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

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**I also want to thank everyone for their support and encouragement.**

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**14th Day of the 8th Moon, 299 AC**

**The Quiet Wolf, Myr**

*He dreamt of the Northern mountains, of a corpse-strewn shore with towering weirwoods before an old castle, but the faces looked freshly carved, all solemn, grim, and vengeful to the last. The pleasant chill in the air felt nostalgic after Essos's suffocating heat. It felt like home. Ned knew that place, for he had visited Stonegate Keep many times, even with the uncharacteristic stench of death and battle lingering in the air.*

*'This is not a normal dream,' Theon's cautious voice echoed. 'I can feel the **cold**.'*

*'Why thank you, I hadn't noticed,' Ned noted dryly, his hand already reaching for his blade. To his surprise, it found the calming chill of the icy hilt.*

*Just as he wondered what brought him here, the scenery changed, and the ground was strewn with strung up-corpses and a hill, no, not a hill but a pale pyramid of skulls that climbed for tens of feet. How many dead did it take to pile it up this high? Thousands?*

*'By the Gods!' his ancestor didn't even bother to hide the awe in his voice. 'I don't know who did this, but he has style. A proper penchant for violence.'*

*"It was Jon," a childish voice came out of the branches of one of the Heart Trees.*

*A young boy of six swiftly climbed down the bonelike bark, and Eddard froze. While changed, he could recognise the voice and the face anywhere.*

*Rickon had grown; his short but messy hair now flowed down his shoulders like a mane of russet, and one could even mistake him for a girl if not for the new-found hardness in his face. Carrying a pair of icy bracelets that awkwardly fit on his small wrists.*

*"Rickon?" The words came out faint from his lips, his heart torn between hope and dread.*

*"Father!" His son lost no time and flung himself, hugging his waist and holding onto it with surprising strength as if fearing Ned would disappear. "They said you were lost at sea, but I knew you survived! I knew it!!*

*"I'm here," he whispered softly, picking up his youngest and holding him tightly. He felt real in his hands. The smell of his boy was the same if mixed with sweat, pine, leather, and horse–as if he were in the woods. He was real.*

*How was this even possible?*

*'It must be the old frost,' Theon mused. 'Amplified by the fresh sacrifice to the weirwood. Do you not feel the remnants of their screams still lingering in the air? The boy really wanted to see you, and he did it subconsciously. The gift is strong with this one.'*

*'I thought this was just a dream?'*

*His ancestor laughed.*

*'You should know better than anyone how real dreams can be.'*

*"Why do you have two voices, Father?" Rickon had latched onto him like a little monkey, refusing to let go.*

*"It's just an old annoyance that refuses to die even after his time has passed," Ned explained, ignoring said annoyance's sardonic snort. Sighing, he motioned to the surrounding carnage. "What even happened here?"*

*"Uh," his son blinked. "Theon got Arya killed, and she's now with Nymeria. Jon found Theon and killed him and the bad men from the sea. It was so awesome!"*

*A dagger stabbed into his heart. He had felt that one of his children had perished, but the confirmation made it all the more real. The boy he had taken on to raise, turning his cloak–he'd known about the possibility of it, but it didn't hurt any less.*

*'What a waste of my good name,' His ancestor's voice oozed disdain. 'I've lost count of how many times I have thrown those squid back to their drowned god, yet it's clear they never learn.'*

*His heart grew heavy with grief, and a thousand questions weighed upon his mind, but he was just glad to see Rickon alive and well, even if it was just a dream, no matter how real.*

*"How did you meet Jon?"*

*His son finally let go, scratched his head and looked at his feet while he shifted his weight uneasily.*

*"I just went for a walk and found Ghost." A predictably childish lie, but it amused Ned more than anything else. "Jon has a daughter now, and I'm an uncle twice! She looks a bit funny and mostly sleeps, but I still like her. I saw the big shaggy men and the leafy girls and-"*

*The more his son spoke, the more enthusiastic he became, even if half of Rickon's words made no sense, but he was just six. The other half, however, raised even more questions, and Ned knew that getting an answer out of a six-year-old was a tall task. But as tempted as he was to just enjoy listening to his youngest prattle, the Lord of Winterfell had duties that couldn't wait and questions that had to be answered.*

*"Uhhhmmm–I have two more siblings now–Lyarra and Artos. They're small."*

*"I took the bracelets from Jon. He has a whole chest of the stuff after killing plenty of icemen."*

*"I made a friend! His name is Edwyle, but he's a bit too tall…"*

*"I don't know. Jon said he would kill all the bad men and gift Mother and Cella with skulls. I don't think Mother will like the skulls–they're a bit ugly, and we've been using some of them for chamber pots. The clansmen are with Jon–and a lot of shaggy dogs and..."*

*"I learned how to skin a deer and fling rocks already…"*

*"Jon took the axe I found, and he makes me swing a wooden sword each night until my hands grow numb…"*

*"I was supposed to go to the uhh…Fast Part and Arya to the hills…"*

*"Everyone else is fine, though. But I think Robb is also angry."*

*At that moment a cave-bear-sized snowy direwolf padded from behind one of the heart trees, tilting his head as he looked at Ned, then at Rickon, who quickly turned abashed. Despite its impossibly large size, the beast felt familiar and friendly.*

*"Uh, Ghost. I was just taking a nap on the tree 'cause digging was boring, I swear…" Before his son could finish, the direwolf picked up Rickon by the scruff of his neck and carried him away like an errant pup, and both of them were gone.*

*Everything turned blurry, and the world fluttered like a reflection in a windy lake.*

*'Fine sons you've raised there,' for once, the Hungry Wolf sounded calm, approving even. Almost happy, instead of his usual anger, his lust for violence, or boastful horseshit. 'The wolf is not too bad either. A lot bigger than yours, too.'*

*Ned ignored the light jab; it was almost friendly compared to their usual banter.*

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Last night's dream had been real, and he knew it even without Theon's amused confirmation. Ned felt it in his bones, the tingling joy of seeing his boy and running his fingers through Rickon's auburn hair. Yet the meeting was as sweet as it was bitter, even if a part of him wasn't surprised it was Arya who had died. He had already gone through his anger in the last few days, and now came the begrudging acceptance, especially now that he knew his daughter was avenged. It sounded sweet, but Eddard Stark knew the desire for vengeance just as he knew loss, and both made you feel empty in the end. Alas, the middle of a campaign was not a place for mourning.

Only after the fighting ended, the foes were vanquished, and the dust had settled, he would mourn. Until then, Ned would take solace in the rhythm of war, even if he loathed wanton violence and destruction.

Yet, for all the questions the talk with Rickon raised, it gave him a sense of calm. The main query that had weighed upon his shoulders–whether or not to rush back North to defend his kingdom–was resolved.

Despite his outwardly cold demeanour, uncertainty and a sense of loss had gripped his heart the last few days. According to the former smuggler, the attack on the North was much more severe than he had imagined, but he couldn't give him many details, for he knew little.

Should he rush back home and abandon this campaign despite being at the very end or continue?

Yet Eddard Stark no longer needed to dwell on that matter. Jon had it well in hand.

*'You trust your sister's boy to defend your wife and lands and children?'*

*'I do–Jon is already doing so. My sister might have given birth to him, but it is I who raised him. It is I who taught him and watched him grow. He might not have come from my loins, but he's still my son.'*

Theon offered no response, but Eddard could feel the man's begrudging acknowledgement.

The burden on his shoulders felt lighter now. Even if he rushed back North, it would be a moon along with the risk of braving the once-again stormy Narrow Sea. More than anyone else, Ned knew how fierce and treacherous its dark waters could be. Even now, the horizon to the west was choked full of heavy clouds.

It didn't matter anymore, for he had a city to break. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and donned his cloak. It was still dark outside, the barest hint of purple to the east heralding the coming dawn.

As usual, Tommen waited nearby, tightly wrapped in a heavy cloak, ready to fulfil his duties. The only sign of his station was the black stag stitched upon the inner rims of his dark cloak, which was relatively easy to miss if one lacked an eye for detail. The boy hastily helped him don his arming doublet, flexible dragonsteel armour, and gorget before retreating to Howland's side.

Jory, his bannermen, Royce, Belio, and the other revolt leaders slowly gathered before his tent, all clad in steel.

"Is everyone ready?"

A fierce chorus of 'ayes' greeted him, and he just hoped everyone had memorised the layout of the Myrish streets as he had ordered. It was a surprise to learn the now infirm Donnel Locke had travelled to the Free City several times and managed to map a decent layout of its streets for their assault. It was the most he could do as he lamented his uselessness over the past few moons, although he and his maester friend had taken to writing down their exploits and talking to many of his Northmen and even the Dothraki.

"Are you certain the walls will fall?" Syoren, a former pit fighter and one of the youngest among the freed slaves, asked suspiciously. "Even the trebuchets have barely done anything that couldn't be fixed overnight."

"Just watch," Damon Dustin said, his eyes aflame with anticipation at the coming carnage. "Walls, no matter how thick and tall, draw strength from the foundations deep in the ground. Take away the ground beneath…"

"...And they crumble," Ser Wylis Manderly finished with undisguised amusement. "It's a rarity that a siege gets that far, but when it does, it's a sight to behold. The city is quite populous. It will be a bloody battle."

"There are two slaves for every freedman left in Myr, even after the previous massacres and revolts," Royce noted. "Do you think they will rise in defence of their masters? Do you think their masters would be willing to even give them arms?"

"Enough, dawn approaches." Ned reminded them coldly. "Steel your hearts now, for a day of blood and death awaits. To your positions."

As the rest of them dispersed, he waved over Mallo and told him to inform the sappers. After a subtle nod, Howland also disappeared along with his crannogmen, all of them looking particularly small and inconspicuous in their brown cloaks.

They had been subtly re-arranging the positions in the camps during the last two days in anticipation of today's attack so as not to alert the Myrish. Even so, he had also chosen to attack at the crack of dawn when the shifts would change. It was perfect, for those guarding the walls would be tired after a long night of vigil, and those who would replace them would not yet be fully awake. The army's camp had even foregone torches, lanterns and campfires beyond those with the sentries to make full use of the cover of the night.

Still, Ned held no delusions that the battle would not be bloody, no matter how many tricks he employed to stack the odds in his favour. Yet a part of him looked forward to it. Even though Jon avenged Arya, the cold fury in his veins since her death still felt fresh and had yet to settle. But he

was not Robert, who raged and roared for the whole world to hear until he could vent with his warhammer.

Instead, he buried his fury deep, letting it ripen until the perfect moment. And whilst leading a battle required a cool head, his seething fury could always be unleashed once the moment to cross swords came.

Only Zolo and his two bloodriders remained here.

“We want to fight too,” he said.

“The streets are no place for riders unless you want to fight on foot,” Ned reminded. “Besides, your task is just as important. I entrust Tommen and my back to you. If any of the Myrish lancers sally out from the side gates to strike at us, it will be up to you to halt their advance.”

“It shall be done, Khal Stark,” Zolo solemnly slammed a gloved fist on his chest.

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**The Horned Knight, Myr**

Earning his spurs brought a sense of satisfaction, even though he didn’t feel much different. He rejected a few young lads eager to become his squire because he didn’t yet feel like a proper knight or know how to teach anyone.

Gendry did not have the wits to plan wars and battles. Steel, iron, and bronze were easy, as was killing, but leading men? That was hard. The responsibility seemed crushing, for any mistake might see those following you killed. That was why he had declined Lord Stark when he had been offered the honour of leading a band of men in one of the many preceding battles, preferring to follow his old master’s lead.

When the Lord of Winterfell had asked for volunteers only with full suits of heavy plate to join him in the vanguard in the breach, where the fighting would be thickest, Gendry, of course, volunteered, as did many others.

Just as dawn broke and Gendry thought things had gone awry, a terrible cracking sound echoed. It started up sharply before it turned into a deafening rumble as three sections of the Myrish curtain walls collapsed.

“It was supposed to be five,” one of the Stark men grunted unhappily, but Gendry didn’t see the problem. Before the dust cleared, they were already marching at their fastest pace towards one of the breaches in good order. As the sea wind cleared the air, he saw the defenders scrambling around the other portions of the walls and bells ringing hurriedly, no doubt raising the alarm. Gendry could see the breach now, a gap of over fifty yards wide, where the wall had collapsed into rubble. Even better, nobody tried to halt them as they approached.

The ribbons of dust still wafted through the air, and his throat felt uncomfortably dry; a few of the men started spitting on the ground angrily.

Climbing the uneven rubble wasn’t easy while lifting a shield over his head, but the scant few defenders trying to halt them were mowed down by the Dothraki wings circling behind them to provide cover. The first sign of organised resistance was the uneasy city guard rushing to form a shield wall around the gap, but the Red Wake and Lord Stark reached them first, sweeping through the disorganised ranks of half-armoured foes.

Gendry was just behind Walder, his maul swinging through the air, smashing shields and bodies. Hearing bones crunch made him reflect on the fragility of humans. One heavy hit and a life was snuffed out, while you had to hammer steel many times before it would take shape. He had lost count of how many souls he had slain moons ago, and the sickening crunch as a man's ribs broke no longer made him feel queasy. Even the stench of voided bowels and blood mingling in the air was like an annoying old friend.

Just as he thought the battle would be easy, they were beset by a small volley of crossbow bolts from the nearby rooftops. Gendry felt a few impacts on his shoulder, but it felt like a love tap compared to Walder's training hits as they slid off him due to the rounded shape of his pauldrons.

Most of the projectiles bounced off the plate, but a few found purchase in weak points in the armour, yet failed to pierce it. Only one of the Northmen fell, having the misfortune of being hit in the thinnest part of the helmet twice, while the others just broke the shafts off, leaving the heads stuck in layers of armour.

"Shields and spears and halberds!" Stark roared. "Alard, protect the rear. Form a wedge and *after me*!"

Those with shields and spears would bear the brunt of the enemies, while only men in full suit of plate armour carried a halberd.

Maul hung on his belt, Gendry found himself at the tip of the wedge of flesh, wood and steel as the Lord of Winterfell advanced forth steadily. More city guards and Unsullied and what looked like militia dressed in padded jackets tried to stop them but were easily cut down or pushed down to the cobbled ground and trampled. No matter what forces the Myrish sent, they were quickly slain.

The Essosi's shields were shaped like raindrops, covering their neck, shoulder, torso and upper legs. The weakness soon became apparent as Gendry followed the Northmen in using halberds to hook behind their exposed helmets or knees and forcing them to the ground, disrupting any attempts at forming a line. When they did manage to form one, Lord Stark's wedge split the formation into two segments, which didn't last long under the Northmen's blades.

But the deeper they delved into the city, the fiercer the resistance became, and they were met by better-armoured foes. Gendry realised they were heading towards the barracks. A few squads of city guards tried to strike them from the side as they crossed junctions, but with little success. Gendry could see Jory, Ser Dustin, Rogar Wull, Morgan Liddle, Rickard Ryswell, Cregan Knott, and Artos Ironsmith make short work of them. One dragonsteel blade barely made a difference in a formation, but when they had nearly a dozen such swords?

On one of the streets, they faced a proper wall of long pikes–Unsullied. It became a game of thrusting spears. The eunuch soldiers had good discipline, yet their armour was simple ringmail, small shields, bronze helmets and thin greaves that could hardly compare to a proper suit of plate. Slowly but surely, the eunuchs' losses mounted, pushed back by the wave of Northmen. Upon Lord Stark's command, the first line split, letting the Northmen who brought javelins come forth and pepper the enemy line, breaking their formation or rendering their shields useless.

Once their line wavered, the ranks quickly reformed. The Red Wake ignored the spearheads bouncing off his plate, stepped forth and swept them away with his enormous halberd, allowing Lord Stark to lunge forth.

"WINTERFELL!"

As the icy blade glinted in the sun, cleaving through ringmail and flesh, the Lord of Winterfell looked like a wolf amidst a flock of sheep. The cold sword tore through the air as if it had a mind of its own as it sought the necks, joints, wrists, and other weak points of their lightly armoured foes. Each strike was as mesmerising as it was deadly, and nothing the Unsullied tried could stop him. When a few of their foes opted to tackle the Lord of Winterfell, their path was blocked by the captain of the guards as Jory precisely cut them down with his Valyrian Steel sword.

'Lord Stark's ever-present shadow' was what the men called him.

Gendry shook off his awe and charged with the rest of the Northmen. The Unsullied tried to recover, but their formation was split in two as the spears bounced off Lord Stark's dragonsteel coat and thick greathelm. With the line of spears keeping him away broken, Gendry grasped his maul and rushed in swinging.

*Crunch.*

A man with a bronze cap fell like a sack of turnips.

*Crunch.*

The shield broke, and so did the hand and arm holding it, judging by the unnatural angle it was bent, though the eunuch didn't utter a sound as he countered with a riposte to Gendry's neck. Gendry trusted in his armour, and sure enough, the sword blow bounced off the gorget, and the maul was already swinging towards the man's head.

*Crunch.*

*Crunch*

Another body with a broken neck and a shattered skull.

*Crunch.*

Caved-in chest.

*Crunch.*

Broken shoulder.

*Crunch.*

Shattered knee.

*Crunch.*

The pleasant rhythm of death returned, and Gendry lost himself as his foes started falling one after another. But just as his blood started roaring in jubilation, he found no more enemies, only men fleeing from a bloody street filled with corpses and carnage.

"Form up!" Stark's icy voice doused the fire churning in his belly like a bucketful of cold water. "If we linger in one place too long, they might try to hammer us from behind."

The Lord of Winterfell looked like a demon, covered in crimson from head to toe, as did the Red Wake by his side. In contrast, Jory Cassel was relatively clean due to his more precise style of combat, which became increasingly deadlier with each subsequent battle. As the bloodlust receded, exhaustion took its place.

The Northmen hastily reformed into a wedge and surged onward once again at a steady pace. Sounds of clashing steel and shouting echoed from the nearby streets and houses, too, turning everything chaotic. It wasn't long before they reached the barracks, a stone building with a sturdy gate that barely lasted ten strikes as Morgan Liddle and Walder used their dragonsteel weapons to cleave the hinges off.

A volley of crossbow bolts greeted them, and Gendry grunted as pain bloomed in his shield hand. The steel broadhead had pierced the shield and embedded itself in his gauntlet, probably leaving a nasty bruise. A second volley followed, but it did not hurt as much as the first; the Northmen were better prepared as they resumed their advance into the barracks courtyard.

It was another short battle, for the Myrish barely offered any resistance after the initial clash. The Northmen didn't even bother entering the squat buildings to deal with any men hiding inside, instead simply setting the wooden roofing on fire and killing any who ran out of the burning building.

"And this is how you smoke out rats," Rickard Ryswell quipped as he wiped the blood off his purple dragonsteel longsword on one of the fallen Myrish guardsmen.

It was at this moment that Gendry realised what Lord Stark was doing.

The group with him were Northmen trained since they could walk in all the matters of warfare and fighting, given the best choice of armour the Northern smiths provided–or had taken the choicest pick of the spoils from the fallen sellswords and slave soldiers after each battle.

Stark had used their discipline and superior armaments to cut a bloody swathe through the unprepared city with frightening efficiency, using all his advantages to strike at the Myr's weakest points.

Aside from a few pockets of Unsullied, there was hardly any proper resistance, and Gendry's arm grew numb as the hours passed. March, fight, kill, regroup and repeat. Hours ticked by, bruises and aches piled upon his body, and his shield looked like a porcupine with many bolts stuck in it. Each bolt stuck in his shield meant one that hadn't hit his vitals, and Gendry regretted not following Morgan Liddle's advice to line both sides with bull hide. A glance quickly told him that not even a single bolt had pierced through the clansman's shield because of the double lining.

By noon, all organised resistance had collapsed, and the men focused on shattering the doors of taller houses whose roofs had small groups of crossbowmen - all that remained were the private guards of the many manors of the city. They saw battered groups of the former slaves with their bronze or direwolf headbands and other Westerosi–Clawmen coming from the opposite side, even if they looked in far worse condition than the Northmen. While the enemies had stopped coming, the killing did not. The sounds of battle died off, but the screams and moans of pain persisted as the former slaves and Westerosi began breaking doors and entering houses big and small to take what they wanted.

Coin, riches, and… women.

His blood boiled, roaring for more, his heart thundered in his ears like a war drum, and Gendry almost followed some of the Northmen into one of the fancier-looking manses. But something stopped him. A knight was meant to protect the weak and the innocent, women and children–not kill them. It was wrong. It was as if someone had doused the fire inside him, and he lost his desire for blood.

A terrified part of him realised that the streets were strewn with corpses, smoke could be seen from many places in the city, and Gendry was right in the middle of the carnage. How many had died today? How many more *would* die?

As his desire to smash receded, he became aware that his back had turned itchy from all the sweat soaking into his arming doublet, his left hand felt like one giant bruise from all the punishment and crossbow bolts his shield had endured, and his waist ached. All of his muscles and lungs burned as if on fire; his throat had gone dry hours ago, and he really needed a gulp of water to wet his tongue–but one of the spears had skewered the flask of wine on his belt, and it was empty.

Howland Reed popped out of somewhere, his cloak and sleeves stained with blood, and he hastily whispered something in Lord Stark's ear.

The Lord of Winterfell waved the Crannogman away, who quickly disappeared into one of the side alleys like a ghost.

"With me to the palace!" Stark's voice was hoarse as he stood as straight as a grim statue, observing the chaos from behind his visor. The Northmen quickly abandoned whatever they were doing and flocked to him.

Gendry desperately wanted to know what the Lord of Winterfell thought right now of the carnage.

Would he approve of the savagery, the pillaging, and plundering, or did he perhaps not care?

But he was none the wiser, for Eddard Stark was as readable as a block of ice even without being clad in steel from head to toe. Soon, they approached the palace from which the Myrish Conclave ruled, a slender building of white marble with a gilded roof that the weather had dulled in colour, looking more like piss than anything else.

Surprisingly, they met little to no resistance on the way there, but it quickly became apparent why. The gates lay broken, the sprawling courtyard was strewn with corpses, the garden of flowers on the sidewalks was all trampled, and cries and yells of pain echoed from the palace itself.

Lord Stark halted by a fountain with a silver, dog-sized snail statue with water gushing from its spindly eyes and warily looked around, giving them a brief moment of respite - many of them using the chance to drink. Gendry graciously received a gulpful of Morgan Liddle's offered flask. Once his throat no longer felt like sand, Gendry took a better look at the palace–all of its windows were made of transparent glass, and the roofing was lined with sapphires and other blue gems he didn't recognise. It all looked fancier than the Red Keep by a lot but not nearly as big, and the curtain walls were thinner and lower by a third. Even if the towers and roofs above lacked crenelations, they were quite tall, though Gendry had noticed larger and more opulent-looking manses in the city.

"Walder, take two dozen and secure the left wing. Damon, go to the right one and deal with any trouble. The rest follow me."

The Red Wake kicked a door off the hinges–it wasn't even thick, and a sentry tried to stab him, but a gauntleted fist grabbed his sword and yanked it out of his grip. Walder grabbed hold of the sentry's armoured hand, twisted it with a sickening crunch and pulled the man behind him into the yard.

Gendry's maul was already flying, shattering the man's head.

"I hate fighting in hallways," Walder grumbled at the doorframe that was shorter than he was–the Giant of Winterfell would have to lean in to enter, and the corridors did not allow him to use his favourite halberd properly.

The men sheathed their swords in favour of one-handed axes and war picks while the muttering Walder took out his heavy bludgeon and stabbed his dragonsteel halberd with the blood-splattered banner of House Stark into the pavement, the metal sinking halfway into the stone. The Red Wake had claimed another Valyrian Steel blade, more of a short sword or long dagger, and had Gendry secure it on the butt of his halberd.

“The Stark Banner can never fall.” was the gruff explanation.

Shields raised, they entered a sprawling antechamber, and Gendry realised the walls were relatively thin, barely fifteen inches, and were merely for decoration–especially judging by the lack of any murder holes anywhere. Just glass, silken curtains with sordid art that made heat rush up his face, marble and jade statues, and tapestries lining the walls.

Hallways and doors lined the walls, but Walder stopped before a wide, gilded, spiral staircase at the bottom of the room. The stairs descended from above and tunnelled underneath the marble floor.

“Gendry, take Erik, Torghen, Donnel, and Tomard and sweep the lower floors,” the giant of a man decided.

The underground floors were colder and slightly less luxurious, but if any guardsmen were here, they had long fled. A sparse few torches threw a ruddy red light, making the shadows dance ominously.

Gendry cautiously reached for the first door–and found it locked. Without hesitation, he took a step back and carefully swung his blood-stained maul. Whoever had forged the lock did a good job because it was only dented by the strike.

Snorting, Gendry dropped his shield and grabbed the haft of his maul with both hands before taking a mighty swing. The door flew off its hinges, revealing darkness beyond. Yanking one of the torches from the wall, Gendry threw it inside, illuminating yet another polished floor of white marble along with a relatively bare room with unadorned walls, a single pillowed bed, and a chamberpot.

It didn’t look like a place a guardsman would hide, but Gendry stepped forth to check the far corners not illuminated by the dwindling torch on the ground.

Before he could take three steps in, a light figure leapt onto his back from a dark corner and started stabbing something small at his helmet. Gendry annoyingly caught one of the angry limbs–finding it holding a dented silver fork– and tossed the offending figure onto the bed, his maul rising only to freeze.

It was the astonishment more than anything else that had him lower his maul, for the one who attacked him was a scantily dressed young woman with wavy dark auburn curls and angry dark eyes with a sweetly freckled face that looked like a cat who had its tail pulled. Gendry forgot what he was doing–in favour of staring at the almost completely exposed ample bosom that heaved dramatically with every breath she took. The only thing marring her beauty was the iron collar clasped on her neck–this one looked like a shoddy work not fit over a goat’s neck, let alone a fair maiden.

“Fuck you, you damn slaving bastards!”

“Wait,” Gendry groaned, feeling stupid at the familiar lilt of the Common Tongue. “You’re… from Westeros?”

The woman paused, blinking as if seeing him for the first time.

“I am Janna. My father’s from Crackclaw Point,” she said guardedly. “Who are you, and what are you doing in the palace’s dungeons?”

“Ser Gendry of King’s Landing, sworn man of Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell,” he said evenly, trying to tear his eyes from her bosom and barely succeeding. “Sweeping the lower floors for any trouble.”

“You won’t find much trouble here,” Janna laughed bitterly and dangled the chain that hung from the iron collar on her neck. “But all the slaves and hostages the Magisters deemed important are here.”

That sounded important indeed.

“You know the layout here?” Gendry asked, unsure what to do.

“I memorised most of it,” she offered.

“Great, you’re coming with us,” he decided. “Want me to get your chain off?”

“It requires a special key…”

“No need,” Gendry snorted. Ignoring Janna’s confusion, he took off his gauntlets and grabbed the collar, inspecting the shoddy craftsmanship with his fingers. Her neck was turning dangerously red–was the collar too tight to suffocate the maiden?

It wouldn’t do. Once he found a weakness in the joint, Gendry wasted no time gripping the cold metal; his whole body tensed as he pulled with a roar, ripping the collar open.

A flushed Janna blinked twice at him and fainted on the pillowed bed.

“Damn it,” Gendry cursed while trying to inspect her neck for injuries but saw none. Worse, he wanted to scratch his sweaty neck and that itch behind his ear, but he had to unstrap his helmet first.

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**18th Day of the 8th Moon**

**The Lord of Winterfell**

All of his body ached, and hardly a part of him was left unbruised–the cost of leading at the front. His muscles still felt sore after a whole day of fighting. The dragonsteel scale armour was excellent in its design and lightness, but it was far from invincible.

Howland’s men had managed to sneak through the city and open one gate to the harbour, letting Shireen’s mariners in from the other side, making the whole battle just a bloody formality–even if a costly one. Amidst the initial chaos, Reed had even managed to find and kill the commander of the city guard on the streets before he could organise a proper defence. Ned didn’t need to see the corpse to figure out how the Myrishman had died–a poisoned dart the right size to be launched by a blowpipe, something Howland was a master of.

It was how crannogmen fought in the Neck, after all, and while Ned disapproved, he couldn’t blame them for it, even more so as it was done after the battle started. No matter how bordering on dishonour, he could begrudgingly admit the effectiveness, as it probably saved many men. Not nearly as many as Ned hoped, for the Myrish fought like devils to protect their home. If only they were that decisive when he had asked for passage.

Bringing order to a sacked city was neither easy nor quick. It was even more challenging to do, considering there were two armies to manage, each under different command. The surprise morning attack proved effective, and the rampant looting and murder stopped by the third day.

Even the losses were far less than Eddard expected–barely two score of Northmen and two hundred former slaves had perished from his retinue, though the toll on Royce's men was far heavier. Nearly five thousand had died because of the lack of proper armour against the Myrish crossbows. Three thousand more had perished storming the fortified magister manses that employed Unsullied, which were eventually overrun with the help of the Northmen.

Shireen's losses were quite heavy, even if the bulk of the city guard, pikes, and sellswords had first converged towards the breach. It was no wonder she had lost control of some forces before the city was fully taken.

Everything went without incident otherwise–aside from an angry Ser Jonothor Cave trying to brain Ser Gendry, roaring with fury as a scantily clad maiden clung to Robert's bastard, shrieking, "Father, he saved me, stop, stop!"

As amusing as it was to watch the drama, Ned signalled to Walder and Morgan Liddle, who quickly restrained the frothing bear of a man.

It didn't surprise him that by the next dawn, a very confused Gendry found himself wedded to a blushing Janna Cave. He was far from the only one; almost every unwed Northman in his retinue found a wife very quickly.

While he hadn't had the time or desire to instil the proper level of discipline in the whole freedmen army, Ned had strict orders against uncouth behaviour for his personal retinue, for any potential raper knew the consequences of disobeying him. Naturally, the pent-up men on a military campaign had found a way to circumvent the whole thing, and the day after, the sack was filled with an almost frightening number of weddings.

The mariners with Shireen, however, barely bothered to show any restraint. The hundreds of thousands of newly freed slaves in the city didn't help as they turned into savage beasts, inflicting cruelty, pain, death and all sorts of beastly indignities upon their masters. Many were slaughtered indiscriminately for simply not being slaves, and Ned had to personally behead hundreds of fools to restore order. War made monsters out of men, Ned mused grimly.

*'No, war only reveals what was already underneath,'* Theon had unhelpfully supplied. *'Men are the most savage of all animals. Normal beasts kill for food and to protect their young, but humans? We often kill for satisfaction, for the thrill of it and show of vainglory. Our desires run deep.'*

The daughters of wealthy magisters, merchants, and masters were throwing themselves at the Northmen to avoid the fate of what women suffered during a sack–or after it. Even those who were spared the indignity of being despoiled could only whore themselves out for a living without sons, husbands, and fathers to take care of them.

It was a crude, cruel thing, but because of it, his men found themselves spoiled for choice. A silver-haired maiden with blue eyes clung to Jory's side, afraid of almost everything and everyone; Walder had found himself a petite blonde lass with purple eyes who almost looked like a child next to his looming muscled frame. Even his cook Calon had taken a former slave maiden with dusky skin for a wife.

To Theon's amusement, a growling Winter spared Ned from chasing off any attempts to test his marriage vows. The prowling direwolf had skipped the battle by Ned's design–a city sack was no place for Winter, for he made a large target, and his fur couldn't withstand the crossbows. Serala, the Myrish envoy that tried to seduce him, was also found dead in one alleyway–her body mauled and all of her limbs savagely torn apart, and it didn't take much to figure out the culprit.

The direwolf had appeared late at night after the battle dried blood on his snout, bringing a pale furball, only to drop it into Tommen's lap. Even the following day, the little feline pawed cautiously after the prince like a duckling after his mother.

"This is a Hrakkar cub," Mallo explained with a troubled voice as soon as he saw the prince.

"What's a… hrakkar?" Damon Dustin asked curiously.

The former slave rubbed his shaved head.

"They are white lions living in the Dothraki Sea. Some rich merchants keep them as caged pets." Mallo glanced at Winter, napping on a torn, silken curtain nearby. "They grow nearly as large as this beast but not nearly as well-mannered."

"Tommen," Ned began, sighing inwardly. "Such beasts belong in the wild."

"But you have Winter," the prince objected, hastily shielding the cub with his arms. "He's big, too. And lions can't survive alone in the wilderness until they're a year old. If he's released, he'll die without his mother."

Why was Ned not surprised that Tommen was so knowledgeable about wild cats?

The boy's pleading green eyes reminded him of Bran the day he tried to convince them to take the direwolf pups. His heart clenched painfully.

For the first time ever, he was the one to initiate the conversation with his ancestor.

*'Theon,'* Ned exhaled. *'Do you think the boy can…?"*

*'Skinchange? No, it requires not only blood and luck but the right faith. The boy might have the blood of the First Men, but he's too taken by the stone statues.'*

*'What does the Faith of the Seven have to do with anything?'*

*'**Everything**. I know your memories, Eddard. They call it the Coming of the Andals, but only Andal warriors came, a drop in the bucket compared to those who lived in their lands. And the Andal warriors who won enough battles to remain intermarried with the First Men might carry their Andal names but have more First Man blood than Andal. Yet why do you think the skinwalkers dwindled to nought below the Neck aside from the Blackwoods when their lineage has intertwined a thousand times before?''*

Tommen stubbornly held onto the mewling cub, and Ned couldn't find the strength to decline in his heart. He had condemned hundreds of thousands to their death in the last few days, and his heart had grown weary of it. Eddard Stark knew that four out of five lion cubs died in the wild before reaching adulthood, yet he couldn't bring himself to condemn yet another life.

"Please, Lord Stark." Tommen continued stubbornly. Gods, Ned was the one who taught him to find his confidence. "I promise I will look after him myself. Feed him, train him, and-"

“You may keep it, Tommen,” Ned allowed. “But keep this in mind. At the first signs of it going feral or maiming someone without cause, *you* will be the one to put it down. You will feed it yourself without any aid from the servants. You will train it and clean after it.”

The young prince jumped with joy, but Ned quickly halted him with his stern gaze. “Your duties as a page, however, have not diminished. Feed your pet and follow me.”

If Winter had brought the cub in, surely it couldn’t be bad. However, all he could feel from the napping direwolf was a sense of smugness.

The fighting was the easy part, and now came the clean-up. Belio, Royce, and all the other leaders of the former slaves were quite tense as they converged for a proper meeting with Ned, the young Shireen Baratheon, and her captains.

Even though he expected her, the young girl still surprised him. The previous uncertainty and apprehension in Shireen’s blue eyes were gone, replaced by a hardness that reminded Ned of her father. Her gaze was cold, almost calculating as it inspected the surroundings, and would easily fit on the face of a seasoned veteran of many battles or a cunning old lord. Ned lamented the twists of fate for forcing a young maiden to such a point.

But she was still limited by her age and being born as a lady.

Shireen’s position had turned shaky, for the significant losses taken against the Myrish Fleet and during the battle had given rise to dissatisfaction–and the loss of control of her men during the sack. While decent on the sea, her command during the siege had left much to be desired. No longer was she the ‘invincible Lady Scars’, but just a young girl with significant knowledge of naval matters and plenty of luck. The lords, knights, and captains under her command would soon begin to test her and push her limits if they hadn’t already.

Tall for her age, thin and wiry like a Bravo’s sword, with a square jaw. Shireen would never grow into a beauty, especially with the greyscale marring her cheek, and her childhood had ended before it had even begun.

Her stiff demeanour melted away at the sight of Tommen, who quickly introduced her to the still-nameless lion cub. At that moment, she looked like a proper child.

Ser Rolland Storm, who shadowed her as a sworn shield, frowned at Mallo, the prince’s minder. The former slave, now clad in a bright yellow brigandine taken from an enemy commander a moon ago, just gave him a toothy grin, which only put the knight on edge more.

Ned had seen many familiar faces accompanying the young Mistress of Ships, from the Sistermen to some Vale knights, and the most unexpected of them were the three Skagosi chieftains clad in what plundered armaments they could claim–one of them even sported a dragonsteel axe. Apparently, Wyman Manderly had been negotiating with them for more sailors for the Northern fleet when the call for aid from Dragonstone had arrived.

Shireen had a young handmaiden her age, a little thing with a flat, dusky face and eyes of molten gold carrying rolls of parchment, inkpot, and quills.

“So, what shall we do with the city?” Monford Velaryon was the first to break the silence after everyone of import was sat around the table.

“We’ve taken our pound of flesh from the Myrish already,” Ser Jonothor Cave snorted.

Lord Triston Sunderland laughed, giving a nod to Ned.

“Pound of gold and dragonsteel, you mean, Ser Cave.”

Thirty more dragonsteel armaments were looted by the Northmen alone in the sack, and those who had come with Shireen undoubtedly had found just as much, if not more.

Ser Wylis Manderly rubbed his hands and looked at Ned with barely disguised greed while the former slaves looked disgruntled.

“Ruling a city such as this will not only make anyone a rich man but have countless other benefits-”

“The former slaves fought for their freedom,” Ned interrupted, finding himself under the attention of everyone. Rightly so, for he was the one who had led this campaign and had the first claim. Despite being the mistress of ships, the young Shireen had subtly deferred to him by sitting with Tommen at the far end of the table, leaving him with the burden of command and decision. “They can have the city, should they wish, so let them rule themselves. We have far more pressing matters than running this place, for everything from the Wall to the Red Mountains is consumed by the mad flames of war.”

“We should head straight home,” Damon Dustin stood up stubbornly. “Reavers and Reachmen, pirates and zealots, all need to be shortened a head. Or better, hung like the damned brigands they are!”

“Aye!”

“Down with the Hightowers and Squids!”

“I say we go back to King’s Landing-”

“If Hightower has sent all his men North, we should sail to Oldtown and sack it…”

“We should be cautious,” Ser Davos said weakly. The former smuggler looked half a decade older since the last time Eddard had seen him, his brown hair turning fully grey. “Many of the ports up the other side of the Narrow Sea are either closed or taken with the Black Plague. Worse, the whole debacle has made word from Westeros slow to arrive…”

So now plague was added to the already volatile mix of rebellion, zealots, and pirates. Yet, if not for that dream, Eddard would be in a rush to get home, even if it would see his army quite possibly stuck knee-deep into the Northern snow.

“How bad is this disease?” Howland asked.

The onion knight sighed.

“Terrible. They say seven out of ten men perish once they fall ill, and the maesters can barely do anything against it. Vinegar wash, Bloodletting, medicinal pastes, cleansing powders and incense all prove ineffective.”

“I say we wait the disease out,” the scarred Lord Alesandor Torrent of Little Sister proposed. “Like the Shivers, Winter Fever, and the Great Spring, this Black Death will run its course.”

“Ah, but Alesandor,” Ser Wylis’ voice thickened with mocking. “You might have forgotten your histories, but most of those diseases reached the Free Cities, and we’re in one. Where do you propose we hide for over a year?”

Yet Ned could see that many seemed to agree with the Torrent lord. No warrior was eager to fight a foe he could never best with a blade or even see like a deadly disease.

“We can hardly rush back when the Narrow Sea has turned tempestuous,” Ser Jason Melcolm said, tapping his hand on the table. “‘Tis the season of storms, my lords. One look to the southwest, and even a fool would be blind to miss the coming storm. If not today or tomorrow, the day after.”

At that moment, the door was opened, and Walder peeked in, loudly clearing his throat.

“A royal envoy from King’s Landing.”

A sinewy man in silk and Baratheon livery entered and pulled out a scroll sealed by both the roaring lion of Lannister and the crowned stag of Baratheon.

“For Lord Stark’s hand only,” he proclaimed in a grave voice.

Ned received the scroll and broke the seal with rising trepidation as the whole room quieted in apprehension. What would Joffrey or Tywin want with him now? Royal edicts and orders were troublesome, and his senses told him this would be no different.

His head pulsed as he read the words signed by Tywin Lannister. The letters had a dark decisiveness that one would expect from the Old Lion, but the words shook him to the core in a way that had happened only twice before. The first time was long ago when Jon Arryn received that dark letter from the Red Keep and came to Robert and Ned, and the world shattered. The second time was when Winter brought him that scroll that changed *everything*.

A boy-king’s fevered final word against the rightful chain of succession, sidelining a brother and a pregnant wife. He couldn’t help but wonder if the crown went hand in hand with woe. A quick glance at Shireen and Tommen at the end of the long table eased most of his concerns. Stannis’ daughter smiled as the lion cub curiously licked her fingers while Tommen sat just by her side, looking happier than usual.

*‘So, you’re raising a king now,’* Theon’s dark amusement was quick to follow. *‘Everyone will start currying favour with the boy, making your task all the more difficult.’*

His ancestor was right. But this was also an opportunity to clear the court and give Tommen a solid foundation.

*‘This Tywin Lannister must trust you plenty to make your eldest’s wife the Lady of Casterly Rock.’*

*‘Only upon the condition that one of her sons inherit and takes the Lannister name,’* he coldly reminded, unable to suppress his annoyance with the old lion. Tywin had done it because he knew that the Lord of Winterfell would respect his final wishes even if he didn’t like them - even if Ned was loath to entertain any request from the Lion Lord. At this moment, if someone asked Ned, he would claim that the Lannisters ought to have taken a snake for their sigil instead of a lion, for it was far more fitting.

Eddard Stark stood up and walked before his page.

“Renly has been repelled from King’s Landing, but Joffrey Baratheon is dead,” he announced before bending the knee to Tommen. “Long live the king!”

The prince’s green eyes widened in disbelief, followed by a short moment of stunned silence. The scraping of chairs filled the air, and the landed knights and lords started kneeling.

*“Long live the king!”*

It was one thing to have the royal heir–or an unofficial spare as a page, but an entirely different matter to have the young king of the Seven Kingdoms by your side looking for guidance and protection. The meeting continued now, though Ned found himself being declared a regent by his page.

Despite many urgings from the Lords of the Narrow Sea and his bannermen, no other decisions were made that day because Eddard would not blindly sail to Westeros through a budding storm, especially as he trusted Jon to deal with the problems in the North.

The mantle of a royal regent was upon Eddard’s shoulders, and perhaps it was for the better, for the old lion had doubts about his continued health. Yet for all that it entailed, it wasn’t the fate of the North that weighed upon his shoulders now, but the Seven Kingdoms themselves.

Tommen accepted the idea of betrothal to Shireen without any reluctance, though he suspected the boy didn’t fully understand the implications of the arrangement but just wanted to be friends. Shireen requested time to consider the proposal, not out of dislike for Tommen but under the Onion Knight’s urgings.

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**19th Day of the 8th Moon, 299 AC**

Everything Ned tried to speak again to his son but failed, much to his irritation. He had gotten to hear–and touch Rickon and could hardly get enough of it. Oh, how he longed to see Cat and his newborn children.

*‘Is there no way to speak to Rickon again?’*

*‘I’m no good with the ice magick, and what your boy did was probably instinctive, just in the place and time. Unless he finds a few hundred sacrifices for heart trees again to pave the way again…’*

A part of him regretted taking the mantle of a regent. But should Tywin Lannister perish to the Black Death, there was nobody else with sufficient power, prestige, and skill to rule a kingdom at war.

Just as Ned thought he had grown numb to surprises, a large delegation from Lys appeared just after he finished breaking his fast. The Lord of Winterfell wasn’t blind and knew that the last of the Three Daughters had indirectly supported the slave revolt here but never thought they would show their face in person.

“The First Magister of Lys and our gonfaloniere have great respect for House Stark and the Iron Throne,” A plump silver-haired magister named Torreo Haen declared with far more sincerity than Ned ever expected from his ilk. Upon a closer look, the man reminded him of a fatter version of Lord Velaryon, and they were even dressed in similar light blue doublets. “We bring many gifts to Lord Stark as a showing of our goodwill, sincerity, and friendship!”

Ned stood in the audience hall, just blinking in confusion, for the man was not lying, nor did Winter sense any danger.

Surely enough, under everyone's curious gazes, burly mutes dragged over dozens of heavy chests overflowing with gems, gold, and jewellery. The wealth displayed before him could easily bolster House Stark’s coffers by half. Ned even spotted an ornate axehead amongst them. Smoky ripples so dark they were black glinted upon the sunlight, blending into the folds was a red so deep they could

be mistaken for blood. The two colours rippled over each other but never touched in a mesmerising dance, each ripple distinct like waves of darkness and blood with a promise of violence and death. Dragonsteel. It wasn't the only one, even, for Ned could spot a dirk and two daggers of a similar make next to it.

*'You scared them,'* Theon noted with undisguised glee. *'They want to pay you off like some raiding horselord.'*

And it was working; Ned could hardly spit in the face of a smiling man coming with a genuine offer of friendship.

"There is one more *gift*," the magister rubbed his hands as a woman in her twenties wearing a purple gown was ushered forth. Her sun-kissed skin, dark hair, and purple eyes made her quite the beauty, probably from one of the Free Cities. Her face was guarded, and she carried a fussing bundle in her arms.

Winter stirred from his place at Ned's side, curiously sniffing at the air. It smelled like family!?

*'I'd say that babe is one of yours if I didn't know the sort of prude you were. Perhaps a dalliance of your son?'*

"And who might this be?" Eddard Stark stood up, asking coldly.

"Nymeria Sand." Torreo Haen nodded wisely. His common tongue was good, even though the soft accent made it strange in Ned's ears. "Lord Commander Benjen Stark's paramour and his newborn son–we found her in the Water Garden. She wanted to hide the pregnancy from House Stark. Despite that, we treated her with every courtesy."

"I didn't want to hide anything," she said weakly.

The hall erupted in whispers, and the woman began to shiver. While the Lyseni man didn't lie about her good treatment, a gilded cage was still a cage, and a hostage was still a hostage, and Winter could smell her fear. The baby started wailing, and Ned got angry, and Winter began to growl unhappily.

"SILENCE!" The commotion stilled, much to his pleasure; only the babe's cry continued echoing in the chamber. Ned walked forth and carefully took the bundle from the stunned Nymeria Sand. The wail halted with a hiccup, and a pair of blue eyes flecked with steely grey blinked curiously at him. He *knew*, then. "That's Benjen's get, alright."

The Lord of Winterfell knew there would be trouble for this, both for Benjen and for him. The babe was innocent, yet the world was not so kind, nor were men and women. Another nephew, another bastard, awaited by a long life of stigma, struggle, and hardship.

"What's his name?

"Osric..."

"Osric Snow, for he shall be raised in Winterfell as is proper," Ned declared. "I must thank you, magister Haen. Your sincerity is well-received, and my nephew and his mother are hereby under House Stark's protection."

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**Author's Endnote: Twisting and turning, we arrive at the bloody end of the Myrish plotline. There are a few more things, but they can wait for another chapter or even an excerpt. I wanted to cram more into the chapter, but I think I got the most essential things in.**

**Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the messy siege–sacks and city warfare are always chaotic.**

**Starring: Rickon "digging is boring, I was just taking a nap, honest!" Stark, Theon, "Your son has style" Stark, Gendry "I'm really no good at problems that can't be hammered" Of King's Landing, and Tommen, "It's just a smol kitten, and he'll behave, I swear," Baratheon.**