

Nymeria's War

Interlude: The Kings of Dorne

Crows of a Feather

It was summer, but up here in the North that didn't mean much. Lucifer Dryland felt the crisp wind on his skin, and it felt colder than anything he had ever felt back in Dorne. Even under his thick wool and leather clothes and fur coat Lucifer was shivering. *I'll never get used to this*, he thought grimly.

Another thing Lucifer would never get used to was looking up a seven hundred feet tall wall of ice every single day. Right now, he was riding towards said wall, and specifically the gates of Nightfort, already hearing the horn of the gatekeeper welcoming him. Nightfort was the oldest and largest castle the Night's Watch had, and it did have a certain crude majesty to it. Just by looking at it Lucifer could tell that parts of it had stood there for thousands of years, whereas other parts had been added or rebuilt much later. This was the first time Lucifer was here, summoned by the Lord Commander himself, after serving almost two years in Eastwatch-by-the-sea. They had been the two most miserable years in his life, and not a day went by without him hoping he had defeated Nymeria, or at least fell on the battlefield fighting for his kingdom. Now he was just withering away here at the edge of the civilized world, struggling every day with the thought that his line would come to an end and there was nothing he could do about it.

Lucifer's grim thoughts were interrupted by the gates of the Nightfort opening in front of him. He rode into the crowded courtyard, which had no welcoming party waiting for him. The brothers of the castle all continued their chores and training, hardly even paying attention to the newcomer. *I'm certainly not a king to these people*.

As he dismounted his horse, Lucifer did notice one man approaching him. This man was on his mid-twenties, tall and handsome, with pale skin, short dark hair and sharp grey eyes. "Lucifer Dryland?" He asked with a deep and smooth voice, and Lucifer nodded with a stern expression on his face. "Aye, I am," he grunted as an answer, and a small smile formed on the young man's face.

"Welcome to Nightfort," he said casually, and offered his hand for shaking. "I'm Eldon Stark, ranger of the Night's Watch, and the fourthborn son of King Eyrion Stark." Lucifer grabbed the ranger's hand and looked him in the eyes. "Never thought I'd meet a Stark," he said with a mildly amused tone, to which Eldon chuckled softly.

"Can't say I ever expected to meet a Dryland," he replied with a relaxed tone. "Anyway, Lord Commander Osmund is waiting for you," the Stark continued with a more professional tone, and Lucifer nodded. "Let's go then," he urged, and Eldon Stark began to lead him towards

the quarters of the Lord Commander.

Lucifer had heard a lot about Osmund Gardener during his days in the Eastwatch, and he had looked forward to meeting him in person. Being the son of the late King Gyles Gardener, fifth of his name, Osmund came from a status even higher than Lucifer, which was rare in this place. So far most of the fellow brothers-in-black that Lucifer had met had been either third- or fourthborn sons of some petty lords, or common folk criminals. Osmund was a thirdborn as well, but the thirdborn of one of the most powerful families in Westeros.

Eldon led them past the armory and the great hall, leading them to the ancient stony keep that was leaning against the giant wall of ice. The watchers guarding the doors paid no mind to them, and soon they were at the dark wooden door of the Lord Commander's office. Eldon Stark knocked, and soon a dark-haired and pale boy on his early teens opened the door. "Morning, Ned," Eldon greeted with a warm and friendly tone, and a happy smile formed on the boy's face. "Morning, Uncle Eldon," he responded calmly, before turning his eyes to Lucifer. "You're Lucifer Dryland, right?" He asked, and Lucifer nodded. "Yes, I've been summoned here by the Lord Commander."

"Aye, he's been waiting for you," the boy said, making way for him. "We'll wait outside," he added, walking next to Eldon. Lucifer nodded again, and entered the room, closing the door behind him. Turning his eyes to left, he saw the Lord Commander sitting quietly behind his desk. He was an old man, probably on his early eighties, with wavy light grey hair, bushy beard and wrinkled pale skin. However, the look on his green eyes was still sharp, and he sat on his chair with a remarkably good composure for his age.

"Lucifer Dryland," Osmund Gardener spoke up with a calm and sharp tone on his voice. "Please, take a seat." Quietly Lucifer approached the desk, and sat down opposed to Osmund. "Lord Commander," he grunted with a small nod, and a sly smirk formed on the old Gardener's face.

"How has your time in Eastwatch been?" He asked calmly. Lucifer stayed quiet for a few seconds, considering his words. "Could've been worse," he finally answered with a shrug, which made Osmund chuckle. "It's been over thirty years, but I still remember my first days at the Wall," he said with a wistful sigh. "It was winter back then, and a harsh one as well. I had never experienced anything like it in the Reach, and there were days when I was certain I wouldn't survive. But I did, and here I am now. I imagine these two years have been hard for you, for multitude of reasons."

"They have," Lucifer admitted sternly, and Osmund nodded. "I must say I was surprised when I received the letter from the Martells. A Dornish king being sent to the Wall by a foreign conqueror? I admit, the Reachman in me felt a certain glee at the thought. Less than two centuries ago the Dornish raided our lands and burned down Highgarden while the kingdom was torn apart by the civil war between the Peakes and the Manderlys. My great-grandfather Mern the Sixth rebuilt Highgarden and united the Reach under one banner again, and my grandfather Garth the Eleventh took vengeance upon the Dornish by littering the Red Mountains with Blackmont and Manwoody corpses."

"That was over a century ago," Lucifer pointed out nonchalantly, and Osmund nodded in agreement. "True. By now my grandfather is long dead, as is my father and all my brothers. Now the kingdom is ruled by my nephew whom I last saw when he was still more boy than a man, but I can guarantee you that the hatred for Dornish still runs deep in my family."

"So, now you want to take some petty vengeance on me, is that it?" Lucifer asked cynically, but to his surprise Osmund Gardener shook his head. "If I was still Prince Osmund Gardener, grandson of King Garth the Painter, then yes, perhaps I would feel the need to humiliate you, just as Garth humiliated your people so long ago. However, I am no prince, I am the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, sworn by a sacred oath to take no sides in the conflicts of Westeros. I assume we can extend that oath to apply for the conflicts of the past. I am not a Gardener, and you are not a Dryland – not anymore. No, we are both brothers of the Night's Watch, the watchers on the Wall."

"So, why did you summon me here, Lord Commander?" Lucifer asked sharply. Osmund took in a deep breath, studying Lucifer's face while he considered his answer. "You were defeated by a conqueror, but you were a king before that," he began with a calm tone on his words. "You may have a new purpose here, but there is no reason to ignore your past. You were a ruler, raised to a position of power, trained to command. The past two years you have been acting as a mere servant on the Eastwatch, and perhaps that has been necessary to remind you that you are not a king anymore, but one of many equal brothers in black, serving the realms of men. However, about a month ago I received a raven from Westwatch, informing me that its commander had fallen. Harwin Umber was a great warrior, who had successfully defended the Westwatch against the wildlings for over a decade, so I was shocked to learn he had been slain by a band of raiders attempting to cross the Bridge of Skulls. Westwatch is the fort that gets assaulted by the wildling most frequently, and now it has been left without a proper leader."

"You would make me Commander of Westwatch?" Lucifer asked with a genuinely surprised tone, and the Lord Commander nodded affirmatively. "Aye", he said quietly, narrowing his eyes as he leaned closer and looked Lucifer to the eyes. "The position is not a comfortable one, nor does it give you a crown or bring you any personal glory. Westwatch is a hard place, and it requires a strong leader, a commander capable of rallying his brothers against the wildlings, again and again. Do you see yourself as the man for the job, Lucifer Dryland?"

"I do", Lucifer answered with stern determination in his voice, and the Lord Commander's lips formed a satisfied smirk.

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The King of Nothing

Albin Manwoody held a piece of parchment in his hands, a letter sent from the Yronwood. Filled with empty words and hollow compliments, its true message was to ask Albin to seize

his war efforts against the Fowlers. "I hope you will follow the instructions I have given here, so the negotiations for alliance with King Garrison can begin," Albin muttered the last words of the letter, before squashing the parchment in his fist and throwing it away.

Maester Gilbert picked the letter up sheepishly and slipped it into the sleeve of his dark robe, before giving the King a meek look. "Your Grace, how shall we answer?" He asked with a shivering voice, and Albin shot him a cold glare. "Yorick Yronwood does not command me," he said sternly, his words oozing of anger. "There will be no answer, and we will keep raiding the lands of House Fowler," he said determinedly, and Gilbert bowed to his words.

"Your Grace, I should remind you that Yorick still has troops on our lands," the maester said with a gulp, and Albin slammed his fist furiously against the desk. "I said there will be no answer," he growled, and once again Gilbert bowed. "Now, get out of here," he commanded, and the maester obeyed without missing a beat. Now Albin turned his eyes to the other man still in the room, his son and heir Prince Arvin Manwoody. For a moment they were both quiet, until Albin chuckled coldly. "You want to say something, don't you?" He asked sharply. "Go on then boy, say what you have to say."

"Maester Gilbert mentioned the Yronwood troops patrolling our lands, but they are not our only problem" Arvin said with a sigh, and Albin narrowed his eyes, gesturing for his son to continue. "Several reports from the north have come recently, sent by lords Littlemill and Purell. Apparently, some foreign band of raiders has been causing trouble there."

"The Carons again?" Albin asked sternly, to which Arvin shrugged. "It could be, but I doubt it", he said calmly. "After all, it has been only a few months since the Storm King marched to Riverlands. And if these men do work for the Carons, at least they aren't carrying their banners."

"I don't have any troops to spare for something like this, my vassals can bloody well take care of their own problems," Albin hissed, and Arvin gave him a displeased look. "And what will our vassals think of us if we don't even bother to protect them against foreign invaders?" He asked with a frustrated tone on his voice.

"They will speak ill, as always, but at the end of the day they will all bend their knee and kiss my feet, because I am the Great King of the Red Mountains, and disobeying me means death," Albin answered to his son, an underlying threat in his words. "Really?" Arvin asked dryly. "Because the way I see it, right now you are not the Great King of the Red Mountains, you are not the Great King of anything. In fact, you are just another vassal of Yorick Yronwood."

Albin clenched his fists, almost shaking in anger. How could his own son dare to say something like that to his face, it made him furious. "Shut your mouth!" He roared. "You are my son, how dare you speak against me like that? It is treasonous, it is disgusting!"

Arvin turned his gaze down regretfully, letting out a deep sigh. "I am sorry father," he muttered quietly, before turning his eyes up again. "All I'm saying is that perhaps it would be

wise to pull our troops from the Fowlers' lands, and instead concentrate on driving away this foreign army from our northern borders. This would please both Yorick and our own vassals."

Now Albin stormed up from his chair and approached Arvin, proceeding to grab him from the collar of his tunic and staring him straight to the eyes. "Did you not hear me, boy?" He asked with a chilling tone, his voice shaking of anger. "I have made my decision, and disobeying it will mean death. Do you understand me?"

"I... I understand, Your Grace," Arvin managed to mutter, clearly shaken, and Albin let go of him. "Is there no one I can trust?" The King asked hysterically, leaning against his desk with one hand and breathing heavily. "Even my own son is trying to undermine me," he spat, glaring at Arvin.

"I am not trying to undermine you," Arvin tried to assure, but Albin just laughed coldly at his words. "I can see it from your eyes, boy," he said with a grim smirk, pointing at his son. "The way you look at me, you can't wait to see me die so you can claim my crown, don't even try to deny it. That crown will be yours one day, as undeserving of it as you are, but before that I intend to make sure that history will remember my name."

"I understand," Arvin said quietly, avoiding eye contact with his father, and for a moment silence lingered in the room. "Go!" Albin yelled with frustration. "I can't stand to look at your treasonous face any longer, go!"

With a deep bow Arvin quickly made his way out of the room, and so Albin collapsed back into his chair with a sigh. "Missy," he muttered quietly. "Why can't you be here, Missy?" Albin asked with his eyes closed. Every woman in his life had betrayed him, but Missy had been different. *They took her away from me*, he thought bitterly. *She admired me and loved me, and they took her away.*

He remembered all the times Missy had pledged her love for him, her loyalty and service. *Why can't you be here?* Albin's thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. The king clenched his fists and frowned. "Who is it?" He bellowed, and the door was opened. In stepped Larry the Kind, bowing deeply to his king. "Your Grace, I apologize for bothering you, but you have a guest", Larry spoke with a humble tone.

"A guest?" Albin asked with narrowed eyes, and Larry nodded. "Yes, a strange woman, some sort of priestess. She is saying that the gods have sent her to..."

Larry was cut off by a tall woman walking behind him and putting her hand on his shoulder. She was dressed in black robes, and her skin was dark. The woman walked silently past Larry and removed her hood, revealing a bald head and a face mutilated with burn scars. In her brown eyes was a tense and sharp glare, oozing of confidence and power.

"Who are you?" Albin asked sternly, and a tiny smirk formed on the burned woman's face. "I am a servant of the one true god, the great lord of darkness and death, and I've come here to make you the strongest king in Dorne", she introduced herself smoothly.

“And how would you do that?” Albin asked with narrowed eyes. The priestess glanced at Larry, and Albin understood her gesture. “Leave us”, he said nonchalantly, and after hesitating for a couple seconds, Larry walked out of the room.

“I knew your cousin, Ser Mordekhai, before he died”, the woman spoke up again, and Albin raised his eyebrows in surprise. There was something strange about this woman, something unsettling even, and there wasn’t much that could make Albin feel that way. “You knew Mordekhai?” he asked quietly, and the woman nodded.

“I serve the same god as he did”, she answered, now standing right next to Albin. “He died fighting for our lord, slain by the servants of fire. The same people left me scarred and mutilated, but by the mercy of the Great Other I survived, and now I have come to show you his power.” As she finished speaking, the priestess offered her hand for him. Albin took in a deep breath and looked the burned woman to the eyes, and finally grabbed her hand.

He fell into abyss, surrounded by nothing but darkness. Screams of pain echoed around her, voices of all the people he had made suffer in his life. And then he saw them, the cold blue eyes in the darkness. Their stern gaze brought Albin down on his knees, and made him bow his head before them.

“You are King of Nothing”, the screeching voice said, and the words made Albin shiver in fear and anger. “You shall serve me, you shall be my weapon, and my enemies shall tremble before you.”

I shall serve you, Albin thought, and fell asleep.

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The Dawn of War

King Vorian Dayne stood on the balcony of his royal chambers, gazing at the eastern shores of Torrentine. It was a calm and sunny day, but something bothered Vorian. He was distressed, though there shouldn’t have been a reason for it. His kingdom was in peace, his people were safe, and his vassals respected him. His heir had just a couple weeks ago married Ashara Nightfall, the daughter of one of his most important vassals, and little over half-a-year ago his second son had become the father of two healthy boys, their mother the daughter of Vorian’s strongest ally. There was plenty of reasons for him to feel happy and accomplished in this moment, but there were a few concerns creeping in the back of his mind that he just couldn’t shake.

First one was the looming threat of Nymeria. The Rhoynar princess had made herself strong after defeating Lucifer, and held now even more territory than King Yorick Yronwood. Granted, a large portion of that territory was desert, but nonetheless there was no denying of her power. Vorian had no illusions that Nymeria wouldn’t sooner or later make her move

against him, and he could only hope he'd be strong enough to defeat her.

Secondly, Vorian was concerned for Nealia, his only daughter. It had been years since she left, and there was no way of knowing if she was still alive or not. Ser Rolan Nightfall claimed to have met her at Salt Shore, but even that was over two years ago, and knowing that she was travelling with an infamous sellsword company didn't exactly reassure Vorian that she was safe. *Perhaps I shouldn't have let her go*, he thought with a subtle gulp.

Queen Arenna suddenly walked next to him and laid her hand gently on top of his on the railing. "You look concerned, dear. Is everything alright?" She asked softly, a sincere tone on her voice. Vorian flashed her a smile, and put his arm around her in a calming manner. "Everything's alright, Arenna", he assured quietly. "I was just thinking about what's to come, the challenges we'll have to face."

"You mean the Rhoynar invader?" Arenna asked calmly, and Vorian nodded, letting out a small sigh. "From what I know of Nymeria and her past, I can appreciate her vision for Dorne. She has been a hero to her people, and now she wants to be the hero for all of Dorne. I agree with her that the Dornish kingdoms should strive to work together, especially if we'll ever be threatened by the Reachmen or the Stormlanders. However, it shouldn't come at the cost of our legacies being swept aside, and our crowns denied from us."

"Perhaps you'll be able to change her mind", Arenna suggested with her typical optimism, to which Vorian chuckled amusedly. Arenna raised an eyebrow and spoke up again. "What? Trust me, we women can be much more reasonable about these things than you men."

"I know, but I have a feeling this Nymeria won't be so easily swayed to change her mind", Vorian responded calmly. "We'll have to prove our strength to her first, and perhaps then she'll be willing to listen."

"You have allies in Blackmont and Skyreach", Arenna reminded, and Vorian nodded. "I do. However, Benedict's willingness to give any meaningful support is questionable to say the least, and Garrison is continuously struggling with the Manwoodys. In fact, I have a feeling that is where Nymeria will strike first. She has surely made notice of the Fowlers being weakened by their prolonged war with King Albin. And if that happens, Garrison will be the one asking for my help."

"And do you plan to help him?" Arenna asked quietly. "Of course", Vorian answered immediately. "Our kingdoms are tied together by marriage, it would be shameful of me to abandon Garrison in his time of need." After this they both remained quiet for a moment.

"Look", Arenna suddenly said, pointing towards south with a surprised expression on her face. Vorian turned his eyes where she pointed, and saw a single ship with the sails of House Dayne approaching Starfall. It wasn't just some merchant ship though, but one of their war galleys. "Isn't that your brother's ship?"

"It is", Vorian muttered, frowning as he looked at it. "But... he is supposed to be garrisoning

Clearhaven, right?" Arenna asked, and Vorian nodded wordlessly. Garret had just visited Starfall a couple weeks ago during Malcolm's wedding, there was no reason for him to be returning so soon. Vorian knew his brother to be a dutiful man, which meant he had to have a very important reason for leaving his post. "Perhaps he forgot something here", Arenna suggested, but Vorian wasn't convinced of that. Without even responding to his wife, the king walked back inside from the balcony. He changed his clothes quickly and made his way down from the tower.

At the hallway of the main keep, Vorian was approached by Jamison. "Father, I saw Garret's ship approaching the docks", the dark-haired prince said with a tense tone, and Vorian nodded to him. "I saw it too", he replied, continuing to walk towards the doors of the keep, and Jamison followed after him.

"Why do you think he's here?" Jamison asked as they walked through the courtyard, and Vorian shook his head. "I don't know, but I doubt it's anything good", he muttered sternly.

Ser Laroy and his squire Darnis of Southpoint joined them at the gates, and together they made their way down to the docks. There they stood in tense silence, as Garret's galley swam closer and closer. When the ship was finally anchored, Garret was the first to storm to the docks, approaching his brother and king with a stern and concerned look in his eyes.

"Brother", Vorian greeted him with an alarmed tone, and he bowed to him in response. "Your Grace, Clearhaven is lost", he blurted out immediately, which was followed by a tense silence.

"What?" Jamison was the first to speak up, his voice equally angry and baffled. "How?"

"The Martells launched an attack during Prince Malcolm's wedding, which suggests they knew its defenses would be weakened", Garret spoke grimly. "I left rest of my ships to Southpoint, to prepare for either retaking Clearhaven or defending Southpoint from further attacks."

So, it has begun, Vorian thought with a sigh, turning his gaze down. "So, what happens next?" Ser Laroy asked with a frown. "That's what I've come to ask from my brother", Garret responded without missing a beat. "Your Grace, how shall we answer to the Martells actions?"

"We should take Clearhaven back", Jamison argued impatiently, and Vorian gave him a meaningful glance to calm him down. "We shall gather all the ships we have and attack", the king stated calmly, which brought a satisfied smirk on Jamison's face. "Garret, are the sellswords still under our command?"

"Some of them fell at Clearhaven, but most managed to retreat to Southpoint, including their leader Khazor the Sarnori", Garret responded with a dutiful tone. "Good", Vorian said calmly. "We must act quickly. The Martell forces have surely suffered losses in taking over the town, and there is no easy way for them to bring in reinforcements and supplies. If we strike now,

and strike hard, we should be able to take Clearhaven back, and reinforce its defenses so it won't fall into our enemies' hands again."

"I will begin the preparations right away, Your Grace", Garret said with a firm nod.

"I will lead the attack", Jamison declared suddenly, stern confidence in his voice. Vorian raised his chin, eyeing his son for a moment. He had to admit that he was proud to see him so eager to fight for their kingdom, even if he couldn't tell whether it was a sense of duty or something else that compelled him. "Are you sure?" Vorian asked sternly. "You are a father now, no one would blame you for staying to protect your sons."

"Samwell and Ferris are perfectly safe here with their mother", Jamison pointed out calmly. "However, by taking Clearhaven the Martells have just robbed them of their legacy. What kind of father would I be if I didn't fight to take it back?" He asked with a subtle smirk on his face.

"So be it", Vorian agreed, giving his son a small nod, before turning towards Ser Laroy. "Laroy, tell Maester Norbert to send ravens to Nightfall and Sword's Edge. Lords Gerold and Alester are to muster as many men as they can in a week, and bring them here."

"Understood, Your Grace", Laroy responded with a dutiful nod, and began to march back towards the gates, his squire coming closely behind him. Vorian took in a deep breath, gazing at the shimmering sea ahead of him.

"The war has begun", he stated quietly. And it will be the most important we ever fought.

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Blind and Broken

Garrison Fowler felt the soft wind on his skin, heard the calming sound of the running water from the fountain close by, and smelled the flowers. This garden had been his favorite place in Skyreach ever since he had completely lost his sight almost fourteen years ago, because it offered something pleasing for his other senses. He had many fond memories from here, earliest of them being the memories with his parents, and his sister Obara. Those memories were fading, a lingering shadow of the times when Garrison had no care in the world. Then there were the memories with Ashara. They used to spend many evenings together in this garden back when they first got to know each other. *My beautiful Queen*, Garrison thought wistfully. His sight was already getting worse during those years, but he at least saw well enough to know that Ashara had been the most beautiful woman on this world.

Then there were the memories with the children. Garrison remembered an afternoon just weeks after Ferris' birth, when he had sat on this very same bench, looking at Ashara feeding their baby, and feeling like the luckiest man in the world. Now they were both gone,

and Garrison was still here, blind and broken. Andren had traveled to the Citadel almost a decade ago, and Isabella now had a new life and family in Starfall. All I can do is hope that they are both happy, Garrison thought. It had been over three years since Andren had last sent a raven, and the last time Isabella had wrote to him was over half-a-year ago after she had given birth to her twin sons. Garrison certainly didn't blame her, being a mother of two was surely keeping her busy.

"Grandfather!" A happy voice of a young boy suddenly yelled from the other end of the garden. "It's Prince Matthos and his mother", Ser Russal calmly informed the King, while the steps of the boy came closer and closer, until Garrison felt him hugging on his leg.

"Matthos!" He exclaimed in delight, and searched the boy's head so he could ruffle his hair.

"Your Grace", the voice of Dana Fowler said, and Garrison nodded towards the direction he heard it from. "Arianne just gave birth!" Matthos yelled. "It's a girl", he said, his voice slightly less enthusiastic now, and Garrison chuckled. "I am sure she is beautiful", he said calmly.

"I'm not so sure about that", Matthos replied immediately. "Her face was all red and she just kept wailing and screeching", he explained with an amused tone.

"You were just the same when I gave birth to you", Dana remarked calmly, but Matthos just huffed at her words dismissingly. "No way, I wasn't like that", he claimed pompously.

"Maester Gannon is approaching", Ser Russel said quietly, and soon Garrison also noticed the soft footsteps approaching. "Your Grace", the maester spoke with his calm voice, and Garrison nodded. "Maester Gannon, I just heard I have a new granddaughter", he replied warmly.

"Indeed," the maester confirmed. "There were no complications on the childbirth, and the baby seems to be perfectly healthy. In case you are interested, Desmor and Arianne are planning to name her Ashara."

Garrison gulped, being for a brief moment unable to find words. "They chose a good name", he finally spoke quietly, hoping in his heart that his late wife could see this from wherever she was now. "I thought so too, Your Grace", the maester said with a lighthearted tone. He then proceeded to gently grab the King's hand. "Would you like to go meet them, Your Grace?" he asked, and wordlessly Garrison nodded to him and stood up.

As they made their way into the keep, Garrison could constantly hear the cheerful chatter of Matthos close behind him. The boy had been so young when his father died that Garrison wasn't sure if he had even truly understood it, but regardless of that he was happy that the prince and his mother had managed to move on from it. Garrison himself would be forever bitter about losing his firstborn son to Manwoody blades, but it was reassuring to see that life would go on nonetheless.

As they got closer to Princess Arianne's chambers, the crying of the baby could be heard. She was loud, and even as a newborn baby there was strength in her voice. *She will be a*

strong-willed girl once she grows up, Garrison thought with a smile on his face. Maester Gannon opened the door for them, and they stepped inside.

"Shh girl, it's fine, ma is here", Arianne tried to soothe the baby, a tired but still affectionate tone on her voice.

"Father", Desmor greeted Garrison, and escorted him to a seat by the bed. Suddenly the girl's crying mellowed down a bit, and Arianne chuckled softly. "That's your grandpa", she chirped.

Garrison heard Desmor standing up and walking next to his wife. "Come, let's get you to grandpa's lap", he said with a relaxed tone, and soon he indeed lowered the newborn girl to Garrison's lap. With slightly shivering fingers he gently stroked the baby's head. "Sweet girl", he mumbled, overwhelmed by feelings. "Sweet little Ashara."

"She is staring at you with her eyes wide open", Desmor described with an amused tone. "Poor baby must be wondering who this withered old man who keeps his eyes closed is", Garrison responded jokingly.

After a moment Desmor raised that baby to his own arms. The baby stopped crying, and as they sat there together, it was the happiest Garrison had been in a long time. Then someone knocked on the door. Maester Gannon opened it and walked out, only to return just a moment later. "King Garrison, Prince Desmor, something has happened", the maester spoke with an ominously concerned tone. "We'll come", Desmor said calmly, and handed the baby back to Arianne.

The prince helped his father up from the seat, and together they made their way out of the room. "Your Grace, this is a messenger of House Blackpool", Gannon informed as they closed the door.

"I am Ser Justan, Your Grace, and unfortunately I am bringing bad news from the Blackpool lands", the voice of a young man said, and Garrison gave him a firm nod. "Have the Manwoody raiders trespassed that far south?" He asked sternly.

"No, Your Grace", Ser Justan responded with a small sigh. "Not the Manwoodys."

"Well, what is it then?" Desmor asked with a hint of impatience in his voice. "An army of approximately four-thousand men has crossed the desert from south, and are now camped half-a-days ride from the Blackpool Keep", Ser Justan responded to the prince, and Garrison could spot the fear in the man's voice. He then continued. "The scouts spotted them carrying banners of House Martell and House Uller."

"So, the Principality finally makes its move", Garrison said grimly. "Four-thousand men... I'm not sure if we have the manpower to face them on the field."

"I can send ravens to Starfall and Blackmont, perhaps they'd be willing to aid", Maester

Gannon suggested, and the King gave him a nod. "Yes, do it", he agreed quietly.

"Did the reports tell who is leading this army?" Desmor asked sternly. "No, my prince", Ser Justan answered, and a tense silence followed. Finally, Desmor broke it by speaking up again. "Father, I think I should go speak to these invaders", he spoke with a calm and serious tone. "Perhaps they can be reasoned with. Our kingdom is weakened by the war, we should try our best to avoid this conflict with the Martells, or at least stall it for long enough to get support from our allies."

Garrison took in a deep breath, considering his answer carefully. His dream had been to raise the Kingdom of Stone and Sky back to its former glory, but now it seemed that dream was coming crumbling down. However, he knew his son was right, they had to buy time or they would be crushed.

"I agree", Garrison said weakly, and searched the shoulder of his son with his right hand. "Go meet them, try to convince we should be allies instead of enemies, but do not show weakness. The future of our kingdom will be decided on these coming months, and we have no room for mistakes."

"I understand, father", Desmor responded with a dutiful tone. Garrison gave his son a smile, though he doubted it was enough to hide his concern.

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A Light in the Dark

King Benedict Blackmont stood on the courtyard of Blackmont, the warm summer day nearing its end. Calmly he observed a small entourage riding in from the gates, led by his son Naemon, who was flanked by his squire Davos and Ser Kegan. They had been gone for little over a week, settling a dispute between Lord Hugor of Gravesend and a bunch of farmers on his lands.

Watching Naemon dismount his horse, Benedict was once again amazed at how fast his son had grown into a man. It felt like just yesterday Naemon had still been a boy, and there he was now, in charge. He still lacked some of the qualities of a leader that his sister had possessed, but there was no denying that Naemon had matured and taken responsibility over these past few years.

"Naemon", Benedict greeted his son as he approached him, and the prince responded with a tense nod. "Your Grace", he said emotionlessly.

"How did it go?" Benedicts asked with a professional tone. "It's been settled", Naemon answered with a small sigh. "Lord Hugor agreed to lower the taxes of the farmers until the land yields more plentiful harvests again, and in compensation the farmers collectively released ten men from their service to join Gravesend's townguard."

"And did everyone seem pleased with this solution?" Benedict asked, and Naemon hesitated a moment with his answer. "As pleased as you could expect", he finally said, a hint of frustration in his voice. "Now excuse me, I need a bath and some rest." With these stern words the prince walked past his father, and entered the keep, his squire following closely behind him.

With a sigh Benedict turned his gaze to Ser Kegan, who approached him with a bow. "Your Grace, everything is in order in Gravesend", he assured with a dutiful tone. "Your son did a fine job in the negotiations."

"I'm glad to hear that", Benedict muttered, giving the Drinkwater knight a small nod before walking away.

As he walked through the corridors of the castle in silence, a strange feeling took over Benedict. For some reason he felt a spark of hope that somewhere Gwendis was still alive. However, he was quick to remind himself how unlikely that was. It had been well over two years since her disappearing, Lyla had never returned, and even if Gwen still was alive she could be anywhere in the world. This wasn't the first time Benedict struggled with these thoughts, unable and unwilling to let go of the memory of his daughter. And the hardest thing was not knowing, being in the dark. If Benedict were to find out that Gwendis had died it would break his heart, but at least he could find some closure, honor her memory. Now it was as if Gwendis was gone, but her ghost still lingered here, reminding Benedict every day that he had failed her.

Finally he arrived to the door of his chambers. However, as he put his hand on the knob, he stopped, turning his eyes towards the door of the laboratory. *There would be one way*, he thought with a subtle gulp. He had considered it before, countless times, but always lacked the courage to do it. *Not anymore, this has to end*, he decided, letting go of doorknob and marching forward towards the laboratory. He rushed in, and immediately approached Noctis, who was tinkering with some kind of medallion by the table. "Your Grace", he spoke up with a surprised tone as he saw Benedict approaching.

"Light the glass candle", the king commanded sternly, and Noctis' eyes widened. "Your Grace, are you sure that..."

"Yes!", Benedict cut the sorcerer off, his tone making clear he wouldn't tolerate any objections this time. "I cannot bear it any longer, I need to know what happened to my daughter, whether she is alive or not. I need closure, so I can move on."

Noctis nodded to him. "I understand", he said quietly, though the expression on his face was still hesitating. Nonetheless, he stood up and walked to the altar where the glass candle was standing, and grabbed it to his hands. After taking in a deep breath, the sorcerer spoke a few words in Valyrian, and slowly the candle started glowing. First the light was dim, but as Noctis kept stroking the candle's jagged surface, the light grew brighter.

"Your Grace", Noctis muttered as he handed the candle to Benedict. The king grabbed it with a gulp, and stared into the light.

I want to see my daughter, Benedict thought as his mind traveled into the darkness. First he saw only mist. Then mountains rose from the ground, reaching the blue skies above. Floating towards the mountains, Benedict saw a dark cave and entered it. Once again surrounded by darkness, a storm was suddenly raging around him, and a wicked laughter echoed in the air. Then a fire was ignited in the middle of the darkness, and the laughter stopped, replaced with chilling screams of agony. Slowly light returned to the world, and Benedict saw a large city separated in two by a river. Elephants and palanquins pulled by horses roamed the streets of the city, pale and silver-haired men and women riding them. Meanwhile people in dirty rags and iron collars traveled afoot.

Soon the sun began to fall behind the walls of the city, and darkness started to take over. Now Benedict saw a great palace, and on the plaza in front of it a great fire was burning. Priests in red robes stood around the flames, praising their god. Benedict walked closer to it, stopping next to a young dark-haired woman who was watching the ritual from a distance. Turning to look at this woman, Benedict saw her purple eyes, and she recognized her daughter. She looked slightly older than she remembered, more a woman now than a girl, but she was undoubtedly Gwendis. Their eyes met, and her widened in surprise. Everything else disappeared around them - the priests, their great fire and massive temple, the whole city. Only Gwendis and Benedict were left there, together.

"Father", Gwendis spoke, her quiet voice shivering ever so slightly.

"My sweet daughter, you are alive", Benedict spoke with an emotional tone, tears welling up in his eyes. He knew he couldn't stay for long, but he used every moment to study the face of his daughter, the daughter he had though was lost forever. "I miss you, my dearest child. Please, come home", he managed to utter, before the vision began to fade.

Soon Benedict noticed he was once again in his laboratory in Blackmont, the glass candle in his hands, its light slowly fading. With a sigh he lowered it onto the table, and collapsed into the nearest chair.

"Did you find what you sought, Your Grace?" Noctis asked with his calm and emotionless tone as he grabbed the candle, and Benedict nodded wordlessly. "She is alive", he muttered after a moment of silence. "Somewhere far away, in a foreign city."

"What was this city like?" Noctis asked curiously, and Benedict thought back to what he had seen. "It was divided in two by a wide river. There were elephants, and a large temple, which by a great fire burned in some sort of ritual. That was where I saw her."

"Volantis", Noctis stated knowingly, his eyes narrowed. "I wonder what could have taken her there. Certainly not Aisha, she would be killed immediately in that city."

"How so?" Benedict asked with a raised eyebrow, and a subtle smirk formed on Noctis' face.

"It is the home of her greatest enemies, the red priests of R'hllor", he explained calmly, to which the King nodded. "I saw them", he said quietly. "It was their ritual that I saw."

"Perhaps your daughter was saved from the claws of Aisha by one of them, and she decided to follow her savior to Volantis", Noctis suggested with a shrug. "It is the most logical scenario I can come up with. Did she see you?"

"Yes, she did", Benedict confirmed, remembering the surprised look on Gwendis' eyes. "I begged her to come back home, but I'm not sure if she heard me."

"She did", Noctis said confidently. "Communication is one of the main attributes of the glass candle. If you spoke, she heard you. Most likely you were inside one of her dreams, so even if she doesn't understand how you reached her, she will know that you want her to come back. The question is, what will you do now?"

Benedict considered his answer for a moment. Part of him wanted to send his best knights to Volantis to bring his daughter home, but he knew that was not the right thing to do. He had told her that he missed her and wanted her to come back, now it was up to her to decide if that was what she wanted to do.

"I will wait", Benedict finally said quietly, turning his gaze down as he spoke. "And hope she will find her way home safely."

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The Conqueror

The sun was setting and the night drawing near, as King Yorick Yronwood gazed at the white castle of Ghost Hill from atop his mount, behind him the mighty cavalry of House Yronwood. Meanwhile hundreds of troops led by Yoren Jordayne and Emerson Allyrion were scaling the western walls of the castle, and hundreds more led by Ser Theodore Wells and Willem Pyke were attempting to breach the gates.

Yorick had half a mind to be there in the frontlines himself, getting his blade bloodied, but alas this battle simply wasn't worth risking his own life for. The Bloodroyal had had his eyes on Ghost Hill for a long time, and now that Nymeria had shifted her focus to west it was the perfect time to strike. It would be a pity for a conqueror to die on his first real conquest, so Yorick decided to lead from behind this time.

The King shifted his gaze to Lord Terren Jordayne, who was standing right next to him. "Do you think the young lord will cooperate?" Yorick asked casually. Terren was perhaps his most trusted vassal, but also one of the few people that he considered a friend. "It is not Levor Toland who has been in charge here these past two years", Terren stated with a small sigh. "He may be the Lord of Ghost Hill, but it is his uncle Tomas Toland who has convinced him to side with the Martells."

"Perhaps we'll give the boy his uncle's head, that ought to change his mind", Yorick suggested, only half serious, and a subtle smirk formed on Terren's face. "I would recommend a more tactful approach, Your Grace", he responded calmly.

"Hasn't really worked so far, has it?" Yorick remarked sharply. "After all, we are only here because your strategy didn't work."

"I admit, I underestimated how quickly Princess Nymeria could win the loyalty of the Tolands", Terren responded with a small sigh. "Then again, I suspect Lord Tomas' devotion stems more from his hatred towards us than any love for the Martells."

"Hatred can be turned to fear", Yorick said nonchalantly, and Terren gave him an agreeing nod.

The fighting went on for another hour, until finally the Toland garrison yielded and laid down their arms. The gates of Ghost Hill were opened, and Yorick led the cavalry in, received by cheering Yronwood and Jordayne troops. As Yorick dismounted his horse, he was approached by Emerson Allyrion. The young Allyrion's face was stained with blood, but he looked to be unharmed himself.

"Your Grace", Emerson greeted him with a bow, breathing heavily. "Lord Levor hasn't been found", he quickly continued, a touch of nervousness in his voice.

"Hasn't been found?" Yorick asked sternly, a sharp glare in his narrowed eyes, and Emerson nodded. "Yoren is currently interrogating Tomas Toland", he explained hastily.

"Fetch them here", Yorick commanded quietly, and with a dutiful nod Emerson hurried away. The King turned back towards his troops and approached them with calm and authoritative demeanor. He waited silently for the chatter to die down as the soldiers noticed their king was observing them.

"Men of Yronwood!" He finally roared, grabbing the attention of every man present. "We have achieved a great victory here tonight, a victory which shall be long remembered in the pages of history. Many a conqueror would seek to claim all the glory of such victory for themselves, but I would never allow myself to do so. You and I, gentlemen, have achieved this victory together, and its rewards are for us all. The conquered territory belongs to you as much it belongs to me, and together we shall reap its benefits. Those who will continue to fight beside me to achieve all our ambitions, shall be greatly rewarded. And when the day comes that all of Dorne kneels to Yronwood, you shall be the greatest among its people!" Yorick ended his speech, and the troops cheered loudly.

"For the Bloodroyal!" Ser Theodore yelled, raising his sword towards the night sky, and so the troops started chanting it. After a moment, Yorick felt a light tap on his shoulder, and turned to face Lord Terren. "Your Grace, he's here", the Jordayne lord said calmly, gesturing toward the doors of the keep, where Yoren and Emerson were dragging out shackled Tomas

Toland. The middle-aged man was still clad in a chainmail, and his clothes were stained in blood, indicating he had fought in the battle personally. There was also a small fresh cut above his brow, and a dark bruise around his left eye, though those could've just as well been the work of Yoren.

The troops quieted down as Yorick approached Tomas in the middle of the courtyard. "Tomas Tolan", he greeted him dryly, a scornful look in his eyes. "Where is Lord Levor?" Yorick asked tensely, and a subtle smirk formed on Tomas' face. "You will not find him here, Yorick", he replied sharply, a gleeful tone on his voice. "He is with the Martells."

A moment of tense silence followed, and Yorick stepped closer to the man. "That changes nothing", he said sternly, looking Tomas straight to the eyes. "Ghost Hill is now part of my kingdom, and if your nephew does not submit to me, then I will simply have to find a new lord for this castle. There are plenty who would gladly take it."

"Ghost Hill belongs to House Toland", Tomas hissed, and now it was Yorick who smirked. "And I am willing to let you keep it, if you bend the knee", he said calmly, seeing the anger rising in Tomas' eyes.

"We will never kiss your feet, Yronwood!" He roared defiantly. Yorick let out a small laugh for this, which many of his troops reciprocated. Then he punched Tomas to the gut, making him bow down and gasp in pain. Without mercy, Yorick proceeded with a knee on the face, which broke Tomas' nose and sent him to the ground. As he squirmed there in pain, Yorick slowly walked next to his head, and stared him down. Wordlessly, he moved his right foot above Tomas' head, and then softly pushed the sole of his boot against the man's lips.

"I'm afraid you will have no say in it, Lord Tomas!" he bellowed, and the troops burst into laughter and cheers. Slowly Yorick removed his foot from Tomas' face, and walked away with a satisfied grin on his face.

End of the Interlude.