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

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23rd Day of the 7th Moon, 299 AC

Tyrek Lannister

Tyrek thought the world had ended after the enormous rumble that shook the world, making him leap off his bed in fright. It was a familiar rumble, something he had heard a handful of times before, if somewhat weaker–but he had been prepared back then. Yet the terrible sound was but a herald of what was to come.

"PLUMM, GET YOUR MARKSMEN ON THE LEFT PORTION OF THE LION'S WALL! BENFORD, SHIELDS TO THE RIGHT BARRICADE! PUSH THEM OUT!" Tywin Lannister's roars echoed above the clash of steel and the sounds of men dying. In the darkness, it was nigh impossible to use flags or signs to control the men. Nobody knew where the hornblowers were–or if they were even still alive with the hefty plague creeping through the city. Thus, Tyrek had the pleasure of hearing the oldest lion roar with all his anger and fury–something that he never thought the composed Tywin Lannister was even capable of.

Another terrible aspect of fighting in the dark Tyrek had never expected was that it was hard to find their arms and armour, let alone put them on, and tripping was very easy if you couldn't see the uneven ground. Lanterns, torches, and candles were suddenly in demand. Everything was chaotic at night, especially at the three armouries.

The fact that Renly had managed to muster and move in first didn't help much either, for with the ten-minute advantage, the Reachmen and the Stormlanders had spilt into the streets and past half the undermanned barricades and traps. The only reason King's Landing wasn't flooded with Renly's army was Commander Balon Swann and his valiant gold cloaks holding on by the skin of their teeth.

The retching stink of death choked the air, mingling with the overwhelming stench of brimstone. The only reason they could see was the eerie green flames that were still festering like giant sinister torches placed at the ends where the walls connecting to the Lion's Gate were gone as if a giant had decided to rip the gatehouse out. The damning alchemical flame threw a sinister emerald glow in every direction. Smaller but no less creepy fires were sizzling angrily in an enormous semi-circle from their centre, slowly but surely engulfing everything, be it wood, flesh, or bone.

If there was a scene that could belong to the Seven Hells, then this was it. The whole world flashed white for a second, and Tyrek stole a glance at his Lordly Uncle atop his stallion. The Lion of Casterly Rock looked like a cold statue with two emeralds for eyes, dispassionately observing the brutal slaughter in the dark. After the lightning came the thunder, deafening the whole battle for a heartbeat, but the men continued fighting.

A pittering sound followed, and flashes of lightning continued, some distant, some close. The drizzle turned into a fierce downpour within moments, making everything even messier. But even the rain couldn't defeat the stubborn green flames.

“FORM UP A LINE FASTER, PIKES TO THE BAKER’S STREET. I WANT MORE MARKSMEN ON THE ROOFS, SERRET-”

A small part of him realised that the enemy also knew Lord Tywin’s commands could easily be heard by the Reachmen, too.

The situation was not looking good, from what Tyrek could barely see atop his pony. Thousands of Reachmen had entered the gap and taken the left wall. What remained undamaged from the barricades prevented long lines from forming, and with the fighting spilling into the nearby streets and between the houses, it became a contest of prodding and pushing, where the defeated would fall, only to be trampled to death whether by his allies or foes. The rain making the cobbles underneath more slippery didn’t help, but it managed to wash out some of the stench of blood and ruptured viscera that permeated the air. The sound of sizzling and the small clouds of steam made Tyrek’s spine crawl as the jade flames continued, undeterred by the water pouring from above.

His Lordly Uncle was trying everything to prevent the enemy from spilling further into the city, slinking along the walls to open the other gates, but neither side seemed to have the upper hand. There were no tricks, no clever plans like in the Bloody Crossing, just the mad rush of battle as men bulled into the bloody slog until one side broke.

And Tyrek didn’t like their chances. More than half of the knights and men-at-arms in the city had fallen ill to this new black plague, too weak even to stand up, let alone pick up a blade and fight. Thousands had already perished in the last fortnight.

“Shouldn’t we rush in to help?” Tyrek turned to his lordly uncle, his gloved hand awkwardly reaching for the arming sword on his belt. Another flash of lightning illuminated the hundred of the finest redcloaks in the Westerlands surrounding the two of them, personally selected by Lord Tywin.

“Only as a last resort,” came the curt reply. Tywin Lannister did not even move his head; his stern gaze focused on the battle before them. “Commanding from the front leaves you blind to the greater battle, and should you be struck down or captured, the blow would be crushing to morale.”

Yet another blinding flash followed by an enormous rumbling ***BOOM*** as the world shook, and his gelding neighed and reared up in fear. Tyrek instinctively held onto the reins with everything he had. His blood chilled as he saw yet another enormous green shroom blooming from the north—just where the Gate of the Gods was.

A heartbeat later, the battle continued with zeal, but the new ringing in his ears wouldn’t go away.

“RENLY!” The Reachmen pushed forth into a frenzy. “RENLY! THE SEVEN ARE WITH US THIS DAY! EVEN THE GODS HAVE DECIDED TO SMITE DOWN JOFFREY THE ILLBORN AND HIS MEN!”

Any doubts that it was an explosion inside the city were soon squashed. As the young Lannister squire still struggled to get his usually calm steed back under control, an emerald shower of molten debris–including something that suspiciously looked like a large, twisted chunk of the portcullis–started falling everywhere, setting even more things aflame.

“Kevan.” Tywin’s face had turned grim. “Take Tyrek and your men to the Gate of the Gods and try to hold.” He strapped on his helmet and turned to the captain of the red cloaks, Ser Vylarr. “It is time. Men, with me. HEAR ME ROAR!”

Had they reached the end of the rope?

Tyrek's mind was numb as he followed his uncle Kevan and his solemn men towards the other breach. They reached the Cobblers Square through the narrow alleyways, where the sounds of fighting were already spreading. Tyrek felt the heat first, the cold rainfall doing little to dispel it.

The ruddy light of the remaining lanterns was overwhelmed by the eerie green shine illuminating the night. His stomach lurched as he saw what looked like a Marbrand man-at-arms moaning with agony as his face was still steaming, half-melted by something, revealing chunks of charred bone underneath. Now, the stench of brimstone was mingling with the one of charred meat. A few more fallen were trashing in agony, green flames hungrily devouring them, making the flesh slough off their bones as they fell.

Their pained whimpers and hoarse, wheezing cries would be forever seared in Tyrek's mind, doubtlessly to haunt his nightmares if he lived through the battle.

"Green piss is a bad way to go," he heard one of the redcloaks with the retinue grunt. "But at least it's fast, unlike the Black Death."

"Not nearly as ugly either," quipped another with dark amusement. "Have you seen the dead of the latter? They look more demon than human."

The image conjured in his mind, coupled with the sight in front, was too much for Tyrek, and he heaved over, voiding his dinner from his belly.

The situation looked even worse; through a veil of choking steam, Tyrek could see the Marband men and a handful of gold cloaks, headed by a man who could only be Serjeant Gerold Waters, with his looming stature, barely holding back the tide of Reachmen pouring through the darkness.

"Tylon, grab your men-" Just as Kevan was already barking orders, Tyrek heard a voice he least expected to hear tonight.

"RIDE FORTH!" Joffrey's yells echoed through the night as the sounds of horses appeared. It would have been slightly more dramatic if a few steeds didn't slip just as they rushed through the Street of Seeds. "MINE IS THE FURY! LET US VANQUISH THIS HERETICAL RABBLE OUT OF MY CITY!"

Sadly, the momentum of the charge was killed as the horses started slowing down and resisting their riders the more they approached the emerald flames. Even warhorses had more sense than humans in approaching the green piss, it seemed. The young king was clad in an elaborate armour that couldn't be mistaken anywhere else. From the forge of Master Tobho Mott himself, the gilded metal glinted eerily in the eerie green light, giving a sickly twist to the roaring lion and the rearing stag depicted on the ornate breastplate.

Yet his royal cousin was undaunted, rushing into the first breach, if flanked by his white cloaks, swinging his ornate sword with rare eagerness. But the action seemed to wind him fast, and he quickly retreated, letting his men do the fighting.

Joffrey and the Red Keep's elites' mere presence seemed to invigorate the defenders, who fought with renewed fervour. Even all the white cloaks were here, two guarding their king at all times, while the rest dismounted and commanded the royal men-at-arms into the fray.

"Lancel," Kevan's voice sounded considerably calmer now, even though he cautiously glanced in Joffrey's direction every few heartbeats. "Take two dozen swords and secure the ramparts towards the Old Gate–I see the Reachmen already trying to take control. Tyrek, with him."

After a short skirmish through the dark alleys, Tyrek followed his cousin up the stone steps to the top of the curtain wall. Too narrow to form a proper line, it turned into another bloody scuffle, even though he had the chance to poke at a Reachman fighting against a gold cloak. Nobody expected a squire of three and ten to battle, but Tyrek hardly had any choice when all hands were needed.

Thankfully, Lancel seemed to know what he was doing, and soon, the Reachmen were being pushed out.

“There’s more of these flowery heretics down the ramparts,” Tyrek could hear Lancel grind his teeth, and his lion-shaped visored helmet looked almost demonic, especially now that it was splattered with blood. “Emery, Tylon, and Jarek guard the stairs. Tyrek and Jord, see if you can work that scorpion and rain some death upon the Reachmen. The rest with me!”

Up close, the angry emerald flames licked at the stone; the former gatehouse looked as if an invisible giant had ripped out the fortifications or smashed them with a titanic hammer, leaving an enormous smoking pit behind.

“Eyes up, lad,” a gruff voice coming from who was probably Jord shook Tyrek awake. “Do you know how to work this contraption?”

The Lannister squire grimaced as he glanced at the scorpion that was slightly taller than him. “I have worked a crossbow before…”

How hard could it be?

Five minutes later, Tyrek wanted to cry because it was far from easy, especially in the flickering green light. As they were trying to figure out the enormous winch, pulleys, chains, and ropes, an angry roar echoed from below, “THE KING IS DOWN!”

Surely enough, Tyrek turned around to see Joffrey had fallen off his horse, and the white cloaks were lugging his unmoving body onto a steed and away from the battle. The royal forces wavered, and the Reachmen pushed forth visibly with redoubled strength…until a furious bellow came from the tall gold cloak commander as he grabbed a maul as large as he was and swept it through multiple men, broken bones and swords clattering on the ground.

“PROTECT THE KING, DAMN YOU! BRING ME YOUR BEST, FLOWERS!”

For a whole minute, Tyrek could hear Gerold Waters and his thundering challenges at anyone as he held the gap between two barricades by himself, allowing the royalists to reform behind him while Tyrek and Jord tried to operate the scorpion. Finally, the Gold Cloak was beset by eager knights thinking him the Demon of the Trident come again, poking at him with halberds and billhooks while agilely dodging away from his maul. His knee got hooked when he overextended as he turned a daring Knight's head into a pulp, and once he fell, Tyrek didn’t see him stand up again. The remaining gold cloaks were already turning around to flee.

“THE SUN OF WINTER!” Only for Karstark’s bellow to herald yet more reinforcements, and an uneasy stalemate was reached, but Tyrek knew no more help would come. Aside from the Northmen, everyone was already fighting–or defending the other gates. But he couldn’t deny that the damned Northerners were fighting like demons, throwing themselves at their foes no matter what. The rabid attack inspired the hesitating defenders once more.

Seeing the battle was not yet lost, the two of them continued silently.

“How good a marksman are you, boy?” Jord wheezed, voice breathless from exertion as the two of them finally pushed and aimed the scorpion outside of the breach.

“Good enough,” Tyrek said as his muscles groaned in protest, feeling as if all his limbs were made out of lead. His arming doublet underneath was soaked and felt heavier than a ringmail.

He could hardly see anything in the dark, let alone through the uncomfortable kettle helmet that kept falling over his eyes. The flickering green flames that made everything into an unrecognisable shade of emerald made things even harder. Eventually, they pointed the iron-tipped bolt towards the thickest part of the incoming attackers, where the armours flickered the brightest on the light–probably belonging to someone important who had his squire shine their plate constantly. Tyrek grabbed the rope that was supposed to trigger the longsword-sized iron-tipped bolt, but it didn’t budge. The man-at-arms came beside him, and with grunting and groaning, they leaned onto their rope, pulling with all their strength and weight. Eventually, the rope gave, and with a clinking sound, a bolt was launched into the breach.

“THEY'VE KILLED THE LORD HAND! THE LORD HAND IS DOWN! RETREAT, RETREAT!”

“...did we just kill Mace Tyrell?” Tyrek whimpered out a laugh as his shaking legs gave out, and he fell on his arse.

Kevan Lannister, later in the morning.

“How is His Grace?”

Pycelle frowned, nervously wringing his hands under Tywin’s stiff gaze.

“His Grace has received a few bruises, but nothing harmful from the night’s fight,” the grandmaester cautiously said. “But he’s weak. He’s caught the plague.”

“Why am I only hearing of this now?”

For once, the old maester grimaced, no longer bothering even to look sleepy. “Because it seems His Grace has hidden his symptoms and avoided any meeting with me.”

“For how long has His Grace been ill?” Kevan asked. Pycelle shrunk under their gaze, looking even more nervous than before. “*For how long?*”

“At least two days. The bulbous swellings have begun to grow around his ribs and armpits and have darkened considerably.”

“Very well,” Tywin said slowly. “Do what you can to save him. Spare no efforts. And find a bloody cure for this pestilence already!”

“Our medicine supplies have been stretched thin by the plague,” Pycelle took the chance to complain. “Out of the nineteen maesters in the city, seven were killed by Joffrey for treason because they hailed from the wrong kingdom, and nine perished to the Black Death already. Some say it’s magical in origin!”

“Superstitious nonsense.” His brother scoffed coldly. “Well? Try harder, Pycelle, lest you want to see yourself replaced by someone more capable. I hear Renly’s maesters have found ways to effectively stave off the onset of the Black Death.”

“They’re merely delaying, my lord,” the grandmaester bowed, wiping his glistening forehead with a pale napkin. “I have heard of their ways, using extracts of garlic, cloves, poplar bark, and even thyme. But such things can be just as lethal as they are helpful if administered wrongly. Didn’t you say the young flower knight perished despite their best efforts?”

“Pray Joffrey doesn’t follow in his stead because you shall join my grandson in death.”

An hour later, the exhausted Lannister brothers retreated into the Hand’s Tower, both feeling dead tired. Even the usually stoic Tywin slumped on his chair after Tyrek helped him out of his armour, looking ten years older.

“I heard you took down the rose lord,” Tywin said, closing his eyes. “You can pick any free fief after the war, as promised. Go and get some shut-eye, Tyrek. I expect you back to your duties in five hours.”

Smiling as if he had just won a tourney, his nephew ran off to his quarters on the lower floor.

The royal promise of ennoblement and enfeoffing was not of a free pick of any lordship or castle but intentionally vague, and most would probably receive some minor holdfast. But such an important foe like Mace Tyrell merited an equal reward, especially when done by their dear nephew.

Even more so when Tyrek’s random stroke of luck could have saved them all. If the Gate of the Gods had fallen, Tywin’s forces would have been flanked and defeated, leaving the way open to the Red Keep.

There was no worse blow to morale than to have your king fall or flee. Just as he had thought his men would break, the Reachmen had retreated first. Eventually, the assault on the Lion’s Gate–or the Lion’s Hole, as he heard his men call it–also dwindled. As soon as the attackers retreated, the wildfire was doused with sand and new barricades and wooden fortifications were quickly raised to plug the gaps.

A knock on the door announced the presence of a guest or visitor. However, this one had to be important and urgent to bypass all the guards easily.

“My lord, Renly’s army is retreating,” Vylarr’s muffled voice echoed. “They are breaking camp and heading towards the Golden Bridge with haste.”

“Very well,” Tywin said. “I will send for you should I have any orders.”

“As we expected.” Kevan laughed, but the sound was hoarse, like a chalk scraping on a wooden board. “Should we try and pursue?”

“With what men?” Tywin asked quietly. “This plague left us with barely seven thousand able to wield arms. Many thousands have perished not to a sword or a spear or an arrow but to the dark hand of the Stranger. Just as many are ill. See what the whims of the gods have left of the might of the Westerlands? Even though they have not counted the bodies yet, I know it in my heart. We lost more than half tonight, and our only solace is that Renly’s forces suffered just as much as us, if not more. Besides, if we sally out of the city, we risk the plague spreading further before a cure is found.”

“Renly’s men will already spread it through the Crownlands,” Kevan pointed out weakly.

“Perhaps they will, but we cannot risk crippling Edmure’s Riverlanders. Besides, Penrose should still be nearby, with nine thousand fresh swords. Should we chase, we can find ourselves trapped and slain. Moreover, Renly’s foolishness has begun catching up to him. I have received word from my

spies in the Dornish Marches that the Golden Rose and all of her ladies-in-waiting have been abducted by Wyl's bastard of all people."

And trueborn Wyls were infamously cruel to their captives, let alone bastard ones. He shuddered to think what was done to highborn maidens, even if they were the wives and daughters of his foes.

"And now, without Mace Tyrell… Renly's support will be shakier than ever," Kevan concluded shakily. But he was too weary to feel any joy. "The war is far from over, though."

"Indeed, let us not lie to ourselves. Renly's rebellion won't end until he dies and armies sworn in his name no longer take the field. The situation in the North troubles me, and those zealots do not seem to care which king supports them."

The night had been a victory, but it scarcely felt like one. Knowing his brother, he was already scheming ways to leverage this new advantage into a fatal blow to Renly's cause, but that was a matter for fresh minds. Kevan Lannister crashed onto the nearest bed with his clothes on, too tired to even take a bath, let alone walk all the way to his quarters.

24th Day of the 7th Moon, 299 AC

Septon Glendon, Barrowton

"Bread? Does anyone have some bread to spare?"

"I'll work a day for a bowl of gruel…"

The feeble words could be heard at every corner of Barrowton, but the Hightower men-at-arms guarding the place paid them no heed.

Shivering men so emaciated that you could count their ribs, clearly visible under the rags that did little to stave off the Northern cold, lined the streets. Even the scarce sun did little to banish the chill for more than an hour or three, and it oft wasn't enough. On a particularly bad day, the clouds darkened and could drench everything in a cold drizzle for days, turning everything muddy.

Few paid attention to the white tower fluttering in the skies above. Hightower had claimed the seat of House Dustin, but Redwyne received the shores and the docks in return–along with Torrhen's Square and the enormous sentinel lake.

"This cannot continue, Your Holiness," Septon Glendon protested as the Faith's hefty retinue headed towards the large manse set aside for them. "Coming here was a mistake."

"Nothing worthwhile is ever easy, my child," the High Septon responded, not unkindly. Unlike the utter misery that spread through most zealots and vagrants, he was dressed in pristine robes of flowing white silk, his crystal crown glittering like a beacon in the Northern sun. "This is but a challenge the Seven have placed before us to test our devotion."

And what a challenge it was. The vast majority of the Northmen fled for their lives, leaving none of the expected food or valuables behind. While the empty fields and farms were being worked by the Reachmen, the soil itself was different and far harder to plant on, and the nightly chill killed most of the usual crops. Only turnips, onions, leeks, carrots, and cabbages seemed to survive here, but it would be moons until they were grown enough to feed anyone.

Dozens of men died each day, whether to the cold or hunger, Glendon could not tell. But for every Reachman who fell, three new arrived by ship, thinking they were coming to a better place for a righteous cause. What worried him the most was that fewer and fewer corpses were buried each day despite the increasing death toll, and he suspected some had fallen into the sinful ways of maneating.

Thousands foraged in every direction, but the Reachlords and their army took a vast majority of the food and game they found, continuing with their campaign. Word arrived yesterday how Redwyne had already taken Torrhen's Square. The bulk of the Hightower forces were already marching as fast as they could towards Winterfell, the pious knight had set his sights on the heart of the North. Despite the heavy losses, Grimm and Hewitt's siege of Moat Cailin had not shown any results.

"I don't like working with these Ironmen. Crude, godless barbarians, barely any better than these filthy Northmen." Septon Archibald of the Most Devout muttered with his haughty rasp. The old, balding septon was oft strong-spoken against everyone and everything outside the Reach, and even now, he was spiritedly waving about his weirwood sceptre encrusted with diamonds the size of a pigeon egg to illustrate his point further. Since they had started cutting down the weirwoods, every Septon and Septa had one, oft lined with gold or gems, if not both. Glendon suspected the sizeable amount of remaining weirwood was being sold south for profit. "Do we not risk damnation by working side by side with the faithless reaving heathens?"

It was not a new question, but the High Septon always responded the same.

"His Grace has declared we are allies, and until that is no longer the case, we are forced to work together. Even in the Seven-Pointed Star, it is written that one must join forces with the unbelievers if a greater cause demands it. Cooperation is one way to spread the holy teachings, even in the cold hearts of the Ironmen. Did I not personally anoint Theon Greyjoy with the seven holy oils in the Green Sept?"

"Indeed, Your Holiness. Of course, we bolstered Lady Desmera's numbers with a retinue of Septons and Septas on her way to her husband," Septa Myrena added knowingly. "The Light of the Seven can be spread with a velvet glove." Her wrinkled face scrunched up as she looked around the dilapidated surroundings. "But some places demand an iron fist to be brought into the fold."

"Go now, Glendon," the High Septon waved dismissively. "You should pray harder if you can be shaken by mortal suffering."

Glendon gritted his teeth inwardly but bowed deeply and excused himself, but he managed to hear some more as he walked away. "We should pick the best spot for a Grand Northern Sept. Preferably something more central. We cannot allow the heretical Sept of Snow to continue with its influence. Hightower has promised us the coin for a grand building out of marble…"

There was coin for a sept, but not to feed the men they convinced to come here. While those zealots and vagrants who followed the army managed to find some small measure of food in exchange for tasks of fighting, there were only so many additional throats the lords were willing to feed. The rest were left at their own devices and completely unprepared for living in the cold, harsh North. Despite being only early autumn, it was supposed to be the warmest part of the year, but as soon as the sun was covered by clouds, even Glendon's heavy woollen robe barely warded off the chill.

On his way back to his cottage on the outskirts, he saw a few emaciated men squabbling over a scruffy pigeon.

Far more were gathering around a warrior shouting, “I have experience commanding men! Need more volunteers for raids on the Rills! Food after each victory, and plunder is finders keepers!”

Every other direction was claimed by one lord or another, but neither Hightower nor Redwyne or the coastal lords seemed to be interested in the thorny Ryswell lands. The most important part was probably not the riches or plunder but the foraging. Every morsel of food between Barrowton and the White Knife was being cleared by the lordly foraging parties, which was not the case for the Rills. Even the roots were dug out for sustenance, leaving a barren landscape in their wake.

A patchwork of hills and plains, the youngest Ryswell son had proven fierce in the defense of his lands, striking fast and hard with his light lancers and horse archers against any Reachmen or Ironborn that dared cross his borders. But his numbers were paltry, and he could hardly be everywhere at once. With King Renly’s promise to uphold the Right of Conquest, many second and third sons and landless knights seemed eager to make a play on the Rills, hoping for plunder and thinking of ‘winning’ the lands by cunning.

Six such groups, each more than four hundred strong, had departed, yet Septon Glendon had yet to hear from them again.

“Need more hands to dig through the barrows…”

Those criers were eyed with far less enthusiasm, though the man still managed to gather a few dozen desperate men who looked ready to keel over from the cold and hunger. Only those with nothing left to lose went to dig through the cursed barrows. Nine out of ten were empty, and most of those who dared dig died within a sennight, their limbs rotting away.

“It’s cursed,” many had said, rightly so. In fact, all the diggers had died two days after the first dig into the Great Barrow, and so had everyone else who followed. The treasure found in the enormous tomb was just as cursed, and every one of its owners had died so far. Not that the lauded riches had been significant; he had heard most of it had been obsidian, carved tablets, crumbling bronze, and salt, with little silver and a handful of gemstones. Things that may interest a maester or some foreign merchant but could not feed anyone.

Glendon knew that even the High Septon dared not approach stuff dug out from the Great Barrow. Curse or no curse, the allure of treasure was irresistible to those desperate enough; even an old nugget of silver was enough to buy you food for a few days, depending on its size.

Jeyck Leygood awaited him by the dilapidated cottage, cleaning out a handful of roots and by a sparse bowl of what looked like diluted gruel.

“Septon Glendon,” he greeted far less enthusiastically than before. Jeyck was no longer a squire; he had decided to give up the road to knighthood and join the Faith after the day the Hound slew his brother, and Glendon was glad to take such a good soul under his wing. But the honour had turned the sinewy boy thin, eating away all the baby fat from his face since they had arrived in the North. “Any luck with His Holiness?”

“Alas, it seems the High Septon has his sights on different things than us. He refuses to even entertain the topic, let alone order Redwyne and Hightower to stop shipping more poor souls into this hellish place.”

The young novice’s eyes were clouded with worry. “What do we do?”

“We pray,” was the quiet answer. “We pray, and we preach to the new batch coming later today.”

“We can always go to Ser Clegane,” the boy muttered, looking at his weather-worn boots. “He and his men never go hungry.”

The Hound led an assortment of over a thousand warriors, though most were hedge knights, turncloaks, repenting brigands or deserters, or even crooks with some skill with the blade. It was the High Septon’s attempt to circumvent Maegor’s laws since Renly Baratheon still refused to allow holy men to bear arms. Yet Glendon suspected their existence was only tolerated because the Hound was still useful, and the force was nominally answering to Hightower in all matters of warfare.

Even now, they had participated in the siege of Torrhen’s Square. But with the Faith’s backing, the previous gathering of rabble was now clad and armed with the finest steel gold could buy, courtesy of the smithies of Oldtown, turning them into a significant force.

“To thread the road of the Seven is to abandon the violence in your heart and embrace virtue in its stead,” Glendon said softly, stifling a sad sigh. “While Ser Sandor has the Warrior’s favour, it comes at a cost. All who live by the sword die by the sword, and taking a life… it’s an ugly thing. And his heart is filled with undying vengeance and anger.”

“But Joffrey and the Northmen… they started everything,” Jeyck protested.

“Perhaps they did. But when shall it end? Will it end when you kill all the Starks? Or perhaps all the Northmen and Westerlanders who have lost kin and kith? What happens when all of them are dead, but the fighting keeps going?”

The boy did not meet his eyes again, and Glendon sighed. “The more oil you pour into the fires of hatred, the harder they are to put out. I’m afraid peace is moving further and further away with each following day. Yet the days grow shorter and shorter, and the nights longer with each next dawn. The Starks have the right to it, I fear. Winter is coming, and the Seven’s presence can hardly shield us from nature's wrath in this harsh foreign land.”

Even this cottage was taken from some poor soul chased out of his home. War… war was the death of virtue.

“Then what do we do?”

The earnest question made his heart clench. Yet Glendon had no answer for him, for the cycle of hatred was not easy to break. Even the ancient teachings of the Seven-Pointed Star offered him no solution to their conundrum.

“When the times are dark, one can only do what they can and turn to the gods for guidance…” The words felt empty on his tongue. How had it come to this? All he wanted was justice and righteousness for the smallfolk, for the Faith to be better, not this grotesque charade of suffering and misery in a distant land.

Worse, all the burning and hunting of *heretics* and *heathens* went against the teachings of the script. How would they see the light if not offered a chance for redemption?

He remembered the well-groomed and richly clothed High Septon and the crony crowd of Most Devout who cared not even one whit for the surrounding woes and the suffering of the common man. Deep down, Glendon knew the answer.

It was not the Gods who were wrong. No, it was as if the Faith he loved and cherished had further devolved into deviancy and corruption even more than it had before.

A commotion started nearby, and a mob of hungry vagrants were headed towards Barrotwon's granary, where a few builders hastily abandoned the half-finished wall.

"FOOD!" The chant chilled his veins. Glendon knew this wouldn't end well. For the first time in a while, he cursed his powerlessness.

"Seven above," he clasped his hands in prayer. "Let there be no bloodshed today. Crone, let wisdom and cooler heads prevail. Father, grant us justice in these trying times…"

But the Seven did not heed his prayers today. The angry crowd were quickly met with the drawn blades of the Hightower men-at-arms. Some fled in the muddy streets, while others soldiered on, and cries of pain and death soon filled the air.

Same Day

Theon Greyjoy, outskirts of the Northern mountains near Stonegate Keep.

"It's all because of your thrice-cursed grandmother!" The angry shrieks belonged to Elinor Goodbrother, formerly Tyrell, who had been the wife of the Greydon Goodbrother, but sadly, he and his siblings had perished at Flint's Fingers, leaving the Reach maiden a widow. Not for long, though. Denys Drumm had taken the beauty as his mistress.

As for who Elinor was shouting to? It was his harpy of a wife, of course. By the gods, Desmera was a beauty. Willowy, with full breasts and wide hips, her hair was like a fiery waterfall that harboured a heart-shaped face that made his loins ache. A man's dream.

Yet underneath the beauty hid an angry shrew with a heart as cold as ice.

"Olenna is no grandmother of mine," was the cold response. Theon could easily hear the venom dripping off Desmera's tongue. She addressed Margaery Tyrell–and all other Tyrells with the same vitriol. To many's great amusement, Mace Tyrell was oft called gormless craven and a fat lackwit.

The two women were like cats fighting, trading barbs and outright insults on sight.

A few of his men laughed at the feud, while others whistled at the passing accompanying Septas who tried to shrink in their robes. The only thing protecting their virtue was Theon's word–and his desire to keep the alliance with Renly and the Reach for as long as possible. He had screwed up once and did not want to start a mess again.

But he still felt inadequate, if not in matters of warfare this time.

Theon had tried. A part of him hoped for the warm marriage that Eddard Stark had with Catelyn. Another part of him wanted to treat his proud wife like a whore and fuck her senseless for daring to ignore him. Or for her refusal to even speak to him or look him in the eyes and lay still like a dead fish on the marriage bed. He was tempted to instil some wifely manners into her, by force if need be.

But two things stayed his hand. The first one was his pride; it was rare for a woman to so blatantly resist his charm or attempts of wooing. How many pairs of teats had he seen? How many wives had he fucked with but a smile? Theon wanted to conquer Desmera with his skills. And the second reason was far more practical. Her father was powerful and commanded many men and a mighty fleet, and her ginger brother had Asha under his whims. Even now, she was with the Reachmen, probably in Torrhen's Square. Theon had learned that his father's threat to sick his sister on Arya had been just

that–an empty threat. But knowing Balon Greyjoy, he could have something far nastier hiding under his cloak.

Not that it mattered. Theon had an important task. Proving himself before his father and the Ironmen could mean he was not a man to be messed with. Not a weakling or a Greenlander, as some whispered.

“My men have cleared the lands around the Stonegate Keep,” Denys Drumm had reported as soon as Theon had disembarked on land. “But we don’t dare siege the place. Up the damned hills is filled with tough Greenlanders–thousands of them, my scouts reckoned. If they gather up, they can give me a good fight.”

“Dorne will freeze before that happens without a Stark,” Theon had scoffed. “There’s a saying in the North. Three mountain clans cannot even agree on who to fish in which river, and four cannot even agree on the weather above without a Stark to arbitrate.”

“But there is one of those damned oversized mutts here,” Denys’ face had twisted in fury as his hand reached for the jewelled hilt of what could only be Red Rain. “A horse-sized beast that fears no men and preys on my scouts at night. And that little bitch that commands the beast slew my father!”

Theon almost cringed at the anger dripping off the snarl, but the new Bone Lord had continued, “And the little shit and her beast continue harassing my men at night as if to *mock* me! Somehow, she finds the camp’s weakest spot every time and strikes true. It must be some unnatural Greenlander magic. I already summoned Drowned Priests from Old Wyk, but they’ll take over a moon to arrive.”

Damn it, Arya. Why couldn’t she sit still in whatever place she was supposed to be? Which, knowing Catelyn Stark, was not the outskirts of the mountains fighting Ironborn with a small warband.

“Don’t worry,” Theon assured. “I know how to deal with Arya Stark and the mountain clansmen. With the swords I bring, the Greenlanders would pose no threat to us.”

With the men he recruited and those his father put under his command, Theon brought thirty-four hundred men from various houses, totalling nearly five thousand with what Drumm already had here. If he needed more, he could always summon the Netleys and the Goodbrothers of Downdelving and of Corpse Lake, who raided northward while avoiding committing any forces on the land. With Robb taking all the horse South, Theon had little to fear aside from a few daring skirmishers.

Now… how to bait Arya? Or how did she somehow find out the weak spots in Drumm’s camps?

As he was lost in thought, Theon absentmindedly looked towards the skies, only to see the familiar silhouette of a snowy eagle and a plan began forming in his mind.

Seeing the eagle above, he climbed the nearest barrel, grabbing the men’s attention.

“Alright, men,” he shouted, loudly enough to be heard from afar but not too loud. “Meron, Erak, and Dagon will take ten men to look for the Stark girl up the hills while the rest of us set a trap here…”

His throat went dry after three minutes of yelling, and once the damned eagle… what did Arya call it. Aba? Ava? It didn’t matter. Once the bird left, Theon looked at the sky for a whole minute to make sure it was gone.

“Good, the damned bird is gone,” he could see the many questions he would have to answer. Even Desmera was looking at him as if he was a lackwit. Theon wasn’t sure *what* to tell them, for most of

it was a hunch after hearing too many of Old Nan's tales and seeing Robb and his siblings with his direwolves. Perhaps he would look like a fool if his plan failed or he was wrong, but he was willing to take the risk. "Now, forget what you just heard…"

25th Day of the 7th Moon, 299 AC

Victarion Greyjoy, outside of Deepwood Motte

"Good keep," Victarion frowned at the double ring of curtain walls protecting Deepwood Motte, which did not look like a motte and bailey at all. Nor was it deep into the forest. "It will be hard, but we can take it."

Many would die, but they could win with the nine thousand men here. Unlike Flint's Fingers, where only three thousand died, a bigger part of them were Orkwood and Ironmaker's men at their first defeat. Still, it had been a surprise when they landed on the shore to find the castle right in front of them. They had expected to make the trek to where the castle was supposed to be, fifteen leagues deep into the woods. Instead, it appeared the Northern lord had pulled a fast one on them.

"Glover is an old and cautious dog." Balon clicked his tongue. "Doubtlessly, he fears my retribution after slaying my Maron." His brother was just as cautious, seeing the thralls digging trenches and fortifications around the castle, surrounding it into a second, makeshift fort.

"My nephew had a good, worthy death, man to man, in a battle against a superior foe," Victarion pointed out, feeling confused. "The Drowned God has already welcomed him in his halls. Why would you be still wroth with Glover?"

His brother barked out a laugh. "Paranoia. These Greenlanders don't trust us. Even Renly and his flowers don't. Rightfully so. A dead son is a dead son, and what father would I be if I let my boy go unavenged?"

"I have some Myrish siege engineers with me, brother. Give me a sennight, and I'll have dozens of trebuchets raining destruction upon the castle." It's how Flint's Fingers had fallen after the foolish Castellan had sallied out to face him in port.

"If only," Balon said, begrudging respect seeping into his words. "There's no stone bigger than a fist within five leagues; even the beach is made from soft sand. Glover had chosen a good place to build his new castle. The hill, the spring that fed into the moat, the two curtain walls; It has turned this castle into a dragonturtle from Ibb. Impossible to defeat lest it leaves its shell." His brother then turned his gaze towards the nearby shore, where the Iron Fleet was beached. "I want Deepwood Motte for myself, especially as it is no longer deep in the woods. With it, I can control half the Wolfswood, build a new port town for our fleet, and it will prove a powerful buwalrk against the savages up the hills."

"But how will you take it if we don't attack?" Victartion scratched his head, but no ideas came to mind. He and his men could discard all armour and brave the moat with axes and shields and try to hack the gate open in the cover of the night. Or perhaps throw hooks and try to climb the walls–but Balon would have surely tried such tactics. "Will we divert the river and wait for their moat to dry?"

"Too much work, and with this weather, we could wait till Summer for that to happen. No, the solution is far simpler. We'll starve them. Scouts have arrived from deeper into the woods. The old

castle is abandoned, and not even a single man is holding it–the walls have even been torn down while the wooden keep has had all its doors and windows removed. Glover made a mistake and has over two thousand throats to feed behind those walls from his warriors alone. Their food will run out before ours does. We can probably take the castle by force, but the price would weaken us greatly. My lords have grown cautious of the Greenlander fortifications after so many losses."

"What of the cold?" Victarion asked. "Two, three months before the cold comes here if my new salt wife is not lying."

A common fishmaid had caught his eyes along Cape Kraken; he had found her alone at sea while sailing with Iron Victory towards Flint's Fingers. While not particularly beautiful, Alyna was a young but fierce thing, raising herself after her parents had perished in a storm six years prior. Victarion would have taken her for his rock wife if she hailed from the Iron Islands, baseborn or not.

"We Ironmen are no strangers to the cold," Balon scoffed. "The army can weather it at the new ports along Sea Dragon Point or Bear Isle. If it turns too cold, we can always sail back home and return once the weather turns for the better. Besides, there's plenty of work to be done. I have to send my scouts in groups of three or more if I want them to return. This bay is full of fish to be caught, and the woods are teeming with beasts and huntsmen. I also want construction on the port to begin sooner rather than later. We have the thralls for the work, and winter is coming."

Victarion sighed inwardly; it was good that his brother was confident in their victory, but… Sieges were as interesting as watching a man dig a hole in the ground–which was to say not at all. They were far slower, too! Worse, all the worthy warriors had gone South with the Young Wolf. Alas, his brother knew him all too well. Balon had ordered to avoid provoking the wolves of the North on the open field.

"My orders?" He asked, suppressing his irritation.

"You'll sit here and wait with me," Balon said. "The more men are outside of Glover's walls, the lower his morale when nobody is coming to aid him."

And now, all the big action was in the damn South. Everyone worth their salt in battle was making a name for themselves, and Victarion was thousands of miles away, with hardly any chance to challenge or provoke them into a fight. He was especially frustrated since Flint Finger's castellan had perished to a bludgeon before Victarion could face him.

26th Day of the 7th Moon, 299 AC

Arya Stark, the Northern Mountains

Everything hurt. The feeling of a cold arrow sinking into her body and the following cold froze her mind. Arya was flying in her dream, and she had died… *but she was alive*. But the chill and void in her chest did not go away, and it felt as if a phantom arrow had pierced through her chest and stayed there. In her panic, Arya found herself again on four feet, running madly up the hills.

Eventually, her mind slipped back into her body for a world of pain.

Her eyes felt like lead, but with a hefty struggle, Arya forced them to open, only to be met with the visage of Sansa. No, not Sansa. She was older, nearly twenty, had some freckles up her rosy cheeks and looked far more arrogant and annoying than her sister could be on a bad day.

“Tsk, I didn’t expect my fool of a husband actually to succeed,” came the catty, arrogant voice. “I thought the cold had scrambled his wits, speaking of things such as wargs and skinchangers. It sounds scary, even, and one would think of some old greybeard practising in a cave, not... *you*. You’re such a scrawny thing for the sister of a highlord. Poor girl, captured by the Ironborn like me.”

“Wait…” Arya croaked out. “Did the reavers catch me?”

“Yes, Theon Greyjoy and his lot did. I have the pleasure of being his wife.”

There was not even an ounce of pleasure in her words.

But as the implications sank in, Arya spat in her face, but she quickly saw stars. The stinging pain on her cheek was worth it, she decided, and the arrogance was back on the lady’s face.

“I suppose your time in the wild has made you feral. Perhaps your Septa or your mother failed to teach you manners,” the mocking tone and the insult towards her mother infuriated Arya even further, but now even her mouth hurt. “I expected a kindred soul but found a savage. I suppose I will leave you with the Septas for company.”

With a huff, the woman turned around and walked out of what Arya recognised as a tent. For a moment, she regretted spitting in the woman’s face, but the remorse quickly faded. Theon’s wife… Demara Redwyne or something, it did not matter. She clearly couldn’t be any good if she insulted Arya’s mother.

A thousand questions swam in Arya’s mind. She had failed. What of Shadd and the rest of the Winterfell guard accompanying her? What of Sara Snow and Torrhen Flint? What happened to her friend Lena?

How often had they insisted on retreating up the hills to Breakstone Hill or Little Hall, and Arya stubbornly declined, saying they could keep making trouble for the Ironmen, thinking herself untouchable in the sky? How many had died along with Ava because she felt invincible and drunk on her success?

Worse… what would happen to her?

Old Nan said Ironborn spoil all maidens. Worse, even someone horse-faced like her wouldn’t be passed up; according to Lyanna Mormont, the Ironborn went to sail the seas and abduct wives because their women were just too ugly.

The Septas came, all old and wrinkled and garbed in grey and white, with faces sterner than even Mordane could sport. Each of them held a copy of the Seven-Pointed Star, and Arya felt her head hurt even more.

But before they could say something, the tent’s flap was pulled open, and a tall, dark figure entered.

“Out,” the familiar voice was far more forceful than Arya had heard before.

“But-”

“Arya Stark is *my* hostage. Out. *Now!*”

The annoying old crones scrambled, but Arya couldn't find herself to feel any joy.

"Theon," she croaked out. But no more words left her mouth. She was too tempted to call him a craven turncloak, but even Arya knew it wouldn't end well, and she wasn't excited to find out how 'worse' looked. So she tried her best to remain silent.

"Arya," Theon greeted, his voice neutral, but his gaze lingered on her burning cheek. "I see you already made a big impression on my wife. Desmera sure is a feisty one, isn't she?"

She almost felt a sliver of pity for Theon. Arya had suffered the stupid Demara for a handful of minutes, but he would have to suffer her until he died. *Almost*.

"I know you're probably angry at me," the Turncloak continued, his voice lowering to just above a whisper. "But I need you to stop making trouble. Saltcliffe and Drumm would love to get their hands on you, and you being *my* prisoner is the only thing that protects you."

His haughty tone irked her. Arya was tempted to spit again, but instead, she muttered, "I haven't killed any Saltcliffes."

"Robb killed three of Maren's brothers, his father, and his uncle in the Westerlands."

"Oh." A pity Robb had missed Maren.

"Regardless, just sit here and don't make any trouble. Listen, Arya, we don't have to do this the hard way. You're almost like a younger sister to me, more than Asha, who is my flesh and blood, if you would believe me. The war will drag on for some time, and if you behave, it'll be easy to ransom you back to Winterfell."

Arya said nothing, and Theon's expectant face fell as the silence stretched. She didn't trust even a word that had left his traitorous tongue–he was the one who nailed Ava with his arrow.

But her body felt too tired to move; the phantom ache in her chest still made her feel as weak as a newborn. Her feet were chained to a thick iron rod hammered into the ground; she spied the cloak of a guard standing outside the tent through the flap. Worse, her mind was muddled with a constant dull ache that just would not go away, just like the phantom arrow that felt to be stuck in her chest. She even had no idea if Nymeria lived or if anyone had escaped to alert the clansmen of her capture.

Even if they did so… Arya knew they wouldn't work together. She knew this because she tried. Many chieftains had asked her. "Who would lead?"

Harclay had stated, "You can't expect me to follow this green Liddle pup or that stubborn Knott second son. Wull, Redclay, Burley, and the rest are no better! Those fools will send my men to die while they win all the glory and plunder!"

While welcoming with a smile, when it came to warfare, all the chieftains and castellans were hoary, old, and stubborn. Each refused to contemplate fighting together and claimed they knew better than everyone else.

Arya realised she had fucked up. Colossally. And there was no one coming to get her out of trouble either.

Author's Endnote:

And so ends Mace Tyrell, randomly nailed by a scorpion bolt in the dark. Loras also pitifully expires.

Yet another long, action-packed chapter. This, including the previous two chapters, takes place in a short time span. The dates are accurate. The next chapter won't be much different, either.

Renly eats a big L, Joffrey's luck runs out, and the weather, coupled with the wildfire (or you can just attribute it to the gods), decides to fuck with King's Landing. But Tyrek Lannister turns what seems like a looming defeat into a W. Also, people around KL are dying like flies in large numbers.

The situation in the North is not particularly rosy for any of those involved, and we get to peek into the ugliness underneath. Finally, Arya's arrogance and unexplored skills meet Theon's eagerness to prove himself and come short…

Retconning the prologue, Glover altogether moved Deepwood Motte to a better economic location.