Obligatory disclaimer: I don't own ASOIAF; that honour goes to GRRM.

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20th Day of the 12th Moon, 299 AC (13 Days Later)

The Onion Knight, King's Landing

There was a risk to every endeavour. Every man who had lived on the edge of the law knew this–Davos more so than most. Smuggling was, in essence, the art of measuring and taking risks. Big risk oft was fortuitous upon success but rarely bereft of consequence. He would know. A knighthood and rising from the muck of Fleabottom–in exchange for a ship full of salt and onions and the fingertips on his left hand.

The risk he had taken this time was a big one, and the rewards… the rewards were insignificant. Ser Garlan Tyrell had offered him coin for his assistance, but Davos had no heart to accept it. It felt wrong. A proper smuggler would have never taken such an undertaking for a lousy reward. But nearly two decades had passed since Davos of Fleabottom had been a smuggler. But he had taken the risk regardless, and now it was time to face the consequences.

He could have probably remained with Ser Garlan Tyrell, a worthier man than most, but that would be a true betrayal. Just as he was no stranger to success, he was no stranger to punishment either–the longer he stayed away without explaining himself, the worse things would be. So he swallowed his trepidation and returned to his liege lady.

The onset of the evening saw him arrive in King's Landing. The full moon looked cold and angry, and the city felt like one big graveyard. An ill omen of the things to come–Ser Davos didn't put much stock into omens, but the foreboding feeling only increased the unease in his chest. The ships waiting in Blackwater Bay were nowhere to be seen, and most of the hastily constructed wharves were missing, quite possibly swept away by that moon-long storm. His was the only ship here. Dread pooled in his stomach as the harbour master jolted down Black Betha's presence in his ledger and told him he was expected by Lady Baratheon in the Red Keep.

Judging by the contingent of men-at-arms led by Ser Richard Horpe that silently surrounded Davos as an escort after he passed the Iron Gate, it was not an invitation but an order. The three black moths of Horpe on his cloak were replaced by white bereft of heraldry, a deed that Stannis Baratheon had failed to achieve–it seemed that Shireen had taken to the position of a future Queen. Such an appointment was doubtlessly discussed and approved by the Hand or the Regent.

Hearing the Black Plague and the following Battle of King's Landing had been devastating was one thing; seeing it with his own eyes was an entirely different animal.

Everything was so deathly quiet past the walls, and the crashing of the waves was quieted by the curtain and the increasing distance as they made their way to Aegon's Hill. The sound of greaves clinking on the cobbled streets thundered ominously, making Davos feel like he had entered a ghost haunt. No children were running down the Street of Looms, and only a single peddler was selling his wares on a dingy stand that looked like it was about to topple over at the first gust of wind. Even the peddler in question looked as pale as a corpse and was huddled into his woollen cloak. The

occasional soul brave enough to venture outside was hurried and avoided talk, not daring to linger or approach others.

The veil of mist wafting from the Blackwater Rush grew thick and made everything even ghastlier. His heart jumped in his throat as a devil erupted from the mist, all demonic and shade-like under the filtering moonlight above. It was no demon but merely a knight carrying a lantern to meet them on the road.

'It was just that season,' Davos reassured himself inwardly, but the worry and fear in his chest did not lessen.

Thankfully, there were no mishaps on the way, even if the Red Keep was scarcely better than the city below; the knights and men-at-arms standing guard at the bronze gates and Maegor's Holdfast looked like unmoving stone statues. This was the first time Davos set foot in the heart of the Red Keep, where only royals and their most trusted retinue were allowed. It was less majestic than he imagined, certainly less fancy than Lord Tywin's meeting chambers; a shock of gilded ornaments, expensive-looking vases, statues, and seven-coloured stars adorned some doorways hewn from sparkling gemstones hardly awed him after walking through the grand palaces of Myr and Tyrosh.

They led him to what looked to be one of the meeting rooms on the first floor, judging by the decorated interior. Shireen, completely expressionless, waited for him at the head of an ornate table, her shadow, Ser Rolland Storm, standing vigil just behind her. But the colours of his heraldry were no longer reversed, which meant he was no longer a Storm but a Caron. A striking change, considering the last Caron had perished with Renly Baratheon, which made Rolland the Lord of Nightsong.

"My Lady," Ser Davos bowed, almost fumbling the proper courtesies out of nervousness.

"Am I? am I truly your liege lady, Ser Davos?"

The cold question pierced his heart, but it was the disappointment in her blue eyes that hurt far more than anything else.

"My loyalty has always been to your father and then to you," he said, swallowing heavily.

"If so, why did you desert your post?" Shireen rubbed the edges of the flaked, stony scarring on the left side of her neck, a subtle tell that always betrayed her irritation. "Why did you disobey your orders? Explain yourself, Ser Davos."

Davos told her everything. He told her about the rose knight, the men, the kidnapped women, and his own disgruntlement and disillusionment with the war. It wasn't a long story, but Shireen remained impassive throughout. By the very end, Ser Rolland Storm–Caron now–looked torn between drawing his sword to cleave his head off and praising him. Thankfully, he remained as silent and as unmoving as a statue.

"What you did is dangerously close to desertion," she whispered. "Some might even call it treason–and they wouldn't be wrong."

"I accept any punishment you levy upon me, my lady," Davos bowed, lowering his head all the way to the varnished tabletop.

His heart thundered like a war drum, and he could hear the hammering of blood in his ears as the silence stretched and stretched until it became oppressive. But he stubbornly kept his head lowered.

After what felt like an eternity, she spoke.

“I will forgive you the offence, Ser Davos.” A small sigh of relief left his lips, even if Shireen’s words thickened with disappointment. “Just this once, I shall forgive you such foolish disobedience because you proved yourself a leal man where others wavered. But I will not forget. Know this–for all your aid to Garlan Tyrell, he had no qualms to lead knights to murder, to pillage, to make allies with the Greyjoys, or to kill innocent women and children at Castle Wyl. This is the man you betrayed me for.”

His insides twisted. Davos had seen Garlan for what he was–a good man forced to make bad choices. A good man who was his enemy. But he remained silent. He cursed war that made monsters out of good men, then–he cursed the greed of ambitious lords and ladies, the grasping fools who set flame to the world for their own gain.

“Garlan Tyrell could have bent the knee,” she continued. “After his father died. He could have negotiated his surrender or even self-exile or a life of duty and redemption in the Watch like an honourable lord would, but he didn’t. He could have done many things otherwise, but he chose the way of death and destruction. My father warned me at length of the treachery of the Tyrells. But let us not speak of this again. In the end, this is my mistake.”

“I am at fault, my lady–”

“I do not need empty platitudes, Ser,” her childish voice was frosty. “It is easy for you to claim fault and beg forgiveness, for you do not have the weight of the Seven Kingdoms balanced precariously on your shoulders. What do you expect me to do? Deserting your post is a crime punishable by death, and even if I were to show mercy, mine and Tommen’s enemies would see this as weakness.”

“Then, take my head,” he urged hoarsely. It was never his intention to harm the girl that was his daughter in all but name. “Take my head and wash away the weakness.”

“I… I already said I have pardoned your offence, and a future queen must not go back on her word,” Shireen whispered. “To the world, you did what you did under my orders.”

What could Davos do but remain silent? How could he even imagine what the consequences of mercy be for his lady? Davos did not have a mind for lordly or stately things and politics. All he could do was bow his head and await his lady’s judgement.

“I knew you were not a man with a mind for war or a heart for bloodshed. Sending you to lead ships in war and fighting was akin to asking a hound to fly. I have a far more suitable task for a person like you–if you still want to serve me.”

“Always!”

“Be my eyes and ears in Essos,” she said slowly, her words bereft of emotion. “Perhaps even my mouth when it is required. Are you up to this task?”

An envoy and a spy. The latter was a punishment to a man as terrible with courtesies such as him, and the former was doubtlessly a test of his loyalty and ability–doubly more so when his loyalties and face were well-known on both sides on the Narrow Sea.

“I shall do it,” he said. Did he even have a choice?

“Very well. You will receive your first assignment soon. And Ser Davos–I forgave you once, but there won’t be a second time.”

The scraping of the chair and the two sets of footsteps heralded the end of the meeting, and Davos finally dared to raise his head, only to catch a glimpse of Shireen Baratheon’s back as she was leaving

the room. It was a small, childish back, and it looked incredibly lonely–but he had no words of advice to offer her. Davos hated himself for it.

The end of the long summer of Year 400 After the Doom or 298 After Aegon's Conquest, as the Sunsetlanders call it, heralded a new era of change and bloodshed similar to the Century of Blood. Only, this one was far bloodier and shorter as the illusion of peace collapsed and city-states and kingdoms fell like dominoes across the known world, lasting from the end of 298 to 305.

It's hard to say when exactly it started. Some consider the death of Robert Baratheon to be the beginning of the unrest, while others believe R'hllor's silence had caused much turmoil and uncertainty far earlier in the same year, sowing the seeds for the coming conflict. Regardless, it all culminated towards the end of 298 AC with the beginning of the Red Riots. The damage had been done as the Red Faith splintered with the Crimson Schism and dragged more than half of the Free Cities into chaos, bloody revolts, slave uprisings, and worse.

Rumours of White Walkers and old darkness at the extreme north of the far-west beyond Brandon's Wall stirred a part of the more war-like Red Priests, but whatever lay there had quickly fizzled out after the royal command had seen the Night's Watch ranks swell. With the aid of the mad pyromancers and the Red Priests, the Black Wolf had forced the fiends from legends to crawl back to whatever hell they spawned from.

After the Great Battle of the Five Forts that saw a majority of the Red Priests there perish, the Death Walkers of K'dath and the endless hordes of Shrykes were decisively smashed by Khal Drogo and the armies of the Azure Emperor Bu Gai. After the Khal was betrayed and slain by the treacherous Yi-Tish, peace did not last long in the empire. The Azure Emperor demanded the Duke of Jinqi to present the horn to his person as a tribute, but the Duke rebelled.

Such an act of defiance was beyond daring, considering the consequences. However, the Imperial Army had taken significant losses at the countless battles at the Five Forts, and the rebellion raged for a whole year before it was finally quelled with the Duke's death at the hands of his bodyguards. As the old saying goes, treachery begets treachery in the lands of silk and jade. The powerful runic horn rumoured to break the dark magics of K'dath finally ended up in the hands of His Majesty Bu Gai, who proudly blew the horn to announce a new era of peace and prosperity…only to perish on the spot. His death was said to be the most gruesome thing the Azure Court had seen, as the Emperor stilled the moment the discordant, shriek-like bellow echoed from the horn, and blood began to dribble from his seven orifices.

From then on, everyone dubbed the magical item the Cursed Horn of Winter, for it had been crafted by the hands of the powerful dark sorcerer Eddard Stark of the Bloody Blade.

Bu Gai's sole son was only seven years old and was said to be slain by his grand-uncle by poison, and the Empire of Yi Ti was once again engulfed in the flames of war, for the emperor had three brothers, and each desired the throne. Pol Qo, the Hammer of the Jogos Nhai and the general who had been dismissed after the Great Battle of the Five Forts, used the unrest to gather men and enter the fray, raising his claim to the throne, claiming the Azure Emperors had lost the Mandate of Heaven.

By the middle of 300 AC, the Black Death had run its course in the Sunset Lands and Western Essos. Slaver's Bay managed to avoid the worst of it for a time with its so-called quarantine, but it also fell victim to the vile disease, as did war-torn Yi Ti. Nor was Qarth spared; within the Palace of Dust and

the Undying, all had perished; the warlocks were said to have turned into shrivelled husks of rotten flesh and blackened bones.

Heavenly Physician Dai Li found yet another method to cure the Black Plague–but the vast array of herbs was just as complex to prepare as Ebrose's famed Cure and relied heavily on herbs that only grew in Yi-Ti. With the civil war raging, it made procuring them even more difficult.

New Ghis was not spared and suffered heavily, with a third of the city's population perishing in two moons. During that time, garlic, sage, turmeric, and other herbs were worth thrice their weight in gold.

With blood flowing like rivers, the demand for Unsullied was so high that by the beginning of 300 AC, a century of warrior-eunuchs could only be purchased in an auction where one could only bid with pure gold, with the starting price being seventeen hundred taels of gold.

With the Golden Company breaking the Old Blood of Volantis, the city and its vassal towns spiralled into unrest, with new archons, tyrants, and kings declared every half a year from the former towns of Volon Therys, Valysar, Selhorys, and the occasional triarchs from the half-ruined city of Volantis, each warring between each other for scraps of influence. With the dearth of sellsword companies after three-quarters of the active mercenaries met a bloody end in the Great Ashen Plains of Myr, the Volantene claimants started employing Dothraki Khals with gifts and tributes to join their side.

After Khal Bolo joined Qohor against Norvos, the Norvoshi started losing slowly but surely and were forced to send envoys to Vaes Dothrak to secure further assistance. But they were caught on the way, and the city's outer walls fell after half a year-long siege. However, Khal Bolo demanded the lion's share of the plunder during the sack, and when the Qohorik Commander refused, they came to blows.

The infighting gave the bearded priests and the remaining defenders the much-needed time to rest behind the sturdy walls of the High City and the fortress-palace. After a day of infighting between their enemies, they rallied the remaining defenders and expelled the weakened attackers after three days of bloody fighting in the narrow streets.

Both Qohor and Norvos started raising yet another army, but their forces lacked the strength to take the field, and both cities came under the harassment of smaller Khalasars. The interrupted trade and the distance from the seaports turned into boons for Qohor and Norvos, allowing them to avoid the brunt of the Black Death.

But the ultimate victors of the Bloody Fall seemed to be Pentos, Lys, the Dothraki, and the Summer Isles, who had made a fortune selling turmeric…

Excerpt from ***'The Bloody Fall'*** *by Grand Scholar Izlak zo Zorhan of New Ghis.*

The beginning of Winter, Storm's End

Ser Braxton Bulwer the Red

Deep under the unshakeable tower constructed by the Builder lay the crypts of the Storm Kings carved into the bedrock itself. Each king or lord from the line of Godsgrief who ruled over Storm's End rested here and had a statue of their likeness wielding their favourite weapon to guard their stone coffins. Each stone coffin had an iron sword atop the lid to prevent the dead from rising as vengeful spirits, though the passage of time had turned the older swords into dark rust stains.

The flickering lantern offered no heat, and the walls of the arched hallways sucked away all warmth that managed to find its way here, sending Ser Braxton shivering every time he stood guard, tightly wrapping himself in the red silken cloak that offered little respite from the cold. Oh, how he wished he could trade for a heavy travel woollen cloak lined with fur. But he had no choice; only he remained from the Rainbow Guard. Brienne the Blue and Ser Guyard the Green had fallen with the Queen. Ser Bryce the Yellow had perished in the Battle for King's Landing, and Ser Robert the Orange had succumbed to his wounds after catching the Black Death. Ser Parmen the Purple had disappeared in the confusion after the battle, though Braxton was sure the man had perished in some ditch to some nameless vagrant.

But there was no corpse, and a part of him liked to think the Crane knight had made his way to the warm, peaceful beaches in the Summer Isles.

Alas, things had truly taken a turn for the worse.

It was not the defeats on the field that had broken Renly Tyrell but the loss of his wife and kin.

Renly's sun-kissed complexion had turned ghostly pale in the damp darkness below, and the gleam of ambition and authority in his green eyes was replaced by dullness and grief. His clothes were torn or unkempt, his well-groomed, inky locks had become a tangled mess, caked with sweat and dirt, and the scent of perfume was replaced by the stench of privy. Worse, only pallid skin peeked from his bony frame as the last three moons had melted away the once-muscled body that had made many a maiden blush.

The king barely ate, and the servants had to clean him where he sat every day, for he would refuse to move away from Loras Tyrell's remains in the space next to Robert and Stannis' graves.

They were as black as tar, not from flame but from the Black Death. It had seeped all the way into the bones in its final stage, burning them as dark as the night, and three moons later, they crumbled to the touch. But Renly still refused to move from them, gazing at Loras' final remains under the dim light of the lanterns. So great was his obsession that he barely rested on a nearby cot, all soiled with shit and piss.

"Your Grace, we must bring these revolting lords to heel!"

"Your Grace, there is another pretender now!"

"Your Grace, Highgarden has fallen. We must act now!"

"Your Grace, we must relieve Bronzegate and Lord Buckler!"

"Your Grace, Lord Footly has bent the knee to Tommen!"

"Your Grace, the Golden Company has taken Stonehelm!"

"Your Grace, the Pretender… he has sent a generous offer of peace. You should read it…"

"There is still time, Your Grace. We can take a ship and flee to the Summer Isles!"

"Nightsong has fallen, and Harvest Hall has surrendered to Aegon, Your Grace!"

"Griffin's Roost has fallen!"

"Your Grace, Felwood is under siege! What shall we do now, Your Grace?"

Time and time, Ser Cortnay Penrose came to see the king, yet the only reply he received was a completely disinterested “I see, return to your post.”

Renly’s voice had grown so hoarse it sounded like the scraping of stone, and on the rare occasion he spoke, a wet cough accompanied his words. “Guard the gate and leave me to mourn, Ser Cortnay.”

“But the time to act is now-”

“I already gave my orders, Ser.” Renly’s eyes had turned into two malevolent orbs that could freeze the blood in your veins, doubly more so after his sclera remained pitch-black after his heavy bout of the Black Death that was barely cured.

Cortnay Penrose was a good knight and leal man, yet he was no magician to turn the tide around. The fifteen hundred men inside Storm’s End were all unhappy; morale was low, and there had been three mutinies so far. One such attempt had come close to succeeding and killing Ser Cortnay himself. The following mutiny had the gate guards abandoning their posts and deserting alongside two hundred men-at-arms.

At this point, Ser Braxton Bulwer was unsure why he remained. No, that was a lie–the knight knew precisely why he was here. It wasn’t the solemn vows sworn to a defeated king or such foolishness but the fact that he had nowhere else to go. Everywhere was hell or death and worse. Men were dying like flies in every kingdom, whether at the Stranger’s Hand or the war. Nowhere was safe, not even Essos… and the walls of Storm’s End seemed quite sturdy.

But the sturdy walls did not deter ambitious men for long, it seemed. Eventually, Cortnay Penrose descended to the crypts again.

“Your Grace, the Golden Company and the Pretender are outside the gates! They asked for a parley.”

Yet Renly remained unmoving in his vigil over Loras’ bones in the crypts underneath Storm’s End. Word from the outside world no longer reached them, for the longbowmen of the Golden Company took down every raven flying in or out of the castle.

Ser Cortnay Penrose continued coming down to dutifully report, but his loyalty remained unrewarded, and his wise counsel unheeded.

The time for the royal commander’s visit approached yet again. Another day in the dark. But this one seemed different. Ser Braxton opened his eyes as the clamour of footsteps echoed from the entrance to the crypts again. But this was not the rhythmic walk of Ser Cortnay but the clamour of a hurried dozen men.

Renly remained like a statue on his cot while Ser Braxton listened to his survival instincts that never failed him before, quietly drew his sword, and hid in the darkness of the alcove behind Robert Baratheon’s statue.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!

The echo of crossbow bolts hitting flesh echoed in the crypts ominously, and Ser Braxton knew Renly was dead.

He counted the footsteps and grimaced inwardly–there were at least a dozen of them. Too many, especially for men who meticulously reloaded their crossbows, judging by the creaking of the windlasses.

“Where’s the red cloak?” The rough voice sent goosebumps down Braxton’s spine. It was Faren, a man-at-arms serving under Ser Cortnay. *A mutiny had succeeded.* The thought shouldn’t have surprised him, but it still did. He had hoped…

“I bet he ran away,” another man scoffed. “It doesn’t matter. Get the stinky corpse so we can show it to the dragon king, and let’s get out of here. This place is cursed for those not of Durrandon blood.”

His heart hammered like a war drum as the men did their work merely yards away. Cold sweat trickled down his spine, and his limbs felt like lead. If anyone peeked behind Robert Baratheon’s statue, they would see him. He could see their shadows dance eerily as they moved in the ruddy light of the oil lamps.

Yet his fears remained unfounded, for the men wanted to linger here as much as Braxton did. The traitors left, taking the lanterns with them, leaving him alone in the darkness.

He remained unmoving like a statue for what felt like an eternity before cautiously leaving his hiding place. Cursing inwardly, he groped his way out of the darkness of the crypt. When he left, he was greeted by a dozen Dornish men-at-arms belonging to House Yronwood, and Braxton hastily threw down his arms and took off his helmet.

“I surrender!”

“A kingsguard who not only fails to defend his king but surrenders afterwards?” An aged voice filled with disdain made his blood freeze. The Dornish warriors parted, revealing a man every knight in the Seven Kingdom knew.

With a white cloak, plate with silver scales and chasings, and white greaves–a kingsguard. Not any ordinary kingsguard but one Ser Braxton recognised as Ser Barristan the Bold. In his fist was a pink longsword with dark ripples elegantly twisting along the length of its blade.

Before he could offer an excuse, the blade lunged forth like a viper, and the last thing Ser Braxton saw was the world spin around as a headless corpse collapsed.

With Braavos crippled by the plague and bogged down by the new Sealord’s election, Pentos’ treachery and rebellion remained woefully unpunished. Much to the consternation of the Iron Bank, Eddard Stark had used the plunder gained from Myr to pay off the last of the Iron Throne’s debt, and even if the keyholders wanted to involve themselves in the war in the Sunset Lands, there were no companies left to hire.

The direct involvement was also decided against, with the Ibbenese still lusting after Lorath, even after the devastation of the Black Death. No matter how much anger the Braavosi felt, there was nought that could be done against the cunning Pentoshi, not with the Westerosi royal fleet controlling the majority of both sides of the Narrow Sea.

The Forty of Pentos had hidden deeply. Once the alliance with the Iron Throne had been established and the other Free Cities had either fallen or were plagued by war and disease, they discarded all pretences of peace, instituted mandatory martial training for every citizen and built up their fleet. With the tribute of the Pentoshi and the fertile Flatlands, the logistical burden on King’s Landing, Eddard Stark’s campaign in the Vale, and the Northern food shortage were greatly alleviated.

In the end, after a new Sealord was finally elected, he decided to focus on pacifying Ibb and strengthening Braavosi control over the island-state of Lorath and the Axe peninsula, which was one of the main sources of trees suitable for shipbuilding.

After a month of siege, Storm's End fell to treachery. Ser Steffon, the knight who had led the mutiny, had been rewarded with a minor lordship along the Rainwood.

Only Bronzegate stood between Aegon and King's Landing, but with Renly's demise, Lord Buckler declared for Tommen Baratheon and sent all of his family to King's Landing to join the royal court and act as hostages as he remained inside his seat with a hefty garrison. Soon, the Golden Company had Bronzegate under siege.

With winter setting in, snow could be seen falling from Casterly Rock to the ruins of Harrenhal, and the cold seemed to greatly slow down the outbreak of the Black Death.

Aegon's armies were cautious in their movements, marching slowly and sowing garlic, herbs, leek, cabbage, and carrots everywhere they passed to tide them through the cold. It was considered a wise move since the royal fleet under Ser Jason Melcolm had stripped the Dornish coastline of ships, villagers, and food, forcing Aegon's armies to procure their supplies from the lands they conquered. This was no simple foraging. Instead, it was cultivating the land and waiting for whatever meagre winter crops could grow in the Stormlands.

After Storm's End, his forces split again to avoid mishap, with the Golden Company marching towards Bronzegate and Aegon circumventing the Kingswood from the west and meeting with the eight thousand swords led by Dayne and Blackmont on the way towards the Rose Road.

Their caution paid off when, during the third moon of year 300 after Aegon's Conquest, the plague struck the Golden Company, now besieging Bronzegate. The supplies previously sown helped thwart the Black Death, and the death toll was under three thousand with the help of Ebrose's cure, though the reduced potency of the disease was attributed to the cold.

After sitting out most of Renly's Rebellion, the Vale became a centre of conflict with Eddard Stark's landing at Runestone.

The unfortunate death of Cersei Lannister due to overindulgence in wine was considered a bad omen for the start of the Vale campaign. The Queen Dowager was so unpopular that not even her son asked any questions about her demise, and her body was almost immediately sent to King's Landing, where she was quickly cremated. There were even rumours that Anya Waynwood had attempted to poison Eddard Stark and failed, but most found them unlikely as the Royce maester found no traces of poison or foul play.

Eddard Stark's presence in the Vale caused many supporters of Anya Waynwood to waver, but she struck down those who attempted to leave with no mercy, including Lord Harlan Hersy, Lord Elryck Wydman, and other landed knights.

The subsequent Vale campaign saw Eddard Stark marching to the seat of House Waynwood, Ironoaks, and taking it by storm. After defeating the Freys at Trident Minor, Ser Harrold Hardyng tried to retreat to the Vale when he learned of Edmure Tully and his army turning his way, but the Highroad was barred by the heavy snowfall that reached more than fifteen feet deep at places. With nine thousand men under his command, Hardying, on the advice of Lord Morgen Ruthermont, wheeled towards the Trident, where he took Darry and marched towards King's Landing with all haste in a brave bid to take the Iron Throne for Aegon and hold the city. But the Crownlands, scoured

by war, famine, and plague, proved inhospitable to his men, and he started losing many to the cold and hunger. Seventy leagues from the city, his men caught the Black Death, discipline fell apart, and Harrold Hardyng was killed in a mutiny. The remaining Valemen were broken by Bracken's cavalry.

Eddard Stark besieged Anya Waynwood, who had fortified herself with three thousand swords within the Gates of the Moon. When she learned of her ward's demise and the fall of his army, she attempted to negotiate a surrender but was promptly refused with a now infamous, "Why would I waste my breath on treacherous oathbreakers and fence-sitters like yourselves?"

The terrain and snowy weather were unsuitable for sapping, and the Bloody Blade wasn't confident in storming such a strong and well-manned fortress. But just as it looked like he would have to retreat until the weather turned favourable, a small force of three hundred men led by the Red Wake and Ser Gendry the Hammer descended a mountain goat path through the steep forested slope at night. It is said a fair maiden with the feet of a goat had guided them through the treacherous paths.

Some of the more outlandish rumours claimed it was the ghost of Ser Gendry's long-lost sister, with eyes as blue as the summer sky and hair as dark as the night. Others swear that she is none other than the newly wedded Lady Mya Redfort, wife to the newly raised Michael Redfort, who inherited his father's lands after the death of his father and brothers to the plague and the struggle for Robert Arryn's regency.

After a gruelling battle, the Red Wake and his men cut a bloody path to the main gate, opened it, and lowered the drawbridge, allowing the army inside. Eddard the Bloody Blade once again proved his name, personally beheading Waynwood and her supporters. House Waynwood and Hardyng were attainted, stripped of all lands and titles, and the remaining Lordly Houses who supported her were reduced to landed knights, losing much of their lands, leaving a significant amount of land to Lord Arryn to redistribute as he saw fit when he grew of age.

With Waynwood defeated, the reticent Ser Vardis Egen finally descended from the Eyrie and handed over the regency of the young Robert Arryn to Eddard Stark, and the young Lord of the Vale became one of Tommen Baratheon's first companions.

After Lord Beron Dustin slaughtered his way through the smallfolk and then sacked Honeyholt and Bandallon, the cruelty was said to be heartwrenching, for the Northmen had not spared even the women and the children. Many estimated that merely one out of ten souls managed to survive the Northmen's bloodthirsty war parties that were systematically killing everything in their path around the Honeywine. It was of little wonder that the remaining Hightower vassals bent the knee and sent their families hostage in Highgarden.

Dustin and Ryswell then proceeded directly to Hightower's personal lands and used fire and sword to deliberately herd the smallfolk into Oldtown as they foraged supplies for a siege of the ancient city. Meanwhile, Robb Stark spent the next three moons dealing with peasant uprisings and Faith Militant revolts, helping the Reachlords pacify their lands and meticulously stocking up on herbal remedies against the Black Death. When the disease eventually struck, the Northmen were prepared and suffered minor losses.

Once the Reachmen in the North proper were utterly crushed and the garrison of Torrhen's Square surrendered at the sight of Paxter Redwyne, the White Huntsmsan proceeded to Barrowriver with seven thousand battle-hardened Northmen. Two thousand of the Rivermen under Blackwood abandoned their horses and volunteered to join him on his campaign for the Iron Isles. With Pentoshi food sailing up the White Knife on barges, the budding famine was nipped in the bud.

In the last moon of 299 AC, the small Ironman garrison in Flint's Fingers was slaughtered by Jon Snow. In the first moon of 300 AC, Duncan Liddle led a thousand men to Bear Isle and, with the help of the locals sallying out of the woods, expelled the reavers and then sailed to take control of the newly built Ironport at Sea Dragon Point.

With the Ironborn forces shattered in the North, sparse garrisons remained on the Iron Isles. By the time Jon Snow and the Redwyne Fleet arrived on the Iron Islands, a thrall revolt had begun. Lord Jason Mallister joined the campaign with thirty ships. Jon Snow took Old Wyk and sacked the seat of House Drumm, killing all those who bore the name of Drumm.

During their naval campaign, Jon Snow and his Northmen faced two mutinies from the Reachmen's mariners, but the Crownbreaker and Lord Redwyne ruthlessly squashed them.

Facing no organised resistance, the Iron Islands quickly fell as the garrisons and castellans quickly surrendered, unwilling to meet the same fate as Drumm. After numerous skirmishes, Jon Snow slaughtered all the Drowned Priests and their acolytes, including Aeron Greyjoy, who had tried to call for a new Kingsmoot and lead an organised resistance against the attacking Northmen. The Reaversbane then had Nagga's bones broken apart and scattered into the sea and took each family member under twelve of the reaver houses as hostages in the North and the Riverlands. The remaining lords and castellans were sent to the Wall for forty years of service, and each castle had a Northman noble or a Riverlander knight acting as castellan with a small garrison of their own troops as the former Ironmen were dismissed.

In less than four moons, Jon Snow did what many others had failed or thought impossible. He had broken the Iron Isles and had uprooted the pesky faith of the Drowned God, and with the blessing of his father, Lord Regent Eddard Stark, banned its vile practises, including thralldom and reaving on pain of death. All Ironborn shipbuilders were shipped to the North, and a new, back-breaking tax was introduced on the make of warships and longships that would force the future Ironborn lords into trade or poverty.

The rebel thralls were given the opportunity to return home or settle the Isle of Old Wyk and Great Wyk as landholders for their assistance.

There were less than a thousand casualties in the Iron Islands campaign, and almost all were among the Redwyne mariners. Jon Snow did not hesitate to use them as shock troops, and he led them into every battle.

By the middle of the 5th Moon of year 300 After Aegon's Conquest, the Westermen had taken back Fair Isle, the Lords of the Shield Islands had gone to Highgarden to bend the knee, and Jon Snow, with the Redwyne Fleet, had finally blockaded Oldtown from the sea as Robb Stark had already put the city under siege…

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

17th Day of the 5th Moon, 300 AC

The Young Wolf, outside Oldtown

There was something ironic about sieges. First, you struck down and swept the fields clean of farmers and burned all the produce you could not take to force starvation and famine upon your

besieged foe. But once the enemy hid behind their walls, you had to start picking up the ploughs and hoes to sow a new batch of food, for it was the easiest way to feed a besieging army.

Warriors who had butchered countless lives before quickly turned into farmers and woodsmen while mules and carts slowly dragged in the disassembled trebuchets prepared by Florent in Brightwater Keep. The Reachmen smallfolk spared the scouring of Oldtown's hinterlands had been entrusted with the daunting task of procuring stones from the Honeywine to supply the trebuchets.

So deep into the south, it was still warm even at the beginning of winter. Any snowfall was sparse and melted at the first rays of the sun, and the south wind was pleasantly warm compared to the frigid gales of the North. And the soil, gods, the soil was ridiculously fertile. There were scarcely any rocks in the ground, and everything planted would sprout with minimal care.

No wonder the Reach was overflowing with food, men, women, and children.

But as Robb's preparations continued, sails were spotted in the Whispering Sound. Jon was coming, as he had written he would do from Pyke, the fallen seat of House Greyjoy.

Would he be changed by the war the same way his father had been? Robb had been glad when the first letter from Runestone had reached him, but each following one had been shorter and harsher in tone if none aimed at him. With each success on the field, he felt his father turning heavier-handed in action.

As the Redwyne ships blockaded the bay, longships bearing the Stark sails disembarked by the shore.

The first to descend was a handful of eager direwolves all too happy to see land.

Ghost had grown to the size of a bloody bear, nearly two feet taller and one foot wider than his brethren, yet still rolled in the freshly fallen snow like a small pup, only to turn around and playfully chase Grey Wind. Shaggydog's black figure also trailed after the two playfully, as did three other direwolves Robb failed to recognise.

Seeing his brother felt as if something had awoken Robb from a dream. Jon had grown taller to a little over six feet. His previously pretty face, which made many maids swoon, was marred by a long pale scar running through his left temple. Another had cut through his cheek, disappearing under the stubble covering his neck, and many smaller ones marked his face.

Steel had replaced the broody softness in his grey eyes, and his gait was that of a dangerous warrior as his brother held himself as a commander. The icy breastplate, gauntlets, bracers, pauldrons, chausses, and greaves carried a soft chill felt even through the snowfall. The armour reflected everything like a crystalline mirror; the sight of it stung Robb's vision.

Even the belligerent and overproud Northern Lords were struck quiet by the sight of his brother. But Jon wasn't alone; Lord Redwyne trailed by his side like a servant, pale-faced with haunted eyes. Lucas Blackwood, now the heir of Raventree Hall, was there, along with Lord Glover, a small retinue of Mountain Chieftains, and a few minor Northern Bannermen.

How much did the past and the present change Jon? Did he still think himself his brother, or would he be treated like a distant cousin?

Robb decided to break the tense silence with a warm greeting, "Words fail to describe how glad I am to see you here, brother."

“So am I,” Jon responded, his eyes softening like fog, and Robb’s unease melted away. “But I cannot deny that fate loves its ironies. I never thought we’d meet at the far end of Westeros, Robb.” A small smile crept up his face.

Robb was no longer alone in this damned war, far away from home and the family he could trust; he just *knew* Jon would support him unconditionally. The weight on his shoulders instantly felt lighter.

Chuckling, the two of them embraced. His brother might have grown tall, but so had Robb. The frost armour felt cool to the touch, but it was a pleasant kind of chill.

“Why’s Rickon with you?” he whispered, surprised that his younger brother had not rushed to greet him and merely waved from afar. But the excitement on Rickon’s flushed face was unmistakable.

“Kept escaping your Mother’s supervision, I took him as a page to teach him some much-needed discipline lest he ran into trouble again, along with Edwyle Umber and Larence Snow as squires.”

“That’s great. But why does he have a great mountain eagle with him?” The eagle in question had a plumage of chestnut darkening into inky black and easily reached Rickon’s chest in height. It lazily strutted around his brother, unafraid of men and direwolves alike. After a few moments, it shook its feathers like a chicken out of water and took to the skies.

Jon’s lips quirked with amusement. “Blackfeather was tamed by sheer stubbornness, and Rickon slowly developed a skinchanging bond with it. You have no idea what a menace he has become. Our brother has a mean aim and throws rocks to knock down birds and even a foolish Ironman trying to sneak onto the ship at night.”

“That’s a relief,” Robb noted. “But I see his naming sense is as terrible as always.”

“That it is. I see you have squires of your own.” Jon nodded towards Harys Oakheart and Alyn Ambrose.

“They’re as much squires as they are hostages and wards,” he explained quietly. “The heirs to Old Oak and Ambrose. Anyway, I must give you my most heartfelt gratitude-”

“There’s no need for such courtesies between brothers,” Jon interrupted, face solemn. “I only did my duty.”

“And you did it damn well, I say,” Greatjon’s murmur echoed as loud as everything else that came out of his mouth, eliciting a splutter of approving ‘Ayes!’ and “Stark” and “Crownbreaker,” some cries echoed even by a few of the Reachlords.

“Down with the Iron Isles!”

“Hear, hear!”

“I suppose we ought to move to the feast at this point; we can speak of the siege later,” Robb announced loudly, cutting through the commotion. “Let us celebrate the fall of the Iron Islands!”

“Hear, hear!”

“Cheers!”

The following four hours were filled with feasting, drinking, and cheer, but Hightower did not sally out and fall into the trap Robb had prepared. With the nearby forest cut down by Hightower, the direwolves had nothing to hunt and prowled towards the Honeywine’s shore to catch fish. But there

wasn't much fish left in the river, and Robb suspected they would return to take the choicer pick of some poor auroch from the herds of cattle Dustin had prepared for the coming siege.

Rickon was already shadowing Harys Oakheart and Alyn Ambrose, firing one question after another as Larence Snow, Edwyle Umber, and the rest of the squires listened on with rapt interest. Everyone managed to get along with the Westerlanders under Ser Daven Lannister, the Riverlanders with Lucas Blackwood, and even the Northmen and the handful of wildlings that still accompanied his brother.

Of course, it helped that Robb and Jon didn't hesitate to behead in public the three fools who had started a brawl between the wildlings, the Westerlanders and the Northmen. At least the wildlings numbered only two hundred, a small enough warband to be tolerated by the lords, who treated them like quarrelsome sellswords.

Jon was sitting right next to Robb in the place of honour as the lords accompanying them were absorbed in the feast and chatted happily as ale and wine flowed like rivers. It was a much-needed celebration in the face of the cold and siege outside, helping them forget the harsh reality of war for a night.

Robb's gaze roamed over the Lords of the Reach and the North, the former looking at his brother with caution, fear, and distrust, while the latter with a mix of disgruntled approval, suspicion, and joy. Jon's feats should have earned the respect of both groups… if not for his dabbling in magic. But his brother took the glares, the suspicion, and the attention with ease, uncaring of the silent scrutiny upon his person.

In the merriment, there was only one person who did not seem to have a good time. Many were glancing with distrust and even outright hatred at the figure bearing a burgundy grape on his sea-blue silken doublet. Paxter Redwyne looked like a ghost, barely ate anything, and visibly cringed at the sight of meat. Perhaps there was some credence to those rumours of Baelor Hightower and his indulgence in manflesh.

"Is it true you brought giants and children down the Wall, boy?" Everything quieted under Greatjon Umber's bellow.

"Aye, but they can't stand the heat so far south," Jon explained, raising a horn of ale. "After the Iron Isles, the giants returned North, and the Earth Singers rest in Winterfell's godswood."

"I'll be damned!" Rickard Karstark shook his head, still looking at his brother with a mixture of respect and caution. "First the Others, now giants and children and wargs. And those grey rats kept speaking about how magic was dead and gone."

"Not gone, merely forgotten or avoided with caution as is due," Jon's frosty reply sobered them all. "Sorcery is not to be underestimated, and there's always a cost."

"So you did turn all those Ironmen into weirwood bows?" Ser Wendel Manderly blurted out, face pale. The unspoken question, *'and what was the cost of it',* hung in the air.

"Not quite. Flesh and blood nourish the weirwoods, as many of you might know, and the reavers left plenty," was the amused explanation. "Still, the Singers know how to guide the process with their queer wind-like song."

The Northmen wanted to know more, but Jon was tightlipped about further details.

"Did Hightower really eat his own fallen?"

Redwyne's sudden vomiting was all the answer they needed, and the lord hastily excused himself as the servants scrambled in to clear the mess.

"Is it true…"

Jon was soon beset by questions on all sides, each more ridiculous than the last. Many were eager to hear of the battles against the Others, the Ironmen, or Hightower, but Jon had a knack for being laconically reticent and tight-lipped, his stories being short, dry, and woefully lacking in detail once he got irritated at the overeager questioning.

But he still retained his snarky attitude when Lord Ambrose drunkenly asked, "Is that shiny mirror-like armour of yours any good?"

"We can have a spar right now if you wish to test it," Jon replied languidly, his previous lazy smile growing dangerously thin even as the Ambrose Lord flinched. "No? A pity. It's been over three months since I had a decent fight. Your son was betrothed to Elinor Tyrell, was he not?"

Alyn, Robb's squire, perked up from the lower table.

"Aye, and wedded to that reaver scum because of Mace Tyrell's unadulterated ambitions," Ambrose spat, his face darkening.

"You're in luck, I say," his brother raised a cup. "The five men Elinor the Cursed bedded all perished within a moon, and there hasn't been a sixth since the last one slipped off the snowy deck on the ship on the way to Flint's Fingers and drowned with his armour."

The now-queasy Lord Ambrose hastily nodded and soon excused himself from the feast while his squire Alyn looked green in the face.

By the time evening came, Robb ordered the servants to remove the food, and the war council commenced.

"Shouldn't we hear Hightower's parley, at least?" asked the scarred Ser Daryn Woolfield. As the head of one of the scant few landed knightly houses in the North, the man was allowed a place in the council.

"Too proud to surrender, that one. I have no desire to bargain with that old fox or hear his schemes," Robb dismissed the foolish notion immediately. "By my estimates, after Lord Dustin drove the smallfolk here, Oldtown has at least four hundred thousand souls behind its walls that he cannot afford to feed. We can soften them up with hunger and trebuchets for another moon or two before we storm the place and get rid of Hightower once and for all."

"A pity Hightower had time to clean up his moat," Lord Florent lamented. "Otherwise, we could have started digging with sappers."

"How about we sail down the Honeywine with boats? I know Oldtown doesn't have a defensive chain facing the river; the city's main water fortifications face towards the sea and the Whispering Sound."

"A few hundred of Hightower's personal men, four thousand trained city-watch and twenty thousand militia. Not worth much in an honest battle, but they can hold the walls."

After missing on the raiding down the Honeywine, Greatjon was rearing for battle, his booming voice drowning out the rest.

“We outnumber them anyway. Fifteen thousand with Lord Robb, another nine thousand with Lord Jon, and Redwyne leading seven thousand mariners, I say we storm the damn walls as soon as the wooden bridges, ladders, and battering rams are assembled!”

“Allow me to lead the attack on the walls on the southern end of the Honeywine, Lord Robb,” Lord Tarly’s words were full of eagerness as he bowed his head. “I will bring you victory.”

“We might have the numbers, but the city layout forces any sieging force to split in three,” Jon was the cold voice of reason, much to his amusement. “One invested on the far side of the Honeywine, one on this one, and the attack from the bay…”

“We still have to conserve our manpower. We ought to starve them out like the rats they are, I say…”

“There’s still Aegon, who’s marching towards King’s Landing. We can’t linger for too long here, or we’ll be late for the battle!”

The talks continued for another two hours and Robb adjusted his plans based on the suggestions offered and the information available to them.

Evening rolled over as Robb and Jon observed Rickon aggressively meeting Alyn and Harys blow for blow in the makeshift training field despite being respectively two and four years younger than them. Greatjon was loudly and shamelessly cheering on his younger son as Edwyle smacked the younger Reach squires around, and Larence Snow struggled to score any win against the older boys but did not give up.

Surprisingly, Jon had Rickon do one last set of sword drills before joining the other pages and squires for dinner, and their younger brother obediently listened without any whinging or crying.

Robb used the chance after dinner to finally get to speak to Jon in the privacy of his tent. During the day, he couldn’t help but notice that his brother always kept his direwolves and swords close; for now, three dragonsteel blades were in his possession. Dark Sister, Red Rain, Nightfall, and two more blades of frost looted from the Others that his brother occasionally used as javelins, each one but the first pried off the hands of a slain warrior of renown, speaking volumes about Jon’s skill as a warrior.

As he shed his armour and arming doublet, a wiry but powerful body that reminded Robb of a shadowcat was revealed underneath, far more scarred than his face had been. His brother pulled on a common tunic, unbothered by the chill of the night. Perhaps a spar to compare skills wouldn’t be remiss. Jon had earned himself a reputation as a dangerous swordmaster, and Robb felt eager to cross blades once more. He had grown skilled in wielding Ice in battles, skirmishes, and revolts and spent most of his spare time in the training yard to get a moment of solace from all the trouble and tedium of planning that pacifying the Reach had saddled him with.

“Gods, I’m jealous, Jon. I miss the North and Winterfell. How I long to see my mother and wife and siblings… Worse, you got to see my son before I did,” he sighed, chasing away thoughts of any fighting from his mind. “I still can’t believe I’m a father. How is little Edwyn like?”

“Energetic like any other baby,” Jon’s face softened. “Loves tumbling in the snow with the wolves, as well as his aunt and uncle and my daughter. The four of them are definitely going to be hellions once they grow up. You should see Sansa–she’s more enthusiastic about the whole thing than your wife and mine combined. She keeps singing them to sleep and has probably tailored dozens of new garments and baby scarves each. Sansa will make a fine mother once she grows a year or two more.”

“She’s already five and ten,” Robb said, fondly remembering his sister.

“That she is. Sansa fears being given away for an alliance, and I think she holds a secret flame in her heart.”

“Who?” The words came more like a growl rather than a question, earning him a pat on the shoulder from his brother.

“You know as well as I do that daughters and sisters can’t stay in the family forever,” Jon clicked his tongue. “Even if they marry out, that doesn’t mean they’re gone, but I understand your qualms, for I am loathe to part with another sister as much as you do. Yet Sansa is tight-lipped, but your wife thinks it’s the Dustin heir.”

“Roderick Dustin.” Robb clasped his hands and rubbed his face as he began to consider things. “Young but fierce with a warhammer and lance. An honest character who doesn’t indulge in wine or whores. I suppose she could have chosen worse.”

“We have time to observe him and test his character,” Jon added, his eyes growing icy. It seemed that his brother had finally grown close to Sansa.

For the first time since the war started, Robb finally had a feeling that everything was right in the world, despite all the death and loss he had waddled through.

He had a thousand things to ask Jon, from his thoughts on family now that he knew who his mother was, or his future plans and his considerations on the war, but such things could wait for later. Robb was finally reunited with his kin! Yet before he could be at ease, he needed to know one last thing.

“How did Arya die?”

“By being herself–too stubborn and daring for her own good,” was the morose reply. “Theon lured her into a trap, and Denys Drumm killed her despite being a hostage because she had slain his father in an ambush earlier…”

Robb closed his eyes. He had plenty of time to mourn but still… had his fill of sorrows. He took a sip from the wine flask Peake had gifted him from his personal stash and found it too bitter. But such was life, filled with joy and sorrow, and he would partake in it all, the sweet and the bitter.

“Tell me more of your journey Beyond the Wall, brother,” Robb requested earnestly. “Tell me of the good, the bad, and the ugly. Tell me of the Mountain Clans, and the giants and the so-called Singers. Tell me how they came to call you the Crownbreaker. Tell me how Mother and Myrcella are faring.”

“This shall be a long tale,” Jon said, his grey eyes growing distant.

“It’s good that sieges are a slow affair, and we have all the time in the world, then.”

“Very well. I suppose I should get comfortable for this.” His brother discarded the stool and laid down on the bear furs covering the tent’s ground, placing his hands behind his head. “My journey started out of foolishness and desperate daring more than anything else, if I have to be honest…” His brother’s words were wistful and slow to leave his lips, but Robb listened with rapt attention.

The chill of winter began to thaw as it always did as the end of the first half of the year approached.

Leyton Hightower continued his attempts at bargaining but was met with silence from Aegon and cold dismissal from Robb Stark, who refused to entertain anything but an unconditional surrender.

The enormous number of refugees in the city quickly diminished the granaries, and with the Redwyne fleet blocking the city from the sea, citizens couldn't venture out in the Whispering Sound to fish anymore. The constant bombardment by the trebuchets slowly took a toll on the citizens by sowing more chaos and destruction in Oldtown, which was already teetering on the brink. The Black Death spread throughout the city, and soon, the famine in Oldtown grew worse as riots spread through the city. By the middle of the sixth moon, the Northmen had stormed the walls.

The defenders were too feeble and exhausted to offer much resistance. The sack was brutal, for the Northmen and Westerlanders were all still eager for blood. It was recorded by the maesters that men turned into beasts as they killed, raped, plundered and burned their way into the city, each lord encouraging his men to be more vicious than the last. Even the fellow Reachmen from the Arbour had partaken with ferocity into the sack, being no less savage than the Northmen in their eagerness not to leave the war empty-handed and to gain a measure of vengeance for being dragged into this mess.

The famous Starry Sept was looted and sacked by Ser Daven Lannister, who was eager to gift the relics and statues of the Seven to the Gilded Sept of Lannisport.

A quarter of the city burned, two-thirds of the city's population perished, and much of the other half was spared, only to starve within a moon or two, for the Northmen only brought food for themselves and had taken everything of value. The Battle Isle lasted a fortnight longer, for Hightower had hoarded much of the food supplies for himself and his closest retinue. But the Hightower was alone, and its gates were eventually battered open, with Jon Snow being the first to breach the gloomy halls of the black labyrinthine fortress.

Yet the House of Hightower didn't perish to fire and sword; their death had been the peaceful embrace of poison consumed once the gates had fallen.

By the next dawn, Hightower was extinct in the male line, and only Leyton's daughters remained: Lynesse, who had become a chief concubine to a merchant prince in Lys; Alerie, who had joined the Silent Sisters after the infamous Pruning of Highgarden; Denyse, who had wedded a Redwyne knight, and Alysanne, Lord Ambrose's wife. Only the Mad Maid was unaccounted for, yet the Northmen cared not about a lackwit–only that they could not kill Leyton Hightower themselves.

Baelor's sole child also lived–Lenora Hightower, the pregnant widow of Lord Baelor Blacktyde, who had been amongst the first to surrender in the Iron Islands.

And so ended eight millennia of the rule of House Hightower over Oldtown.

After much consideration and back and forth with ravens to Winterfell, the Gates of the Moon, and Riverrun, the Citadel was spared any indignities, but their order was to be reformed by the order of Lord Regent Eddard Stark as punishment for their deeds during the war. The Citadel had eagerly supplied Baelor Hightower with advice and knowledge of the castles he took–knowledge that should not have been known in the first place. The Archmaester of War himself had joined the Northern Crusade and was responsible for devising the contraption that had ripped Winterfell's portcullis open.

With trust in the maesters undermined following the disastrous attempt to assassinate Robb Stark, none of the lords objected. All the books, even in the secret vaults, were to be opened in the purview

of the crown, the Conclave was to be disbanded. Each Archmaester was to join the Watch for life for meddling in the wars of the Realm.

All the libraries and books were to be moved to King's Landing after the war, reducing the Citadel in Oldtown to a secondary chapter of the scholarly order. The Great Houses of the Westerlands, the Riverlands, and the North were to be allowed to open and manage new chapters of the maesters under their own purview and choose and nurture acolytes and maesters of their choice.

After half a moon of looting, Robb Stark and Jon Snow left with the Northern cavalry, rushing towards King's Landing. Lucas Blackwood and Ser Wendel Manderly were entrusted with the command of the foot and the daunting task of restoring some semblance of order in the city and the surroundings.

In hindsight, I find the refusal of negotiation with Hightower questionable, for storming the city saw heavy losses among the attackers. Over seven thousand perished, and twice as many were wounded, but the bulk of the deaths were amidst Redwyne's mariners, who were the first to storm the city from the Whispering Sound, a cunning move by the Young Wolf to further weaken Lord Redwyne and his naval might.

Bronzegate fell to the Golden Company nearly two moons before Oldtown, but Jon Connington's pace was slowed by his limited supplies, giving time for Lord Edmure Tully to organise a resistance. The Dornish army that had taken towards the Rose Road was also beset by the Black Death, losing a tenth of its numbers.

Edmure Tully and Jonos Bracken did escape unscathed by the disease compared to Harrold Hardyng and the Valemen, losing merely a fifth of their men.

The Lord of Riverrun was not deterred by the setbacks and met Aegon in the field twice despite being outnumbered. The first battle by the Rose Road was indecisive; after two days of fighting and heavy snowfall, both sides were forced to retreat with nothing but thousands of corpses left behind.

In the second battle, Aegon leveraged his numerical advantage, fifteen thousand against Edmure Tully's remaining ten thousand, and scored a victory, but it also wasn't decisive. The Riverlord managed to retreat in good order after suffering losses and rushed back to King's Landing.

Meanwhile, Bracken, who harassed the Golden Company's supply lines in the Kingswood, hastily retreated towards King's Landing lest Aegon cut off his way across the Blackwater Rush. It was said that the snow and the chill killed as many men as sword and arrow did, for those wounded in the cold didn't last long.

In the end, Aegon was met with the same obstacle Renly encountered–the Blackwater Rush. His side boasted twenty-six thousand men to the Riverlands' thirteen thousand, swelled to eighteen thousand by the remaining Westermen in King's Landing and the Clawmen returning from the Myrish campaign.

The initial attempts to cross the other side ended in bloody failure, for both banks were manned by determined veterans commanded by competent lords, and thus, a temporary stalemate was established.

But no stalemate lasts forever, and this one was broken by the arrival of Eddard Stark with four thousand veterans from his Vale campaign. A sennight later, the Young Wolf's six thousand lancers, two-thirds of them as good as any knight in skill and armaments, rode up the Rose Road, putting Aegon at a numerical disadvantage for the first time since he landed in Westeros, even if his foes had not yet linked up. Two years of brutal war and plague had seen Westeros completely exhausted, and

the last armies Westeros could field were converging upon the Crownlands to contest the Iron Throne, yet the very same river that prevented Aegon from crossing left the Young Wolf riding up the Rose Road isolated from his Father's forces.

But neither Aegon, The Young Wolf, nor The Blood Blade were in any rush to commit to a battle that would see them at a disadvantage, and the thickening cold and increasing snowfall only allowed for skirmishes. It looked like the war would conclude not with a bloody slog but with a whimper by seeing who would last longer in the cold…

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

Author's Endnote:

Here, finally, a proper time skip. At this point, I got sick of writing war; there are no more turning points but pure tedium of logistics and minor trifles, so this is what you all get.

The Iron Islands are completely dismantled as a sovereign political entity, Hightower is pulled out root and step, and so is Waynwood, Ned clears house in the Vale, and the Citadel is forced to swallow a thick dose of Eddard Stark-style royal reformation.

As for those wondering why the Northmen can be so bloodthirsty when unleashed despite their 'honour', I will raise you a simple counterpoint-explanation. Honour (in pure terms, the worth of your word) is essential in survival during long, brutal winters where cooperation makes the difference between life and death. But this honour only stretches as far as promises given and unspoken rules of war go, which is to say it's been tossed into the gutter long, long ago. Coupled with the pagan morality that would accompany the belief in the old gods/any ancestral/shamanistic system, which puts almost all of its emphasis on martial success and self-greatness, mercy and moderation mean very little.

OCs: Ser Daryn Woolfield, the Knight of Woolfield. *Grand Scholar Izlak zo Zorhan*- obviously, the head scholar of New Ghis. Faren - one of the men-at-arms serving under Renly, a turncloak.