Disclaimer: I don't own HP, GOT, or ASOIAF. Would have finished the last two properly if I had.
Edited by Bub3loka

22nd Day of the 9th Moon

Sarella Sand, Sunspear

Her eyes studied the painting on the wall. It depicted Nymeria, the Warrior Queen and her ancestor, clad in lobstered steel below her neck, with a bared face shining in resolve amidst a battle over a river crossing. It was a fine painting, painted by a master's hand, with its colours so vivid it nearly looked real. Yet now, Sarella was irked by it.

The canvas had done nothing wrong except to show the queen wearing *too much* steel. The Rhoynish avoided heavy armour while preferring the lightness and flexibility of brigandines. Sarella couldn't begrudge the painted for his whim—an armour had a more imposing presence, even on a warrior-princess. And yet….

Sarella puffed up her cheeks and threw herself on the bed. She had paced across her quarters like a caged beast at first, but it had done nothing to soothe her frustration. It was not the old painting that vexed her, but even the finest art would grate on the eyes if it were all you saw. And she was sick of looking at that particular wall, no matter how pretty the wood panelling and the painting.

It was the same quarters she was always given in Sunspear, on the far end of the family wing, with a mahogany bed, sandsilk covers, and soft myrish carpet. Sarella loved the painting when she was young, despite the liberties the painter had taken.

Oberyn had always said, *"Nymeria is proof that no gates are ever closed for a woman of ambition and sufficient skill."*

Those words—the very same painting—had inspired Sarella to chase her dreams. Even the imperfection was inspiring, for if she succeeded in life, her descendants would paint her as more beautiful and awe-inspiring than she was in person.

A child's foolish dream. Chasing dreams rarely had anything to do with fame or glory, especially for someone like her, who had chosen to seek knowledge. Few remembered scholars, healers, or learned women after they died, and even fewer bothered to draw portraits in their honour.

Her visit to Sunspear was meant to be swift, merely a quick stop on her journey. She planned to stay for a handful of days to greet her princely Uncle, cousins, and half-sisters and then sail northward. The memory of the day she had arrived was all too fresh in her mind.

"We feared the worst after word about the Mad Kraken's bloodbath arrived," Arianne said, hugging her tightly as if she would disappear.

Nymeria and Tyenne were also gladdened to see her alive, but her sisters were not nearly as clingy as the princess. They never were.

"I was lucky enough to be out of the city at the time," she muttered sourly, remembering Samwell the Craven. How could someone be so blessed with wits but so woefully lacking courage? "Where is Obara?"

Her cousin had grimaced.

“You know how she is. Obara took Uncle Oberyn’s passing the hardest and has gone to vent her anger against the Lions, joining Ser Manfrey’s host. Of course, he is sending her to hunt bandits and deserters instead of fighting in the front.”

For good or ill, Sarella’s eldest sister had inherited the worst of their father’s temper.

Sarella’s remaining sisters were not here either—Ellaria had retired to the picturesque Water Gardens to raise her four young daughters away from woes.

“Are you here to stay, niece?” Prince Doran inquired at dinner.

He looked even worse than before, occasionally slipping from the blankets that covered him, revealing limbs painfully weak and joints swollen, turning his figure misshapen and ugly. Sarella could recognise the signs of heavy gout. Yet, he did not seem in pain and drank heavy amounts of thickened Dornish vintage as always. Which was even worse, for pain-numbing draughts like milk of the poppy affected the body when drunk for long, especially when combined with heavy wine.

Yet it was not a matter she would raise, nor was it her duty to. Maester Caleotte had undoubtedly cautioned the Prince.

“Only for a short time to see you,” Sarella said. “I plan to visit the Night’s Watch next. I met a brother of the Watch in Oldtown forging his chain, and he claims the libraries on the Wall hold tomes that even the Citadel does not possess.”

Her uncle remained silent, watching her for a long moment.

“Now is not the time for such matters,” he said at last. “Perhaps after the war ends and the King’s Peace is restored. Besides, the North is even more dangerous in winter, and trouble around the Wall has been brewing for years. I am not risking any more of you for flights of fancy.”

And so, Sarella had been barred from leaving. It didn’t matter that her disguise as Alleras was good, and nobody had seen through it for years. Her freedom had been taken, and her plans thwarted.

Even Nymeria’s painting did not bring her the joy it had before. She could wander around Sunspear, but the guards meticulously checked everyone who left and entered and were under orders not to let her leave at each gate. Of course, Sarella had tried to sneak out thrice but failed, and each attempt saw her grounded to her quarters for four days, and the security in the castle tightened.

Yet she was far from the only one disgruntled. Arianne was furious with her father, even more so than Sarella.

“He sent a whole host, Rella,” the princess vented angrily. “Fifteen thousand of the finest Dornish warriors to support some Lyseni pretender. Revenge for Elia, he dared lie with a straight face!”

No matter what, Arianne refused to believe Aegon was who he claimed he was. Perhaps she was right, for all the evidence hinged on the word of Varys the Spider, a man with unknown loyalties. Eunuchs… who would trust them?

If he saved Elia’s son, why not bring him to Dorne, under the protection of his closest kin? Or at least, why not inform House Martell of it?

“Well, the Lannisters shall fall in the end,” Sarella said at last, her words heavy. Knowledge of their doom brought her no joy; she would sooner see her aunt lie unavenged if it meant her father yet drew breath. “Is that not vengeance enough?”

Could you hug revenge?

Could it whisper sweet songs when you had nightmares at night, or give you words of wisdom when you needed them the most?

Predictably, the words had failed to console her princely cousin.

“Yes, but at what cost?” Arianne cried, her voice raw with fury. “Dornish spears raised in service of some upjumped thief who dares to use our cousin’s name like a stolen cloak. My father would have us swallow the lie, call this Aegon Elia’s son because it pleases his little games, but I know better. Gods, the shame of it, the indignity!

Nymeria and Tyenne were just as unhappy with it, but they were like Sarella, daughters of the Sands. They called them Sand Snakes, a title of some honour—at least compared to others baseborn—but they had no more influence than any other Dornish bastard. From the Red Mountains to the Broken Arm, all the Sands were treated well, but it did not mean they were equal to their trueborn siblings or parents.

Yet no fire burned forever. As days passed, even the flames of fury dwindled, and begrudging acceptance grew as Arianne grew quiet and no longer quarrelled with her princely father. However, each next raven arriving from Aegon’s army, sent by Ser Manfrey, only made them more disgruntled.

“Poor Quent,” Tyenne cried.

“An accident, Ser Barristan claims,” Arianne spat, venom dripping from her words. “My brother attempted to claim a dragon and died? What a load of horseshit! I know him; Quent was many things, but such daring was beyond him. Daenerys did not even bring back the bones! How many insults must we suffer?”

Aegon, the pretender, now mounted a dragon and Daenerys as his wife—he no longer even needed Dornish support. And they had gotten too invested to withdraw any support.

“Perhaps he truly is our cousin,” Tyenne muttered weakly. “How else could he claim a dragon?”

The princess had no answer but refused to believe it. Yet Aegon had succeeded where Quentyn had supposedly failed—becoming a dragonlord. How could he do that without the blood of the dragon?

“It’s not that bad,” Sarella said.

Her sisters looked at her as if she had grown a second head. “Not that bad?”

“Even if he’s a pretender, Aegon will be forced to honour Dorne all the same.” Sarella cocked her head. “The claim of his birth can’t be taken back any more than an arrow that has left the bowstring.”

And perhaps… perhaps that was why Prince Doran had thrown his support behind him. He must have seen it from the start. Even though he was so ill that he struggled to stand on his feet, her Uncle stood above them all and could see further for it.

There was not much they could do here but accept the happenings for what they were. The Sand Snakes were used to it long ago; the lords and ladies, kings and queens, played their games, and the rest could only live with it. Perhaps that was why Arianne was so disgruntled by the sense of powerlessness.

She was feeling what the rest of them always felt.

It didn't change much, though. Sarella's dark eyes stared at her panelled ceiling, feeling more bored than ever. The view of the turquoise waves of the Summer Sea battering the sandy shore beyond the window had lost its allure years ago, and the painting…

Worse, Sarella had already read all the books in Sunspear's library not once, not twice, but thrice.

Even now, *Watchers on the Wall*, the collection of tales and legends about the Night's Watch inked down by Archmaester Harmune, lay open on her table.

The North and the Watch had far more myths left behind from the Age of Heroes, the only unbroken kingdom and order by the Andals for eight millenia, where the ancient traditions still lingered and most clung to the Old Gods. Their accounts were woefully incomplete but far more numerous than the South could muster.

Even now, the book was opened on the tale of the Night King, the infamous Thirteenth Lord Commander, who took a wife and declared himself king before being slain by Brandon the Breaker and Joramun, the first King Beyond The Wall.

Such a great event had left its mark upon the Watch—their castles were forbidden to build curtain walls. But Harmune speculated even further that it brought a change in the vows, specifically celibacy. The myriad of kings dotted across the North had not moved for twelve years after the nameless Thirteenth Lord Commander had wed, but only when he placed a crown upon his brow.

Thus, the black brothers could have taken wives before the Night King. It was a sound conjecture, but there was no proof to back it.

All records and tales agreed the Thirteenth Lord Commander had been slain, but Sarella noticed that his wife, the supposed Corpse Queen that corrupted him, had not been mentioned further, as if she had disappeared in thin air.

Yet who would boast about slaying a woman? It would be ugly to ink down your name in history with dishonour unless she were Maegor with Teats.

Sarella glanced at the table where the book lay sprawled open and sighed helplessly. It was the fourth time she had read it, and she couldn't muster enough will to continue, not right now. She didn't even feel like visiting her sisters or cousins.

Stretching lazily, she pulled over the soft cotton cover and let her mind drift into sleep.

The creak of her door woke her up, and Sarella's fingers found the dagger under her pillow, but eased. She was in Sunspear, not on the road or in Oldtown. Despite Prince Doran's confinement, she was safe here.

"Rella." It was Nymeria's silky voice. "We're sneaking out."

The words chased away any drowsiness, and Sarella hastily stood up. A glance at the dark curtains told her that night had already come.

"What about the guards?"

"Tyenne slipped some sweetsleep in their drink," her sister whispered. "And we have a friend distracting the sentry at the postern gate."

This… this was her chance to leave. To go North, despite her princely uncle's desires to the contrary.

“Why not tell me before?” Did they not trust her?

“Arianne wasn’t sure it would work and had to be careful for the Prince not to suspect.”

It was a sound reason, but it didn’t make the hurt disappear; it only lessened it. Years ago, before she left for the Citadel, before the war started, and her father still lived, they had all been as thick as thieves, but now, Sarella was no longer trusted.

The Sand Snake ignored the pang of distress and busied herself, packing her meagre belongings.

After half an hour of prowling through dark hallways and spiralling stairs, they were in the narrow streets of the shadow city sprawled under Sunspear’s walls. Sarella had taken her travel cloak, gifted by her father, her mother’s goldenheart bow, and the rest of her sparse travelling effects. Nymeria, Arianne, and Tyenne were also wrapped in unassuming cloaks that covered their faces and bodies to attract less attention—or at least less attention than usual.

Ser Andrey Dalt, the heir of Lemonwood and one of Arianne’s dear friends and former lovers, was waiting for them there with a lantern hanging from his fist.

“So, where shall we meet with Ser Perros Blackmont?” Tyenne asked in an all-too-innocent tone that did not deceive Sarella.

“In Planky Town,” Arianne whispered, though her face was unreadable.

Her blonde-haired sister pouted childishly.

“Argh, we’ll stink of horse by the time we get there without a wheelhouse. And why is Rella coming with us? Did she finally get bored with books and discover the pleasures of the flesh?”

“No,” Sarella said, her tone clipped. “I’m taking the first ship out of Plankytown.” Preferably going northward, but any destination would do—once she was out of her uncle’s control, she could travel at her leisure.

Her sisters and cousins could sleep around as much as their hearts desired, but she was reluctant. As a bastard, she had no income of her own after her father had perished, and taking moon tea too often could harm the womb. Besides, the maidenhead was a woman’s most valuable possession.

Why would Sarella waste it on some lusty knight who would forget her for the next shapely arse, pretty smile, or pair of teats? Why would she believe the obvious drivel those posturing fools said to slip beneath Arianne and Tyenne’s skirts? Yes, the pleasures of the flesh couldn’t be denied, but Sarella wanted to be more than a paramour in some knight or lord’s arms, discarded once they grew bored. Perhaps, unlike those of nobler stock, she could wed for love. And if such a man never came, she’d wed herself to the pursuit of knowledge.

“Tsk, how boring,” Tyenne sighed theatrically. “You really need to learn how to have fun.”

“I’m going with Sarella,” Arianne declared.

“What?!” Sarella, Ser Andrey, Nymeria, and Tyene echoed in unison.

“Weren’t we going to visit Ser Perros?”

The princess’s face was filled with resolve.

“You can if you wish. But I would go mad if I stayed in Sunspear and listened to my father’s plots and schemes for another moon.”

“The Wall is no place for a princess, so please reconsider, cousin,” Sarella said urgently. “The Watchman I know said the place was rife with danger.” The truth of that statement was under some question, for a craven had spoken those words. Wouldn’t everything be dangerous to a coward?

Regardless, Sarella was confident in her disguise, but Arianne would probably give up rather than cut her hair.

“Lady Sarella speaks true, Ari,” Ser Adrey said, looking rather troubled. “If you want to leave Sunspear, I’ll accompany you anywhere—there are many other places than the Wall.”

Nymeria quickly nodded. “We can visit the Free Cities. Perhaps your mother, Lady Mellario, or even a tour across the Nine?” Sarella noticed that the Seven Kingdoms were not mentioned—Prince Doran’s words about the war were taken seriously.

“No, I have set my mind.” Arianne’s brow set in a stubborn line. “The Wall is dreary, that much is true, but I shall go to Winterfell. I want to see that bastard oathbreaker king for myself.”

Father above, Sarella knew the princess liked her lovers dark and dangerous, but wasn’t this too much?

“What if they use you as a hostage?” she said, trying to speak reason. “The North has yet to bend the knee to Aegon, and is thus an enemy of Dorne.”

Her cousin’s face lit up.

“Even better! Now, I’m *definitely* going.”

Nymeria groaned; Tyenne hid her face in her palms while Ser Andrey looked about to cry.

2nd day of the 10th Moon, 303 AC

The Crippled Ghost, the Sunset Sea

Jolts of agony ran through his flesh, but he was used to it. The cold wind sank into his flesh like daggers, but it had nothing on the bite of the northern chill or the sting of the flaying knife.

He should have… he should have escorted Sansa to the Wall.

Even to a wreck of a man, a vile turncloak like him, taking the Black would have washed away his sins.

But Theon was a craven man. Before… before Ramsay, he would have lied to himself. Asha would have said Reek was the coward, that the Bolton Bastard had broken his courage, but he knew it was false.

Theon Greyjoy and Reek were the same, and it rhymed with freak.

He should have fought by Robb’s side to the last. He should have taken Sansa to the Wall and let Jon Snow take his head, just like Lord Stark had taught them. It would have put an end to Theon’s agony, but he was too craven to face death with honour, with dignity that he did not deserve.

A small part of him was glad when word came that Jon had retaken Winterfell. It meant Sansa was alive, Ramsay was dead, and Theon Greyjoy's actions still held a sliver of honour, no matter how small. It was only a small recompense for the harm to the family that raised him, but it was better than nothing.

Even that sliver of relief was meaningless in the end.

Prince Cripple, the crew mocked him when his sister was not near to hear. Broken and gelded, unable to fight or fuck. But the jibes and insults were fleeting like the wind. No matter how truthful, they could never cut as deep as the flaying knife, and any pride he possessed had died long ago in the dungeons of the Dreadfort.

He wanted to jump into the sea and let the Drowned God claim him so his presence would not burden his sister. But Theon Greyjoy was a craven. Yet as craven as he was, he was no longer a fool—pain had taught him many lessons.

The Ironmen were wrong, he knew.

They clung to their pride, to their old ways and iron prices. Yet what was left of it?

Only death and misery. Uncle Euron had bit off more than he could swallow, choking on his greed and ambition at Oldtown, and he dragged the Iron Isles down with him. The iron price left only vengeance and hatred in its wake.

Even now, Silence, his uncle's red flagship, was fervently chasing after Asha's ships, followed by a whole fleet. Each one bore the Hightower sails. His sister's small fleet was running, for they were heavily outnumbered.

Perhaps… perhaps Hightower would catch up to them, and Theon would finally taste death.

A rumble thundered from the west, and he lifted his gaze to the west, only to see the whole horizon choked with heavy, dark clouds. The ship began swaying, and the waves angrily slammed into Asha's fleet, each bigger than the last.

There was another flash of light, a second, a third, and a fourth, and the world was deafened with rumbles. Ice began to pelt down from above, each chunk the size of a goose's egg.

"A bloody hailstorm?" someone started cursing, his voice loud and angry.

Theon laughed, even though the effort sent jolts of agony down his throat and into his spine. Perhaps… perhaps the storm would take him? Would the Drowned God accept him?

"Furl the sails!" Asha's commands echoed across the deck. "Qarl, bring my brother back to his quarters. Move faster, damn you!" Within seconds, the ship churned with panicked sailors.

Would Hightower risk chasing them straight into the storm?

Alas, Theon Greyjoy was craven and didn't resist when the Ironman dragged him into the safety below the deck.

3rd Day of the 10th Moon, 303 AC

Daenerys Targaryen, somewhere in the North

They flew up the kingsroad the first four days after the Gates of the Moon, and things were deceptively smooth until they crossed the Neck. It was as if they had entered a different world altogether, as a vast expanse of white and vicious cold welcomed them to the North.

“Fly over the Kingsroad, he said.” Daenerys scowled, shivering from the cold and huddled closer to Drogon’s warm scales. For the first time, the pleasant heat felt insufficient and woefully muted.

Gods, she couldn’t remember the last time her legs were not cold and wet, and her arse was warm and not covered in sore blisters.

“It was covered with snow, Your Grace,” Barristan said ruefully.

The old knight barely fared any better, and the two were nestled under Drogon’s wing for warmth. The bloody snow was everywhere—a thick veil of endless white covering as far as the eye could see.

It made her child particularly lethargic, and he tired even faster here.

None of the landmarks Ser Barristan had memorised from the map could be seen in the white desert. It reminded her of the Red Waste, only more desolate and brutally cold had replaced the blistering heat. It was just an endless mishmash of snow, snowy hills, and snowy forests, with the rare small village or nameless holdfast hidden in their midst. It did not help that the old knight had never been in the North before…

Daenerys had only ever felt this miserable in the Red Wastes, but preferred the heat to the cold. The damned cold was insidious; it seeped through your clothes and into your skin, no matter what you did. The North was a cursed land where things were either freezing, frozen, or wet.

She had never felt so vulnerable as she did now. The elements were fierce enough, but it felt like the land itself was trying to cast her out. Each time they landed, her eyes darted around, looking for a foe waiting in ambush. Without an army to protect you on the ground, sleep was dangerous. No dragon could fly forever, and the ground was either hard and cold or wet and cold, and you could scarcely rest, only to wake up irritated by dawn.

Their supplies had run out three days prior, and the old knight had to sneak into a small village to buy chickens. Yet *nobody* was willing to sell him food in winter, no matter the coin offered.

“What use is gold here?” The villager had spat on the ground. “I can’t eat it when the winter snow falls high.”

Drogon barely managed to hunt enough for himself and never brought back even charred bones, so Barristan was forced to steal some hens.

Ser Barristan the Chicken Thief.

It would have made her laugh if their situation had not been so piteous.

Even asking directions didn’t work—Daenerys was too conspicuous with her silver hair, and Ser Barristan was met with heavy distrust. Out of the ten times he had asked for directions, they had received only a

single curt, largely unhelpful reply. She considered threatening them with Drogon but was reluctant to act like a brigand, invite the villagers' ire, or, worse, expose their location.

Needless to say, they got lost again. Things got even harder when the sky remained dreary grey for days, with no signs of the sun overhead to give them any direction. The snowstorms did not help either, for they forced Drogon to land lest they fly into some hill or trees.

They had told her the North is the vastest kingdom in Westeros, but words and flimsy ink on some map failed to describe the cold truth of the matter.

“We must be near the White Knife this time,” Barristan murmured. “I think I saw a river in the distance before we landed.”

“Which branch of the White Knife?” Daenerys snarked, her patience wearing dangerously thin. “About half a dozen of them are strewn across the whole North!”

She was now willing to kill for a hot soak and freshly cooked meal. She just hoped House Stark’s hospitality was half as good as Arryn’s.

6th Day of the 10th Moon, 303 AC

Wyman Manderly

As his years piled up, Wyman Manderly realised he liked boring things. Boring things were pleasantly predictable or peaceful and did not make trouble where you least expected it. A perfectly mundane and boring issue, no matter how troublesome, could be planned for and dealt with with ease. Excitement and interesting things were for the young, eager, spirited, and foolish.

Alas, like any grandfather, his beautiful granddaughters were his weak spot. Wylla’s sad blue eyes tore at his heart, but he steeled himself.

He had wanted to make her a queen, and unlike most grandfathers who wished much the same, he had the means for it. A golden crown would have sat well on her pretty head, and it helped that Jon Stark was the stuff of kings, if somewhat unconventional in some of his decisions. He was gentle and proper when dealing with maidens and women, and none could say his sisters weren’t faring well under his guardianship. Wyman Manderly would dare claim he had gone too far in the other direction, indulging the royal princesses more than was appropriate.

Those who had asked for Princess Arya and Sansa’s hands were firmly rebuffed. *“I am in no need of alliances right now. If you want to wed my sisters, win their affection.”*

Of course, the Hand would never dare voice his thoughts openly and had raised the matter only once to the king, in the privacy of the royal solar.

“I know,” Jon Stark had said with a rare smile. *“I mean to indulge them, and so what? They have suffered enough.”*

It was rare to let a lady, let alone a Princess, choose her spouse. Or, well, give them the ability not to choose, for Wyman suspected Princess Sansa had had her fill of husbands after her last two marriages. He did not doubt that this was the king's intent.

Jon Stark held the same honour his father did, if with a streak of cold ruthlessness that Eddard Stark had lacked. It was not a bad thing—it was mercy and hesitation that had seen to Robb and Eddard Stark's demise. If the old Stark lord had wanted to apprehend the lion queen, he should have moved swiftly against her, sweeping all plotters and not giving her a chance to act back. If Robb had wanted to rule as king, he should have struck down the Frey host the moment they had turned their banners away from his army, slighting be damned.

But it was easy to judge from the side. Regardless, Wyman could think of no better man than Jon Stark for his granddaughters to wed, crown or not.

Alas… Shireen Baratheon mounted the dragon in more ways than one, and that chance had flown away. The Lord of White Harbour noticed that the king did not even spare a glance at other maidens once the vows were spoken before the heart tree. For good or ill, Jon Stark did not take after his wild uncle in matters of love.

Countless hearts were broken that day, and only the gods knew how many dreams were shattered.

A foolish Slate chit had tried to get close to Bloodfyre a few days past, hoping to become the king's second wife, like Rhaenys to the Conqueror.

Alas, she was still abed, half her organs ruptured and three ribs broken after the crimson drake had ruthlessly smacked her with a tail, knocking her into the nearby wall. Her father, the younger brother of Lord Slate, had been dismissed from Winterfell, and as soon as Elyn Slate was well enough to travel, she would follow.

It did not change things, though. His granddaughters were over twenty now, and if they delayed any further, they would be half a spinster. If Wyman could not snag a Stark spouse this generation, there would always be the next one, but that meant he needed to arrange good marriages for his darling granddaughters now.

With the Freys out of the way and the crown out of reach, Wynafryd's consort had to be carefully selected, for she would rule White Harbour when he and Wylis passed away. Wylla, however, was easier to match and far more urgent.

"I will do my duty," she mournfully muttered while tugging on her green braid. "Can I choose?"

"There is some choice, yes," Wyman said ruefully. "The new Damon Dustin is still unwed."

A heavy frown settled on Wylla's face. "He's old enough to be my father."

"Not that old, just in his thirties. The new Lord of Barrowton might be a bit wild, but does not whore around and is proper and courteous where it matters." Wyman drained his cup with a sigh. "Larence Hornwood is a tad younger than you but has yet to find himself a spouse, and he has the king's ear and the king's trust and is the new Lord of Hornwood besides."

"Any other?" Wylla asked, face set in an emotionless mask.

Oh, child, poor child. You set your sights too high, and now, the rest will not enter your eyes…

“Lord Mazin’s heir, Lord Harrion Karstark, should he return alive, and the Daryn Wells. The Wells might be a Masterly House, but they’re the strongest amongst those, better off than some lesser lords.”

Seeing his granddaughter remained unmoved, he stifled a sigh. “Morgan Liddle has yet to find a spouse, and you can do worse than a Liddle. There are four chieftains with eldest sons unwed, if you can bear to live up the harsh hills. Torrhen Flint, the king’s squire and the heir to Breakstone Hill. Of course, you can become the queen’s lady-in-waiting, allowing Her Grace to arrange your matters as you see fit.”

His granddaughter’s grimace was all the reply he needed. Alas, there would be no friendship between her and the young queen. He had hoped… but gods often laughed at the plans of men.

As she was thinking, he washed down the heavy bite of sausage with some proper wine. It was not as good as lampreys and eels, but it was the best next thing, together with a well-roasted capon.

“Isn’t Torrhen just a boy of three and ten?”

“And that boy will grow into a man within two to three years,” he chortled. “A royal squire trained by the king will have his ear and favour. His future can only be bright with the effort and tutoring His Grace puts in the Flint heir.”

His mind wandered towards the South. He had considered reaching out to a Vale House of some standing, but abandoned the idea swiftly. It was not suitable for House Manderly to ally outside the kingdom, not when the king commanded dragons. It was wiser to make a strong alliance in the North proper, to bolster his influence further than to spread himself thin outside the kingdom.

Yet doing so was easier said than done. The pickings on this side of the Neck were rather slim. The war had left many a widow and had seen the death of many fathers, brothers, and sons. Two or three noble ladies were unwed for every noble son available. Would this be a second winter of widows?

It didn’t bother Wyman as much, for he was the Hand of the king, and his granddaughters came with a hefty dowry and a significant alliance that no other could match the North save for the king’s sisters.

“Larence Hornwood, then,” Wylla said, voice dull. “He’s about my age, and I will, at least, be rather close to White Harbour, and I can visit my mother and sister often.”

It was a good choice, rekindling his old alliance with the Hornwoods. Alas, if only Donella and her boy had not perished, such a union would not be needed.

“Excellent,” Wyman said. “I will write to Lord Larence and start negotiations.”

Wylla could sulk now, but it was one of the duties of a highborn Lord or Lady to wed for duty. He and his son had married for duty, as had many other lords. Love could come with time. Some who were foolish and hasty and married for lust, passion, or affection discovered that those things faded with time, unlike duty.

“Even a match out of duty can grow sweet with time,” Wyman said softly, giving his granddaughter an encouraging smile. “Don’t lose heart, Wylla. Respect and understanding are the road to happiness.”

This failed to lift her spirits. Damn it, he had to summon Leona, who would be far better equipped to deal with such talk. Ah, how he missed his wife, sweet Lynara. She would have set Wylla straight with nary an effort if she lived. But the gods had decided that his sweet mermaids had never known her grandmother, and they never would.

The rest of their meal went in silence, though his granddaughter found staring at her rib steak more appealing than eating it.

The door slammed open, and his page burst into the room, tripped and fell face down.

Wyman watched with concern as the red-faced boy immediately stood up, seemingly unaffected by the fall.

“Lord Manderly,” Alyn said breathlessly, eyes wide with fear. “Ser Brynden has called for you outside urgently!”

“And what does the Blackfish need me outside for?” Wyman frowned at his unfinished plate of honey-glazed capon. If he went now, it would grow cold.

“A b–big dragon’s come down in the yard!” the boy stammered, near wild-eyed with panic.

The Hand very nearly cuffed him for his foolishness. Had the whelp lost his wits entirely?
“Have you no eyes in your head? His Grace’s dragons land there near every day.”

“This one’s not the king’s!” the lad blurted, voice cracking.

The words struck him like a plunge into icy water. The capon turned to ash upon his tongue; his chair screeched across the rushes as he lurched to his feet and lumbered for the yard as fast as his heavy legs could manage. Alyn scrambled after him.

“Has the Blackfish sent word to His Grace?” he barked over his shoulder.

“I—I don’t know, my lord,” the boy stammered, rubbing at his scraped elbows as he hurried to keep pace.

The moment the cold bit at Wyman’s cheeks, he halted, breath misting.
“Fetch me my cloak,” he snapped. In his haste, he had left it behind, and though his bulk kept out much of the chill, even his fat would not shield him long.

In the snowy courtyard, scores of guards cautiously ringed a giant dragon in a trembling circle—none daring closer than twenty yards. More men poured in, spears lowered, shields raised. On the ramparts above, archers were stringing bows with frantic hands.

For good or ill, the great beast had yet to unleash torrents of fire. No, if this were an attack, it would never land but unleash its hellish flame from above, out of reach of spears and arrows.

Wyman's steps faltered when his eyes finally settled on the dragon.

Black and deep red, its scales slashed with streaks of vivid scarlet red, the colours of House Targaryen in the flesh.

Greater than Winter in size, but its crimson horns lacked the viciousness the king's dragon had, and his eyes, whilst glowing like two crimson pits straight from the Seven Hells, did not send the same shiver down his back that Winter's gaze did. Its draconic frame was slender in comparison to, and its tail looked bare, nearly ordinary like Stormstrider and Bloodfyre's, without the bony spike at the end.

Whatever it lacked in demeanour, it made up for in size, nearly twice as large as the blue dragon, and its wings fanned out far further, nearly blotting out half the great courtyard.

A dragon alone would have no reason to come to Winterfell, not like this, and Wyman Manderly needed to look no further than the chains strapping a saddle at the base of its neck to find out why.

The rider was a figure wrapped tight in furs and wool, though the streaks of silver spilling out from the hood betrayed it. A Targaryen.

Wyman knew of this dragon, though he had not seen it before. Edwyle had described the dragons the Mad King's daughter commanded, and this particular beast fit the description of her mount too closely for comfort.

In the end, dragons were not some cabbages one could find in a market, and no other soul could boast of dragons but Daenerys Targaryen. A closer squint confirmed that the fur-wrapped figure was too petite, too slender to be a man.

The Hand's mind raced as he watched the figure unstrap with no small amount of confidence. She was not alone, for a knight in a greying plate helped her down the saddle, and the bold confidence in them made his heart sink.

The dragon's tail whipped at the nearby guards, and the beast roared, a terrible sound that made the snow on the rooftops flutter. The men-at-arms surrounding the dragon faltered, retreating slowly, and Wyman did not blame them. No amount of training or drilling taught you how to deal with a beast like this.

This was bad.

In a moment, the knight nodded his head, concluding whatever talk he had with the woman. Head raised high, he approached with deliberate slowness.

Wyman's eyes darted across the courtyard around to find His Grace, but all he saw were the faces of frightened guards peeking beneath their helmets. There was not even a pip or sound of Winter, Bloodfyre, or Stormstrider.

Wiping the beads of cold sweat pooling on his brow, he waddled through the snow to meet the stone-faced Blackfish.

"Where is His Grace?" Wyman demanded.

"He has gone flying with the queen," said Ser Brynden, face stiff. His eyes were wary, but the Tully knight was a steadfast man and would not falter here. "The knight coming to speak bears no small resemblance to Ser Barristan the Bold."

Surely enough, the old, tired face indeed looked familiar up close.

The famed knight had turned grey, and a long white beard hid much of his face. Ser Barristan no longer wore white armour and cloak but a simple plate with a three-headed dragon of House Targaryen on the surcoat.

A sword still adorned his hip, but his once vigorous footsteps had grown uneven, stilted by a slight drag in the right foot, and a cane was gripped tight in his gloved hand, though to Wyman it looked more like something the old knight would use as a bludgeon rather than a proper walking stick. Still, there the seven-coloured flag of parley was tied to it, and that brought Wyman no small measure of relief.

Before long, the man was standing before them, and any doubts of his name melted away—Wyman had seen the Bold more than enough to recognise him, even after his hair had grown white and his face struggled against the onset of wrinkles.

“Lord Manderly.” Ser Barristan’s voice was hoarse, much like that of a man about to fall ill from exposure, and his face was reddened by the cold. Still, he kept to his courtesies and regarded even the Blackfish with a polite dip of his head. “Ser Brynden.”

“Ser Barristan,” Wyman returned uneasily, his mind racing but conjuring no plan but to delay. Delay until the king returned. “Serving Princess Daenerys now?”

The old knight frowned.

“I am here to accompany the *queen* on King Aegon’s orders.”

Wyman was wrong; this wasn’t bad, it was *terrible*. If Daenerys had wed Aegon, she could only be here to ask them to bend the knee. Alas, it seemed things were happening far faster than Edwyle’s fledgling spy network could keep up.

The dragon was here to intimidate, to cow them into kneeling, just like Torrhen had been cowed. Drogon, his mind supplied the great beast’s name—an odd name coming from Daenerys’ first husband, a horselord of some infamy. Edwyle had given it in a report about some weeks earlier.

Yet… yet, Wyman knew Jon Stark was not one to lay down his sword, let alone kneel, not now, not ever. The knot in his belly tightened to the point of pain. Conflict… seemed inevitable, and no amount of envoys or talking could turn the inevitable away. Dragons and their riders… fighting in the sky, setting the very air aflame. Another Dance, and their side had the smaller dragons.

The idea of it frightened the old merman lord, and for a moment, he faltered. For a moment, he considered advising the king to kneel with all that he had. He himself was too involved with House Stark to allow his loyalty to falter. But even if the king lay down his sword and surrendered his crown… would the overproud Targaryens suffer a Stark and a Baratheon to ride a dragon and be forever a threat to their rule?

The dark behemoth shuffled in the snow, its great jaw snapping wide open to unleash a low, rumbling sound that Wyman felt even in his bones.

Another attempt at cowing them.

Even if there was a fight, he was too old to be of aid, but it didn't matter. The vows of fealty were already spoken, and the Lord of White Harbour had long decided to back Jon Stark to the death. While ruthless, he was honourable, and if anything happened to him and his, the king would not abandon House Manderly so long as they served loyally.

"There is only one king in the North, and his name is Stark!" he declared with far more confidence than he felt. Yet his proclamation made the Stark men-at-arms stand straighter against the dark dragon.

Ser Barristan let out a snort. "It is well that a Snow is claiming the Northern crown, then. Regardless, Her Grace means to see this Jon Snow in person and make her case."

They were mocking him, Wyman realised. No titles, courtesies, or even a formal acknowledgement—they were mocking Jon Stark and King Robb's final will. It was not a simple disregard of one person, but for the whole of the North, as if they were no more than some annoyance to be dealt with in a day.

Perhaps… they would be right a year ago, when a Bolton sat in Winterfell's Great Hall, having come to it by the means of treason and ruling the vast lands of the cold North in the name of a young lion cub, cowing others into obedience with hostages stolen at that bloody wedding and threats of doom. But today, things were no longer the same. North had Jon Stark. It had a queen, too; small as she was, she was brave enough to claim a dragon of her own.

Wyman could give the word, and all the Stark men here would rush the dragon. Unnerved as they were by the great beast's looming bulk and the fiery glow in its maw, they were not unmanned by its fierce presence. Ser Brynden was not someone who would ever allow cravens, fear or not, they would fight to the death. Just one word, and all the archers on the walls would rain arrows upon the beast from above. Perhaps they could kill the dragon, but even if they failed, an armoured knight would not survive a hail from all directions, let alone Daenerys Targaryen protected by mare fur and wool. The cost of such would be dire, for Wyman and many others would probably leave this place as nothing more than a charred husk.

Yet, just like the guest right or bending the knee, it was not his call to make.

In the distance, nestled under the dragon's great shadow, the Mad King's daughter looked around with a fierce frown as if Winterfell prickled at her eyes and the North disagreed with her.

"In such a case, I'm afraid we're at an impasse." Wyman clasped his hands tight to cover his unease. "His Grace is currently out of Winterfell."

Perhaps grown bored of waiting, Daenerys trudged through the snow until she stood by Barristan's side, her face a mask. Though the old lord couldn't say if she were hard to read or just numb from the cold.

Up close, Wyman noticed her hair was a mess, and big dark bags had formed under tired purple eyes as if she had not had a good night's rest for at least a sennight. Yet there was a coldness, pride to the point of arrogance to her demeanour that reminded Wyman of Aerys in his youth.

But perhaps that was the arrogance of those born to the House of the Dragon. His eyes flicked to the dragon. Unlike her sire, Daenerys certainly had the power to back it.

Ser Barristan leaned in, whispering in her ear.

Daenerys Targaryen straightened up, her purple eyes narrowed as they pinned down Wyman… and the paw-shaped pin on his chest.

“How quaint.” Her reddened lips curled as puffs of mist slipped out of her mouth with each word. “If Jon Snow is not here, surely someone is in command of the castle. Someone who could follow courtesies and receive us as is proper.”

As is proper?

Did she want to be greeted like a queen, granting a visit to a royal subject?

Or perhaps she desired the offer of bread and salt that would guarantee her well-being here, even though Wyman had no right to grant it?

“Of course,” Wyman said slowly, giving her a slight smile. Haste was of no little use for him or the North now. “When the king is absent, the Hand rules the kingdom. And I have the fortune of being granted that honourable office.”

“A king?” Daenerys let out a low, chilly laughter. “I’ve long heard that crowns are cheap on this side of the narrow sea, and kings were five a penny.” She turned to the old knight to her side. “Ser Barristan, was it not you who said that bastards were never set to inherit land or claim castles, let alone claim a crown?”

“It is so, Your Grace,” the knight said tightly.

“Any man can claim to be king,” Brynden finally spoke, his rough voice solemn. His eyes narrowed at Daenerys. “Any woman can claim to be a queen, too. Three of those lay claim to the North. Tommen Baratheon styles himself the king of the Seven Kingdoms, your husband claims to be the rightful Lord of the realm and all that it entails, and yet… the North has long grown weary of those high and mighty claims.”

Ser Barristan Selmy frowned.

“Your tongue has grown gilb since I last saw you, Ser Brynden,” he said calmly. “And yet those words ring hollow from a Tully not born or bred in the North, serving the bastard son of your niece’s husband, a boy unrelated to you by blood. What sort of folly has taken root in your skull to drive you to speak so insolently before those who had mastered a dragon?”

“Folly?” The Blackfish let out a short, harsh bark of laughter. “The very castle I was raised in was gifted to a Frey, and for a deed of betrayal most vile. I have watched my entire world crumble and the line of Tully wither as the legacy of mine own house was shattered both in spirit and deed. My grandnieces linger, yes, but as dear as they are to me, they are all wolf, and I see the line of Tully left little mark on them. Jon Stark has given me a purpose and a place to shelter my old bones until the day I breathe my last, and I shall not stand here quietly as you or yours speak with naked disdain and offer insult to a man’s back.”

“I have spoken harshly, yes,” Ser Barristan’s face was all stone, “but not unjustly. No falsehoods have left my tongue today, ser.”

“I dare you to speak the very same words to His Grace’s face, then.”

Wyman Manderly cleared his throat loudly. “Further talk on this matter is moot without the Stark of Winterfell. Let us spare ourselves needless barbs. If you desire the North’s fealty, it is he you ought to convince, Ser Barristan, *Princess* Daenerys.”

Her lips thinned with displeasure, but she gave a curt nod and grew her shadowskin cloak tighter. “We shall await the *Lord* of Winterfell, then.”

Ser Barristain remained a tall shadow at her side, his pale blue eyes studying the surroundings.

Silence hung in the courtyard, and tension mounted by the second, the tail of the great black beast snapping with impatience. They took each other’s measure, yet nobody dared to speak further.

Wyman’s mind raced, trying to think of a way out of this situation. Warring with the House of the Dragon was ill-advised now, with a dark threat looming beyond the Wall. No wise king would wish to fight in every direction.

Yet, no matter how hard he groped for a solution in the darkness, his mind struggled to conjure a way forward. Even an uneasy peace could result in a second Dance of Dragons if only delayed. Perhaps… perhaps if Jon Stark’s children wed those of Daenerys.

But planning such things with unborn babes was nearly an impossible task.

The bad blood between House Stark and Targaryen would not help such matters either—

A sudden roar shattered the taut silence, and Wyman let out a breath he did not realise he was holding. This roar was as savage as ever, thunderous enough to make you feel small and helpless, but now there was a hint of challenge to it.

Daenerys’s great beast reared upon its hind legs, vast wings streaked with crimson unfurling in a storm of leather and sinew. With a single mighty beat, it sent a flurry of snow whirling through the courtyard, forcing Wyman to cover his eyes with his forearm.

Seven above, do not let them fight here in the courtyard!

Could three smaller dragons even take down a bigger one?

By the time Wyman wiped the wet, cold snow from his eyes, the skies glittered with blue and purple.

Relief flooded his veins when Winter and Stormstrider landed on the far end of the courtyard, away from the great black beast. The king was already helping his wife off her saddle without standing on ceremony.

Wyman took no small joy at the stunned face of Daenerys Targaryen, her mouth gaping like a fish. Her purple eyes threatened to pop out when Bloodfyre slid over the curtain wall and landed beside his siblings. The three dragons stood side by side, growing in defiance at the black dragon who had dared to intrude on their territory.

Yet with all of them settled down, the distance couldn’t be starker. The king’s drakes were dwarfed by Daenerys’s beast; he alone was larger than the three of them together.

Smoke curled from the black dragon's maw, but Dragon made no move to attack. Instead, he let out another low, rumbling growl as if to warn the smaller drakes.

While Winter remained uncowed, his blue eyes glaring murder at the big dragon, Stormstrider and Bloodfyre were half-hidden behind their brother's wing.

Then, wings unfurled, Stormstrider took to the left, Bloodfyre flew to the right, perching on the rampart opposite the queen's dragon, and the enemy's beast found himself flanked from three directions—whichever Drogon chose to attack would leave his wings, underbelly, and tail exposed to the other two.

Even Daenerys looked on the arrangement with no small measure of wariness.

Jon Stark strode towards them, the infamous Stark ice mask on his face betrayed nothing but coldness. Trailing by his side, Shireen was far easier to read, even if all Wyman could see in her eyes was resolve.

"Ser Brynden." The king's voice was firm and edged with authority. "Dismiss the guards, for they would serve no purpose here."

Aerys's daughter had finally gathered her bearings, her gaze studying the king with quiet intensity. Her fingers, however, trembled, but Wyman couldn't say if it were due to the cold, fear, excitement, or anger.

The guards filed out of the courtyard, though many eyes were now watching the confrontation from the gates and the ramparts and peeking through the half-opened shutters and windows.

Neither side made a move to speak, choosing to study each other instead.

"Presenting," Wyman cleared his throat. "His Grace Jon Stark, the Third of His Name, Lord of Winterfell, King of Winter, Defender of the North, and Her Grace, Shireen Stark, his lady wife."

Barristan and Daenerys frowned at Shireen, who stood straighter at her husband's side, looking every inch a queen in her white and black riding gown.

"Princess Daenerys Targaryen." The king's voice was so flat that even Wyman cringed. "Your visit here is as unwelcome as it is unexpected. I do not remember inviting you to Winterfell or receiving any ravens to herald your presence."

Daenerys opened her mouth to speak, yet no words came out as her heavy gaze darted from the king to his wife, then to the dragons, and back again.

"Today is a day of great surprises for all of us, it seems," she said, voice razor-sharp.

Yet, for all the pride in her bones, she was the shortest amongst them here, looking much like a petulant child meddling in adult matters—though younger, the Northern queen was easily two inches taller.

Jon Stark cocked his head, his mouth twitching as if he had noticed the same thing as Wyman. "It is poor manners to intrude in one's home uninvited. But that is fine by me. Let us dispense with the niceties. State your purpose and begone."

There it was; any veneer of pleasantries was irrevocably torn before the talk had even started. Wyman felt his back damp with cold sweat.

Her violet eyes hardened. “How do you have dragons?”

“What is it to you?” The king’s voice turned stern. “Who are you to barge into my castle and demand answers from me?”

“Dragons belong to House Targaryen, ser,” Daenerys uttered through clenched teeth. “Everyone from Westeros to Asshai knows of it. How would I not demand answers from some,” she angrily waved his hand at him, “pretender and a thief!”

Jon regarded her with a cold look that most men reserved for children throwing tantrums.

“Bold claims for a mouth who had yet to taste bread and salt,” he said icily. “I can cut you down where you stand, and none in the realm would fault me for it, daughter of Aerys.”

Ser Barristan’s face was taut, his hand hovering over the hilt on his hip. The old knight was well-armoured, just a helmet short of a full suit of plate, while the king wore plain riding garments. And yet… if steel were drawn today, Wyman would bet all of his coin that if Jon Stark wished, neither Daenerys nor Ser Barristan would walk out of here alive. No matter how bold and capable the old knight was, it would not save him, not against the king. But the true challenge was the great black dragon behind them.

“A threat?” Daenerys’s voice was distorted by anger. “A thief dares to threaten me?”

“Let us not be hasty,” Shireen said, placing her slim, gloved fingers on her husband’s sword hand that was clenched tight against the blade’s hilt. “Princess Daenerys, surely you have not travelled to Winterfell only to… stir trouble in our halls.”

Daenerys frowned at the black-haired queen, as if seeing her for the first time.

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” Wyman said, raising his voice so it carried loud. “Ser Barristan spoke of some marriage between Princess Daenerys and the man claiming to be Aegon, and they are here to demand the North’s fealty.”

“Is that so?” The king’s gaze flicked between Daenerys and Barristan Selmy. “You wish to see the North bend our knees?”

It was the Selmy knight who replied.

“Indeed. The queen has spoken in anger,” he said, giving the red-faced Daenerys a glance. “But the purpose of our visit is no secret.”

Ser Barristan’s words were stiff, and his actions were stiffer. His left hand pulled free a scroll from a pouch in his belt. *“His Grace, Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of His Name, is willing to accept the North and House Stark back into the king’s peace, pardon all of their crimes, and let them keep their lordly titles should they bend the knee and pay him homage.”*

The king listened to it with an unreadable face, not making a move to interrupt.

“Is this all to it?” he asked once Ser Barristan stopped.

“Yes.”

“Very well, I have received the message.” Jon Stark gave a solemn nod. “Now crawl back to your Aegon and tell him he can have the North from my cold, dead hands if he wants it that badly. Do you need it in writing?”

For good or ill, the prickly words saw Daenerys’s temper flare up again.

“Such insolence!” she growled. “You steal dragons from House Targaryen and—”

Jon’s response was laden with disdain. “You say that as if dragons are sacks of turnips to be spirited away at night. It is the dragon that chooses the rider; it isn’t some slave or horse to be ordered around.”

“You!” The silver-haired queen heaved, her slender chest falling and rising furiously. “Must you remain so senselessly stubborn over some misplaced pride? How many shall die for this stupid folly?”

Shireen shook her head. “Men die every day. How many have died under the swords sworn to your husband?” Her words grew sharper. “If you so desire the end of the bloodshed, why don’t you start with him?”

“Aegon the Conqueror showed that a long peace followed in the wake of his conquest,” Daenerys uttered through gritted teeth. “Surely you cannot be so blind?”

“Justify your ambition however you want,” the king said flatly. “Regardless, any promise of peace and mercy coming from you or Aegon is worthless. House Stark had our fill of House Targaryen’s mercy with your sire. Perhaps you’ll claim that your word holds weight and yet… I can’t help but wonder. Were you not the woman who broke her word in Astapor? If you’re willing to lie when it suits your needs, what stops you from doing the same now if you think your cause is righteous?”

Daenerys reeled, and Ser Barristan let out a long, weary sigh.

“If your lord father could see you, he would weep,” he said, disappointment plain on his face. “House Stark has always prided itself on its honour and duty. The North is spent. Surely you would want to spare your people further struggle and grief instead of stubbornly clinging to your pride?”

“To live is to struggle, ser, no matter what one chooses, ser.” The king fixed his cold gaze upon the old knight. “Every boy from Sunspear to the Wall grows up with the tale of the honourable Ser Barristan the Bold, the finest knight in the whole realm. Yet all I see here is nothing more than a lackey who changes his cloak like I change my boots. How many vows have you spoken in vain? How many kings has it been? Four, five?”

Ser Barristan’s face darkened. “An oathbreaker speaking of oaths,” he bit back. “Perhaps you have forgotten those solemn vows all the men of the Night’s Watch give? Not only that, but I see the Lannister blazon amongst those here. Have you made good with the very same House that brought about the grisly end of your brother and father?”

“Ser Lucion and Lady Cerenna have no Stark blood on their hands,” the king said. “And unlike you two, they came here announced, followed every rule of decorum that is demanded from an envoy.”

Wyman tracked Selmy’s gaze and found the Lannister guests sticking out like sore thumbs with their red silks and furs dyed golden. The Lannister maiden looked a mix between terrified and preening at the

king's acknowledgement. It did not escape his notice that His Grace had completely sidestepped the topic of the Night's Watch. Clever.

The king continued mercilessly, "Enough bandying empty words. I have more respect for the old ways than your ilk, so you envoys may leave unmolested. Begone from Winterfell and tell Aegon that I care not for the south and your thrones and crowns, but I won't grovel at his feet. Yet if he wants war, he shall get it."

It was a cold, scathing response, but Daenerys had not shown an ounce of politeness from the start. It laid the North's stance plainly—if Aegon wanted to have the North, he would not get it without a fight.

It was a clever move, tearing away the flimsy veneer of legitimacy and forcing Aegon to show himself for what he truly was. A man eager to sit on the Iron Throne not for the good of the people, but for naked ambition.

"You will rue this impudence, Jon Snow," Daenerys spat, words dripping with venom. "I came here in peace, yet you answer me scorn. Winterfell shall burn to the ground, and I shall finish what my father started and kill your cursed line to the last. Mark my words!"

She swirled around and made way for her dragon, shadowed by the silent old knight.

For a short moment, Wyman thought they would all be roasted when the unwelcome guests mounted Drogon. Yet the dark dragon let out a challenging roar, leapt in the air, and with a strike of his great wings disappeared behind the southern curtain walls.

His heart almost stopped when he glanced at the king.

Any sign of calm had melted away. Jon Stark's face was twisted with fury, his amethyst eyes were glowing, and the old merman lord felt like a thousand ants were crawling down his spine. Even breathing became difficult, as if an enormous weight had pressed over his chest. Yet as quickly as it had come, the suffocating pressure drained away.

With a shaky hand, Wyman snatched the hem of his cloak and dabbed at sweat threatening to spill into his eyes.

War… *war* had just been declared with a spiteful threat, and Jon Stark did not look like someone who would take it lying down.

The tension in Wymna's shoulders eased when Daenerys did not return, but the tightness in his chest remained. They had avoided a fiery battle here, and the trouble was just beginning.

Winter gave a low, furious rumble. With a powerful beat of his wings, he lifted into the sky, rising higher and higher before arcing away in the direction opposite of Daenerys and her great black dragon.

"I should have relieved her and Selmy of their heads there and then," the king hissed. "They would've made fine company to the Bolton bastard."

The council meeting had been called with haste, and every member was quick to appear. The whole of Winterfell had seen Daenerys coming with the dragon.

“You already gave your word to let them leave,” said Shireen, though her blue eyes clouded with worry. “No matter how rude and lacking in manners, killing envoys would stain your name forever. Besides, how many would her enraged dragon kill before being slain?”

“Yes, you are right. A king cannot act in anger, even if they threaten him in his own home.” Something dark passed through the king’s face. “But this insult shall not go unrepaid.”

It wasn’t some grand proclamation or a mighty boast but a simple promise. The king had often stated his lack of interest in the south, yet it did not matter now. The old lord knew blood would be shed between House Stark and Targaryen.

Hundreds of thousands had perished because of Rhaegar’s greed and his sire’s madness. How many more would lose their lives because of Daenerys and Aegon’s pride and ambition?

The Hand took a deep gulp from the mulled wine and voiced the question prickling in his mind. “Can we truly afford to wage war with the south when winter is almost upon us, and we have already invested a host in defence of the Wall and might yet have to send more men?”

“No, we cannot,” Jon Stark replied without hesitation, but his fists were clenched so hard his knuckles had turned white. “But… the North shall not fight two wars. As long as Daenerys and Aegon die, their dragons would be no threat. Even if the host they have gathered lingers after their demise, their ambition at the North will end in the deep marshes of the Neck just like hundreds of Andal warlords in the ages past.”

“A king and a queen are not so easily slain.” Gloom had taken hold of Galbart Glover’s face. “Especially in war, where they would have a whole army to protect them.”

“Capable catspaws are worth a king’s ransom and then some,” Edwyle Locke said, looking troubled. “Can the treasury bear such a heavy expense?”

They couldn’t, but nobody said it. Winterfell’s coffers were far from empty, but House Stark was not swimming in gold like the Lannisters of Casterly Rock, and any spare coin might be needed in the coming winter. Or in the war against the Others.

Wyman downed his goblet of wine in one go. He would drink himself to sleep tonight and hope that this whole thing had just been a bad dream. Yet it was too vivid, too real.

“A battle with dragons in the skies will be risky,” he said. “We do not know if Aegon has claimed another of Daenerys’ dragons.”

Glover scoffed. “Why else would she wed him?”

“You mean besides uniting their claims?” The queen said lightly, making the Justicar flush.

“It doesn’t matter if they have one, two, or three dragonriders,” Jon Stark declared. “Winterfell and the North shall prepare. This is not the Black Dread we’re fighting against. These dragons are young, small, and their scales are soft and vulnerable—their flames are far from hot enough to melt stone. Send an order to my bannermen to shore up their defences. I want Winterfell’s walls lined with scorpions as fast as possible. And we must increase our arrow stockpile.”

“It will take some time to recruit skilled craftsmen and carpenters and produce scorpions.” Wyman grimaced. “Years of war have thinned our arrow stock. And we’ve run out of goose feathers for fletchings, too.”

And unfletched arrowshafts were worthless. Ser Barristan was right earlier—the North was too spent for another war, and not just in men to wield swords and spears. The snow and the coming winter would only make feeding and gathering a host not only challenging but also dangerous. Even Winterfell would struggle to feed itself for long, let alone the weaker and poorer lords.

“Those should be easy enough to gather, given enough time.” Jon waved dismissively. “Levy a monthly tax of three feathers per goose and duck on my lands.”

“It shall be done. Then what comes next, Your Grace?” Wyman shuffled in his seat, feeling the chair all too harsh on his arse today. “What shall our plan be?”

“Nothing. You sit here, prepare, and assist my wife to keep the kingdom running smoothly in my name. In a moon’s turn, I shall fly south and deal with the Targaryens myself. Ours is the Old Way.”

The words were uttered with iron surety that made Wyman want to believe.

“How, Your Grace?” Glover asked, face grim. “Daenerys’s beasts are said to be older and far larger. Forget about dragons, you yourself are one man, my liege. A great warrior you might be, but even the greatest swordsmen will eventually tire long before they hack down a thousand foes to death.”

“I have my ways.” Jon Stark’s icy gaze bore down on Galbart. “I do not need your understanding, Lord Glover. All I need is your obedience.”

The Lord of Deepwood Motte shrank in his seat, surrendering a weak nod.

Wolkan and Edwyle were swift to voice their agreement, and Wyman voiced his assent with a heavy heart, sinking deep in thought.

In war, every act, big or small, each decision carried no small amount of danger. But the Hand could not afford to ignore the consequences and had to consider the dangers.

The North would be finished if Jon Stark flew down South and perished. The House of the Dragon did not suffer defiance, not when they ruled the sky. The king was the only thing keeping the North together, and if he died, neither his wife nor his sisters could bear the weight of the crown so easily.

A heir would set Wyman at ease, but the marriage was still young, and certain matters would not be rushed as one wished, no matter how eager you were.

What gave the king the confidence to strike first and strike fast? Was it the element of surprise?

It was a bold idea, no doubt, though one that even the greatest catspaw would hesitate to undertake. Even if Jon Stark could kill Aegon and Daenerys somehow… how would he ever escape?

And yet the tightness in the royal jaw meant that attempting to pry any morsel of planning out of the king would be folly.

All reason told Wyman Manderly that the king's plan was folly. Yet his heart somehow believed that the king would find a way. It defied all sense, but so did many things that Jon Stark had done before.

Wyman Manderly loved boring things.

Alas, the coming moons were shaping up to be entirely too exciting for his taste.