Disclaimer: I don't own HP, GOT, or ASOIAF. Would have finished the last two properly if I had.
Edited by Bub3loka

15th Day of the 9th Moon, 303 AC

Damion Lannister, Braavos

He had never been a large man, nor broad of shoulder, but age had shrunken him all the same. Perhaps it was some hidden ailment, or he had displeased the gods somehow, but at eight-and-fifty, Ser Damion Lannister stood scarcely five and a half feet, his limbs turned to kindling twigs, his knees trembling like old reeds in the wind. The strength he had once carried into the lists, the pride he bore in the melee of his youth, had long since bled away. A decade was all it took to melt his muscles to wax. Worse still, he was too old for his royal cousin's schemes.

Yet he had watched Cersei Lannister from the moment she could walk the halls of Casterly Rock, and he knew her nature better than most. Pride ruled her more than sense, and she was quick to anger and quicker to confuse rebuttal with treason. And to defy the Lady of Casterly Rock—Regent to the boy-king besides—was a thing no Lannister dared even whisper of, no matter how far into madness she had wandered.

He did not understand what twisted turn her thoughts took now, but understanding was not asked of him. Obedience was.

Under the cloak of night, she had commanded fifty tons of pure gold in ingots to be loaded onto the *Roaring Lion*, pride of the Lannister fleet. House Lannister had steadily mined the deposits of Casterly Rocks and the surrounding hills, filling their vaults with gold over the ages until whole grand chambers were bursting to the brim with it. Even so, this was madness. It took three nights to move such wealth into the carved cave-dock that served as House Lannister's private dock. For good or ill, no outsiders ventured there, and Cersei's plan was safe from prying eyes.

Every sailor, mariner, and red cloak involved was sworn to secrecy. Mere vows failed to assuage Cersei's paranoid mind, and each man was specifically handpicked with wives or children within her reach, either living in Lannisport or Casterly Rock. The threat was left unspoken, but everyone heard it—any betrayal would come at the cost of their flesh and blood. Damion was no different, for his wife, daughter, and grandsons lived in Casterly Rock.

Sailing so much gold by ship was folly, but his mad cousin had left Damion no choice but to attempt it. One golden dragon weighed slightly more than a fifth of an ounce and was not even all gold!

Over ten million golden dragons could be minted from the gold Cersei had ordered spirited to the ship. The Roaring Lion could easily carry more than ten times as much weight, but the only cargo was the ingots of gold. Any merchant would weep at the missed opportunity—voyages from Lannisport to Braavos and back could make one rich upon successful return.

Five war galleys escorted the Roaring Lion, all manned to the brim and armed to the teeth.

For good or ill, no word of the venture had gotten out, and without Ironborn to bar his way through the Sunset Sea, they sailed around the Redwyne Straits and Dorne undisturbed.

Two skirmishes almost happened when sailing through the Stepstones. Damion's heart almost burst with worry, but the pirates quickly turned away after seeing well-armoured and manned vessels.

The threat of the fierce sea storms in autumn didn't help soothe his nerves either—if the ship sank, Damion would rather drown with it than be the man who lost a lion's fortune.

Why was all of this folly even happening?

"You will hire the Faceless Men," Cersei had said, her voice frigid. *"Aegon and Daenerys must die."*

"And if they refuse?" he had asked, weakly.

"Then find another," she'd replied, bored, as though he were a half-wit. *"Essos crawls with catspaws. Someone will be eager to take Lannister gold and do the deed."*

Knowing that there was a method to Cersei's madness… was a relief. Yes, removing the Targaryens was well worth the risk. That alone set his resolve in stone, and Daemion swore to himself to give it his all. The dragon had been slighted by House Lannister, and dragons did not forgive. Death would await if Damion failed, not because of Cersei's wrath.

So he had to succeed by hook or crook.

When it came to murder and subterfuge, the House of Black and White were the finest in the world. The Faceless Men had no equal in assassination, rarely left any traces, and it was said they were willing to kill anyone… for the right price. Sons of the Stranger, they were called.

Damion muttered prayers to the Seven with each sunrise. Every docking to resupply in a small harbour or a large city pier was a risk. Fifty tons of gold in ingots were enough to get even the laziest magister on his feet.

He had forbidden descent to the cargo hold; only the captain of the red cloaks, Ser Gawin Cliffon, could venture aside from Damion. He was the sole man who knew what they were carrying to Braavos. His young wife had become a lady-in-waiting for Cersei, and his two children were fostered in the Rock. His two brothers also served under Ser Jaime.

The gods, in their mercy or their mockery, saw Damion safe to Braavos at last. He came weary from the voyage but whole of limb, and more importantly, the gold in the belly of the *Roaring Lion* remained untouched. Only his stomach had suffered; the sea had never been kind to him.

As they passed under the looming Titan of Braavos, he still felt somewhat nauseous, but the ache in his belly was not half as bad as it had been the first day. He caught sight of the Arsenal, the famed shipyard of Braavos, squatting on its jagged rock like some stone leviathan. Gods, it was an ugly thing. He thought it looked as though a dozen shipwrights' yards had been smashed together by a drunken giant.

A thin layer of fog clung to the turbid waters of the Great Lagoon, covering the infamous Hundred Islands with a pale veil.

The war galleys that had guarded them across half the world were denied entrance to the harbour, as was Braavosi custom. So the *Roaring Lion* inched forward alone, waiting her turn amongst the fat-bellied trading cogs. Two hours passed before a dockmaster's horn called them in.

The fog only thickened as Damion set foot upon the quay. The world beyond a dozen yards vanished into damp white, and the dockhands fluttered around like ghastly shapes.

"Seven hells," he muttered under his breath, breath misting in the chill. "Must the gods try me yet again?"

He turned to the man beside him. "Ser Cerion. You said you know the Braavosi tongue?"

"Aye, Lord Damion," the blond knight replied. He was Ser Gawin's second, proud of the bastard Valyrian he'd picked up from the sailors in Lannisport as a child. Like all the Lannister men, he wore an unassuming travel cloak of brown linen and wool.

"Good." Damion leaned close, voice dropping to a whisper. "Find me a guide who knows the city like the back of his hand. Keep quiet about our purpose."

Ser Cerion bowed his head. "As you command, my lord."

After a moment's hesitation, Ser Cerion vanished into the fog, swallowed whole by the pale murk. The silence was so complete it set Damion's teeth on edge. Even the gulls had fallen quiet, and the water of the lagoon was deathly still.

Ten minutes passed before the knight re-emerged, trailing behind him a scrawny slip of a boy. The lad was young, sharp-eyed, and better dressed than most gutter rats, though his bony arms were thin as reeds.

"Tell the boy he'll have two silvers for his trouble," Damion said. He plucked two stags from his purse. "One now, one when we're back. More, if he does well."

Ser Cerion translated in his rough, bastard Valyrian. The boy's face split into a grin when the first coin spun through the air. He snatched it deftly, said something quick and eager, and waved them to follow.

Damion drew his cloak tight against the cold fog. He chose a dozen redcloaks to come with him, Ser Gawin commanding at their head. Only a fool would trust a gutter rat blindly, and Damion was no fool.

What if the boy led them into a narrow alley, where a few rogues waited in the dark?

The mist made the cobbles slick as river stones. Twice, thrice, Damion stumbled, only saved from sprawling by Ser Cerion's steady hand. His old bones ached from the cold, and his thoughts turned treacherous.

He could take the gold, flee to Lys. Live out his final years like a king under the warm Lyseni sun, under the caress of Valyrian beauties. No dragons, no Cersei, no war. But his wife, his daughter, his grandsons... all within the Rock, beneath Cersei's gaze. And even if he found the courage to damn them, how would

he spirit tons of gold past the Rock's guards, past the Roaring Lion*'s* crew? Ser Gawin Clifon, ever-smiling, would put a blade through his ribs before his feeble hands took the first chest.

No. Better to take a handful of the remaining coin when the bargain was done. Just enough to make him wealthier but not enough to rouse the Queen's suspicion.

Braavos unfolded before them like a maze of fog and stone. Bridges arched over inky canals, one after the other, so alike they might as well have been the same bridge walked thrice over. Damion lost count. His unease grew with every corner and every turn. Was the street rat leading them in circles? Was this some cruel trick?

Just as he lifted his hand to give a sign to Ser Cerion, the fog parted to reveal an ominous facade of dark grey stone perched atop a rocky knoll. No windows graced the smooth walls, and the black tiles on its sloping roof glistened in the mist. The front door was no less sinister, with a half-smiling, half-crying face split between ebony and weirwood—one black and the other white.

"This is the place," Ser Cerion said at last, translating the boy's hushed muttering. "The House of Black and White. He says… only one may enter at a time, my lord."

A hush rippled through the redcloaks. Damion felt it too—a tightening in his chest, that old warrior's instinct that screamed turn back. The temple loomed before them, cold and silent. His heart throbbed with doubt.

He could still turn away, though not to flee. Sail east to Tyrosh, Myr or Lys, try his luck with lesser knives and cutthroats instead of these death-priests. Or he could walk forward, down into this dark warren beneath the earth, and trust his life and his house's fate to men who served no kings or proper gods, only death.

Lannisters were meant to be bold.

Yet he felt nothing of the lion now—only his years, the ache in his bones, the smallness of his breath. When he looked at his guards, he saw his fear reflected in theirs. Their faces betrayed nothing, but their hands were white-knuckled upon their sword hilts. Ser Gawin watched him with that same quiet smile he always wore, the one that never reached his eyes. The smile of a man who would gut him in a heartbeat if the queen commanded it.

Did he even have a choice?

"Wait here," Damion said, his voice little more than a rasp. "All of you."

They did not need to know of the gold in the ship's belly, nor the true shape of his purpose. No man stood before the House of Black and White by chance. Even dullards could guess what business brought a Lannister to the Stranger's halls. But the fewer who knew the details, the safer they all remained.

Ser Cerion shifted uneasily. "But, my lord, if something should—"

"If I need a translator, I'll come fetch you," Damion cut in. "Hold your ground."

Cerion dipped his head, though reluctant. *'A loyal man,'* Damion thought. *'Brave, steady, and clever enough with words.'* Had he been born to a better name, he might have had a holdfast or a rickety tower of his own, no matter how small, instead of living in the Lannister barracks.

Damion stepped forward and set both palms against the door. The wood was cold beneath his fingers, hard as iron. His arms trembled with the effort, yet the great slab yielded with a low, mournful groan, parting to reveal a stairwell that wound down into darkness. He swallowed the taste of bile and forced himself across the threshold.

It felt as though he were descending into the Seven Hells themselves. Each step was slower than the last, his breath loud in the still darkness. *Seven save me. I should have brought a lantern.*

Time lost meaning in the dark, though it never thickened beyond the point of consuming the stair's shapes. A faint glow emerged ahead, and at the stairs' end, Damion found himself in a cavernous hall lit only by candles placed upon the stone floor. Their flames burned a muted, blood-red hue, casting long and quivering shadows that made his skin prickle.

Vague shapes and sides flanked the dim path, and the shadows flickered, revealing stretched and roaring monstrosities. Statues, his mind told him, but his heart would not stop hammering. Damion shuddered at the glimpse of a savage goat head atop a human body, a dark lion, a cowled figure with only a skeletal chin peeking beneath the hood. Those were the better ones, for the rest were things that did not look remotely man-like, so twisted and *wrong* that Damion had not even imagined them in his worst nightmares.

"Warrior above, grant me courage," he muttered weakly.

"Only Him of Many Faces can hear you here," a voice came from the darkness.

Damion leapt in fright.

The voice belonged to a figure robed in half-ebony, half-ivory cloth, standing so near that Damion's breath caught in his throat. He had neither seen nor heard the man's approach.

The priest's face was gentle, his smile soft and welcoming, but that only made the chill in Damion's gut deepen.

'Seven above, Cersei, what dreadful pit did you doom me to?'

"*Valar Morghulis.*" The kindly-looking man bowed his head lightly. "What brings you to the House of Black and White, ser?"

The words were crisp and clean, spoken in a common tongue that one might hear at any port in Westeros.

"Valar dohaeris," Damion managed, the words scraping out of a throat gone dry. *All men must serve.* Yes, he had come here to serve, and he felt a shred of strength return as he lifted his head.

The priest gave a soft hum of approval and beckoned with one pale hand.

"Come."

He did not wait to see if Damion obeyed, but slipped soundlessly into the darkness once more. With a shiver and a silent prayer, the old knight followed. The man's footfalls made no sound at all, and that frightened Damion more than any sound could.

They came at last to a still black pool, wide as a hall. Pale candles, burning their sullen red light, ringed its edges. The glow made the waters glisten dark as garnets—like a basin brimming with freshly-spilt blood. A faint metallic scent hung in the air.

"I… I would give two names to the Many-Faced God," Damion said, voice shaky. Why did the air taste of copper?

"The Him of Many Faces accepts only one," the priest replied, soft as silk, still facing the pool.

"I have coin enough for two—"

A gentle chuckle cut him short. The priest's shoulders shook, though his voice remained mild. "Do you truly think so? Do you know the price of such a gift?"

"I have gold," Damion whispered, though the words felt smaller than ever.

"Gold… yes. Few in this world command such treasure as those from Casterly Rock."

The words struck him like a mailed fist. Damion froze. *How does he know?*

"Do not look so startled, ser," the priest went on, almost kindly. "You wear your lineage plainly enough. Your cloak is ordinary brown, yet the gilded lion embroidery on the boots betrays you. There are lions aplenty in the western hills, true—yet how many dare to wear the roaring lion of Lannister with such ease and confidence? And how many men of your winters stand with such pride in their spine?"

He dreaded the question, yet he asked it anyway. "If... if not gold, then what is the price of a second name?"

"For you?" The man did not hesitate. "A child of your blood."

Damion lurched back as though struck, a cough tearing from his throat. *Mother, mercy… no. No, no…*

Cruel, then. As cruel as the Stranger Himself. *Sons of the Stranger,* the smallfolk whispered, and he saw now why.

Worst of all, Seven save him, he *thought* on it. For the brief space of a heartbeat, he weighed the lives of his own blood. And the shame of that would haunt him to his grave. *Not Lucion. Not sweet Lanna. Not little Gerion, nor Tyland, nor bright-eyed Tybolt. Not one of them for Daenerys Targaryen's head.*

"Only… only one name," Damion forced out, breath coming ragged. "Aegon Targaryen. Sixth of His Name."

"Truly?" The priest turned at last, smiling as though they were old friends speaking of something inane like the taste of wine. His eyes shone with a soft delight that curdled Damion's blood. There was

something terribly wrong in such warmth. “A powerful name. A dangerous name. The price, ser… will be steep.”

Ser Damion Lannister closed his eyes. He longed for the warm, gilded halls, for the sunlight that spilt across Lannisport’s cobbled streets, for the mingling scents of spice and salt from the market, and the endless hills of the Westerlands that rolled away like golden waves beneath the sky.

Seven above, he missed his wife and children most of all. He ached to turn the ship around, to flee this cursed place and never look back.

“House Lannister is willing to pay in gold of the finest purity,” he said, forcing the words through his clenched teeth. His hands, stubborn and small, had curled into fists before he even knew it. “All in ingots.”

The candle smoke clung to his nostrils and made his head swim. Sweat prickled at his brow. The man before him, with that gentle, almost friendly face, made him want to run faster than he had ever run in his life.

Yet the dragon’s shadow crept ever closer. He remembered the Mad King’s summons and how a highlord and many heirs had perished without any dignity, without any justice. And yet Aerys had no dragons, unlike Aegon and Daenerys.

Damion was no Eddard Stark, no Robert Baratheon to raise banners and lead armies in the face of overwhelming odds. He was older, smaller, and slower. Yet he, too, could face the dragon. Perhaps Cersei, with all her madness, had the right of it. He could get Aegon killed—the Faceless Men never failed—and then purchase the services of another catspaw to go after Daenerys from elsewhere.

“Fifty tons of pure gold,” the priest said, voice soft as silk. “But do you dare accept?”

Damion wanted to scream. How did he know?!

Ser Gawin Clifton remained on the ship, far from this chamber. Only Cersei and he had known the names.

Worse still—could he afford to refuse? He could leave, yes, and take the chance with another band of assassins, and yet… what if they failed? No other catspaws would ever dare to guarantee a kill, nor had the reputation for it. A king and a queen were heavily guarded, with a whole army…

One dead for certain… or two assassinations that might fail?

Damion weighed it in his mind.

A king… a king was far more dangerous than a queen. The Dance of Dragons had shown it well enough: even a dragon queen was fragile without a dragonlord at her side. What was Maegor with Teats, without a Rogue Prince to bend her enemies to heel? The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth.

“I will do it,” Damion whispered, his voice trembling and hoarse. “I name Aegon Targaryen. The gold… it is yours.”

The priest inclined his head, slow and deliberate. “Come back tomorrow. The harbour master will guide your ship to our private docks. But first… we must pray, to see if He of Many Faces truly desires the name.”

A refusal?

Delay?

Or just a zealot’s madness?

Damion’s chest tightened. He gave a stiff nod, turned on trembling legs, and stepped backwards, careful as a child walking through a graveyard. Each heartbeat thundered in his ears, echoing against the darkness. The moment he thought the priest could not see him, he ran, clumsy and desperate, up the narrow steps.

When he reached the surface and saw the cloudy sky above, he kneeled on the ground, gasping for breath, and began kissing the salty, slippery cobblestones below, uncaring of the bewildered red cloaks.

Not even half an hour had passed inside, yet he felt a decade older.

20th Day of the 9th Moon, 303 AC

Daenerys Targaryen, The Gates of the Moon

It took nearly a fortnight of planning and convincing for her trip to the Vale to happen. Ser Barristan was to accompany her, and naturally, a new, larger saddle for Drogon had to be crafted. The old knight requested Marwyn to look into his lame leg and took time to get the rest of his skills despite his age and old leg.

And Daenerys? To her greatest annoyance, she was tutored like some little girl. Everything about the Vale and the North, histories, lore, feuds, alliances, and the different Houses. Of course, Westerosi customs and etiquette were again included, as if she were a dullard who had failed to learn them last time.

Spending long hours on dragonback proved far harder than Daenerys had imagined.

Flying for mere minutes to taste the sky was one thing; riding for hours, burdened by armour and supplies, was quite another. Above, the winds were ever fiercer, stabbing and slamming into her with relentless fervour. Even securely tied with straps and chains, it was a draining experience, and a moment of laxness could see her head striking the saddle or the dragon’s rough scales. Daenerys knew this well—she had learned the lesson painfully more than once on the first day.

Drogon grew weary long before nightfall, and they were forced to land in sheltered hollows, their ambitious plans to reach the Gates of the Moon by the second or third day cut short.

The chill was no less cruel. Heavy layers of cloth pressed tight against her skin, but the wind still found its way through every gap, the coldness seeping into her flesh and bones. Ser Barristan's armour and the weight of their provisions made her labour doubly hard, and Drogon's displeasure was plain in the ripple of his wings and the impatient snap of his tail. Flying after dark was out of the question, and each evening the old knight had to find a safe place to camp, somewhere sheltered from the elements. The ground was either hard and icy, drinking in the warmth from her shoes, or cold and damp and sticky.

Daenerys had wished for Missandei or another guard to share the burden, yet Drogon allowed no one else upon his back. There were no attendants to bring her wine, no hot baths, no soft silks. Only the dragon, the knight, and the endless sky filled with biting wind.

The nights were bitter. Without dry firewood or a warmed tent, the cold gnawed at them, worse still as they skirted the jagged peaks of the Mountains of the Moon. Drogon hated the snow-capped heights, shivering under the frost, and so they kept to valleys and lowlands, where the wind was less cruel.

Once she learned to bear the autumn chill, the lands below revealed a cold beauty. The Riverlands and the Vale stretched in green hills and golden fields, rivers glinting like silver threads. Snow clung to the Vale's rocky heights, draping the mountains in a cold, regal white that made words seem poor and inadequate.

Once, she had thought Dragonstone a harsh, desolate place Dragonstone. Yet the wind here was sharper still, the clouds lower, the cold deeper.

Five days it took, five days of toil, struggle and cold, for Daenerys and Ser Barristan to reach the Gates of the Moon, the winter seat of House Arryn.

There were no surprises in the Vale. As her husband and his council had predicted, Lord Arryn had bent the knee at the mere sight of Drogon.

"I, Harrold Arryn, Lord of the Eyrie, Defender of the Vale, and Warden of the East, pledge my fealty to King Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of His Name," he intoned, voice echoing against the granite walls of the Falcon Hall.

The keep itself was plain, squat towers guarding the base of the Giant's Lance. Within, the halls were well-kept, yet the decorations lacked the grandeur of other castles Daenerys had seen. She had admired the pale, slender fortress atop the summit—the Eyrie—its name as fitting as it was lofty. Impossible, however, to visit now. Even the servants had been withdrawn before the steep mountain paths were buried beneath thick snow.

"Rise, Lord Arryn," she graciously commanded.

Oh, how she liked to see such proud men kneeling at her feet. At first, it had made her fidget, uneasy beneath their eyes. Four years had passed since then. The girl who had whispered to herself that it was all for duty, for the slaves, for the smallfolk—she was gone. That naive Daenerys had lied to herself, and now she felt no shame in the pleasure of power.

But did it matter?

Seeing that moment when all defiance in the eyes of men melted away before the might of dragons was sweeter than any fruit. Hearing those proud lords who commanded many thousands of lives bend their knees and swear solemn vows was more pleasant to her ears than any song.

Even better, she did not have to struggle for it, for most of the effort was borne by her husband.

Many of Arryn's bannermen stood to attention in the hall, eyeing her as if she were some exotic beast. Some looked at her with veiled caution, mistrust, fear, and hatred. How much of it was aimed at Drogon outside?

How much of it was aimed at her?

None would break the rites of hospitality after bread and salt had been offered and taken. What a queer tradition. Why something as bland as bread and salt instead of wine and cheese?

Few of the gazes were filled with burning lust, but it was hidden behind polite smiles and practised courtesies. But they knew better than to make a move… not the fair-haired, blue-eyed falcon lord, though. Harrold Arryn undressed her with his very eyes and did it eagerly without an ounce of shame.

"Your Grace." His bright smile was thick with desire. "Shall I have the servants prepare the royal quarters for your stay?"

The Lord of the Vale was easy enough on the eyes and one of the comelier men Daenerys had seen. But Harrold didn't look half as good as Aegon, even if he was just as tall and graceful. Of course, she had been warned of the notorious skirt-chaser and his tendencies—not even the serving maids were spared from his lusts.

"That will not be necessary," she said, tone even.

His roguish smile, however, reminded her of Daario.

There was no doubt in her mind that the dashing lord would love to grace her bed in a heartbeat if Daenerys showed herself willing. Yet the time for such dalliances had passed; she was a queen. No matter how inexperienced, Aegon was a dragonrider and a king. Lesser men could scarcely compare.

"Perhaps a tourney and a feast in your honour?" Arryn insisted. "Let it not be said the Vale's hospitality is lacking. You shall be treated with a grand display of chivalry and martial prowess, that much I can promise. Who can rival the Knights of the Vale in the Seven Kingdoms?"

Ser Barristan shuffled on his weight, and judging by the faint shake of his chest, he had stifled a snort..

Daenerys fiddled with the hems of her hrakkar pelt—the memento from her first husband, her Sun and Stars. Alas, its musty smell had faded with time, and the once warm fur struggled to ward off the chill in the Vale.

"A tempting offer," she allowed. And it truly was one, unlike the fighting pits of Mereen, tourneys in Westeros were a voluntary display of martial prowess, a matter of honour, valour, and chivalry where the goal wasn't murdering your foe for the entertainment of the few.

Daenerys exhaled, shaking her head. "Alas, I must depart North at once. The Lord of Winterfell has yet to bend his knee."

Harrold's smile dimmed. "A pity. Many knights would have loved to meet Ser Barristan again and fight for your royal favour."

"Perhaps in the future," she said. "Once the war is finally finished, and the Seven Kingdoms are united once more, a grand tourney can be held to celebrate the peace."

"Peace will surely return to the realm with such dutiful rulers." Harrold gave her another overeager smile. "If you must leave with haste, then I must bring the parting gifts."

After a moment of incomprehension, Daenerys remembered the rites of hospitality demanded giving a gift when a guest took his leave, a token to honour the visitor and the house alike.

Two servants hastily ran over, carrying a bulky wrap each.

Harrold nodded as if pleased with himself, as if he was the one to make them, as two thick hides of beautiful black fur graced with lithe white stripes were revealed before her.

"Two shadowskin cloaks of the finest make to keep you and Ser Barristan warm in the cold North," Lord Arryn spoke. "The chill here pales before the frigidness that awaits beyond the Neck."

Daenerys nodded, accepting the gift. A sigh tore from her lips as she ran her fingers through the soft fur of the smaller cloak. Skilful make. And the size was just right to wrap around her fully.

What a sweet gesture, if somehow insidious. Cloaks held a deeper meaning than plain garments to be worn here. How unsurprising—Harrold Arryn was indirectly propositioning her *again*.

Farewells were exchanged, and she finally left for the yard with a swift stride, shadowed by Barristan, whose face looked like a particularly weathered piece of pale granite.

"The gall of the boy," he ground out, disappointment seeping through the tight words. "Lord Jon Arryn would spin in his grave if he could see his successor." Yet that did not stop Barristan from tightly wrapping himself in the striped cloak of black fur.

Drogon's enormous form awaited in the snowy courtyard, shifting uneasily as his tail lashed at the falling snow.

After more than half a year of riding and training, she had gotten the hang of dragon-riding—and so had Drogon. With a command, he lowered himself so she could climb onto the saddle. The heat emanating from his scales wrangled with the chill permeating the air.

"What was he like?" Daenerys asked curiously as she climbed up the saddle. "The Jon Arryn that even Lord Connington seems to respect despite his bitterness."

Ser Barristan's eyes grew distant.

"As High as Honour. Men like Jon Arryn and Eddard Stark are rare. Honour and loyalty and skill are an even rarer match, and if things had been different…" The old knight groaned as he pulled himself onto the saddle behind her. "The realm was lesser for it when Jon Arryn passed away. Pycelle had said it was a fever. I believed that before, but now, to think of it, Cersei Lannister must have poisoned him."

"*Soves*," Daenerys commanded as soon as both of them were strapped tight.

Drogon rose into the sky, the rhythmic beating of his enormous wings against the wind soothing her nerves. The push of the cold wind, however, was anything but soothing.

Barristan was an old man, so Daenerys would not begrudge him some nostalgia, but why would she mourn the death of her enemies?

What good was honour or skill when they were wielded against her?

She did not feel sad about the death of those who had opposed her House. No, she felt amused.

Why wouldn't she laugh at the so-called Demon of the Trident, Rhaegar's slayer, when he died drunk on a boar's tusk?

Why wouldn't she be glad about the death of the Old Falcon, who had been the first to raise the banner of rebellion and propped up the Usurper?

Why wouldn't she find relish at the fall of the grasping Stags, who were now dead to the last?

Why wouldn't she drink to the end of the Quiet Wolf, who had brought the bulk of the swords that had won the Battle for the Ruby Ford?

Now, Daenerys knew they all had their reasons, some ill-fitted, some righteous.

But so what?

They had rebelled against their rightful liege, against her House. A righteous cause would not bring her slain kin back to life. A good reason for fighting did not change the fact that she and Viserys were chased around the Free Cities like some street rats, forced to hide, flee, and beg.

How could she forget it all?

How could she forgive it all?

Only the lion and the wolf were left from the lineage of those who defied the House of the Dragon. Cersei Lannister and her spawn's days were numbered, for the Kingslayer's army had been crushed.

Then, there was the Stark bastard, a man Tyrion secretly admired and everyone else was cautious of. Daenerys could only scoff at it.

What could a single man do against a dragon?

There was an irony there—House Stark, older than the Freehold itself, reduced to some oath-breaking bastard and his meek sister, just like the treacherous wolves deserved. The same overproud House that had provoked her father. Why wouldn't she take her joy in it?

Was this not a punishment from the gods for rising against their rightful liege?

Would the Stark bastard be wise to grovel and kneel as Torrhen Stark did?

Would he bow and try to seduce her as Harrold Arryn attempted?

Or would he struggle and resist in vain like Cersei and her bastard spawn?

Despite the supposed chill, would the vast North be as beautiful as the Vale and the Riverlands?

The way would be long, even atop dragonback, but curiosity was gnawing at her insides.

24th Day of the 9th Moon, 303 AC

Genna Lannister, Riverrun.

To be besieged, knowing no relief would come, was a fear like no other. It whittled down your mind and wore the spirit thin, a creeping dread that set in your throat as if to choke you.

Because that's what she was—besieged.

Genna Lannister felt it most in the quiet moments, when the wind howled through the battlements outside, charging at the keep as if to topple it down. It was then her thoughts turned to her brothers, the four lions, once considered the pride of Casterly Rock, and each capable in his own right.

Tywin, harsh but fair when needed, who ruled as if born to it and never failed with anything but his children, his only weakness—the weakness that saw him to an early grave. Tygett, ever the soldier, whose mind was all full of swords and lances. Kevan, steadfast and sensible, always ready to serve by their eldest brother's side. Last but not least was Gerion, sweet Gerion, all smiles and laughter that could melt hearts and jests that could even pry half a smile off Tywin, but his eyes and heart always wandered, leading him into the jaws of Doom itself.

Had one survived, things would have been different.

She missed them all. She had mourned each in turn, and still did, in her quiet, private way. But mourning gave no comfort beneath stone walls beset by foemen baying for blood.

Genna was alone now, alone with her grandsons who were too young, too green to even wield steel, let alone command men and defend castles, abandoned by her fool of a husband on a fool's errand. Or perhaps he had sought escape instead, and she had been too blind to see it.

The bloody archers killed every raven she tried sending, not that Jaime would risk wasting what little men he had left in a vain attempt to break her out.

Now, all she could pray for was for winter to come swifter and the snows to doom the enemy sieging Riverrun to a slow death in the cold.

From the safety of the solar, where no arrow or trebuchet could reach, she watched the enemy gather. The riverbanks crawled with life; rafts, barges, and siege ladders taking shape under the eager hands of the enemy. Simple but reliable tools to storm a castle, and they made no effort to hide them. They meant to take Riverrun by storm.

Could a hundred and fifty men throw off an assault?

Genna Lannister prayed to the gods for it.

Surrender had been offered politely enough. A greybeard knight clad in the red and orange of Martell had spoken the words, his voice courteous if as dry as the Dornish sand. Genna had refused him. She might have considered it, were the offer from a name of honour, but no such men had proven

themselves such from Dorne. Dornish promises were worth as much as dust in the wind, quick to come and easy to go.

Did not their lords pretend to be pious and honourable while fostering raiders and brigands, if not outright joining them? Did they not break the sacred rights without blinking an eye to kill the Young Dragon and commit ever viler deeds?

But the man in command was merely half a viper and half a dragon.

Would one half be any less vengeful than the other? This Aegon, if he was a Targaryen at all, could bear the madness of his sire and the treachery of the Dornish. Elia was his mother, and Rhaenys would be his sister, and they had perished at Lannister hands. Could he call himself a king, a man, if he forgave such a slight? There would be no mercy for House Lannister. And certainly not for Tywin's kin.

"Oh, Tywin," she whispered into the cold chamber. "Why did the kindness in you have to die with Joanna?

So, the Lady of Riverrun remained steadfast in her defiance. She hoped for winter and prayed for snow, both in the small sept and before the heart tree.

Tygett had once said that sieges were the bane of armies, the death of morale and doubly so when the cold fell. The long, dreadful wait and lack of food and warmth would wear down even the most disciplined hosts.

Genna just needed to rebuff one or two assaults, and they would return to starving her out.

If only Emmon had remained. If only he had not gone to the Twins to rouse the Freys. What were two or three thousand Freys against Aegon's host of thirty thousand? Worse than nothing. Genna doubted the weasel-knights would dare come and fight, save to arrive after all the battles were done and steal whatever spoils remained.

At least Riverrun was strong, its walls steady, thick, and tall, surrounded by the waters of the Tumblestone and the Red Fork. Rocks thrown by mangonels bounced off the ramparts, barely leaving a scratch, and trebuchets took months to assemble. No wonder they were resorting to easier means of attack.

Yet the strength of the walls was about to be put to the ultimate test. Genna peeked from the solar's window—the sieging army was churning with activity and massing on all three sides of the riverbank.

They were preparing for an assault.

It looked like an army of reddish and grey rats from her tower.

Yet, as the barges were being manned, a terrifying roar tore through the air, turning the blood in her veins to ice.

The sound of a fluttering sail, but a hundred times stronger and more rhythmic, grew stronger by the heartbeat, and then she saw it.

A streak of golden fire drowned the panicking men atop her ramparts, and screams and smoke rose with it. A bloody *dragon* swooped from the sky, and Genna Lannister knew Riverrun would fall today.

27th Day of the 9th Moon, 303 AC

Cerenna Lannister, The North

She pulled her fur cloak closer, but it was in vain. In mere minutes, the cold crept even through the thick layers of wool, heavy linen, and fur.

Every gust stabbed in her bare face like a cold knife. Her shaggy mare, Dream, looked unbothered as she trudged through the knee-deep snowdrift. Born and bred in the North, she was at ease with the wet cold, unlike Cerenna.

The world around them was white. A veil of snow blanketed the hills and fields, drowning all other colour, smothering all sound. Cerenna had never seen so much snow. It stretched to the horizon in all directions, endless and pure, and so bright it hurt the eyes to look upon for too long.

To the right, lonely trees dotted the horizon. Pale frost clung to their twisted branches and slim twigs, turning them into statues of ice more magnificent than anything a master sculptor could create.

Cerenna might have marvelled at the sight had she not been so miserably cold. Her fingers ached, her toes were numb, and her throat felt raw with frost. Beauty was a bitter thing when it came with pain.

“How much more?” It was Lucion who broke the silence, his usually bright and eager voice turned weary by the arduous journey.

“We should arrive within an hour,” Ser Vylarr replied, face set in a grim frown. The captain always felt on edge, his eyes wandering around the snow as if expecting an attack. Cerenna didn’t blame him, for the Northmen all regarded their party with mistrust at best.

They had rested at Castle Cerwyn last night, but Lady Cerwyn’s hospitality had been as cold as the northern winds. They had all been searched, and not even a dagger had been allowed inside her castle, even after salt and bread had been offered. Even the guest quarters were small, uncomfortable, and cold.

Less than they had hoped for but more than expected. Jonelle Cerwyn’s father had been captured at the Battle for the Green Fork and perished from his wounds in Harrenhal’s dungeons. Each lord had lost kith and kin in the south to Lannister swords or Lannister plots, and the Northmen hated them all.

Would they just string them up in Winterfell, chopping off their heads when they came?

Their landing in Barrowton had been received no less poorly.

In the Westerlands, the golden lion of House Lannister was a sign of respect, of fear. It was like an invisible shield against anyone who would dare think ill, for all those who had challenged Casterly Rock had perished in the most brutal of ways.

But here, in the North?

Men and women saw the roaring lion fluttering in the wind, and their eyes were filled with loathing, disgust, and *hatred*.

Cerenna had little doubt that if they had not been sent as envoys to Winterfell, they wouldn't have managed to leave Barrowton, not alive.

"I'll have twenty of my men escort you," Damon Dustin, the new Lord of Barrowton, had said as they departed for Winterfell. *"The king wants you in Winterfell whole and unharmed, but make no mistake. This is not merely your escort, but my guarantee to His Grace that you won't resort to your Lannister trickery here."*

The last part was nary a whisper, but Cerenna and the rest had heard it. The indignity of being treated like some dangerous outlaw stung, and they couldn't do anything but push it down.

It wasn't all bad. They said Jon Snow was a bastard, an oath-breaker, but somehow, the fact that they were envoys to Winterfell stayed the Northmen's fury. That and their escort. Her royal cousin had claimed his hold on the North was brittle, that the bastard's rule would crack at the first prod. Yet what Cerenna saw with her own eyes spoke another tale entirely.

Even in Barrowton, the men and women on the streets spoke his name with the kind of reverence and fear commanded by Lord Tywin in the Westerlands. That alone gave her pause.

It baffled her. How had a Snow come to such standing? Bastards were meant to be pitied, scorned, or used but kept at an arm's reach. Yet there was no denying it—Jon Snow was not merely capable but *dangerous*; how else would a bastard sit firmly on a throne so swiftly? And if he were half as comely as Cersei had claimed, her task would be far easier to swallow.

Giving her precious maidenhead to a mighty king sounded far better than giving it to a bastard. It would still ruin her already dwindling marriage prospects, but so what?

Twice betrothed and twice widowed before the vows had been said, many considered her cursed. Even if avoiding the weak-chinned weasel from the Crossing had been a stroke of fortune, it had not come for free.

If Genna Lannister was anything to judge by, Freys made for poor husbands, even before the Riverlands had run red with blood.

Alas, being unwed at three and twenty made her an old maid, no matter how beautiful.

Cerenna had seen many knights and lords look at her with lust and desire, and she was well aware of her beauty. Seducing a man would not be a struggle, she decided.

If the Maiden took a shine to her, she could become a bastard king's wife. Every girl dreamed of becoming a queen, and Cerenna was no different. If she could don a crown, even as a bastard's queen, she wouldn't have to listen to Cersei's cruel orders. Her sons would be kings, and she would be safe from harm behind Winterfell's sturdy walls.

Unlike the rumours had claimed, the Northmen were scarcely different from any man from the Westerlands. Some were a tad taller, their faces grimmer, and with love of shaggy beards and unkempt mane to ward off the chill, their hair dark instead of fair, and eyes set in brown and grey instead of blue and green.

Cerenna was almost envious of the hardiness that allowed them to weather the cold and the wind as if it were no more than a warm sea breeze. Almost.

House Stark's men waylaid them as they went over a snowy hill. Half a hundred riders, all in ringmail and more than half in brigandine, the grey direwolf proudly displayed atop all of their padded surcoats.

At the head was a tall man with limbs like tree trunks, wearing a different coat of arms–three brown pinecones on white and green—but he wore a bronze pin in the shape of a howling direwolf head upon his breast. Cerenna tried to remember the name of the House, but her mind was blank.

"Halt!" The man's gruff voice was all iron. "Are you the envoys sent by Cersei Lannister?"

Her cousin cautiously spurred his steed to the front.

"Yes, ser. I am Ser Lucion Lannister. Behind me are Lady Cerenna Lannister and our escort, Ser Vylarr."

The Northman narrowed his eyes. "This is not the south, and I am no ser, little lion."

Lucion stiffened at the jibe, and his jaw was clenched so hard she could see a vein pulsing over his temple. Cerenna's cousin was far from little at nearly six feet tall; he looked quite dashing and was very good with a sword. After a deep breath, his face turned as blank as the snow around them.

The barrowknight leading the Dustin escort, Ser Rodrick, rode forth to meet the Stark captain.

"Captain Rickard, we haven't let them out of sight for one moment," he said, giving his fellow Northman a solemn nod.

"Good, we'll take it from here."

Now, instead of twenty Dustin men-at-arms, they were surrounded by fifty Stark ones. They were even bigger and more vicious-looking than their previous Northern escorts, doubtlessly selected for their size.

Soon, the walls of Winterfell could be seen in the distance. The snow capping the ramparts could not hide the drab grey stone underneath. The sheer size alone, second only to Harrenhal in the whole realm, made it worthy of a royal seat. Yet this grand castle could not match the size of Casterly Rock's greatness and majesty.

Was that why all the Northmen looked so grim?

Cerenna only hoped it was warmer in Winterfell's walls than outside them.

"Ser Luson." Her cousin's face reddened when he realised that the Northman was speaking to him, and she barely managed to stifle her giggle. "You and your men must surrender your arms, and your guards will stay in Wintertown."

"My name is Lu-ci-on, my good man," the Lannister knight replied through gritted teeth. "And Captain Vylarr must come with us. He is the only one who can confirm whether Princess Myrcella is truly your host."

"Fine, he can come too, Ser Lu-ci-on." Rickard nodded, face solemn.

After all the swords and spears and daggers were surrendered, all the redcloaks but Captain Vylarr were escorted towards the rows of small, neat, snow-capped houses built of log and undressed stone under the towering walls of Winterfell. Most were lived in, as attested by the smoke wafting out like a dark snake from almost every chimney.

Sers Lucion and the Vylarr were the last to part with their swords, both looking a tad reluctant.

They were finally in a snowy courtyard after two heavy gates, a portcullis and a drawbridge. The inner curtain wall had to be nearly a hundred feet tall and looked monstrous up close. Yet it also warded off any cold gales that made her freeze, making the inside far more bearable.

An old greybeard with a craggy face clad in heavy plate inspected them dispassionately.

“So those are the envoys, eh? They don’t look like much.”

He bore no distinctive heraldry besides...a blackened trout on his armour. The Blackfish?

“You’re in luck.” The Blackfish frowned as if the words stung his tongue. “The King is still holding court in the Great Hall, and you can get an audience today.”

They were led through a training yard, where hundreds of men trained hard on the muddy snow despite the cold. After another set of inner curtain walls, they were finally led through a large oaken door bound with thick bands of iron that led to an enormous hall capped by a roof of slate.

They waited outside in the cold for twenty minutes until the herald finally announced them.

“Ser Lu-ci-on Lannister,” her cousin’s shoulders sagged with resignation, “Lady Cerenna Lannister, and Ser Vylarr of Casterly Rock, envoys of Queen Regent Cersei Lannister.”

The first thing Cerenna noticed was the pleasant scent of pine and oak.

Inside, the hall was warm and twice as large as Casterly Rock’s Golden Hall, if far emptier. Various banners covered the walls, and plain long tables were pushed to the side, revealing a wide path in the middle.

Cerenna counted fewer than a hundred courtiers. Her chest tightened. Grim looks sat upon hardened faces; the clothes were plain and mostly made of wool or lined with furs, with a smidgeon of silk or velvet upon some ladies.

She felt all those eyes set upon her, filled with distrust, even outright loathing.

Her heart beat like a drum as they trudged forward. She feared to lift her eyes and look at the throne.

What if Jon Snow was some ugly, savage brute, too?

Yet, no matter how much she avoided it, the moment came.

At the end of the hall was a platform, where two figures sat upon thrones on the dais, behind which a giant white direwolf banner sat on one side and the crowned stag of House Baratheon on the other.

Her gaze was drawn to the man sitting on a cold stone throne.

Long dark curls framed a handsome, clean-shaven face, lips set in a faint frown, and eyes the colour of ripe plums that seemed to make her feel small. He was tall, broad-shouldered, a man whose presence filled the room even before he spoke, a plain circlet of dark metal resting upon his brow. His vest was simple dark silk, yet well-cut, the single white direwolf stitched upon his chest. Even in its plainness, he was a striking sight.

Cerenna had seen more dashing men, perhaps, but none possessed even a fraction of the authority, the quiet command that radiated from him. Her heart began to race, a sudden warmth rising to her cheeks, and she forced herself to look away, though her eyes lingered all the same.

Lucion nudged her gently as he knelt beside Ser Vylarr, and Cerenna lowered herself in the deepest curtsy she could manage.

Her gaze drifted to the second throne, smaller but no less finely wrought from ironwood, set to the king's left. Atop it sat a tall maiden, no older than fifteen, slender but womanly in all the right places. Even Cerenna felt the prick of envy.

Then her eyes fell upon the girl's face, and envy drained away. The gods, it seemed, were rarely kind to any one person. Her hair was indeed beautiful, black as the raven's wing and woven into a long braid, yet what might have been a fair face was marred. Large ears peeked beneath her hair, her cheek was scarred, angular and harsh, a stark contrast to the delicate frame of her youth. A slim circlet of gold rested atop her head, a crown to proclaim her status, yet it did little to soften the severity of her features.

Her pale blue eyes narrowed in displeasure as they fell on Cerenna, sharp and cold. And yet, in that instant, Cerenna finally noticed something she had overlooked: the crowned stag of House Baratheon stood side by side with the Stark banner behind the throne.

Cerenna thought, for a fleeting moment, that it could have been Myrcella, if only the maiden had been fair-haired and delicate. But no. The only dark-haired Baratheon girl in the Seven Kingdoms was Stannis' daughter. And just like that, her childish dream of queenship withered. At least… Jon Snow could find solace in a paramour with a wife so ungainly.

Beside the queen, a wolf as large as a destrier lay sprawled across the floor, its red, fierce eyes set on Cerenna, making her skin prickle.

The hall was silent, heavy with expectation. They squirmed beneath Jon Snow's unyielding gaze until the man finally spoke.

"Rise." His voice was firm and rich in a way that sent a pleasant shiver down her side. "I suppose you'd be here to confirm if Myrcella is truly my guest."

Lucion rose, only to bow stiffly. "Indeed, Your Grace."

"Very well. We cannot have your long journey be in vain." The king inclined his head. "Lady Myrcella, come forth."

From a shadowed door in the corner behind the throne, a young maiden emerged, the heavy crimson of her gown trailing lightly across the wooden floor. She moved with the measured grace of one long accustomed to attention, yet each step seemed hesitant.

Cerenna's breath caught. The girl was of the right age, with a golden mane of curls that all Lannister maidens had. A cruel scar ran from the girl's chin, slicing through her left cheek and ending where an ear should have been. It was not angry or fresh, but pale and faded.

The sight twisted something cold in Cerenna's chest, a mix of pity, envy, and revulsion.

Was this truly the queen's daughter?

The sinking feeling in her gut grew as she caught the captain of the guard's uneasy glance toward the scarred maiden.

"Princess Myrcella." Vylarr kneeled again, face as pale as chalk.

This was all the confirmation needed. This was Cersei Lannister's daughter. The missing princess was alive…

Lucion, however, was red-faced with anger, his golden mane bristling.

"Which vile beast dared to lay his filthy paws on your face, Princess?" He slammed a fist into his chest. "Say his name, and I shall challenge him to a duel to the death, right here, right now!"

Myrcella offered a faint, wan smile, though the cold, judging eyes of the courtiers lingered upon her for a long moment. Even so, when they cast their gaze toward the Lannister knight, that same disdain seemed to falter, giving way—if only slightly—to grudging respect.

"I am heartened," she said softly, "to see that some measure of chivalry still lingers in the hearts of certain knights." She let her gaze rest on Ser Vylarr, and the sigh that followed was like a shadow passing over the hall. "I was ambushed by a vile man in Dorne—Ser Gerold Dayne, who calls himself Darkstar. He would have taken my head, had my mare not moved in time."

"This… you were meant to be House Martell's ward, safe from all harm," Lucion said, his brow drawn low, eyes flashing with anger. "Do these Dornish dogs have no sense of honour, no regard for courtesy?"

Myrcella just lowered her eyes, her quivering lips sealed shut.

From the lower tables, a voice piped up, sharp and mocking. "Clearly, Martell's word is still worth less than horseshit, even after all these centuries. The sun-prince can't even keep his guests safe under his own roof."

A ripple of laughter and murmured agreement spread through the hall.

Cerenna, however, felt that things were far deeper than that. No word of attack on the princess ever reached King's Landing or Casterly Rock. The Martells had broken the hospitality *and* tried to sweep the deed under the rug. She had once thought the tales of Dornish treachery, their cunning, their cruelty, were little more than the old grudges of Westerosi lords, exaggerated into legend.

Alas.

"What now?" Jon Snow asked, his voice tight with impatience. "As you can see, Princess Myrcella is an honoured guest here."

True enough, the princess had obediently moved to Shireen Baratheon's side. There was no mistreatment, Cerenna could see—none she could discern. While Myrcella's face was composed, her garments were of the finest silks, and her green eyes were still sharp and lively.

“With your leave, my lord,” Lucion said, inclining his head in a stiff, formal bow, “I would write to Casterly Rock for guidance, and to inform the Queen Regent of the events that have befallen Princess Myrcella.”

“Granted.” The king’s purple eyes hardened. “But you shall not be allowed to write *anything else*. I suppose that would make you my guests now. Bring the bread and salt!”

Relief washed over her like a wave. Tension that she had never noticed left her, and with it all of her remaining strength. Her fingers shook as she took the bread from the offered platter, but her mind was already wandering towards a warm bath, a cup of mulled wine, and a soft, feathered bed.