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.

19th Day of the 8th Moon, 299 AC

Myrcella, Winterfell

Myrcella stood on the battlements of the so-called Princess Tower. Now fully rebuilt, it was taller than before at nearly two hundred and seventy feet and was her most expensive project. She had requested the rebuilt watchtower to be as tall as possible, but what made it more expensive was the thick iron rod on the roof and the thick band of copper wire that went from it all the way under the ground.

"Could have made dozens of swords from that much metal," Mikken grumbled, but he had followed her orders anyway. "And nearly a ton of bloody copper isn't easy to forge and twist into bands of wires as old Luwin requested. Pardon me for the language, m'lady."

The final price was even numbing to her, and she could still see Catelyn throw her disapproving glances every time they neared the tower.

But Luwin and his Archmaester friend's idea about protecting the building from thunder and lighting in a similar manner to the infamous Storm's End had *worked*. Three times had lightning struck the tower in the last half a year, and the building was completely undamaged. The outrageous cost was the only thing stopping them from using it on every tall structure. The Princess was happy with how the tower had turned out, even if some blamed her for throwing gold at 'vanities'. But the vanity–even though there was nothing vain in her burning lungs after the steep climb here–allowed her almost a bird's-eye view over Winterfell's surroundings.

And the unmistakable flood of steel and men coming up the kingsroad, fanning out like an ugly beast trying to swallow Winterfell and the surrounding lands.

It was like a nightmare coming to life. Hearing others speak of some battles out of sight felt distant, unbelievable even, but seeing the foe with her own eyes made her veins freeze. They were not fully prepared yet, and Myrcella felt scared, as if an invisible hand had gripped her heart, ready to rip it out.

"They arrived a sennight faster than we thought," Ser Rodrik Cassel noted grimly by her side. "Our scouts just saw them yesterday. There was no word from Cerwyn either–which means they either took the castle or shot the ravens down."

Cerwyn had a thousand warriors as a garrison and surely wouldn't fall so quickly. Yet the mere possibility made her insides twist.

"And we have seen neither hide nor hair from Arthor Karstark either," Myrcella's voice quivered. "Another thousand men gone. Do we have the numbers of Hightower?"

Oh, how she regretted sending the fool to his death. A fool he might have been, but the thousand swords would be missed.

“My scouts counted about twenty thousand men between Hightower, Redwyne, and their bannermen. Three thousand more under the banner of the Seven-Pointed Star and over twelve thousand zealot levies with just slings and shields and axes and spears.”

With five thousand men garrisoned behind Winterfell’s walls, they were outnumbered over seven to one. *‘A dark irony of numbers by the gods,’* Myrcella mused inwardly.

“What worries me the most is Wintertown,” the old knight gazed at the houses sprawled beneath the walls to the south. “We should have scoured it by fire earlier to deny the Reachmen, and now Hightower can turn it into his camp and a handy point of assault.”

Catelyn–and Myrcella, for that matter, had hesitated to torch the town from which House Stark drew a significant amount of wealth, trade, prestige, and swords. There was also a reluctance to act until the very last moment, hoping snow would come early this year and the enemy would never reach here. But the gods were not on their side, and the opportunity was lost, for the surging tide of Reachmen was spilling hungrily toward Winterfell’s walls, with streams of riders rushing around and ahead to secure the surroundings.

“It’s where the clansmen and the other Stark subjects come to weather the winter,” Luwin had explained. “If it’s destroyed, tens of thousands will die with no food or shelter in the coming winter.”

And now the shelter would be a boon to Hightower.

“Can we still sally out and burn it?” The words were as bitter as vinegar upon her tongue.

“We can try,” Rodrik said, but his voice lacked conviction. “Otherwise, Hightower will be like a thorn in Winterfell’s walls. Worse, a thorn we will would be unable to dislodge if he fortifies Wintertown as his base.”

20th Day of the 8th Moon (one day later)

“Fortune favours the bold,” Luwin said weakly. “Though the masters of warcraft always claim that it’s the reverse–the gods punish hesitation.”

Two hundred men dead and just as many more wounded were the cost of hesitation; the skirmish amidst Wintertown had been bloody, and they couldn't commit for too long with the gates open when the encroaching army arrived. Worse, an hour later, it had begun to rain, putting out the meagre fires, and her fears had come true: Hightower had turned the place into his camp.

Poxy Tom and Eldon were among the dead. They were guardsmen who had served House Stark loyally for decades, as did their families for generations.

Even now, the wails of their widows and hundreds of others haunted Myrcella. But their foe cared not for grief.

An opposite camp was being hastily erected, ditches, palisades, stakes and all on the northern side of Winterfell to face any potential attack from Mors Umber. Though the western and eastern gates remained unbarred, the Reachmen were everywhere.

“Curse Hightower and his heretic ambition!” Catelyn hissed when she saw the middle of Wintertown's square. The enormous throne carved of weirwood lined with diamonds could be seen from afar, and the pale seven-pointed star above him was like a mocking taunt. As if that was not enough of a humiliation, the Hightower king and the other Reachlords all wore wolf pelts for cloaks to signify that House Stark was regarded as little better than prey. “We should have made Mors Umber and the nine thousand men stay inside the keep and escort some of the smallfolk further north and east instead.”

Hightower by himself wasn't as scary as the implications of the new kings gracing Westeros. Aegon the Blackfyre, backed by the Golden Company, had claimed a crown of his own. The next pretender was again Balon Greyjoy–which meant that between Renly and the new kings, no significant assistance from the South could be expected soon. Joffrey was dead, but she only felt numbness at the news. Perhaps she was a terrible sister, but a part of her rejoiced, and the only sorrow she felt was that so long as the Iron Throne was empty, any of the four pretenders' cause would be strengthened.

Some servants in Winterfell even whispered that Edwyn should be king, but Myrcella silenced all that talk–Joffrey’s wife was still pregnant in White Harbour, and Tommen also came before him, and the last thing they could afford was a division in the face of so many foes.

Dark wings, dark words, for there was no further news of Jon Snow, who was supposed to campaign in the Northern Mountains or from across the Narrow Sea, where Lord Stark and Tommen were stranded.

“Perhaps,” Myrcella allowed weakly. “But did we not agree to send Umber away, lest Hightower decide the odds were not to his liking and take Cerwyn? Worse–staying there and focusing on consolidating his gains on the other side of the White Knife as a spear constantly pointed at our throat?”

It sounded sensible; five thousand skilled veterans would surely be enough to defend a castle, but she felt uneasy. *No, not five thousand but four thousand and eight hundred,* she amended. Hightower had lost nearly a thousand in taking the town, but that was a drop in the bucket compared to any losses Winterfell suffered.

“It is true that no sane man would siege a castle with fourteen thousand men garrisoning it lest they had hundreds of thousands to throw at the walls, and Hightower is no fool.” Luwin nervously tugged on his chain. “The more we drag this war on, the worse it will be for House Stark and the North. Undoubtedly, it will be a bloodbath, but the question was always *when* and *where*.”

Sieges broke armies; even Myrcella knew it. And they wanted to break Hightower as soon as possible. But had they underestimated the risk to Winterfell?

“If our plan succeeds, Hightower will lose many to the coming cold,” Catelyn said, her voice dripping with dark satisfaction. Ever since that day, half a moon prior, when Lady's mournful howling had greeted them, echoed by all the hounds in the castle, there had been a newfound sense of anguish

to her as if she had lost something. Even Sansa had become withdrawn, hovering over Edwyn, Artos, and Lyarra all the time. “And if he has to retreat, the march back to Barrowtown and Torrhen's Square in the snow will thin his forces even more, and we can take the initiative once spring comes.”

“But we have to hold out until the cold comes first,” Ser Rodrik said, looking as if he had aged five years since yesterday. “I'm more worried about the zealots. Despite many losses, they fought with unmatched fervour, as if they had no care for pain or death. I saw it from the walls–a man had his gut torn open, but he latched onto his killer as his guts were spilling out, allowing another man to brain him. It's not right.”

Luwin paled, then.

“Did any of the men… have red teeth?” He asked faintly, his hand shaking.

“Aye,” Rodrik nodded, rubbing his eyes tiredly. “I saw some with red in their mouth, but I thought it was just blood or chewing too much sourleaf.”

“What is it, Luwin?” Catelyn’s blue eyes shimmered with worry.

“I've heard rumours in the Citadel before I left for Riverrun,” he began, voice quivering. “Rumours of Archmaester Harodon experimenting to make a concoction that would replicate the effects of the Unsullied's wine of bravery. Numbs them to pain and gives them unmatched courage in battle. I didn't think much of it then, but now… He's had decades since then–and we all know the Citadel cannot ignore House Hightower.”

And suddenly, the significant number of zealots previously dismissed as rabble became all the more alarming. Even more so now that Hightower’s army had access to the White Knife and the Wolfswood, two hefty food sources.

Fitting nearly twenty thousand more mouths to feed–women and children from the nearby Stark Lands–was no easy matter. The sheer logistics of getting everyone housed and fed would have been crushing if Lady Dustin and her steward had not offered to help. Her own gaggle of ladies, Rosamund, Joy Hill, Eddara Tallhart, Wylla Manderly, Serena and the rest, proved a significant boon as well and were in their elements, ensuring everything ran smoothly from her recently built ladies’ parlour.

Though there was hardly enough sleeping space, hundreds of new 'servants' and their children settled in the outer houses and the surrounding courtyard.

“Leave this to us,” Serena Umber had solemnly requested. “There isn’t much else we can do, but we also want to be of assistance.”

The desire to 'do their part' against Hightower and the Reachmen was shared in all the noblewomen here. They held no delusion about their fate should the walls fall. The children will be killed and burned, and if the women were lucky, they would meet the same fate. The unlucky ones would be put to countless indignities and a fate worse than death, so Myrcella always carried a dagger under her gown, just in case.

In a normal siege, surrendering too early would be shameful, a show of weakness even. Surrendering too late would be fatal, for enmity would have been formed, and the attackers would have lost any

mercy in their hearts. There was just the right moment to show that you ‘held your own’ before surrendering with a grace that would satisfy both ally and foe without creating unneeded enmity.

But the seeds of hatred had long been sown between both sides and had not only born fruit but ripened.

After the death of Dustin and Tallhart, nobody even dared to think, let alone speak of surrender. The Reachmen had no honour and were barely any different than rabid beasts to be put down.

The women and children inside Winterfell were all put to work planting cabbages, leeks, garlic, carrots, and onions–things that would survive the cold and snow. The many courtyards of Winterfell had turned into gardens and farms, and a suitable portion of the godswood had been cleaned of weed and stone and some pines that had begun to grow ill. Some had baulked at the idea of disturbing the ancient garden of the gods, yet she and Catelyn held enough respect and authority to silence any complaints.

Especially as they had repurposed the small sept into a storage shed.

Many praised Myrcella for her acumen in doubling the granaries and expanding the larders and the cellars, without which they could hardly afford to feed as many as they could now, but that had been all Robb and his condition even to begin rebuilding the First Keep and the Guest House amongst her other projects.

The dreaded request for parley arrived at noon when the sun was highest.

Catelyn Stark scoffed dismissively. “Surely they don't think us lackwits to entertain the foolish notion of leaving the walls and trusting our safety to a heretic and his zealots?”

“There will be no talks with Hightower until he and his rabble leave the North,” Myrcella added darkly.

“A show of resolve is good, but perhaps we can show ourselves in the right by at least hearing him out–and giving our terms in return.” Luwin’s voice turned dry. “Even if it would be for nought other than trading insults.”

Neither Myrcella nor Catelyn trusted the Hightower to ensure their safety outside of Winterfell’s walls, so they reached a compromise after two hours of back and forth.

The walk through the many courtyards was disheartening.

“I want my daddy!” many children wailed. "Where is he?"

Women asked for their sons, brothers, and husbands, and Myrcella's insides twisted, and she had nothing to say.

Others were just frightened, looking at Myrcella with those wide eyes so filled with hope as if she could make Hightower go away. Oh, she wished she could proclaim that everything would be hard, but even the idea of smiling felt impossible. Catelyn appeared to reassure the women and children that everything would be fine, but her words sounded weak.

Myrcella’s heart had grown heavier when they reached the outer curtain wall.

It allowed her a new view of the surrounding hills. Wintertown had turned into a fortified camp, and tents spilt out in every direction that was out of the range of the scorpions. There were less than fifteen yards from Winterfell's outer curtain wall to the closest building in Wintertown, and the Reachmen had already begun to shorten the distance by constructing wooden walls and ramparts.

As she feared, many were toiling in the Wolfswood, chopping and cutting timber into beams to be turned into ladders, siege towers, trebuchets, and other means to test Winterfell’s defences.

Soon, a small delegation rode forth, led by a knight in ornate armour inlaid with gold and diamonds the sizes of goose eggs. His hair was a brilliant silver, and the coat of arms was unmistakable.

“This must be Gunthor Hightower, the third son of Leyton Hightower, so-called *prince* and self-proclaimed *Seven’s Blessed Champion*.” Myrcella’s lips curled in disgust. “But I remember seeing him before–knocked on his arse by men better than him in many of the tourneys my father hosted. Not a single victory under his belt.”

“Amongst Lord Hightower's sons, the second one, Garth, was said to be the most talented with the lance and the sword, so much so that even his own father gave him Vigilance over the eldest,” Catelyn added as she inspected the man, then she raised her voice as it echoed down from the battlements. “Is your eldest brother too craven to come and speak to us face to face?”

“Baelor thought it appropriate after you refused to meet him face to face in good faith,” came the solemn response. As solemn as an echoing yell from below could be–the wall was eighty feet tall, and communication required raising one's voice.

“A craven who claims a crown that isn't his and attacks defenceless men, women, and children in the name of the Gods, profaning the name of the Seven with his foul deeds!” Lady Stark's voice thickened with disdain. "And here he is, shamelessly grasping for something he has no claim to, wearing a crown he has never earned. Why would I ever trust the word of such a man?”

“Pah, my brother is a knight, true and honest, unlike your sorcerous husband! The Seven above and the swords of the Faithful are all the legitimacy Baelor needs!” Gods, he sounded like he believed it, and it chilled Myrcella's blood. What had she heard the Spider say in a rare moment of wisdom once?

“No man is more dangerous than the righteous fool convinced he’s doing good deeds.”

“If King Robert could shoulder the shame of grasping the throne with a meagre claim of blood, so can we once victory is in our grasp.” The Hightower continued, his voice full of conviction–Gods Old and New, they truly have bought into their mummery. “Through our veins runs the blood of Rhaena of Pentos, a descendant of the Conqueror himself.”

Catelyn’s face was unreadable, but her body stiffened.

“I see you're well-read in the matters of history, Ser,” she said. “But you're far from the only one. There's no shortage of kings and warlords who have tried to conquer the North only to leave nought but their bones. Go back home to your warm city and leave this place; you cannot fathom a Northern winter, and winter is coming.”

Hightower’s brow shot up all the way to his hair.

“You’re a woman who has been anointed in the Light of the Seven by the holy oils of a Septon, yet you seek to defend heathens?”

"Heathens or no, they are my husband's subjects, and you have no right to bring fire and sword to them!" She retorted darkly. "An even more ludicrous claim coming from a man consorting with Ironmen, slaves, and pirates. Speak your piece and begone!"

“Very well.” The incredulity drained from Gunthor Hightower’s pale face. “My brother is a generous man. Should you surrender Winterfell to him, acknowledge him as your king and liege, hand over your children as hostages, and chop down the heart tree, you may remain here unmolested and continue ruling as you did before.”

Catelyn laughed in his face. It was a dark, bitter sound, as if something was scraping a piece of glass on steel.

“But would we rule, or would the Hightower rule in our stead? As if I would trust my babes to a child murderer,” she growled. “Or his word. What of Benfred Tallhart or Artos Dustin? Were they not children?”

“Old enough to pick up a sword and lead men into battle,” the knight waved the words away.

Catelyn’s eyes hardened like two chips of ice, and she looked almost like a statue then.

“If you want Winterfell, come and take it!” she spat, turning around and leaving the rampart, unwilling to listen to Hightower any further.

“You can still leave the North and return home!” Myrcella advised coldly, though she hated that her voice cracked slightly as she had to shout–she was unused to raising her voice for any occasion. “We can have peace. Or do you trust the walls of Oldtown will save your kin in the South from my husband’s wrath?”

“Peace?” Gunthor Hightower scoffed. “Peace with heathens, heretics, and abominations created from sin like you is only won by the steel and flame. We'll have peace once the North has been cleansed by the light of the Seven. We'll have peace when your husband falls to the swords of the righteous, for he is but a savage leading savages.”

“So be it.” Myrcella closed her eyes, trying to ignore the twist in her gut. Gods, this was madness. “*And the Father said that those who dig a grave for others will fall onto it, and those who roll a hill up in mischief or villainy will be crushed under its weight.*”

“Do not quote the Seven-Pointed Star to me, vile creature!” Hightower sneered. “Even holy words sound like blasphemy through your sinful lips!”

“We have the crossbows to make a pincushion out of him,” Jeor, one of the guardsmen, proposed quietly as he patted his loaded crossbow. “Just give the order, m’lady. All sense of courtesy has already been thrown to the pigsty with these cunts. Might as well nail the last bit of it out.”

Gods, she was tired; the last moon had been stressful enough, and her nerves had been stretched taut. Myrcella wanted to spend time with her little babe but couldn't. The men and women in Winterfell looked to her and Lady Stark for guidance and direction.

Myrcella felt so small at the seemingly endless expanse of the enemy. It was disheartening, soul-crushing even to have so many souls baying for your blood, and the only thing between them was two sets of walls that seemed more lacking by the heartbeat. She wanted to feel safe again when the summer was here; war was but a distant tale the old veterans reminisced over a tankard of dark ale, and her biggest worry was if the babe in her belly would quicken.

But the summer had passed, and winter was coming. Suddenly, the fear and worry in Myrcella's veins were gone; in their place, she felt rage coursing in her blood; she was the daughter of kings, the lineage of conquerors and great houses with a line unbroken all the way to the Age of Heroes, and this cretin kept insulting her. He offered no mercy, only humiliation and death, and would receive so in kind.

"There's no need." Myrcella declined with a faint murmur, signalling the men-at-arms to lower the crossbows. "He means to provoke me to break the truce."

And perhaps he had succeeded. Perhaps her grandfather was right. Her spine straightened then, and she looked at the man before her, really *looked* at him and saw nought but an overproud peacock.

*"*Be careful, Gunthor of the Hightower, for House Stark does not stand alone, and the Northmen have long memories." A surprising amount of venom dripped from her own words, but Myrcella didn't care. The dam had already been broken, and the words were coming like a flood. "I might not be a ruler, but I'm a highlord's wife, a king's daughter, and a king's sister. Sooner or later, I'll have your head, and your brother's head, and your children's heads. Your wives and sisters will be butchered, your mothers will be hung like brigands, and your very name will be sung as an example of foolish pride. The fertile Hightower lands you're so proud of will be salted, its people put to the sword, and your precious High Septon will be hung for the heretic he is!"

Her voice had turned hoarse, and she was almost roaring now. She felt an ugly, dark satisfaction in her breast as Gunthor Hightower's face crumpled.

"When the war is over, your precious city and its high tower, the jewel of the Reach, will be nought but ashes and death. Your very remains will be fed to the heart trees you so clearly detest, and your House will be but a bad memory that will be sung of for centuries to come!"

"Bold words for a sinful creature born by incest and cuckoldery!" Hightower's dark words echoed as he grinned sadistically–any sign of nobility, no matter how lacking, gone as if he tired of his own mummery. "When Winterfell falls, I will not save your soul by cleansing you with fire, no. I will fuck you until I get tired of your cunny and then give you to the blooded zealots until each one of them has had their fill of you. All the while, the sinful fruit of your union will be hung, drawn, and quartered, and-"

"*Nail him*!"

There was no hesitation from the crossbowmen as nearly a hundred bolts rained down on Hightower. It seemed that Alastor's crossbows were superior to the armour smiths of Oldtown, and Myrcella vowed to pay him better–and even find him a beautiful highborn maiden for a bride.

Within ten seconds, nobody was alive, and she savoured Gunthor Hightower's widened eyes–or well, widened eye- for a feathery bolt sticking from the second one. His face was now forever frozen in disbelief, as if his mind could not conceive his all-too-sudden meeting with mortality, thinking himself untouchable under the flag of parley.

Parley was already broken once he threatened her family!

Shouting had been tiring, but the last two words had taken the most out of her. Heaving angrily, Myrcella spun around and left, not paying any heed to the cursing Reachmen dwelling in Wintertown. Perhaps her grandfather had the right to it. She had always thought the Rains of Castamere was distasteful in its showing of empty vanity, but now? She could see the appeal.

A part of her knew she had lost her calm and that this mistake could affect her husband, but honour was wasted on the honourless, killing any fleeting feeling of satisfaction. The last decree her brother had sent out before he died had stripped all Hightowers and Greyjoys of their lands and titles, turning them into outlaws to be killed on sight with no recourse. That was a poor excuse to break parley, even in her ears. Catelyn said nothing, but her tired face frowned before she shrugged and made her way down from the battlements.

Yet no matter how she raged or seethed, her anger was doused by cold water when the next day came. Hightower had wasted no time–possibly spurred into action by the death of his brother. The night had been long and bloody; from dusk till dawn, the zealots tested each gate with axes and torches, and nearly half a hundred men perished–emboldened by the foul concoction, zealots proved a hardy and tireless foe. Each following night was just as bad, if not worse, and Ser Rodrik's attempts to sally out were none too successful.

Days tickled as the Reachmen continued testing the gates, and soon came a grimmer surprise; with the finest minds the Citadel had to offer, Hightower had already managed to construct trebuchets, and balls of fire were already flying at Winterfell.

'Probably wrapped with linen rags soaked in resin and oil,' her mind supplied. A waste of resources. Or so she thought when she realised that they weren't aimed at the walls but above them.

An ugly, utterly unladylike curse escaped from her lips as one such ball fell into the Godswood where not only the Heart Tree but the gardens were. Thankfully, it started to drizzle before the fire could cause serious damage.

20th Day of the 8th Moon (same day)

Robb Stark, Highgarden

The so-called *Heart of the Reach* was as impressive as its name implied. It embodied everything he loathed about the Southron kingdom.

An excess of vanity with multitudes of marble statues, gilded patterns upon the gates, rose and starry inscriptions intertwined upon the bleached crenelations. Intricate colonnades paved the walkways leading to lifelike fountains in various shapes, from beasts to little children, maidens, and warriors, with red rubies, emeralds, and turquoise sapphires glinting from their eye sockets. Robb had never seen so much gold and silver and marble in one place, not even in Winterfell's treasury. He had long lost count of all the windows of coloured glass he had seen today, but they would surely be enough to build ten more greenhouses in Winterfell.

The sheer number of gardens filled with verdant flowers and golden roses made Robb's head spin–so much fertile land *wasted*.

But for all its wanton display of wealth, Highgarden still sat atop a hill with three curtain walls, each higher and thicker than the last. Despite the lack of a moat, it was a veritable fortress that could stump a large army.

Not Robb after he put his mind to it, though. Early in the morning, when their caution was lowest, they hadn't hesitated to welcome a group of riders wearing Crane, Webber, and Tyrell livery, claiming they had urgent news for Lord Tyrell. And once they slaughtered the unsuspecting guards at the last gate, the other two were easy to open for the rest of the men to rush in.

His whole body was sore, his joints screamed from pain as if they would break, and exhaustion seeped all the way into his marrow as he marched through Highgarden's central courtyard, stepping over the corpses of the Tyrell men-at-arms and knights. Fighting after twenty hours of maddened riding was exhausting, but Robb felt more numb than anything else.

Robb thought he would be angry when Willas Tyrell, his aunt Janna, his Hightower Mother, and the Queen of Thorns were dragged before him, yet he felt nothing but exhaustion. A few younger boys and girls, all roses if from a lesser bush, were brought before him, but they cried or fainted at the sight of the slaughter, so Robb just waved the men to send them to the sept. Gods, he just wanted to sleep–a little more, and he could collapse into a proper feathered bed.

Janna Tyrell broke down into tears and tried to rush at the corpse of some Fossoway knight, wailing, "Jon, my Jon!"

For a moment, Robb thought she spoke of his brother but realised her husband was named Jon. Yet the sorrowful cries and moans only made his head pulse with pain. Upon his signal, one of the Stark men tore a piece of her husband's cloak and shoved it in her mouth, finally silencing her.

Robb's attention settled on the man who could only be Willas Tyrell.

The new Lord of Highgarden looked more scholar than warrior, with his furrowed brows, limping leg and cane–a result of a joust gone wrong in his youth. His body was soft, and Tyrell was garbed in a doublet of velvet green dotted with golden roses. But there was a brightness in his eyes, a sort of cunning that reminded Robb of a fox.

"Lord Stark," his voice was soft and near soothing; it lacked any anger or fury, only unbridled curiosity and a sliver of resignation. "Forgive me if Highgarden's hospitality is lacking. Last evening, we received word that you were at Cobble Cove, over a hundred miles from here. We did not expect you until the next sennight."

He stiffly inspected the corpses of his men littering the courtyard. “There was no need for such violence. House Tyrell no longer possesses the means to fight further or the will to support Renly Baratheon, and we would have bent the knee if you had asked.”

Greatjon guffawed.

“Gods, that is the biggest pile of shit I’ve ever heard in my life.” His chest still shook from the laughter as he leaned onto the dragonsteel greatsword stabbed into the coat of plates of a fallen knight. “And I had to listen to the whinging merchants of Lannisport and that Oakheart widow.”

“You could have proclaimed your father had lost his wits and bent the knee to Tommen weeks ago and beg clemency.” Torrhen Liddle snorted scornfully. “But you were a greedy Southron twat, waiting for the last moment to bargain for the biggest concessions.”

“Your father started this war, boy!” Beron Dustin grunted out, his whole suit of plate drenched in blood from head to toe–it seemed that no amount of killing could satisfy him, and he kept seeking the thick of the fighting. “Would that prancing fool Renly have dared crown himself without Tyrell swords, Tarly spears, Peake lances, Redwyne ships, or Hightower knights, all who answer to you? The stag wore the crown, but it was you, the roses, who put it on his damned head, and now you want to surrender!?”

The Barrowlord’s roar finally made Willas Tyrell flinch.

“We might have fallen low, but we still have some power over the Reach and aid you in bringing them into the King’s Peace.”

“Even if you offered me a surrender, I would not take it,” Robb began slowly. “I did not ride day and night to come here, killing thousands of good horses in my mad rush and wearing Tyrell livery to catch you unaware just so you can try and sweep away all the woe you have started with kind words, courtesies, and smiles.”

Gods, he was tired. He was tired of war, he was tired of fighting, and he wanted to go back home to Myrcella. He was tired of those Southrons who would smile and lie to his face and try to stab him in the back.

The mad ride from Chequy Water was not only exhausting, but it had stretched his nerves taut and tested his ability to plan. Moving an army as fast as he had was impossible, but fifteen hundred skilled raiders? That was doable, even if he had to sacrifice warhorses for haste, have his outriders and scouts screen his advance, and mislead any Reachmen on the way. It was daring as it was risky, but the Old Gods had decided to bless him with fortune today.

“You are an honourable man who returned House Oakheart’s ancestral blade and spared them,” Willas nodded to Harys Oakheart by Robb’s side, the boy shrinking in his boots as if trying to disappear under everyone’s gazes. “House Tyrell has not wronged the Starks of Winterfell-”

“I received an interesting letter from the Archmaester’s Conclave in Oldtown,” Robb interrupted darkly, pulling out a crumpled scroll from his belt. “I had maester Arryk, a leal man hailing from Fairmarket, subtly inquire in Oldtown about the make of the miniature crossbows that killed Lord Bolton and tried to slay me.”

“Of course, it seems old Arryk wasn’t as subtle as he thought when the reply came back signed by his friend and *twenty-three* Archmaesters from the Citadel.”

The old crone stiffened then, making Robb even wearier. So, the grey rats were not lying. Alerie Hightower, Willas, and Janna Tyrell all looked more confused than anything, while he couldn't take a read on the old Queen of Thorns. But Grey Wind could, and he could smell fear and a sliver of guilt. It was damning. He looked closer at her then; she was small, tiny enough to be mistaken for a small child if not for her wrinkled face, wizened hair, and gaunt, hunched-over frame.

“It must be a serious thing to require nearly everyone from the Conclave to put their names and honour behind it,” Willas noted, his face curious.

“Indeed,” Robb agreed. “The custom-made crossbows weren’t nearly as interesting–the make is from Oldtown, but common enough that anyone with enough coin could purchase aplenty. Yet they were very forthcoming with the identity of the acolytes who tried to poison me. Perhaps they were eager to distance themselves from failed attempts at poisoning a highlord.”

“A wise thing to do,” the crippled rose lord nodded solemnly. “None would want their name sullied by such a foul deed, much less the maesters. Who was it, then?”

Snorting, Robb unfurled the scroll and handed it over to his new squire.

“I’ll let Harys read it aloud, I suppose.”

The boy, who had voided his stomach at the ugly side of death and carnage earlier, turned even paler; his fingers shook when he accepted the scroll.

“Pate of Springfield and Mern Flowers of Vinetown entered the Citadel in the year two hundred ninety-one and two hundred ninety-three after Aegon’s Conquest under the recommendation of Maester Gormon,” his voice cracked then.

“Louder, boy,” Greatjon urged, his booming voice making the squire cringe. “A proper warrior must have strong lungs and be heard from afar in battle. If you want to become nearly as good as your father, read louder!”

Robb sighed and gave an encouraging nod at his skittish squire.

Harys coughed and continued. “Maester Gormon, also known as Gormon Tyrell at birth, with Acolytes Pate and Mern’s tutelage paid for by the patronage of Olenna Tyrell, born Olenna Redwyne at the Arbour in the year two hundred and twenty-eight after Aegon’s Conquest.”

The silence was deafening as Willas Tyrell blinked. First, there was the disbelief; then it gave way to grim acceptance as he looked at the old crone, who was nonchalantly picking her ears as if nothing of importance was happening.

“Grandmother?” His soft voice had turned brittle.

“What?” She clicked her tongue. “I suppose I can deny it, then, but why should I? If the wolf boy had died, then we would be rid of so much trouble. You men and your prattle about honour and justice,

hah! As if it is more honourable to kill hundreds of thousands than a single man! The only reason the Northmen are here now is because I *failed*."

The words made the plump Janna Tyrell pale while Alerie Hightower looked… outraged.

"Mother, how could you?!" She pointed an angry finger at the old woman but lost any further words at the sight of Olenna's unabashed face.

For a good half a minute, he stood there, blinking in disbelief at her daring. His mind just… didn't comprehend the dynamic. An old, powerless crone, his prisoner, to so openly admit to her wrongdoings, nay to boast about how her success would have brought them victory while disparaging all the honour of the nobility without an ounce of regret?

Even the Northmen were half-stunned, half-furious. Did she think she could take refuge in audacity? That it would shield her from his wrath?

The hot, churning ball of fury in his gut threatened to explode, but he took a deep breath, trying to centre himself.

'Some foes will try to force your hand into making a mistake–whether out of anger or something else. They will seek to exploit even the smallest chink in your armour in hopes of finding a weakness, no matter how dishonourable.'

His father's words doused his rage instantly, leaving only bone-deep exhaustion in his body. His weary mind raced, setting out to figure out what Olenna Tyrell wanted, and then it clicked.

Gods, he hated the South. She was banking on his honour, he realised. House Stark's carefully built reputation was a shield as much as it was a sword, and she wanted to use her own death against him or take it away. There was one more Tyrell that wasn't here–Ser Garlan the Gallant, a formidable knight with a significant warband under his name, so the legacy of House Tyrell would live on to trouble him if he made the wrong move.

Willas Tyrell looked resigned then, and Robb couldn't even blame him; the young lord had failed to control his own household.

"The sentence for trying to murder a lord of the realm is death," Robb slowly reminded, a plan forming in his head.

"An old woman like me doesn't fear the Stranger. But you have no tangible proof besides some scrap of paper written by the cravens in Oldtown," Olenna gave him a toothless smile. "Can you take my head in your barbaric customs with a clear conscience?"

Robb snorted. "The good name of twenty-three Archmaesters is enough for me and should be enough for everyone else in the realm. I had planned to behead all the Tyrell men for treason, spare the servants, and send the women to the silent sisters in Atranta or Lannisport."

The mention of the Vance seat made them all pale even further to the point they looked like ghosts, and rightly so. The Lord of Atranta had lost two sons and a brother to the Reachmen in the Battle of the Rushing Falls; the less said about the Westerlands, the better.

“But you seek to provoke me. Consider yourself successful,” Robb smiled darkly. “I will hang every single member of House Tyrell like common brigands, behead all of your servants to the last, kill even the dogs and the chickens. Or perhaps I’ll strip you all naked and let you walk barefooted to King’s Landing to repent. Not you, though. Perhaps I’ll give you roses to the Bolton torturer, who will flay you slowly. It’s a sickening art, flaying; no wonder my ancestors outlawed it in the North. With the proper tools, you can keep the victim alive for moons in constant agony. But you? You’ll stay alive and untouched to watch as every last soul bearing the name of Tyrell expires until I’ve hunted down your grandson Garlan and sent him to the Seven Hells.”

“Good,” Dustin spat on top of one of the many corpses. “Tis no more than these wretches deserve. Mercy is wasted on honourless curs like them-”

“Do you have the guts to do it?” Olenna asked evenly. “Such dark deeds would darken you and your children forever, boy. The Old Lion ought to know how his legacy of fear almost destroyed his House. Robb Stark the Cruel, many will call you and worse. Acts of wanton cruelty like this would make any House think twice before surrendering to you. It would only feed the Fledgling Faith Militant here in the Reach. Perhaps you can kill ten thousand men, but how about hundreds of thousands or even more?”

Gods, the old thing loved the sound of her own voice. Robb’s head began to hurt as she continued talking.

“Besides, you need us to bring the rest of the quarrelsome bannermen to heel. If we denounce Renly and Hightower, your work will be much easier. You *need* us to help you. The Lords of the Reach might be spent in war, but not all castles will be so quick to fall to your ruse. We know their weaknesses and how to make them-”

“Mother, stop,” Alerie begged, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Enough of this stubborn pride, please!”

“I don’t recall giving birth to you-”

“Walton,” Robb called, and the Bolton captain saluted, his fist slamming dutifully against his blood-splattered breastplate, silencing the woman dumb. “Bring me the Squealer; we will see him work in person now.”

Gods, he was tired of being prodded and tested. He was tired of being taunted and thought of as a spineless lackwit. Why did they believe honour was a weakness when he owed them no courtesies or mercy?

Walton hurried to get the torturer while Robb smiled grimly at the paling face of the Tyrells, "His mother called him Lom. They don't call him the Squealer because his victims shriek in pain, though I assure you they do, but because he squeals in joy as he watches them writhe in agony for days. It's not a pleasant sight–or sound, as you will learn soon enough."

“Truth be told, I always felt uneasy about employing the services of a skilled torturer,” he admitted. “But the enemies of House Stark have decided to hide in the shadows or go after the sons and daughters of the North like that craven Hightower, leaving me no choice but to respond in kind lest they can think such vile behaviours will go unpunished.”

The Tyrells were frozen as Walton returned with the Squealer, a nondescript man who would not look out of place in a tavern or a street vendor. Except for his brown leather tunic, covered by belts and straps slung over his waist and shoulders, lined with pouches full of knives, pliers, and other tools that even Robb failed to identify.

“Ye–you called fer me, milord Stark?”

“Aye, I’ve got some work for you.” Robb’s gaze fell on the no longer arrogant face of Olenna Tyrell. The Queen of Thorns was impassive as if trying to call his bluff, yet he could smell the terror in her heart. Robb stared at the rest of the Tyrells, his gaze settling on the Hightower woman, whose face contorted in horror until her son hobbled protectively in front of his mother.

“Lord Robb, please–”

“She will do.” Robb’s eyes had already passed them and stopped on the sobbing form of Janna Tyrell as she held her slain Fossoway husband.

The Squealer’s placid face contorted into a grin of ecstasy as he followed his hand, “As you wish, milord.”

Walter quickly moved and dragged the wailing woman away, even as Willas Tyrell tried to object, only for Dustin to punch him in the stomach and force him to kneel. Robb had eyes only for the stubborn form of Olenna Tyrell as the lightest of cracks formed on her face. He had seen the discord in the family; she cared not one whit about her late son’s wife. Her *own* daughter, however…

“NO, MOTHER, PLEASE–”

A blow to the face silenced the recently widowed woman before a table was brought to the courtyard, and within a minute, she was stripped naked, her buxom body on display, though none of his men leered. Despite being a cripple, Willas Tyrell attempted to save his aunt, but the Dustin men kept him down. All the Northmen were still as statues, as the Squealer lived up to his name–a curved knife, a bullocks knife, was in his hand as he gently held her neck, almost like a lover’s caress, before trailing the blade down to her–

“Enough…” Olenna Tyrell shook as she collapsed to her knees, her head bowed. “Mercy! Have mercy!”

Robb looked at the sunny sky above and signalled to the Stark guards to drag away the sobbing Janna Tyrell, covering her in her fallen husband’s bloodstained cloak, much to the Squealer’s disappointment.

“So you admit to it, then?”

“You have us by the throat, and I never denied it!”

So pride only got the old crone so far, and she did care about her blood.

“I want it writ in ink.” Robb tiredly ran a hand through his damp hair. Highgarden was hotter than both Crakehall and Lannnisport. “The rest of your brood will sign it, along with the maesters I

brought and the Lords of the North, and I will send it from the Wall to Starfall and the Arbour so that the whole of the realm may see the duplicity of the vaunted Golden Roses of Highgarden."

Olenna's wrinkled face scrunched up as if she had smelled something unpleasant.

"This will tarnish House Tyrell's name forever." Willas Tyrell's quivering voice was pained.

Robb sighed.

"Would your grandmother ever be able to do what she did without the power of your House? Would you not take refuge and joy in her success whence it came? Did your own brother, Garlan, not disavow the Rowans as treasonous curs unworthy of the titles they carried for the offence of one man?"

None of the Tyrells met his gaze. The Lord of Highgarden struck him as a kind-hearted man, perhaps even an honourable one. Yet, just as he would enjoy victory, so too must he suffer the indignities of defeat. Willas Tyrell did not once beg for his own life; he knew the consequences of defeat, and Robb found himself feeling a begrudging sense of respect for the crippled man.

"The honourable fear not the truth, yet here, your grandmother tried to bluff me after being caught." His words thickened with dark amusement. "Does it not say in your Seven-Pointed Star that the righteous have nothing to fear from the demons of the Seven Hells? You made your bed, and now you must lie in it."

"I'll do it," Olenna said, her small frame sagging in defeat. "I'll write the confession, and I'll even take my life afterwards. Just… spare my daughter such indignities."

Ser Wendel Manderly snorted. "A clean death is more than your wretched lot deserves, let alone any mercy or dignity."

"You ought to be grateful Lord Stark didn't just slaughter you and yours as this flowery castle is sacked!" Ryswell clicked his tongue, his tone filled with disappointment. "None would bat an eye or blame him for it."

The Tyrells shrank even further as the lords of the North clamoured loudly in agreement.

Robb had finally gotten what he wanted but didn't feel any better about it. Gods, he *loathed* the South, but at least he could finally get a hot soak and a feathered bed. Saying nothing, he left the courtyard, letting the foolish roses tremble in fear out of grief more than anything else.

I still remember those dark days. Ebrose's cure took moons to spread across the world, and many were mistrustful of it because charlatans sought profit in misfortune.

With the plague making traders cautious about braving many ports, word from the Sunset Lands slowed down as of late. The chaos in Braavos didn't help, for three of the new Sealord candidates had died within a fortnight; two to the plague and the last one in a duel, trying to secure the services of a healer for his wife who had caught the plague.

The weather had turned for the worse, too. A terrible storm had been raging through the Narrow Sea for over a moon, separating Westeros and Essos with a wall of fury, wind, water, and thunder. It calmed for one day to a drizzle, but none dared to venture in it, for the curtain of dark clouds above remained. Rightly so, for raging winds, thunder, and lightning resumed the following day.

The Myrish Conclave and the infamous slavers of Myr had perished, but the former slaves and pit fighters weren't sure what to do with their newfound freedom. By the authority of Lord Stark's word, Myr was ceded to them, but the city was in dire straits. With the outer walls crumbled in three junctions, they were open to attacks from sellswords or Khalasars in the mainland. The Westerosi would not stay forever to protect them either.

Surprisingly, after half a moon of fierce arguments, shouting, duels, brawls, and unhappiness, Robar Royce was proclaimed Lord Governor of Myr–not a hereditary title–and the city of Myr swore fealty to Eddard Stark of Winterfell as the "Dominion of Myr". The fealty was merely a formality without any strings attached, but all the former slaves were impressed by the Northmen and wanted to continue the alliance and cooperation in the future. After much hesitation, Eddard Stark, who had only remained in the city because the Narrow Sea was too stormy to cross just yet, accepted. Though, I suspect the offer of assistance in the war for the Iron Throne made the deal go smoother than it ought to have been.

"The Bloody Blade has shown us valour, honour, and respect," Belio of the Black Blade loudly proclaimed for all to hear. "We can trust in him and the line of Stark."

Word slowly tickled from the other side of the Narrow Sea.

The Black Death arrived in White Harbour, though the Northern city was not heavily affected. Some speculated it could be because of the sparse population–the plague hardly spread through villages and smaller towns, and the Northmen didn't seem to die as much as everyone else. But they still died; the Many-Faced-God took its due, and even Joffrey's pregnant wife was struck down. Yet the Dowager Queen, Cersei Lannister, had been secluded for moons, away from the court in White Castle, and avoided death's embrace for it.

There was no word of the White Huntsman after his passage through the Wall, but the silence from the Ironmen was just as telling. No ravens, merchants, or travellers passed through the desolate western coast of the North, and only the gods knew what was happening there. Yet with Benjen Stark's nephew bringing wildlings through the Wall, the Commanders of Icemark, Deep Lake, Grey Guard, Stonedoor, and Torches rebelled against the Lord Commander, calling him an oathbreaker for taking part in the Seven Kingdoms' wars.

Maron Flowers had even tried to assassinate Benjen Stark, only to be thwarted by the Flaming Hand, who jumped before his arrow, saving the Lord Commander. It was said that the daring assassin had been torn apart by Stark's black direwolf a few heartbeats later. Sworn brothers turned blades against each other, and blood began to spill in greater numbers than it had against the Others or wildlings.

Commanders Jarman Buckler of Hoarfrost Hill, Cotter Pyke of the Eastwatch, Jafer Flowers of the Long Barrow, and Denys Mallister of the Shadow Tower were the first to support the Lord Commander and moved out against the rebels. The order of the Black Flame all sided with Benjen Stark, especially after Ser Edmun Yelshire killed the red priest in Icemark for being a heathen.

The fall of Highgarden had surprised many; the Heart of the Reach had not fallen to attackers in millennia and had been rebuilt stronger than ever. But Robb Stark had done the impossible again, in what was later revealed to be a ride of over a hundred miles in under a day, hidden by skilled scouts and multiple diversions.

Each male bearing the name of Tyrell–and all of their bastards–had been beheaded by Robb Stark's hand. The women were sent to the silent sisters in Lannisport, but the servants and the surviving lesser nobility were spared. Not before the Young Wolf had sent Olenna Tyrell's infamous confession and the copy of the Conclave's recount to each corner of the realm, destroying all sympathy and lingering sentiment favouring the Golden Rose of Highgarden.

In the same breath, Robb Stark denounced Aegon Targaryen as a liar, cheat, and mummer for daring to tarnish his aunt Lyanna's good name. Meanwhile, word of Aegon's marriage to Arianne Martell began to spread.

The Reach, however, was far from pacified, with some lords proclaiming for Aegon–or others for Baelor. Many of the smallfolk started arming themselves with any weapon they could get their hands on–whether out of fear of the marauding Northmen, the desire to join the Faith Militant or to raise against their Lords in an ill-thought belief of declaring themselves as Free People, causing even further chaos.

King's Landing remained a graveyard inhabited by more corpses and ghosts than men, the Iron Throne empty, and Lord Tully no longer dared to rush headlong into the Stormlands and face the Marcher Lords or the self-proclaimed 'Lyanna Stark's son'. Instead, he left Lord Bracken with ten thousand men to lay siege to Tumbleton while he took the rest of his forces to avenge his uncle and crush Goldengrove, for the next Rowan Lord had foolishly declared for Aegon despite being so close to the Riverlands.

Renly had retreated to Storm's End like a beaten dog, with barely two thousand men left under his command after the Black Plague, desertion, treachery, and incompetence.

Baelor Hightower proved himself a skilled commander, using the seemingly endless hordes of zealots in his army, and the siege of Winterfell turned into a brutal bloodbath on both sides. The zealots were not only promised food, land, and women for every foe slain, but the High Septon had loudly proclaimed that all those who perished fighting in the name of the Seven would be rewarded with forty-nine virgins once their souls ascended to the afterlife. Myrcella Baratheon's blatant breaking of parley and the death of Ser Gunthor Hightower had only driven the Reachmen into a further frenzy.

The Rose Septon in Barrowton and his band of Most Devout had come forth to curse and decry House Stark as accursed enemies of the Seven.

The zealots drank 'The Warrior's Blessing' before each skirmish or assault. This foul substance numbed them to pain and gave them 'unparalleled courage', turning the disorganised rabble of zealots into a fearless menace.

But Winterfell was a stalwart fortress, and mere numbers and drink-induced courage were far from enough to take it.

The battle at the Moat had turned even fiercer; the elderly Lord Manderly had perished in the fighting, heavily outnumbered, it spoke to his competence in how long he kept the zealot army at bay yet his forces were still routed. Despite the Crannogmen's harassment, the northernmost tower of the Moat had fallen to Lord Grimm, and by all accounts, it looked like Baelor Hightower would take control of the entrance to the North.

Yet the thundering hooves from the causeway leading to the Riverlands heralded the first time in history that a Southron army came through the Neck not to invade but to aid the North. Tytos Blackwood and the Rivermen arrived in the nick of time to beat back another assault against the middle tower. The Raven Lord proved himself a skilled rider, fanning out his men into a narrow wedge to weave through the Moat in a charge that had broken through the attackers, the war lances of the chivalry of the Riverlands impaling Lords Serry and Hewitt. So unexpected were the reinforcements that the ragged and disorganised army of zealots, which had suffered innumerable losses at the hands of Manderly and the Crannogmen's stubborn resistance, were nearly routed in a single charge.

Yet even when repulsed, the Reachmen still had considerable numbers, over ten thousand men left, the vast majority of them former vagrants and zealots, while Tytos Blackwood only had four thousand travel-worn men and Moat Cailin was surrounded by marshland on three sides, preventing him from fanning out for a decisive sweeping charge. The Rivermen, already exhausted from the road, eventually tired and had to stop running down the zealots fleeing in every direction when night gathered, allowing Lords Chester and Grimm to rally the routed forces…

*Excerpt from **'Lazyro Zelyne's thoughts on the Sunset War'.***

Author's Endnote: A reminder, the last ten or so chapters all happen in a relatively short timeframe (just a ton of shit happening at once). The stormy Narrow Sea is another point that delays Ned's return to Westeros (GRRM STYLE!), but I'll try to explain it.

I try to stick to realistic travel time. When I realised that Ned could never arrive in Winterfell in time to meet Jon there or participate in the Northern campaign in a meaningful and impactful manner, I decided to rip that plotline off. (There's no narrative sense to have Ned arrive just to see everything already 'over' or be in time to… wait more after the snows fall). Don't fear, though; Ned's plot is far from finished, and he's now faced with new layers of trouble.

I wanted to write two more PoVs in this chapter, but I already wrote over 8k words, so yeah.

The chapter was exciting to write (kudos to those who guessed who tried to 'off' Robb. Any lingering sense of civility is officially thrown out. Understandably, the Reach is a mess; Benjen is dealing with a severe mutiny that has been foreshadowed for quite a while, Renly has become irrelevant outside his castle, and Aegon is late to the party (cause he has to wait for the bulk of the Dornish banners to reach the Red Mountains, which takes time, and the last few chapters are all happening in short succession). The following chapters will probably be the same until I slice through this plot-thick knot.

Hightower's skill and willingness to win makes him an even bigger menace.

Starring: A tale of a wife and a husband. It's not a particularly nice tale right now, though. Myrcella "You dare threaten my son? *Die, you filthy scum*!" Baratheon and Robb "Look at what you're making me do. Is it so hard to conduct yourself with honour like Oakheart did?" Stark.