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Edited by: Bub3loka

Maelys Blackfyre proved a man of great cunning and even greater grasp of timing. Evenstar Hall was stormed and fell after Lord Arryn and the royal fleet withdrew, but at high cost. According to the Tyroshi Quartermaster's estimates, Blackfyre lost nearly three thousand men to the nine hundred defenders. While far from devastating, this was the greatest loss Blackfyre suffered so far, slightly worse than the death of Old Mother and her sons and the destruction of her ships. But soldiers were easiest for Maelys to replace, who, with the support of certain rich magisters and Free Cities, had more fighting men than ships to sail them with.

According to estimates, by that time, the Nine could draw upon over thirty thousand sailors and more than forty thousand swords to fight on ground, the latter a combination of sellsword soldiers, knights, marksmen from Myr and the Summer Isles and even the infamous Unsullied, not including Alequo Adaris's forces in Tyrosh. Fielding and feeding them in winter across the Narrow Sea, however, had been another matter.

But with the Summer Isles under the control of the Eight now providing endless timber for the war effort, the shipyards in Bloodstone, Tyrosh, and the Koj worked day and night. Blackfyre could build ships near seven times swifter than the shipyards of King's Landing ever could. Sailors and mariners were easier to recruit and train in Tyrosh, the Summer Isles, and the Stepstones, and with nearly a hundred and thirty swan ships from the Summer Isles joining his forces, Blackfyre could act bolder.

With Ormund Baratheon proclaiming his wife queen and mustering the Stormlander banners to march onto King's Landing, Maelys and the Eight pressed their advantage. After two days of rest and plunder and awarding Tarth to Samarro Saan, who had lost the most men in the battle, the Nine sailed north. After a failed assault on Stonedance, they set the harbour to the torch, and the Eight began raiding and harassing across Massey's Hook and Dragonstone, probing for weakness. Not even a week later, Maelys sailed out in full force.

Raids across Dragonstone and Crackclaw Point intensified. Sharp Point and Claw Isle were blockaded by sea and besieged by land, and both requested relief. The fall of Sharp Point would see the Gullet fall and allow the Eight access to half of Blackwater Bay, whereas Celtigar Isle was the last line of defence for the Bay of Crabs and the final shipping lane open to Braavos and Pentos. Neither could be lost.

Jon Arryn, who had kept the royal fleet at Driftmark, decided to relieve Sharp Point first. The battle for Sharp Point lasted two days and two nights, with over a hundred and fifty ships sunk or burned in the fighting, and proved a bitter victory for the Iron Throne. The Blackfyre fleets withdrew, and over two thousand of their men were left rotting beneath Sharp Point's walls, but the royal fleet had lost more ships and mariners than their foes and had little means to replace them swiftly.

During the Battle, Xhobar Qohoa, leading a hundred and fifty swan ships, raided Dragonstone, killed Edgar Tully, and captured his heir as a hostage, then, using their mobility, joined Spotted Tom at Claw Isle and sacked Celtigar's Keep, killing the master of ships and his brother, the Lord Celtigar…

Excerpt from ***Archmaester Mollos's The Great Turmoil***

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260 AC, the Red Keep

The Dowager Queen

Alys Arryn marched into the small council chamber with a heavy heart. At first, she had found the place pleasing to the eye with its intricate ornaments and painted high-backed chairs of finer make than anything the Vale could make, but now it only made her feel stifled and tired.

It didn't help that her legs felt all stiff and swollen. In fact, her whole body felt ungainly and clumsy. It was hard to be graceful when carrying another, and queens were no exception.

The other members of the small council soon slipped in one after the other, dragging their feet, each bearing a weary expression. They liked these meetings no more than she did, but they were necessary.

Today, the meeting was short of three people. The master of ships had died at the battle of Claw Isle, the master of coin had been sent to Braavos to borrow gold from the Iron Bank and secure as many ships as he could from their Arsenal, and the Lord Commander of the kingsguard had disappeared under the stormy waves of the Narrow Sea along with her husband. The other kingsguard fared no better, and the royal order was reduced to a single knight after Ser Gerold Hightower disappeared along with Princess Rhaella.

"Ser Banon Longwaters is dead," her brother said, face grim. Ever since the riots began, Alys had invited him to attend as a royal advisor. "His head was found down the Street of Seeds, eyes gouged out."

Nobody asked where the rest of him was, nor was there need to. A head alone was proof of his grisly end. This was the third gold cloak captain dead after a night in the city. The second dead amongst those most loyal to her, too.

"Rioters again?" Alys asked. It took all of her self-control to keep her voice steady.

"Mayhaps," said Ser Gawen Corbray, the master of laws. "Mayhaps it's someone else. Some of the city watch patrol the streets by day, then loot and pillage and kill by night, no different from the unruly mob, only cloaked in gold. I arrested Ser Alen Godfrey for insubordination two nights ago, and his men all fled into Fleabottom."

The Grand Maester hemmed. "Those were the risks of drawing men into service so swiftly, and—"

"And now we've lost control of a third of the city," the Hand said with a grunt. Today, he wore a black doublet and a blacker cloak in honour of his two cousins fallen at Sweetport and could have been mistaken for a man of the Night's Watch if not for the golden hand brooch on his chest. "That shithole Fleabottom is one thing, but the Old Gate and the Lion's Gate compromise the safety of the city—"

Her mind drifted, as it often did as of late, especially when the talks grew long or tedious. Or both.

Over five times, Ser Gawen and her brother had sallied out of the Red Keep to disperse the rioters, but the disgruntled smallfolk were quick to scatter, draw the fight into the narrow streets between the houses, and even barricade alleys and lanes. At night, things could grow even worse, and the rioters turned into rabid beasts. If gold cloaks patrolled after sunset in bands of fewer than fifty, there was a good chance they would never return, and over five hundred gold cloaks had died since the month the riots started. Just as many deserted. Just five days past, half of the Street of Flies had burned down, and the fire would have spread across the city if not for the snowfall.

This would have been easy to deal with if no other issue had arisen, but the realm was at war, Baratheon had raised his banners in open rebellion, and there was nothing Alys could do to quell the city's unrest. She had sent letters, offering reconciliation, honours, and even concessions for Storm's End, but all she received in return was a blunt refusal. *'The Iron Throne is not yours, usurper.'*

Usurper. The word had cut deeper than Alys thought it would. Her hands cradled her swollen belly. Until her child was born, she was a usurper indeed. Even small folk across the streets decried her as a jinx and a murderer who killed a prince for the sake of ambition.

If only…

"Your Grace?"

Alys jolted from her stupor, realising the small council had gone quiet, and everyone was looking at her.

"Apologies." She schooled her face. "Could you repeat your query?"

The Darklyn Hand cleared his throat. "I was suggesting to muster more swords from Duskendale to bolster the city's defences. My brother can spare three, perhaps four hundred at most without compromising his own defences."

"And I can bring another thirty by the morrow should you give the word," said Hybart Hayford.

The numbers sounded paltry, like pity, but Alys knew this was more than she could have asked for. Her late husband had already squeezed the Crownlands of its finest in the first muster, and taken more still with him when he sailed. More than half were fighting in Blackwater Bay now, and the rest lay in its depths, feeding the fish.

Even this much was a great favour, considering many a Lord and landed knight were wont to bolster their keeps out of fear of reavers or Essosi raiders and reavers.

"See to it," she said, massaging her brows. After a moment, she steeled her heart. "I'll have my brother lead some of the royal men-at-arms and help you retake the gates. Have the gold cloaks fortify the gates within and without. Drop night patrols, and only move in the wider streets."

"That will weaken the Red Keep's defence," Darklyn said.

Ronnel scoffed. "But losing two gates will not?"

Gods, she hated bloodshed.

“Do you perhaps have better plans, Lord Hand?”

When Darklyn shook his head with a grimace, Alys moved her attention to Corbray, who quickly puffed up his chest. “The gates can’t be lost, Your Grace. I’ll coordinate with Ser Ronnel and sweep away the rabble.”

She wasn't blind to the silent contest between the three of them. Even her brother wanted more than being a commander of the gold cloaks, not when his subordinates were a motley band with poor training and even poorer skills. The city's woes made him look all the more incompetent, and Ronnel hated being looked down upon. But he wasn’t one to demand reward without merit, which made him even more irritated by the state of the gold cloaks.

“Anything else?”

“The cheesemaker’s guild and the shipwrights have forwarded a strongly written letter of protest over the heavy war tax, and the crown's failure to keep order in the city…”

“The shipwrights are one thing, but these cheesemakers sure think themselves important,” her brother spat.

Lord Hayford cleared his throat. “They might seem inane, but the cheesemakers' guild has been a close supporter of the crown for decades. They alone donated over forty thousand dragons to the late King's coffers after the war began.”

Ronnel had the decency to look ashamed.

“Then assure them that the unrest will soon be solved,” Alys said, massaging her temples. A dozen complaints like this came in every week, big or small. Whether it was legitimate woe or meant to test or make trouble for the Iron Throne, none of it boded well.

The meeting dragged on for another half an hour, leaving her ears numb and her mind feeling heavy by the time she dismissed the councillors. As if sensing her irritation, she felt a flutter, a faint sense of pressure in her belly. The child was moving again.

“Should I bring back Pycelle?” her brother asked, face full of concern.

Ronnel was lingering by the door, looking as weary as she felt.

“There's no need.” Alys's fingers gently stroked her swollen belly as she hummed. The babe settled, and she felt just as soothed. “This is a trial every woman must face, and even the Grand Maester will be of no use.”

It should have been a joyful occasion—and it was, but she felt more tired than happy. Her mother was right. Bearing a child was never easy. But just as her brother was doing his duty, fighting to defend the realm, she too would not falter.

Still, she couldn't help but worry. It was not Baratheon's claim that troubled her. It was a troublesome matter, but not one of the highlords had deemed him important enough to support. While the Lord of Storm's End had mustered his banners after a month, it was a mere seven thousand men, or so the master of whispers said. Seven thousand men were not something Alys could deal with, but she didn't

need to. The cold and the snow would eat away at the Stormlanders before any battle. From what she knew, they were all veteran men-at-arms and knights, half of them heavy horse. Even so, with a host this size, even if he managed to get them to march through the snowy kingswood, he would be spotted from afar.

Even if he reached the city in good spirits, that would be it. Her brother had patiently explained the ins and outs of this matter to her, and Alys had seen that not one of the lords or knights seemed particularly bothered by the threat of Baratheon. Seven thousand men were scarcely enough to storm King's Landing, and they weren't even enough to block every gate. Even if they somehow managed to siege the city, in the deep of winter, they'd find little food or shelter outside, and they'd be the first to expire.

The real woe on her mind was the city itself. Riots and unrest and gold cloaks dying like flies and deserting like startled birds every day, King's Landing had never been weaker. And like the weakest link in the chain, everything would be over if it snapped.

That night, she wrote to her eldest brother yet another letter, requesting more troops, the fourth time in the last ten days.

The next day, the streets ran red with blood around Old Gate and the Lion's Gate, the crowd putting up surprising resistance. But her brother had delivered, regaining control at the cost of seventy gold cloaks and a dozen royal men-at-arms. Some semblance of order was restored. It could have been the bone-chilling wind blowing from the north, or the snowstorm that stuck in the afternoon, though.

It snowed for a full two days, sometimes slowly, sometimes fiercely, until it buried the whole city under a dozen feet of snow. Some houses with weaker roofs crumbled under the weight, and the gold cloaks had to dig for hours to clear a trench leading from the Red Keep to the River Gate. Alys hadn't seen a winter so fierce even in the Gates of the Moon. According to Pycelle, this was the coldest winter in a century.

"By the Father, it keeps on going," Ronnel said, glancing through the open shutter. Gusts of snow and bitter chill drifted in. "If it snows like this down the Stormlands, we won't ever see Baratheon."

"Close it and don't call the Seven's name in vain." Alys shivered, burying deeper under her thick woollen covers. He obliged, but the cold lingered, much to her displeasure. "Why are you here?"

"To keep my sister company, of course." She stared at her brother until he squirmed. "Fine, fine. What are you going to do with the Lannister girl?"

"She's to be your wife once the mourning time ends," Alys muttered. "Lord Lannister has agreed. Come now. We need to make amends to House Lannister. You know your duty."

Ronnel's face soured. "The lass is prettier than most. Being a widow is no issue," he said with a tone that suggested otherwise, "but I fear she'll shank me with a knife one night."

"Then sleep in different rooms."

“Come now, sister. I can guard against her for a night, perhaps even for a month and a year, but I can’t stay vigilant forever. If it’s no knife in bed, it will be poison in my wine, or some other womanly trick. You *know* she hates my guts. If you could uncover the murderer—”

“If I could uncover the murderer, we wouldn’t be in this deep pit,” Alys bit out. Taking a deep breath, she composed herself; it wasn’t Ronnel’s fault. “I have eyes and ears working on it—beyond that slow lout Hayford. But the schemer is very, very patient and just as prudent. Whether it’s my late husband or I, he strikes only when we’ve let our guard down, and he strikes swiftly and ruthlessly and *only* when he is certain he’ll leave no traces. A snake slithering in the shadows—the worst sort of foe.”

He let out a long, weary sigh. “I know. I almost regret coming here. Not that I’d leave you alone in this viper pit, but… this whole royal marriage was a mistake. Brother would have never invested so hard if the king hadn’t been so generous.”

The king would never have been so generous if he hadn’t been in dire straits, Alys knew. But it was no use knowing this now.

“You can still try and get along with Genna,” she said softly. “Mother she might be, but she’s still half a girl, alone and frightened. She might guard little Daenora like a frightened hen, but once she has another child, that love and care will be divided.”

“Mayhaps,” her brother stretched lazily, “but she doesn't dare leave her room. You permitted those Lannister knights to stand guard at her door, and they're ready to murder anyone who approaches. *Especially* me.”

“Try harder, then. We don't have any other choice. Once you climb the throne, it's impossible to get off easily.”

Her brother grunted in agreement and excused himself. Alys reached out for the bell, summoning her handmaid. “Get the fire running hotter,” the queen said. “And have the kitchen bring me some lemoncakes.”

Mara rushed in, quickly fed two logs into the roaring hearth, then sent word to the kitchen. As much as Alys misliked the cold, it was not without merit. With the thick quilt of snow shrouding the land, everyone was forced into the shelter of their homes. There was no court to speak of, little to no trade aside from the ships braving the Blackwater Bay, and even the city’s unrest had cooled. How could one riot when going into the street required a shovel and hours of hard work?

All of this meant Alys could remain in bed and rest, free of almost all woes. Not all woes, though. The snow and the cold had taken over the land, but not the sea. Seas were stubborn creatures—in summer, they resisted the heat, and in winter, they were slow to cool. According to Pycelle, Driftmark, Dragonstone, and Sweetport Isle saw half as much snow as King’s Landing, and it was swifter to melt. That meant the cold would do little to halt the fierce war across the Narrow Sea, only slow it at best.

Alys hated the war. She hated how her brother had to go out and risk his life and his bannermen just to stay one man's ambition. But her mislike would do nothing to stop Blackfyre or any of her foes.

The next day, the snow finally stopped, and the sky cleared, revealing a murky expanse of blue. But the winter sun did little to dispel the cold or the snow, offering only a fleeting warmth that vanished the moment the first cloud rolled in. The city watch and the guilds organised men to clear the main streets, and by the end of the day, one could ride across King's Landing from one end to the other again.

The riots had yet to resurface, but Alys could feel the discontent bubbling underneath. Her brother's solemn face after he returned from his daily inspection spoke loud enough on its own.

Two days later, four hundred men came by ship from Duskendale. The day after that, a great carrack bearing the blue falcon of Arryn docked into the harbour, bringing another five hundred men.

Ignoring the allure of the warm feathered bed, she had the maids clothe her and waddled uneasily into the snowy outer courtyard. By the time the knight in charge arrived at the Red Keep, the courtiers had also emerged to watch on. A tall man, with a weather-worn face, flinty eyes, and the nine-pointed star on his blazon.

“When are the rest coming, Ser Botley?” she asked. Alys knew the man—Ser Botley Templeton was among her brother's most trusted captains, a good man and true.

The knight bowed deeply. “A thousand apologies, Your Grace. This is all Lord Arryn could spare. He barely had enough swords as it is. Some of the Riverlords have sailed back after Lord Tully’s death, and he still needs to take back Claw Isle at once and defend the Gullet from Blackfyre incursions.”

Whispers rippled through the surrounding courtiers, and Alys felt her heart sink.

“I’ll have my brother arrange places in the barracks for your men,” she said, ignoring the tightness in her chest.

The Red Keep’s barracks and armouries were full, and most of the Valemen ended up joining the gold cloaks in their quarters down the city. It did little to dispel her worries, especially when she saw most were either old and grey or young and green.

With the men who had arrived earlier, that made a thousand swords. Enough to barely keep the peace in the city with the help of the scattered gold cloaks, but nothing more. Perhaps their numbers could deter the brewing unrest for a while, but she held no illusion that it would stop it for good.
Even worse still, there was no victory in sight against Blackfyre, nor any end to the fighting. Worse still, aside from House Lannister, no one had agreed to her painstaking diplomatic efforts. And if they hadn’t agreed in over a moon’s turn, they wouldn’t do so anytime soon. That evening, Alys found herself in the royal sept, praying for the first time in weeks. She prayed to the Warrior, to the Mother, to the Father, and to the Crone, not for a divine miracle, but just a small change for the better.

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260 AC, the Isle of Faces

The Pale Hound

Jon was in no hurry to make his way to King’s Landing. Rescuing a princess from the Red Keep was no easy feat, and definitely not one for a man still recuperating from heavy injuries. If her newborn niece

were in immediate danger, Jon couldn't possibly reach the city in time. If there was no direct threat, she could wait a little longer. It was one thing to kill a crippled prince who had the best claim to the Iron Throne, but another entirely to act against a babe in swaddling clothes. Not only was she a girl, but her grandfather, albeit somewhat useless and meek, was the Lord of Casterly Rock, serving as a protective veil, no matter how thin.

Rhaella did not push him on this either. "You're right. I'll scout the situation in King's Landing first," she said, closing her eyes. In a few moments, he sensed her presence wash over two snow shrikes nesting near the cottage.

The next morning, Jon gathered everyone before the morning practice. "I have decided to help the Princess with one last task."

The boys shared a look but said nothing, while Ser Gerold observed him with an unreadable face.

Harry frowned fiercely. "Another dangerous task?"

"Aye," Jon said openly. "It's more than likely I'll face great peril, and there is little immediate gain. So I've gathered you lot to warn you. If great danger is too much to stomach, you need not follow me in this, and I won't blame you for it."

"Ser Jon…" The axeman hesitated for a long moment. "It's not that we fear death. But can you tell us more?"

The man had been fearless in word and deed before this, not flinching even when faced with knights clad in full steel. But the grisly death of his brother and that great pile of corpses had worn away his bravery, and Jon didn't blame him for it. If he had faced such terrible odds a few years past, he would be no different.

Jon shook his head. "Better not. Just knowing the task can easily bring your undoing, so I can only tell you the details should you choose to join me. We're not leaving just yet, so I'll give you three days to think it over."

"There's no need—I'm in," Harry said, clenching his jaw. "My ma raised no craven. But I'm doing this because I trust you, ser, not because of some spoiled lass's whim."

Rhaella lowered her head.

"So be it." Jon glanced at his squires one by one; each met his gaze and nodded solemnly. Even the white cloak gave a reluctant nod. "We're saving Princess Daenora from the Red Keep."

"What?" Gerold Hightower's voice grew dangerous. "You want to kidnap a princess of the blood?"

"Getting my niece to safety can hardly be called kidnapping," Rhaella said, stepping forth to meet the Knight's piercing glare. "Quite a lot of things have happened in King's Landing since we left. My brother has been brutally murdered—" She gave a short but poignant explanation of the realm's affairs, much to Jon's delight.

He didn't have to rack his head to figure out how to explain his knowledge and reveal more of his abilities.

“Ser Jon,” Arthur called out once Rhaella was done explaining. “Princess Daenora is barely a babbling infant. Is she really in danger?”

“Being an infant doesn't protect you in the deep of the royal struggles,” Jon said patiently. “It only leaves you helpless and at the whim of fate. Princess Helaena's children were of no threat to anyone, yet all three were murdered, whether on purpose or by chance. Certain vicious plotters might just kill a newborn princess to create more chaos or sow discord in court. I suspect Aerys was killed for that reason.”

“Ser Jon is right,” the Hightower knight muttered with a stiff nod. “If they dared to kill Prince Aerys in broad daylight within the Red Keep, his daughter is far from safe. When are we leaving?”

Jon could practically feel the wariness and suspicion oozing from the white cloak’s mind, but couldn’t bring himself to mind. Still, it kept him on edge.

“Once I recover fully.”

Another ten days passed before the awkward stiffness receded from his limbs, leaving only a tightness in his left shoulder, lingering like a stubborn maggot clinging to a rotten carcass. Jon suspected it would never fully go away, but he only felt it when he stayed by the fire. It was enough to get back into archery and get used to the weight of the sword in his hand. At night, he found himself practising his powers. Bending ice to his will came almost as naturally as breathing, and was half as taxing as before.

Yet those ten days saw the weather take a turn for the worse. The sky was dull grey from dawn till dusk, and in the last two days it snowed for hours on end until it piled up high enough to bury a grown man and then some. When Jon woke, it was still snowing.

“Seems like we won’t be going anywhere,” Tormund puffed out, face all red after shovelling a path to the bubbling hot spring for the third day in a row.

Jon rubbed his chin. “Making way down to King’s Landing will indeed be inconvenient.” *For you lot, perhaps.*

“Mayhaps… we should forget about this,” Rhaella said timidly, grimacing up at the wall of snow looming over the cottage. Jon had cleared the roof of snow and the surroundings just enough to link the houses and the small granary, but from inside, it looked like they were surrounded by a wall of white.

“No way. I can still go, but it’ll definitely be hard for you to travel along.”

Rhaella gave him a complicated look. “Ser Jon, you don’t have to risk it.”

“The snow is more of an opportunity than a risk. Any self-respecting Northman knows how to pass through deep snow, though it’s no easy feat, so I’m afraid that I’ll be going alone.”

“Ser, you can’t!” Harry said hurriedly. “Even a master hunter needs to rest, snow or not. Two sets of hands and eyes are better than one.”

Jon weighed the matter in his mind. A skinchanger was never truly alone, and Shadow was waiting for him across the Gods Eye Lake, yet no beast could compare to a good squire or a man-at-arms.

“Fine,” he said at last. “Brynden, Harry, you’re both coming with me. It won’t be easy, and if you can’t keep up, I’ll leave you in the first inn on the way down. If you think you’re not up to the challenge, tell me now. We leave tomorrow at dawn.”

That evening, Rhaella finished working on a small strip of black linen and came to his side, looking rather bashful. It wasn’t the red three-headed dragon of House Targaryen but a lone pink drake curled around itself.

Jon did not refuse the gesture and raised his hand.

“I… be careful,” she said in the end, voice choked as she tied the favour around his wrist. “If it’s too dangerous, just retreat. I won’t blame you.”

“Don’t worry. I know when to advance and when to retreat,” he said, flashing her a slight smile.

“...I will send you a letter to give to Genna. I imagine she'll be desperate to get her daughter out of the Red Keep. And your hair is too conspicuous; I’ve prepared a concoction to dye your hair that won’t fade for months, no matter how you wash it.” She handed him a small leather flask sealed with resin, acting almost like a worried mother. Then, her voice lowered, and she shyly said, “You have my gratitude. I will stand by my promise, ser.”

He wasn’t doing this solely for Rhaella’s sake. The looks she stole while she thought he wasn’t looking were plain and obvious, and Jon had seen it on Sansa’s face when she glanced at the blonde bastard in Winterfell. Her intentions went unsaid, but Jon heard them regardless. A princess for a wife… Jon wasn’t opposed to it now that she made the offer sober and after thinking it through. Rhaella was pleasant company and kind, unlike a certain overbearing woman. It didn't hurt that her figure was growing more womanly by the month, blossoming into the infamous Valyrian beauty the princesses of House Targaryen were known for.

Yet that was not the reason why he agreed, not the whole of it. He hadn’t forgotten that favour Aerys had granted him. It wasn’t a great favour, but Jon was confident he could spirit Daenora away from that viper pit called the Red Keep. And it would be all the better if he could spite Alys Arryn and the other schemers in court in the process.

Jon Snow’s gaze strayed to his reflection in the lake. The chestnut-brown curls looked odd on his head, and did little to hide the paleness of his skin. But whatever Rhaella had concocted worked very well, and even his dark eyebrows didn’t look too strange.

The moment they landed the skiff on the other shore, a black figure darted through the snow and crashed into Jon, slobbering his face all over. Laughing, he reached out, sinking his fingers deep into Shadow’s fur and scratching under his neck just as he liked it. Even if it was just a direwolf, the closeness lifted his mood.

“He doesn’t look at all bothered by the snow,” Brynden rasped out from behind his thick woollen cloak.

Jon laughed. “This is nothing. Shadow has seen more snow beyond the Wall and a cold far more bitter than you can imagine. Now, get ready for your bear paws.”

Harry vaulted over the boat, lugging a heavy wrap of garments and dry rations.

Strapping the flat, wooden, pan-like shoes to their boots, they followed behind him through the snow. It was half as fast as Jon going on his own, but they stubbornly kept up until evening rolled in, while Shadow pawed after him with a wagging tail, going through the snow almost as easily as he did. They spent the night in small, ball-like huts Jon had seen the ice clans use, and he made one in only a handful of minutes. With a small chimney hole on top and a small fire inside, it was surprisingly warm.

Firewood was of no issue. Even in the expanse of white, Jon could easily sense and gather a few branches or find some stump that could be drilled open and burn for the whole night. Drawing the moisture out of them required some effort, but it wasn't too hard with his control over ice.

Food was of no issue either. Jon could sense fish hiding beneath the river's frozen shallows and rabbits hiding in their burrows beneath the snow and could catch them with a thought.

They kept to the Gods Eye River, frozen stiff with ice, save for a small stream still slithering in the middle. The weather showed no signs of clearing, with the sky overcast or outright snowing, though that didn't stop Jon from keeping a swift pace that left Brynden and Harry all exhausted. They didn't utter a word of complaint, so Jon took care of the food and the shelter, allowing them ample rest and honing his ice control further. By then, Vhagar returned to his side, though the wedge-tailed royal eagle kept to the skies.

The river widened, and so did the stream the further down they went. By the fifth day, they reached the confluence with the Blackwater Rush, and the snow had finally stopped. A wide expanse of white shrouded the land, taller than a giant at places and turning the otherwise lively landscape into a quiet tomb. The only sound was the roar of the river, now muted amid the white desert. Even the mighty Blackwater Rush saw frost creep across the edges, but they still managed to take the last barge downstream. Apparently charcoal, oats, salted beef and pork, and hard cheese fetched a pretty penny in King's Landing.

As they sailed downstream, Jon sent Vhagar to scout King's Landing. The city was half-buried in snow, but the main streets and alleyways were cleaned just enough for men to walk out. From most snow-strewn roofs, thick black smoke rose, curling in ribbons that merged into one murky, dark cloud above the city. Bands of idlers and smallfolk in roughspun and wool gathered in groups by the corners, holding pitchforks, crude knobbed clubs, rusty iron spears, or woodsman axes, only to be dispersed by the coming gold cloak patrol. At times, the city watch would even draw their picks, and most of the time, the men would flee into some house or a tunnel dug into some snow-covered alley.

But sometimes, the men didn't disperse, and things got bloody.

Vhagar flew over his manse and found it empty. It made sense that the crown had seized his property, but that didn't stop the cold surge of anger rising in his chest. Jon wondered what had happened to his men and old Anella. Logic dictated they had been dismissed after a short investigation, for they knew nothing.

Jon steered the eagle towards the Sleepy Spearman's Inn and found Daeron leaning on a bench outside, basking in the rare moment of sun. His purple eyes looked straight at Vhagar, and he smiled.

'This one didn't expect to see you again, benefactor,' his voice echoed in Jon's mind. Even though the priest's tone was as jovial as usual, Jon felt a cold shiver run down his spine. *'The Inn is safe*, *if you wish to catch up.'*

Vhagar let out a piercing shriek and wheeled away. Why did Daeron give him such an unsettling feeling? But then again, the Essosi priest had always been unsettling, and his senses were sharper now. But Jon did need a safe place inside the city, and Rhaella's inn was a place as good as any other. But only after he scouted inside and made sure no ambush was waiting for him.

Jon flew over the River Gate and found the guard standing in the snow, busy huddling by a brazier and barely sparing a glance at those coming in or out. In a moment, he slipped out of the eagle's mind and turned to Brynden and Harry, who were waiting right beside him.

"Going into the city will be the first step," he whispered. "We'll get a feel for the situation in the city first before acting."

Author's Endnote: Whew, there we go. That chapter was harder to write than I thought, but we're now approaching the most precious moment of… shit hitting the fan. The war in the Narrow Sea continues in full swing.

Starring: Jon 'How to Kidnap Your Aunt' Snow, Alys 'Snow is surprisingly nice' Arryn.