never on love. An attempt that failed when Leona died giving birth weeks too early, their son following her not long ago.

The king gulped. “We had good times”, he mumbled, smiling briefly at the stony sarcophagus. In his own way, he missed his cunning wife, her sound advice and the way she understood him. But it was nothing compared to the pain it caused him to look at the three graves on the other side of the room.

Daeria, the woman he loved, was lying there. Davos, the Storm Prince and Artos. Taken too soon, by a cruel fate. Elenei's line, the gods his ancestor grieved, their curse that still tried to bring down everything Durran had built up. And Argilac, the scion that suffered under their

fury. The Last Storm, that's what some called him, never when they thought him listening. Yet this was not true. The last man of Durrans line he might be, but not the last Durrandon. The smile on his face was forced, as Argilac approached the three graves. "It's me", he said, announcing himself in the desperate hope that they were listening, wherever they were now. A lump formed in his throat as he put a hand onto the stony face on Daeria's sarcophagus. Her spitting image, forever cast in cold marble.

"There's not a day I don't miss you", he mumbled. "All of you" His fingers wandered over Daeria's features, gently touching a stony cheek. "There's not a day where I don't regret that you're not here anymore", he continued. "And Gella... you should see her, my love. She's so much like you"

For a moment, his smile grew wider and genuine, the sadness fading, though tears shot into his eyes in their stead, as he thought of his stubborn child, his wayward daughter, his little princess of the storm, whom he loved more than all the world combined. "You'd be proud", he said and sighed. "So proud"

"Your grace!", a voice sounded from the other side of the crypt, the stony staircase that led to the courtyard. "Your grace, guests have arrived!" Argilac clenched his fists, as he pulled away from the graves of his loved ones. "I'm coming!", he growled, his deep voice echoing through the labyrinthine crypt. A thousand Durrandons were lying here. So would he, one day, next to the woman he loved. "I'll be back soon", he promised, as he marched back to the surface and to his duties.

On his way, he passed the newest of the graves. Maester Raymond had not been a Durrandon by blood, not even a Stormlander. Putting him into the royal crypts had upset a great deal of his lords. But in the end, Raymond had served for seventy years, longer than Argilac and most of his lords were even alive. None more faithful, a friend, an advisor. He was family, no matter what men like Estermont said. And he would rest there, amid those he served for so long. Losing him, it was something Argilac had expected and yet, the numb feeling that had engulfed him when they found the man, mere days after Gella left for Raylansfair, it had not faded yet. Raymond had been ninety years old at the time of his death, twenty and two more than Argilac. In a way, he hoped that he'd have the same, long life, yet a part of him doubted it.

Of course, the Citadel had already sent a replacement, fast as they always were. A warrior this time, his chain having four iron links, a man that should be to Argilac's liking. And yet, the silver-haired Maester Qoherys left a sour taste in his mouth, if only due to the man he was meant to replace.

At the top of the stairs, he was greeted by the captain of his royal guard. Ser Landry Swann was even taller than the king himself and, as hard as it was to admit, stronger than Argilac had been in his prime. Blonde of hair, unlike his dark-haired brother, the late Lord Steffon, Landry was an intimidating sight, an ugly, yet fearsome man, with a thick, long beard to rival his king's and strong, square features.

"The sons of Lord Errol, Fell and Buckler have arrived", he informed him and Argilac gave him a nod, narrowing his eyes at the storm that ravaged Shipbreaker's Bay. "They are currently in the Great Hall, talking to Schodek"

Argilac sighed. "I have expected them to arrive later", he growled. "Maybe when Gella is here again. She should meet them first" To this, Landry smiled. "She'd eat them alive", he replied. "The Errol boy is three years younger than her and it shows. Doubt he could even keep eye contact"

As the king smiled, Landry raised a hand. "Would you like something to dry your face with?", he asked and it was only then that he noticed the tears that still streamed down his face. Being so close to the ones he lost, it was always a humbling experience.

Argilac shook his head. "It's raining", he remarked, as he stepped out into the courtyard, the water washing away the tears from his cheeks. He sent a furious glare up the skies as a flash of lightning illuminated it, hoping that some god would see it. Durran Godsgrief he was not, but after what they had taken from him, they were his enemies. His ancestors, yes, but their scion had nothing but hate for them. They replied with a fearsome roll of thunder. Silently, Argilac marched over the courtyard. Landry followed him and two of the royal guard that had stood guard in front of the crypt while he was down there. Dickon Morrigen and Beric Storm were young, the youngest members of his guard, yet accomplished fighters in their own right and they had earned their position. That being said, considering that their position included being outside on a day as horrible as the current meant that few envied them, at least few that mattered.

The Great Hall meanwhile was surprisingly empty. Perhaps Baron had thrown them all out after noble guests had arrived. He sat to the left of the throne now, the three young men in front of him standing, though they quickly turned around as Argilac approached them.

"Behold, Argilac Storm King!", Landry announced him and the three saluted. "STORM KING!", they shouted in unison. The king gave them a nod, as he wordlessly stepped past them, to sit down on his throne. Landry took position standing to his right, while Dickon and Beric assumed their places behind him. Only Baron remained sitting to Argilac's left.

"So then...", Argilac growled, as he mustered the three young men. "Whom do we have here?" He knew about his imposing appearance. Still broad and tall despite nearing seventy years of age, his hair was full and black, as was his beard, while his eyes had never lost their piercing, dark blue stare.

First, Baron pointed at the young man standing on the left. He was the youngest of the three, though at the same time the only one that already wore the beginnings of a beard. The short, patchy set of facial hair did not fully hide his youthful cheeks though. With blonde hair and a surprisingly tall height, he was also the most visibly impressed by the huge hall and Argilac's even grander presence. "Jonathan Errol", he said. "Second in line to inherit Haystack Hall" Next, he pointed at the man that had assumed position in the middle of the trio, kneeling there with a natural authority. Tall and broad-shouldered, he was a warrior without a doubt, his tanned skin hinting at many hours spent outside, while the scar above his right eye gave even further evidence for his skill in battle. He met the Storm King's gaze with a haughty one of his own and Argilac had to grin. Oh, if his tongue would be as grandiose as that stare, Argella would tear him apart. "Bernard Buckler", Baron introduced the young man. "Firstborn of Lord Buckler"

To this, Argilac raised an eyebrow. "A firstborn?", he asked. "Does your lord father know of the price that is demanded?" Bernard gave him a nod. "My father is well aware of this", he said. "I have a younger brother and Warrick here has a cousin to continue our lines, should we be chosen" A brief, cocky grin flashed over his face, almost playful in its nature as he looked at Jonathan. "We thought, perhaps a secondborn might be seen as too low for your grace to consider", he added. "We did not want to insult you, or fair Princess Argella"

As Jonathan gulped, Argilac grinned widely, looking at them in the same way a wolf looked at a sheep. It was true, he called for suitors. Argella' twentieth nameday had passed three months ago and she remained a maiden unmarried. The thought of his princess finding a

suitable husband left a sour taste in his mouth, yet he knew his duty and hers. She was to be Queen of the Stormlands and give birth to the next Durrandon king. And for that, she needed a husband as soon as possible. One she loved, that would be what he wished for her, or one she'd learn to love. At least someone who respected her like Leona respected him.

"My father followed the order", Jonathan added after a moment of pulling himself back together. "You have sent for secondborn sons and here I am" Argilac gave him a nod. "Aye", he replied. "For you, should my daughter choose one of you sorry lot, will give up your name, to become a Durrandon of Storm's End, Argella's king consort.

Bernard raised an eyebrow at this last word and Argilac's grin got colder. "You have a problem with that, Ser?", he barked and the young man was quick to shake his head. "None at all", he answered. "This is just... highly unusual" To this, Argilac nodded. "It all fucking is", he said, before he turned his attention to the last of the three.

This man was the oldest, though not by much. The shortest of the three, he had black hair and piercing, blue eyes. What made his calm stare slightly unsettling was the difference in colour, as one eye was notably lighter than the other one. "Warrick Fell", he introduced himself, looking at the king with a lot less enthusiasm than Bernard or Jonathan. That was the full extent of his conversation. He didn't want to be here, that much was clear. And yet he was, doing his duty and in a way, this made Argilac appreciate his presence the most.

"Fell, Buckler and Erroll...", Argilac mumbled. "Your names are not important, but that makes you only more suited for this. If Argella chooses either of you, I expect no fuss about giving up your names and titles. The last thing I want is for her to have a husband that does not fully stand behind her"

Bernard gave him a nod. "Of course, your grace", he said. "Though... may I ask, where is the princess? I expected her to grace this meeting with her presence" Argilac's cold smile faded, as a moment of worry hit him. "Argella is currently not at court", he said. "She has led a group of soldiers to the Reach, where she negotiated as my envoy"

To this, the Buckler boy seemed surprised. "A group of soldiers?", he asked. "You... you mean like a general? Does that mean she has fought by their side?" The dumbfounded look on his face caused Argilac to grin. As Landry next to him burst into laughter, he couldn't contain himself and chime in. "You have come a long way, Sers", he said. "And yet, you know nothing of the woman whose heart you are meant to win" He shook his head. "She will be here in a few weeks. Time enough for me to get to know you and for you to get to know her" He sighed. "This is going to be a piece of work"

In this moment, his gaze fell upon the figure standing in the doorway that led up to the inner quarters of Storm's End. The new maester was almost as tall as Landry and Argilac himself, with the build of a true warrior hidden beneath plain robes, even if the ever-present hint of a gambeson remained right underneath the dark fabric. His silvery-white hair fell onto his shoulders, only half-tamed by a ponytail. His massive beard was almost entirely white, though a single, silver streak was visible, starting beneath the lower lip. His chain was half iron, half valyrian steel, a warrior and a scholar.

Argilac sighed as Maester Qoherys raised a finger, signalling something urgent. "Oh, for fuck sake...", he growled. "I'm afraid I have to take care of this. Wait here, while Baron will explain a few things to you" He glanced at his trusty friend. Though a few years younger, the knight actually looked older than Argilac, with balding hair, completely grey and a heavily wrinkled face. In return, Baron gave him a nod and Argilac rose from his seat.

"Wait here", he told Dickon and Beric, as they attempted to accompany him. He approached Qoherys alone. "Maester", he said and the warrior smiled beneath his impressive beard. "Has there been word from my daughter?" Qoherys shook his head, which filled Argilac with equal parts, relief and dread. "Only the letter she sent from Highgarden", he replied. "I didn't know you were expecting suitors for the princess"

"Correct", Argilac growled. "Maester Raymond wrote the letters to their lord fathers. There was no counsel I needed from you in this" Qoherys raised a silvery eyebrow. "And the princess?", he asked. "Is she informed about this?"

The Storm King smiled coldly, while he and his Maester moved up the stairs and into a more secluded hallway. "Not yet", he said. "Why are you asking? You plan on court her yourself?" To this, Qoherys laughed, a hearty, genuine laughter and Argilac wished he could see anything more in him than the replacement for a man that had been family.

"Oh, I have heard splendid things about her back at the Citadel. Her beauty mostly, if I may say so", he replied. "But I'm afraid these days lie behind me. Though, is it wise to accept suitors from such small houses?" Argilac raised an eyebrow. "Whom would you suggest?" Qoherys shrugged. "I am not sure. Someone powerful and important. If it has to be one of your vassals, why not Estermont. The old lord does not like you, for all I know" Argilac chuckled. "The old lord has been my father-in-law for two years", he growled. "He has outlived all of his children and is bitter of not being grandfather to the next Storm King. More importantly he is eighty and five. He won't live for much longer and then, his grandson Jarrod will become Lord Estermont. He's a more agreeable type"

"Then why don't you arrange a marriage between Jarrod and Princess Argella? He is unmarried, according to the documents at the Citadel", Qoherys asked, to which Argilac sighed. "Your documents are outdated", he spoke. "He has been married for years now, to Mertyns' daughter, Marianne" He shook his head. "House Errol, Fell and Buckler might be less prestigious than Estermont or Tarth or Connington, but they are loyal to a fault. My daughter needs a husband that supports her fully if she wishes to be a successful queen", he added and narrowed his eyes. "And you need more knowledge on my bannermen if you wish to serve me well"

Qoherys sighed. "Does it have to be one of your bannermen?", he asked. "Perhaps it is not too late to consider Targaryen's offer, about Ser Orys..." He did not manage to continue. With a sudden burst of anger, Argilac had grabbed the man by the chain around his neck, pressing him against the wall behind him. "Careful now, Qoherys", he growled. "You're a newcomer here, so I will let this pass exactly once. I believe I made my opinion on the bastard quite clear"

"That you have", Qoherys replied, after a heavy gulp. Then, he reached into his robe. "Yet... perhaps you should read this. A raven arrived earlier, from Dragonstone" With these words, he handed Argilac a scroll of parchment, which the Storm King carefully unfurled. "It comes as I have expected", Qoherys spoke. "Such is the will of Syrax"

Argilac's mouth moved slightly as he read the letter and the anger in him grew. "War!", he barked, his voice sharp and furious. "He has declared war! Demands our submission!" He narrowed his eyes as he noticed the following sentences. "Massey and Bar Emmon have betrayed us for him... Who does he think he is?" His fingers dug into the parchment, heavy enough to tremble.

"The last Dragonlord of Valyria", Qoherys explained. "I studied his family and their beasts. They are alike, Targaryens and their dragons. Terrifying, mercurial and daring, either mad of

mind or brightly genius. And with a hunger for greatness. He will not back down, but perhaps it won't be too late to prevent bloodshed through marriage”

In a fit of rage, Argilac threw the letter onto the ground, before harshly grabbing the maester by the shoulders. “Your kind declared war on my people, Valyrian!”, he barked and Qoherys seemed to cower for a moment, just enough for Argilac to pull himself together. The new maester was not to blame for Raymond's death, neither was he for this insolence that was this declaration of war. And with this realization, he let go of him.

“They are my people as well, your grace”, Qoherys explained calmly, putting a hand onto the iron links of his chain. “I am sworn to serve Storm's End and you, your grace. The best for its people and for you. As such, I have to give such advice. What you do with it is up to you, but I am not one for honeyed words to please your temper”

Despite the anger over this letter, Argilac found it in him to give Qoherys a small, sad grin.

“That's what the Archmaester told me when he sent you”, he said and his grin faded. “This dragon king wants a war? He shall get one. Call for the banners! We shall see what good his dragons will be when Durran's fury falls upon him and the wrath of gods!” He shook his head. “And this bastard you bring up, I'll take his head. Maybe the hands of his ambassador haven't been a message stark enough”

Qoherys sighed. “I am afraid it has been too stark”, he said. “He cites it as one of his reasons for marching to war” Argilac clenched his fists and through a red veil of anger, he knew that Qoherys was right. And yet, a moment of anger could not be undone. What else was there now, but war? For Argilac, there has never been anything else. His life, a string of war and tragedy. Perhaps this one would be both. One final war, a last storm for House Durrandon.

“Durran has braved the gods”, he growled. “Aegon is no god. And though he names them after your fallen deities, neither are his dragons” He approached the window, slamming a hand onto the stony windowsill. “Call for the banners, the lords high and low. Assemble them at Storm's End. Fury against fire. Whose blood, we'll see. But there will be war and we will fight to the last!”

Qoherys gave him a nod, putting a closed fist onto his heart. “To the last”, he confirmed. He turned down the hallway, to his own quarters, as Argilac Durrandon glared out of the window, consumed by silent fury. The storm that raged outside the castle paled, compared to the storm inside its king. And it had only just begun.

End of Interlude VII – The Scion's Fury

End of Interlude – Seven Letters

And with this, you have reached the end of the Interlude between Book 1 and Book 2. I hope you have been enjoying this insight into the minds of the rulers of Westeros, as Aegon's War of Conquest is about to begin. Book 2 is currently being written and I have finished the first two chapters as of this writing. As such, here are two links for you to continue.

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