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Edited by: Himura and R. Yorkshireman; B. Reader: Bub3loka.

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The middle of 300 AC

Ser Garlan Tyrell, Lys

"Is it done?" Lynesse asked, her fingers softly tugging on her lyre, filling the air with a slow, sorrowful tune.

Clad in flowing red and deep blue silks that were so transparent and tight that they left little of her sinful figure to the imagination, his aunt was a vision that would turn even a half-blind eunuch's head. Pale heart-shaped face adorned by two gleaming sapphires for eyes with pouty cherry-red lips and a little nose, framed by a curtain of silky hair the colour of pale gold interwoven with a golden net of rubies and diamonds. Lynesse Hightower was a beauty for the songs.

But her enchanting visage was merely a facade behind which darker things lurked, just like the city in which she dwelt. Lys had definitely changed Lynesse, and it was not for the better.

"The Orange Isles and the Orange Shore are secured, as I promised," Garlan replied, words coming out sourer than intended. "Red Mello's forces have been defeated, new fortifications are being built, and the corsairs from the Basilisk Isles suffered heavy losses and retreated. The fighting wasn't as challenging as they all broke at the first clash of organised resistance."

He was a commander to a sellsword company of Westerosi exiles pretentiously called the Sons of the Stranger. The two hundred men that followed him here were bolstered to eight hundred in the last half a year, the new additions streaming in from the Vale, Stormlands, and the Reach, all knights or men-at-arms unhappy with the state of affairs in Westeros.

Two hundred knights, with the same number of heavy pikemen and veteran crossbowmen to match, the rest being outriders, cooks, builders, smiths, five healers and two siege engineers—all the support and craftsmen an armed force might ever need on the field and out of it.

Coincidentally, that made Garlan the leader of the most powerful sellsword company in this corner of the world because each of his men was a veteran of many battles and had training and discipline drilled into them from early childhood. It helped that his own skills in command weren't too shabby.

Not to mention, Western Essos had a severe lack of manpower and sellswords due to a certain Wolf Lord's rampage, which made establishing a foothold here much easier.

Alas, such a growing number of men required a hefty amount of gold to upkeep, forcing Garlan to take on tasks and contracts he would have never entertained a year or two prior. It was not what he wanted to do, but all these men kept flocking to him as if he were some beacon of hope and honour. He was anything but. He wanted to scream the fact to the high heavens, but it wouldn't make a difference, for the gods had always been silent—except for the Stranger.

Garlan wanted to turn them all away but couldn't. He knew their disgruntlement; he knew their woes, and... he knew nothing but the sword. He couldn't put the blade down. He wouldn't, for he

had decided to dedicate his life to the Stranger. It was his final vow and the only one he could keep. There was still one last task left to fulfil, and he couldn't perish until success was grasped by his fist.

His aunt's soft hand brushed across his face, her fingers trailing through his scarred cheek, waking him from his stupor.

"Great work; it will expand my husband's wealth and influence—and mine in turn, too. Expect your promised rewards and my generous bonus to be delivered to your headquarters by nightfall. But why the long face? Ah, my dear, sweet Garlan," Lynesse gave him a sorrowful look that made his insides twist. "Do you still blame me for not aiding your mewling wife and your late sister's ladies-in-waiting at their lowest?"

"...No," he muttered, collapsing on the ornate chair.

He loathed the parlour with its gilded drapes and the flowery scent wafting from the immaculately kept garden outside, both flushed with luxuries to display Tregar Ormollen's wealth. He hated it because it reminded him of Highgarden, if warmer and brighter. Even in the height of winter, the weather in Lys was invitingly mellow, and even the breeze blowing from the Summer Sea was warm.

"Good." Her face remained pleasant, but her following words dripped with venom. "Though, I felt that it would be rather hypocritical of me to aid them when neither Houses Hightower nor Tyrell sent as much as a word of comfort, let alone an offer of assistance when I was at my lowest. Hmm, perhaps what rankles you is the broken pride of a knight forced to sell his sword in service of another?"

"My pride perished with the Blackfish and Margaery," Garlan offered languidly. "I'm nothing more than a fool in exile."

"But I can still tell that working for slavers and concubines irks you," Lynesse tutted. "But you need not be irked further, for I am now officially Tregar's main wife." *It still didn't change the fact that she employed slaves.*

"And what happened to Ryleana Dagareon and her daughters? Surely, she didn't just decide to step down from her position."

"They met an unfortunate end when their parlour burned down two moons ago due to some careless servant," was the seemingly sad reply. Lynesse even shed a tear, but it was a scorpion's cry, a cry of triumph.

Had he grown so jaded that he didn't care his aunt had murdered an innocent woman? Oh, how had the mighty fallen. But beggars like him could hardly afford the luxury of choice or honour; he had his men to feed still and vengeance to find, and the only proper skill they knew was making war.

"How unfortunate indeed," he snorted, shaking his head as Lynesse forced herself to weep for a woman she loathed and now replaced. A few years ago, Garlan might have been fooled. There was no doubt that the death of the main wife was Lynesse's doing, doubly so that she had now taken her place. And with a two-year-old son to her name, his aunt was well on her way to becoming the mother of the next Ormollen Merchant-Prince.

The mockery of her deed was double, for she was still wedded to Jorah the Slaver, who served Daenerys the Exile in Vaes Dothrak. Their union was broken by a high priestess of Ynanna in Lys, but her authority mattered neither before the Faith nor the Old Gods who had presided over the vows given over a decade earlier.

Yet Garlan could hardly judge. His was from a line of ambitious oathbreakers on both sides. Poisoners, schemers, traitors, assassins, cannibals, zealots, all within the span of a year—was there a family more cursed than his?

“Oh well.” Lynesse smiled, shamelessly unbothered by her situation or deeds. “Don’t tell me that you still plan on saving my prudish sister Alerie and your aunts and cousins from the Silent Sisters?”

“They’re still my kin—my flesh and blood,” Garlan retorted, anger leaking into his voice. “While I don’t doubt my grandmother used poison, I am beyond the point of caring.”

Her lips curled with amusement. “Even if it offends the Faith and the highlords supporting Tommen for it?”

“I am already considered an outlaw in the Seven Kingdoms regardless of which fool wins the Iron Throne,” he said. “An honourless, if bold fool from a line of traitors and oathbreakers. What is one more sin on my shoulders?”

“That’s the spirit, nephew!” Lynesse clapped, face full of sadistic glee. “Shed those useless virtues and delusions that knighthood has saddled you with. However, I would wait for the war to die off, for the tensions to dwindle and for vigilance to grow lax before attempting to sneak into Lannisport since it has been turned into a veritable fortress right now, according to one of my spice ship captains.”

“It might take years, as you very well know,” Garlan said, sighing. Years more spent selling his sword and soul to sin. But what did one more matter when he would burn in the Seven Hells regardless?

“A few years is nothing. It gives you time to find your footing in Essos and build up your connections, power, and wealth—something I already said I’ll help you with. You will always find a place in my parlour, dear nephew,” Lynesse responded, giggling coquettishly. But the girly behaviour only made his spine crawl. If he didn’t know better, Garlan would think she was trying to seduce him.

Perhaps she was; there was this rumour about her eldest sister, Malora, bedding one of her younger brothers. A rumour that Garlan had only heard when he had been in the Hightower, a rumour that Leyton Hightower had done his utmost to suppress. If the eldest sister could fall for a brother, why not the youngest one bed a nephew?

He still regretted the day he accepted Lynesse’s invitation to visit. It had been just two days since Leonette had perished, and Garlan was feeling numb from grief and rage. How could he have expected that his aunt’s failed marriage and exile in Essos saw her as one of the most influential women in Lys?

How could Garlan expect that she would seamlessly weave him into her power plays and intrigue under the guise of *‘mending broken family bonds’* and helping him *‘find his footing after such tragedy’*?

Looking back, Garlan had truly believed that was the truth; the sweet aunt he remembered only wanted to help, yet he then discovered how she had not helped his wife and the rest of the ladies. Lynesse was not that airheaded aunt with her head lost in the songs but a serpent hiding beneath the facade.

“I’m quite grateful for your patronage,” Garlan uttered yet another hollow platitude and turned to leave.

"I shall have another task for you soon," Lynesse's sweet voice echoed as he left her parlour. "Don't be a stranger, nephew!"

The Unsullied guarding the building barely spared him a glance, and the knight made his way out of the magister's palace complex, left through the city gates on his way towards the headquarters of the Stranger's Sons.

The headquarters were situated half a league from the city in a former Rogare manse fallen to disrepair, with a sprawling estate that could house hundreds of people behind its fortified walls. It had taken two moons and a significant amount of gold to turn it into something suitable for Garlan's tastes. With a great hall, an armoury, a stable, barracks, training yards, and a smithy, it had everything a sellsword company could need in a base, including a newly built humble chapel dedicated to the Seven. It even resembled a Westerosi castle, if far less fortified. The most unexpected part of the estate was the fruit garden run by Rhaelle Selmy, who had somehow ended up serving as the company's paymistress for her skill in sums and keeping ledgers.

This was where most of the gold looted from the Wyl's treasury had ended up—half of which had been spent on purchasing the right to base a company on the Island of Lys. Even now, the company had to pay Lys a hefty sum for the permit to operate a base and maintain crenelations on their island.

It took over half an hour to get from the Ormollen palace that overlooked Lys' double harbour, out of the city through one of its many gates, and to his headquarters, though a good chunk of it was the walk through the city that forbade any beasts of burden outside the designated areas near the gates. The Lyseni hinterlands were as beautiful as the city proper, with well-paved black roads of fused dragonstone, the sides lined with decorative trees and statues as the many twisting roads split many beautiful fruit and flower gardens and the occasional field of golden wheat.

It was even more peaceful than the bustling city. He left the black dragonstone road network that stretched across the island for a gravelled path between two gardens and rode hard until he arrived before the whitened walls. Only his slender tower that served as an impromptu seat peeked behind the twenty-foot-tall fortifications.

The guards at the gates, Aron and Morten, greeted him, as did the knights and men-at-arms drilling in the yard after he entered. Ser Willam Wythers had turned into the master-at-arms here, ensuring everyone was in prime fighting condition, disciplined, and, most importantly, familiar with working side by side.

Most of their fighting was on unwieldy terrain like mountains, beaches, jungles, forests, and islands, places where mounted formations became unfitting. Coupled with the difficulty of shipping horses, which made them often fight on foot. The enthusiastic knight had even taken to exploring tactics and formations from Ghis and Yi Ti in a bid to expand their flexibility on the battlefield.

But all Garlan could feel was exhaustion as his feet carried him to his solar inside the pale, squat tower beside the Great Hall. The building served as a meeting place on the first floor and apartments for the company's commanders above. He entered his solar and crumpled on the plain oak chair set to give him a full view of the yard below through the crystalline glass window—a luxury that was ridiculously cheap with Lynesse's connections inside the city.

This was his life now.

Most of the contracts that required the Sons of the Stranger were minor and rarely involved the type of significant fighting that many of his men had eagerly expected. Most of it was teaching some

wealthy merchant's son how to fight with a sword, guard duties for envoys or travelling merchants, or sweeping smuggler hideouts, bandit bases, or corsair camps along the Disputed Lands—the brigands having become so prevalent and lax that they usually fell easily to the might of a disciplined warband.

With the disastrous defeat of Myr and Tyrosh, the Lyseni magisters had deemed mercenary contracts insufficient in exerting their interests and influence. They feared their newly gained hold on the Disputed Lands was inadequate and easily challenged. That had forced the overproud merchants who shunned the sword for copper counting to turn a new page. Martial pursuits and training were imposed upon the citizenry. Lys even formed a class of highly privileged slave soldiers who were born and bred for war, answering only to the First Magister and the elected Gonfaloniere, the Lyseni equivalent of Lord Protector or supreme commander, in times of war.

Garlan found himself approached by the Lyseni magisters to offer his advice and opinion on their own private guardsmen or even the newly instituted martial training for the citizens of Lys.

The Essosi didn't lack instructors or skilled pit-fighters who could offer much-needed training for raising and training a warrior class. Still, the magisters of Lys understood that most such warriors were primarily focused on individual duels or spectacles for the crowds, not warfare, hence why they had approached Garlan.

The raging war that had shaken Essos and Westeros down to its core had truly scared Lys into genuine pursuit of the martial way after shunning it for four centuries, especially as they still struggled to dislodge the stubborn pirate lords from the Stepstones. Last Garlan had heard, half the Lyseni fleet had been burned at Torturer's Deep by an ambitious reaver after moons of struggle and failed attempts to make a proper landing on the island.

The new system was still being planned, but from what he learned, it would be similar yet not as terrible as the Unsullied of Astapor—purchasing hardy slave boys and training them in the arts of war from a young age. Then, when they were old enough to fight and had loyalty to Lys ingrained in them, they would be freed and thus fight harder for their masters. In time, they could wed and settle with a family, where Lys hoped their martial upbringing would have them raise their sons the same way. It sounded nearly benign, but he suspected such plans wouldn't be as easy or bereft of troubles.

Garlan both hated and loved Lys. The city was deceptively peaceful despite the cruelty of slavery hidden underneath. His gaze lifted beyond the walls of the headquarters; even the city's hinterlands and the green rolling hills of well-kept trees, grasslands, and flowers gave off an air of idyllic serenity that felt like a balm upon his tortured soul. Everything on this island was deliberately built and cultivated for centuries, even millennia, to be pleasing to the senses, and his mind felt more at peace the more he lingered here.

He loved how the city and the Island made him feel, for he was not a blind man, yet he loathed everything it stood for. It eroded his resolve and the steel in his heart.

"You look like shit again," a sharp feminine voice interrupted his musings.

"Greetings to you, Rhaelle," Garlan said, sighing. "You should try knocking on the door next time."

Where his wife had broken and shattered to a thousand pieces under cruel adversity, Rhaelle Selmy's cracks had mended out of sheer stubbornness, and she came out stronger, leaving the already prickly marcher lady harsh and unyielding like a pike ready to skewer any fool daring enough to draw near. Dressed in a heavy black gown bereft of ornament that looked formless and hid everything, even her

hair and leaving only her face bare, she was the exact opposite of Lynesse, if just as pretty and half a decade younger.

“So you can pretend not to be here to gaze at the sunset even if I saw you enter?” She snarked back, her fierce blue eyes stabbing at him like two daggers. “I’m still the company’s paymistress and will fulfil my duties. Lady Lynesse has sent the payment, along with a generous boon of seven hundred taels of the finest Qohorik Steel and seven fine destriers—all of them studs.”

“Mocking the Faith yet again,” he lamented, *and most likely some queer attempt at seducing him, something that Rhaelle must have noticed judging by the extra venom in her tone.*

“She can mock all she wants if it fills our coffers.” Rhaelle’s mouth said one thing, but her face looked like she had swallowed a lemon. “But I get it. You somehow look even more morose than you did a moon ago, a feat I never thought possible.”

“I want to get away from this thrice-cursed city and my scheming aunt, but all the work and the opportunities here are... just too good to pass up. It’s... peaceful, and even the Black Plague didn’t devastate the city nearly as badly as I feared, for the magisters of Lys prepared after Braavos and King’s Landing suffered so terribly.”

“It’s the clean streets and Panthera’s favourite children if the rumours are to be believed,” she offered with a tone suggesting she didn’t believe it. But the black kittens prowling through the streets of Lys were quite adept at hunting down vermin. “If you want to get away from the perfumed city, Ser Mern has returned from his voyage with plenty of offers. One from yet another golden Archon sitting his arse in Volantis, though I’d wager this one won’t last long enough for us to get to him. A contract from Yunkai against the Dothraki, a contract from Qarth to fight-”

“Let me guess: fight against another Khal grown too bold?”

Rhaelle Selmy laughed. It was a rare yet pleasant sound that made her eyes soften like the clear blue sky and made her face lose some of its sharpness.

“Got it in one,” she said, still chuckling. “Some Khal named Polo with a sizeable Khalasar of fifteen thousand screamers, extracting a back-breaking tribute, only to come back three moons later, demanding more with the threat of decimating the Qartheen hinterland. Then, there’s an open contract from Yi Ti to fight in their civil war on the side of the Emperor, and Saath with yet another Dothraki problem if you’re tired of working with slavers.”

Saath was the last vestige of Sarnor and the Tall Men, and it seemed that with their usual backers, Ibb and Lorath, busy clashing with each other, they found themselves fending off the Dothraki alone. But Saath was one of the smallest and weakest cities in Essos, and if the rumours were to be believed, that weakness was because of the local clergy of Sarne declaring slavery to be a sin after being on the receiving end of it during the Century of Blood.

“But taking such a contract would see all our efforts here wasted,” he said reluctantly.

“We can always leave Ser Willem to keep the recruitment going,” was the even response. “Even if we move our headquarters elsewhere, we can leverage Lynesse’s goodwill to try and turn this into a separate chapter of the company if you don’t wish to return. It might cost a significant sum of gold for upkeep, but not enough to leave us penniless, and it would allow us options should we need them down the line.”

“I’ll think about it,” Garlan promised after a painful minute of silence.

Rhaelle's face grew sad for a moment so short he might as well have imagined it before hardening like a piece of ivory.

"Very well," she said, a sliver of bitterness sneaking through her voice. "By the way, you realise the smuggler is reporting your every move to his little Queen, right? He would never return from King's Landing if it weren't with her blessing—or orders, even."

"I do, and Ser Davos has been candid on the matter. Shireen Baratheon has stated that she will close her eyes to our presence in Essos and that our exile has been acknowledged and won't be pursued. But if I ever set foot in Westeros, only the gallows await me."

"As vicious as her father, that one," Rhaelle tutted, though he could tell his paymistress was impressed, and for a good reason. Shireen's achievements in Tyrosh and Myr were nothing short of the stuff of songs, and she was a good part of why Lys so adamantly pursued the martial way. "As handy as it is to use the old smuggler's connections and knowledge, we only play into Baratheon's grasp by doing so."

"That's why I have Mern, Lothson, and my aunt Lynesse to make our own connections," he reminded dryly. "Even if the Onion Knight is somehow better than all of them combined while keeping an eye on Myr and Tyrosh at the same time."

"Time and experience cannot be easily substituted," she said darkly. After a minute of awkward silence, her frown deepened, and she curtsied. "If there's nothing else, I'll leave you to your thoughts, Commander."

Garlan's mind drifted as he gazed through the glass window, even after the door closed behind Rhaelle. Gods, he was neither blind nor deaf and already suspected Rhaelle fancied him, even if the bitter young woman wasn't sure how to express her affection. Worse, he felt neither ready nor worthy to take such a step again. What sort of union could two broken souls like them even make?

But perhaps he was imagining things, even if the prickly paymistress only showed a soft side to him. Soon, all thoughts left him but the one niggling at his mind.

To leave behind this city of sin, beauty, and peace, or to stay?

Neither of the options appealed to him, for he had grown weary of bloodshed. But Garlan couldn't put down his sword yet, no matter how much he felt like a rudderless ship, aimlessly drifting along the winds and the currents as he waited for an opportunity for vengeance that might never arrive.

9th Day of the 8th Moon, 300 AC

Jon Snow, the Crownlands

The image of the soft, bountiful south he expected was far from what he had seen. War, famine, plague, and winter had scarred the once prosperous land and its people, from the scoured fields around the Honeywine to the hills of the Northmarch.

Neither he nor Robb encountered trouble beyond a few bands of bandits and deserters through the Reach, a testament to his brother's efforts in pacifying the fractured, war-torn kingdom. Even the bandits and deserters were easy to sniff out with Ghost's help. It was almost peaceful, reminding Jon of a simpler time, for the Southron winter felt like a Northern summer. The middle of the year even saw the days all too warm, and the snow had changed to cold rain for a few moons.

But the thin veneer of peace was shattered the moment they neared the Crownlands with the skirmishes that heralded the presence of an enemy army nearby. The enemy scouts were far more competent than the reavers and Reachmen Jon had fought in the North. Yet, no matter their competence, they lacked the advantage of his direwolves and skinchangers, which gave Jon and Robb an edge.

The two brothers led the river of steel and muscle that was the Northern lancers and Barrowknights through the Crownlands proper. They had a clash with Aegon's horse five days prior, and it had seen heavy losses for the Dornish, with Lords Holt, Drinkwater, Vaith, and Ladybright falling to Ice and Dark Sister, and Jordayne and Uller captured along with their heirs.

The foe matched their five thousand lance for lance, but the Dornishmen's morale had faltered rather quickly when the presence of the direwolves drove their right flank into disarray, allowing Jon to break through, wheel around and envelop the enemy centre unpunished, forcing them into a rout.

But as far as cavalry battles went, this one saw the defeated enemy manage to retreat. While not as decisive as Jon wished, it was a good battle, trading three hundred lancers for five times as many enemies, and would definitely strike a blow to Aegon's morale.

While his forces suffered some damage, they were far from being defeated, and the war would be decided in the following battles.

Their victory also freed up the upper banks of the Blackwater from Aegon's control. A deed that allowed Lord Edmure Tully to build a makeshift bridge five miles down the confluence of the Rush and the Gods' Eye River unmolested. Soon enough, they could link their forces with their Lord Father or flank Aegon should Eddard Stark decide to force a crossing through the Golden Bridge and the lower Rush.

"It's getting colder again," Jon noted as wisps of wet snow began to dance in the air, giving the previously lush landscape a budding veil of white.

Ghost's gaze was roaming the surroundings with frightening intensity, but he knew that his companion was merely waiting for a moment when the snowfall would be enough for a proper roll.

"We've had far colder moons in the middle of summer back home," Robb replied, face looking quite unimpressed. His left hand was still stiff from the heavy battering Lord Holt had given him with a warpick. "And they have the gall to call this a cold winter, the Southrons!"

"Well, these were supposed to be the hottest moons of the year," he offered. "If it's snowing here, it's far worse up home. The farmers in the North might have managed to get two harvests if they were lucky..."

His brother's cheer turned to ice, much like the surrounding landscape.

"It's good that Father secured those generous supplies from Pentos, then. I still don't get how that damned place is so much warmer than Westeros, even though it's just across from the Vale. At least we can end this bloody war soon and finally have peace."

"Peace... I wish it lasted forever." Jon's face darkened. "But as much as we dream of summer and peace that never ends, winter always comes, whether we like it or not. There's always more fighting, brother. It might not be soon, but within a decade or two, some overambitious cretin will stir up from his corner and cause chaos and mayhem and war. You merely need to look at history if you seek any confirmation."

"Quite," Robb agreed stiffly. "But it doesn't stop one from wishing. Perhaps we can do something about it after we get rid of Aegon."

"Perhaps. But the snow and the cold will corner the Blackfyre more than we ever could. And a cornered foe is most dangerous," Jon warned.

Now they knew for sure Aegon was indeed a Blackfyre, but the Dornish had predictably dismissed Illyrio Mopatis' confession, for it was extracted under torture. *"How do we know you have not tortured some poor Essosi until he sang what you wanted to hear?"*

Worse, the Pentoshi magister had perished to a chill, leaving them with merely a written confession, lending credence to the Dornish claims.

According to the hearsay, Aegon was convinced he was Lyanna's son, born moons before Eddard Stark even arrived in the Tower of Joy, and the Blackfyre clung to the lie like a drowning man would cling to a straw. Jon thought he would be angry at the mummery involving his mother, but all he felt was... numb disdain. It was not done to insult his family or himself, merely out of expediency and naked ambition. In the end, the claims Aegon and the Blackfyres were making were not too far from the truth, for Jon existed.

Of course, there were no witnesses of any proclaimed marriage between Rhaegar and Lyanna because it never happened. After all, why would a future king need to wed a second wife when he could just as easily legitimise any children they had as he saw fit without offending the Faith or the pious lords once the crown sat atop his brow?

The more he thought about his sire and mother, the more Jon's mood soured. Aegon's loud claims were an irksome reminder of his circumstances, even if the boy wholeheartedly believed the tale if the words of Mopatis, his true sire, were to be believed.

Just like Robb, his heart was also tired of death, bloodshed, and war, and he yearned for peace. Unlike Robb, Jon had fought for far longer. Swinging his sword and drawing his bow was still laughably easy, for the lives of men were just so... fragile and easy to snuff out, doubly so now that he had gotten scarily good at it.

"Your uncle does good work," Jon noted as they approached a narrower part of the Blackwater Rush. The currents were quick and dangerous, but that did not deter the Riverlanders.

Numerous men toiled on wooden platforms anchored with ropes in the middle of the river, hammering down sharpened pairs of closely linked wooden piles into the riverbed at an opposing angle to resist the fierce rapids.

"The Riverlanders sure work fast," Robb chuckled, visibly impressed at the work done. "At this rate, Uncle Edmure will have a whole bridge up within two days. We shall make camp here to defend this side of the crossing."

"I'll send out scouts and the direwolves to root out any lingering enemies between here and the Kingswood," Jon said. "It wouldn't do if Aegon decides to attack us with everything he's got in hopes of preventing us from linking up with Father."

11th Day of the 8th Moon, 300 AC (two days later)

Shaggydog and Grey Wind cautiously accompanied them through the wooden bridge while Ghost and the rest of the direwolves remained with the Northern horse as Jon's eyes and ears. If he had brought more than Ghost and three direwolves, things would have been far easier. But the direwolves didn't like seafaring, and Jon left most of them with Val and Calla or in the Wolfswood. He could always tap into the few hundred wolves his mind could feel dwelling at this end of the Kingswood, but he decided to leave that as a last resort.

Rickon also had Blackfeather flying above the other bank of the Blackwater Rush with impunity, surveying the unsuspecting enemy camp.

"I must warn you," Edmure Tully cautioned after they finally met on the other side of the Blackwater Rush and exchanged curt greetings. His face was harsh, his eyes sharp, and his lean body was that of a seasoned warrior, starkly contrasting his reputation as an easy-going man who loved wine and women. "Lord Stark... the war has changed him."

But war seems to have changed Robb's Uncle just as much, for the Lord of Riverrun was nothing like the rumours. Was this because of the war and battles he participated in? Or perhaps the loss of his uncle to treachery? There was none of the animosity or suspicion that Jon had expected from Catelyn Tully's brother, either. But that could be because of his deeds in the North and the shattering of the reavers, winning him their begrudging respect.

Even the expected biting remarks or japes about his bastardry were few and far in between from the Southrons, and most were content to throw him a glance filled with suspicion or veiled disdain. Jon supposed that once you get so good at killing, men would simply be glad to have you on their side. Or perhaps his reputation as a sorcerer occupied their minds, and the fact that he was born on the wrong side of the sheets was merely an afterthought.

"Changed him how?" Robb asked.

"Not for the better." The reply sent chills down Jon's back. "My words will fail to describe it. You will see for yourself, nephew, Lord Jon. Let us move, for daylight is limited, and I want to return to my tent tonight."

Robb and Jon shared a worried glance as they spurred their horses forward; they had also noticed the change in their Father's deeds, far more heavy-handed than the Eddard Stark they knew would have done. The increasingly harsh and curt words in his letters had not escaped their attention either. But they had chalked it up to the cruelty and intensity of the war.

Alas, that was the most they could get out of the reticent Lord Tully as they rode hard towards the army camp downriver. They had left behind Lord Dustin and Karstark in command of the camp. The two cunning old foxes were more than enough to deal with any prodding by Aegon, and they knew to retreat if he came in force.

After three hours of fast riding along the heavily patrolled bank of the Blackwater Rush, the sun neared the western horizon. A system of fortified wooden watchtowers dotted their side of the river, ready to sound an alarm if any crossing was attempted.

They soon reached the army camp. Organised in neat, orderly rows of snow-capped tents was an array of colourful banners belonging to Westerlanders, Riverlanders, Valemen, a sparse number of Crownlanders, and Northmen. From the brindled boar of Crakehall to the white sunburst of Karstark, Royce's bronze runic shield, and the dancing maiden of Piper, this was a variety of Houses that Jon had never seen before gathered in one spot.

There were even armoured men riding Dothraki horses that Jon would take for the infamous Screamer of Essos if they weren't tightly wrapped in fur and steel from head to toe.

A Barrowknight wearing a Dustin surcoat that could only be the infamous Mad Lance rode out with a small retinue to meet them, his yellow armour heavily battered in places, but Jon's eyes lingered on the curved sheathed blade hanging on his belt. An arakh, a most unusual choice of arms for not only Northmen but any self-respecting Westerosi knight.

His sharp face bore a cross-shaped scar on his brow, and his eyes were filled with bloodlust.

"Ser Damon," Robb greeted warmly. "Words of your exploits reach far and wide."

"Just minor trifles compared to what you brothers have achieved," the Dustin knight said with a smile that held a hint of madness. So there was some truth to his moniker, after all. His eyes paused on Jon's page. "Truly, Lord Stark is the father of heroes; even young Lord Rickon behind you looks to have the makings of a fierce warrior at seven. They call you two the Demons of Winterfell, and with good reason."

"Yet another overly pretentious title," Jon murmured as Robb elbowed him with amusement, and Rickon proudly puffed up his chest. Perhaps he ought to include some lessons of humility in his brother's education.

"A good fit, I would say," Ser Damon continued boldly. "While many were certain the snow would kill the rabid Reachmen, I must thank you for smashing those grasping flowers in the North and ousting those pesky septons out of Barrowton."

"The latter was the deed of Lord Blackwood, his lancers, and the knights of the Riverlands," he corrected.

"And he would never have the chance to hold onto the victory if the Reavers and Hightowers still roamed the North. Besides, a show of strength is far more imposing than if the foes perished in the cold!" Then, his face looked somehow abashed, and his voice lowered. "If I might be so bold to inquire, where's my brother?"

"On the other side of the Blackwater Rush—I left him in command of the horse," Robb said. "And fret not. Beron and his son, Roderick, have thrived in the South and are in good spirits. Though Lord Beron lost a finger and half an ear storming the Hightower and received a few scars and bruises, but nothing that stopped him for more than a sennight." Jon had volunteered to be the first inside the battle-fortress, much to Dustin and Tarly's chagrin, but the frost armour allowed him to bear the brunt of the pressure and spared the Northmen heavy casualties.

The relief on the Barrowknight's face was plain to see. Even his harsh eyes softened into a foggy grey as he dipped his head in respect and gratitude.

"That's good," he murmured. When he raised his head, steel returned to his posture as he looked at Robb. "Lord Robb, I humbly request a jousting game, and Lord Jon, I would be honoured if we could cross blades together in a spar."

"I don't mind," Jon said, shaking his head in wonder. "But such matters can wait after the battles are done. Duty first, Ser Damon—please lead us to our Father."

"Right, of course." The Barrowknight coughed, face abashed as he wheeled his steed. "I'll show you the way."

Another one of the riders that Jon recognised barely as... Morgan Liddle, clad in a full set of lobstered plate that would make a Reach knight jealous instead of his usual brigandine and ringmail, nudged his garron to Jon's side.

"Lord Jon, how fare my brothers?" he asked, voice hoarse. Middle Liddle was unbothered by the winter chill and still shaved his head clean, leaving only his eyebrows intact and a large, neatly trimmed beard.

"Ah, well, Dunk is doing great," Jon chuckled fondly. "He ought to be in Little Hall now, and I've left Rickard as Castellan of Winterfell. And no need for courtesies; we're practically family after your brother married my wife's sister!"

The stunned Morgan Liddle gaped at him as they rode through the camp before finally eagerly demanding the story.

But before Jon could continue, they arrived at the highest hill where the royal pavilion flying the Baratheon and Stark banners above lay. Why was a shaggy white lion the size of a pony sleeping next to one of the braziers?

"Ah, I forgot to warn you, my lords," the Dustin knight coughed. "Lady Stark arrived from the North with the reverend priestess Melisandre just three days prior."

"Reverend priestess?" Robb echoed, face turning odd.

"She's quite the character, I'd say, and it's high time we, the Northmen, get a clergy of our own!" Damon's voice thickened with excitement. "You should have seen those Septons that kept giving all sorts of excuses not to come to King's Landing because of some pesky curse or out of fear of Lord Stark's sorcery, only to instantly flock here in large numbers, afraid that Lady Melisandre would corrupt the young king away from their *rightful* Faith. Anyway, we have arrived, and my task is fulfilled. I will hold you to my challenge later, My Lords."

Jon could only snort as they approached the entrance where a veritable half-giant clad in steel stood guard in the snow, proudly leaning on the dark shaft of an enormous halberd crowned by a dragonsteel head. This could only be Hodor—or Walder the Red Wake, as they called him now.

It stilled boggled his mind to see the gentle halfwit he had grown used to be... not so gentle and with all of his wits.

"Lord Stark is expecting you, Lord Robb, Lord Jon," his voice rumbled dangerously from underneath his helmet, giving them a solemn nod.

A grey direwolf that could only be Summer—no, his name was Winter now, slipped from the entrance and nipped the growling Grey Wind on the ear. Shaggydog, in turn, tugged on his tail, and before they could blink, the tension was broken, and the three direwolves were playfully rolling around the slush. To his amusement, everyone in the vicinity edged away from the warhorse-sized beasts enough to tear limbs—except for the prior white lion who cautiously approached, surprisingly looking at Winter for guidance as the direwolf nipped at Greywind when he growled at the large feline. Soon, all four massive beasts played together in the snow like three pups and a kitten.

"Rickon, come and greet your Father," Jon waved over his brother before he could rush off with the other squires to explore the camp or join to play with the direwolves. For all his enthusiasm at the prospect of meeting his father, Rickon turned increasingly surly the more they approached the Crownlands.

Jon felt a similar apprehension, if for an entirely different reason. He missed Eddard Stark dearly but didn't know how to face the man, who, by all accounts, had changed drastically from what he remembered. How do you talk to a man whose death you mourned twice? How do you talk to a man who lied to you and the world... even if it was for your own sake?

Would Eddard Stark be a stranger... or would he be the father Jon still yearned for deep inside?

Robb gave him a reassuring smile, and Jon steeled himself and followed his brother inside; escaping once out of grief and madness was more than enough.

The pavilion ground was covered by a thick Myrish carpet and bear and wildcat hides, warding away the cold ground's chill, and the insides were inviting, warm, and dimly lit by a few crackling braziers.

Eddard Stark and Catelyn sat before a long, varnished table, unmoving like two statues so much that even Rickon hid behind Jon. The man who raised him, an uncle by blood but father by choice, had changed.

His well-trimmed beard was now heavily streaked with silver, and his face, which had grown full from ten years of peace and summer, was now gaunt and hardy, with a thin but muscular body that matched it. Lady Stark was the complete opposite; while her face was expressionless, her body subtly leaned towards her husband, and she looked like a cat who had just caught a songbird, her bright blue eyes glowing with satisfaction.

Jon's nose twitched as he caught the scent of what had happened, rendering him utterly speechless.

...he had another sibling-cousin on the way, and if not, he would soon.

"Father, Mother," Robb greeted and nudged the squirming Rickon, who echoed the greeting, his small face solemn for once.

"Lord Stark, Lady Stark," Jon said with a bow to cover his earlier surprise.

"I'm gladdened to see you three hale and healthy." Catelyn was the first to speak, her voice surprisingly warm even as she regarded Jon. "I suppose I should start with the good news. A raven from Winterfell arrived just three days prior—Lady Val has given birth to twin boys. While she stubbornly refuses to name them just yet, they're both healthy according to Myrcella, and the eldest is silver of hair and blue eyes flaked with violet, while the second takes after his father in looks."

"Congratulations, brother," Robb clapped his shoulder while Rickon jumped excitedly at the prospect of having more nephews. "It seems you have me beat. Myrcella and I have a lot of work to do when I get back North."

"It's not a contest, Robb," Lady Stark chided, her voice kind. "Some things ought not be forced. But I won't deny I'd be happy to see more grandchildren soon. Rickon, stop hiding and come give your mother a hug."

The heartfelt reunion lasted nearly two hours, making Jon Snow feel like a Stark more than any crowns or lordships ever did. No talk of war, fighting, Lordships, or religion was brought up, and it reminded Jon of a time he had forgotten long ago. He forgot his previous worries and questions, for they didn't matter anymore. They were family, and that was all he needed to know. Even Catelyn Stark treated him warmly... not like a son but like a favourite nephew, making the whole thing much more inconceivable.

He learned more about Edmure Tully and his marriage to Cerenna Lannister, who was now pregnant, the young Robert Arryn and his precarious health that seemed to get better the more he breathed the cold air outside and saw the winter sun. He had gotten sick thrice during Eddard Stark's campaign—but came out stronger for it after each time.

"I can't believe Lysa spoiled that child so much," Catelyn lamented. "I held doubts about the rumours of her rising madness and paranoia, but to raise the heir to the Vale with no regard or knowledge of his duties and heritage, let alone basic things like self-discipline?"

"Robert is still young and can be taught—especially after realising whinging and attempts to escape will not release him from his duties," his father said, but the edges of his lips twitched. "Ah, how life turns. This must be a comeuppance for all the grey hairs Robert and I gave Jon Arryn."

"We have to do our best," she sighed. "The poor boy, growing up without a mother and a father. Lysa... Lysa should have known better. I knew the miscarriages affected her, but this is too much!"

Rickon looked utterly disinterested in the topic of his aunt—the woman he had never seen was nothing but a distant stranger to him. Robb, however, looked torn, but he never raised the matter of releasing the deposed Lysa Arryn from the clutches of the Faith.

"She's found some serenity in the Motherhouse in Gulltown," the Lord of Winterfell assured. "You can visit her after the war should you wish."

Lady Stark's words were bitter. "Mother forgive me, but I want to. I want to see my sister—the bright and joyful girl that I remember, not the woman she grew into, but it's impossible." Her face was filled with mixed feelings, but her eyes hardened into a glare worse than Jon had ever received from the woman. "...Lysa could have called the banners. She could have called the banners to join Robb and Edmure and honour her family and the alliance she had facilitated, but she didn't. Renly would have crumbled against the combined might of the Vale, North, and the Riverlands. She spat on family, she spat on duty, and she spat on honour, and for what? For what? If things had gone awry... let us not speak of this. But I cannot forgive her yet. Maybe I can learn to forgive with time, but I shall not forget."

Then, Eddard Stark gave his wife a certain look, his voice turning solemn, "I want to speak with my sons in private."

Catelyn Stark reluctantly stood up. "Rickon, come along. Let us visit Tommen—you haven't seen each other in over two years."

The last vestiges of carefree warmth instantly vanished.

She paused at the pavilion's flap, giving Robb and Jon one final, meaningful glance. "I hope the two of you succeed and convince your father against that madness he's considering. And Ned... just tell them."

Nodding, she curtsied and left the pavilion with Rickon, leaving the three men alone inside.

"Tell us what, Father?" Robb demanded, his voice steely.

"Walder, make sure we aren't interrupted," Eddard Stark harshly barked out, receiving a muffled 'Yes, Lord Stark.' "Robb, you wrote you mastered warging?"

"Mastery is a strong word, but I can do it well enough now, after Jon's tutelage," his brother said, face growing impassive.

"Good, get Grey Wind to patrol around the tent with Winter. What I'm about to tell you cannot reach other ears."

"Perhaps you ought not to tell us, then," Jon suggested. While Ghost and his three companions were on the other side of the river, he lacked any of the beasts under his command to help. But he still sensed Grey Wind and Winter circling the pavilion—the strange lion he learned was Tommen's hrakkar had returned to sleep a distance away—and cautiously reached out to the guard dogs in the kennel nearby, commanding them to raise a ruckus should someone untrustworthy appear. "A secret is only one when it's never spoken aloud. I left a single letter, and four souls are in the know about my circumstances."

"That might be so, but I need your advice," his Father said, face hardening into the infamous ice mask the Lord of Winterfell always carried when dealing with other lords. "First, I have to confess a serious matter. The spirit of the Hungry Wolf is stuck in my mind, driving me half-mad with his whispers and lusty jests."

"Come again?" Robb and Jon exclaimed in unison.

"It is as you heard. Worse, Theon Stark is a bloody menace. At first, I managed to ignore him, but with time, it became harder and harder, and he started invading my dreams, not allowing me proper rest, the damned nuisance." That explained the dark bags under his eyes. "I debated tossing the ice blade that I suspected was the cause of this link into the sea, but I couldn't discard such a valuable weapon that I'd grown so proficient in the middle of a war. That priestess... Melisandre is confident in exorcising him, but I am wary of her honeyed promises."

"As you ought to be," Jon agreed. "She is powerful, ambitious, and dangerous, and her gifts are like a sword without a hilt."

"Our thoughts align on this." His father nodded. "But she's not wrong in her ideas to reforge the Old Gods' clergy, or the green priests as she calls them. This war has shown me that the North needs to check the increasing ambition of the Faith and the Septons."

"I thought the war had broken much of the Faith," Robb said.

The Lord of Winterfell rubbed his eyes, his icy facade dropping for a heartbeat only to reveal a face full of weariness.

"The fighting along religious lines might have ended, but now the wrangle to fill the void left behind will begin. There were zealots and overambitious fools on Joffrey's side, too, acting with royal sanction, seeking to consolidate their influence over the young king once more. Even good men like Maryn of the Vale's Most Devout want to strengthen the power of the Faith to prevent corruption and another bloody schism like the one Mace Tyrell exploited." He exhaled slowly, his eyes looking down at his calloused hands. "We need to strengthen belief in the Old Gods, and the best way to do so is through clergy."

"That might be so," Jon agreed reluctantly. "But I still can't bring myself to trust Melisandre of Asshai. She might look like a woman fully devoting herself to the Old Gods, but you have not seen the vile, dark deeds she is more than capable of."

"Peace, son." Eddard's voice softened. "That's why I intend to go to the Isle of Faces after the battle and invite the Green Men, see if they have a solution to my plight, and request they share their teachings and serve as a counterbalance in the budding Old Gods clergy. Catelyn has a similar plan, which includes a pact made with the Children of the Forest."

"We'll deal with these woes as they come," Robb said. "I assume this is not why you dismissed Mother and Rickon. Such eldritch magic and ghosts sound scary, but there must be something else; otherwise, Mother wouldn't have been so conflicted. You taught us to focus on the enemy before us first, remember?"

A distant smile found its way to Eddard Stark's face, but it was gone as quickly as it appeared.

"Quite. It is like you have said... *mostly*." The last word came out so cold, so chilly and harsh that it had Jon instinctively reach for his sword. "Jon, remember the accusation that you wrote Stannis making? The accusations that I had made in my last life, which cost me my head, the accusations that Renly made in this one?"

"Aye, how can I ever forget?" Jon snorted. "Those words damned House Stark to so much tragedy and a bitter struggle with no end for no gain. But nobody had any proof but loud words. *Nobody*. Everyone pointed fingers, and in the end, the truth didn't even matter; only the swords that propped up the claims did. Cersei Lannister might be a proud woman, but surely she wouldn't be foolish enough to deliberately cuckold her husband, right?"

Eddard Stark's silence gave him pause.

Even Robb shuffled uneasily, running a shaky hand through his hair as the implications settled on his shoulders. "This... this can't be right! This is *madness*!"

Jon just rubbed his brow, collapsing onto a chair.

"So... Cersei's children are all bastards?"

"All four of them, including the one she birthed just last year," his father responded darkly. "She drunkenly confessed to cuckolding Robert when she tried to seduce me in Runestone—with her twin brother Jaime to boot. Along with the murder of Myrielle Lannister. I... I killed her for it."

So much for Cersei drinking herself to death.

"So Renly and Stannis were right," Jon groaned. How wroth had his father been to murder a queen with his own hands and mask it as an accident? "Damn it, how could a noblewoman do something so... daringly foolish?!"

Eddard Stark let out a hollow laugh. "Pride, spite, and viciousness, that's how."

"...I thought Stannis raised such accusations out of spite and ambition. Otherwise, he would have told Robert and supported you instead of waiting for your deaths before making a move. It doesn't make any sense. If Stannis had known all along, why would he just wait?"

"Many might not know, but Robert himself told me an interesting thing. The Baratheon brothers hated each other too much in the end," Lord Stark lamented, his shoulders sagging in the end. "I have shared these... revelations only with my wife."

Robb was still opening and closing his mouth like a fish, blinking in confusion.

"So..." Jon Snow swallowed heavily as his mind raced. "With Renly dead, that leaves Shireen Baratheon as the rightful heir to the Iron Throne?"

"She has the blood, but there are numerous precedents against picking a queen, both before and after the Conquest," his father whispered. "While skilled, Shireen's young and merely Robert's niece. There's a grown man with a better claim in this very tent, a man from House Stark with royal blood

and skills as a king and a commander. With more swords backing him than all the others combined, should I just say the word.”

“I’m a bastard,” Jon reminded wryly. “I have made my peace with all it entailed long ago.”

“This damned war has shown me that the truth doesn’t truly matter.” There was madness in his father’s eyes, then. Then, Jon knew it wasn’t Theon Stark’s whispers that had broken his father but Cersei Lannister’s deception that had seen him fight and kill so many for a false cause. “Who’s to say that Rhaegar didn’t marry Lyanna in some obscure ceremony before the Old Gods that we can have Melisandre and the newly elected High Septon acknowledge.”

“I have had my fill of crowns and ruling. If this was my lot, my rightful inheritance by law, I would fight for it to the bitter end, but it is not.” Jon countered, something inside of him roaring with fury at the mere thought of more battles, more scheming, endless bloodshed and struggle. “The Iron Throne is not mine, and I have, at best, a fleeting claim to it. In another time and place, I would entertain pressing such a claim, but not now, not when taking the Iron Throne right now would tear apart our family, the realm, and everything we have fought for so far! *I refuse!*”

He found himself heaving, the words taking more out of him than hours of battle. Taking in a deep, shuddering breath, Jon continued, trying to reign in the bubbling anger that churned in his belly.

“Who’s to say that the realm will not bleed even more if we were to press my claim to the throne? How much will we have to fight for it?” Eddard Stark didn’t meet his gaze. “Worse, we’d do so through lies and deception like the Blackfyre mummer. The House of the Dragon is no more, and few remember it fondly after Aerys. I fear that we will destroy our family and undo everything we fought for if we allow ourselves to be swayed because of the foolishness of that thrice-damned whore Cersei.”

Both Robb and Eddard Stark looked at him wide-eyed at his outburst. While they knew what Jon had gone through, only he himself had lived it. The darkness, the desperation, and the years of bitter struggle piled up one after another with no end in sight as war, death, darkness, and the cold took hold of the land.

“Say I take the throne, a bastard with a wildling wife and staunch belief in the Old Gods. Suppose we win and the lords bend the knee. What happens when someone in the Reach or Dorne or the Vale or the Stormlands or the Westerlands rebel against their heathen bastard king once you return North and disband the muster? What happens when the flames of the Faith Militant that have just been extinguished sparkle to life again? Who will prop up my claim? The pious Crownlords that are spent, their lands ravaged empty by war and famine? The Western Lords that have lost everything in a war they won with nothing to show for?”

His father had the decency to blush, but his reluctance was plain to see.

“Are you sure-”

“Yes,” he spat out, trying to swallow his anger and think of a way out of this mess. “If you say the truth does not matter, Father, why not Tommen? Did you not raise the boy and groom him to be King for the last two years? Is he not betrothed to Shireen, the last true Baratheon, and thus making all of this debate on who the rightful ruler moot within a generation anyway?”

“What... what about Myrcella?” Robb croaked out, eyes reddening. “I considered the possibility when I read Jon’s letter, but seeing it come true for real? Damn it!”

"That doesn't make her any less a woman or your wife," their father reassured, but his words sounded hollow. "Your vows were given before the Old Gods. The cloak of House Stark was clasped around her shoulders, and she is now Myrcella Stark, regardless of her birth."

"And if Lady Stark's earlier words are true, Tommen looks to you as a father," Jon pointed out, feeling tired of this farce. "You bent the knee to him, swearing fealty for many to hear. Your honour is at stake here."

"I swore to Tommen Baratheon, not Tommen Waters," was the tired objection. "Do my vows hold if Robert's son I gave my allegiance to never existed?"

A similar argument could have been made for his brother's wedding, but Jon remained silent.

"I... I love Myrcella," Robb whispered, defeated as he just... sat on the ground and looked torn between tears and fury. "This can't be true, Father. It must be a jest. You said Cersei was too drunk and surely was spouting nonsense-"

"I wish I could tell you so, but I would be lying. Winter can smell lies and deception, and this was the most truthful Cersei has ever been."

Grief and disbelief melted from his brother's face, giving way to fury as he let out a choked, angry laughter. "...Then," his voice grew raspy. "How could we have been fooled so..."

"Cersei fooled the whole royal court for over fifteen years," their father said, looking a decade older as his shoulders slumped. "She fooled her husband, she fooled her father, she fooled the rest of the kingsguard, too. I even got my hands on Renly's copy of *The Lineages and Histories of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms* from deserters from Storm's End. The book was written by Grandmaester Mellon seventy years ago, yet someone had inked down more entries over the years. According to Ser Kevan Lannister, the handwriting in Baratheon's entries in the last fifty years matched the handwriting of Varys the Spider. The damn treacherous Blackfyre eunuch knew and didn't say a thing. I bet he shoved the book into Renly's hands himself."

Jon Snow saw what had eaten so badly at Lord Stark, at his father. The whispers of Theon Stark denied him rest and peace, doubly more so when his heart was torn on such an issue. Truth and falsehood... kin and duty... honour and deception all clashed with one another.

But Jon was also tired. He had spent the better part of the last half a decade fighting and struggling. It was an old exhaustion that had seeped into his soul.

"No," Jon uttered.

"No?" Robb echoed, eyes wide as he tugged on his russet locks in despair.

"No thrones, no truths, no more talks of this madness!" Jon hissed out. "The realm doesn't need the truth. The realm *can't handle* the truth, for it will destroy the kingdoms and even the North for a century to come. If it bothers you so much, write a secret decree adopting and legitimising Myrcella and Tommen into the royal House of Baratheon and be done with it. Ink it down in the Old Tongue with weirwood sap and seal it under lock and key in some secret compartment of the royal treasury. In a century or two, the truth won't matter as Shireen's line would still rule. It is your power as a royal regent. It is your power as the man who props up the crown, the king-maker of this era."

Jon still failed to fathom how Cersei Lannister could screw up things so badly. Worse, the Great Robert Baratheon had uncontested rule over the Seven Kingdoms, yet he was blind to his wife's treachery under his very nose.

"Adoption is a Ghiscari and Yi-tish custom, mostly practised for nephews, nieces, and cousins in the absence of an heir," Eddard Stark uttered slowly as his face grew thoughtful.

"That didn't stop you from adopting Jon in all but name," Robb pointed out quietly. "And it is no ill deed to learn from others what is useful for us."

"Doesn't House Lannister have some distant Baratheon-Durrandon blood?" Jon asked. "It might be a bit of a stretch... but we can fix this. We can make it right. Tommen has the make of a king, he has the popular support, and Myrcella is a good wife to Robb."

"Is she?" Eddard Stark asked, his heavy gaze bearing down on Jon. "Even when she broke parley and killed the Hightower envoy? What if she possesses the same foolishness as her mother and father?"

"House Stark did not lack for madmen or ambitious fools," he said back. "Besides, who would condemn Myrcella for her deed? The Reachmen who loathe Tyrell and Hightower? The zealots who were all slain to the last? The Northmen that cheered her on, including your wife? Westerlanders, who would probably adore her instead? Or ourselves to weaken the unity of House Stark, the same unity that props up the Iron Throne? What she did was not honourable and would diminish House Stark's reputation, but you already picked kin before honour when you decided to raise me. And Myrcella is family sealed in blood now, whether you like it or not."

"I... I'm not leaving Myrcella," Robb spoke up, his voice jagged as he stood up slowly until he faced their father with his spine ramrod straight. "Let's do as Jon proposes, Father."

Eddard Stark peeled the gloves off his hands and tiredly rubbed his face.

"You want me to keep lying and close my eyes to the truth?"

"You did it once with me, so we shall ask you to do it again," Jon said.

"It's not the same," he objected, a tired covering holding half his face as if he no longer wanted to gaze up on the world. "Claiming you as mine was to protect you from retaliation—whether Tywin or Robert or some misguided fool. To protect you from the ambitions of the vipers in King's Landing and the South. This is different."

"Aye, but I could have been protected as Eddard Stark's bastard even if you sent me off to Howland Reed or some Mountain Clansmen, forgotten," Jon countered. "It would be easy to fulfil your perceived duty to your family, doubly more so if I was out of sight and out of mind. Yet you raised me in Winterfell with Robb and the rest."

"I did," Eddard Stark's face grew fierce. "I did because I am the Lord of Winterfell. I make the decisions in the North, no matter how selfish, and I chose to have my family close."

The words warmed Jon's heart more than anything else.

"And I will be forever grateful for it, father. But now, you have the means and the reason to quietly legitimise this whole mess as a royal regent, if only to assuage your conscience. You're the one holding the reigns of authority and the future in the Iron Throne in your hands. Didn't you yourself say that the truth didn't matter earlier? Or were these words merely to push the burden away?"

"I... I'm just tired, Jon, Robb," their father confessed, ice mask cracking to reveal a pained face underneath. "I'm tired of all this, I'm tired of the killing and the war and ordering the death of men, women, and children far away because strategy demands it. I'm tired of secrets and deceptions. I'm tired of dealing with ambitious schemers and fools, and it feels like I'm being pulled in every direction

and break at the seams when the only thing that I want is to go back to Winterfell and never step foot south of the Neck ever again.”

“But you can’t because the war will only continue, spiralling into further unrest,” Jon added knowingly. “Let us make this right, then. Let us win the war, then forge the peace properly in a way that a similar mess will not repeat in ten, twenty, or thirty years as it did before. We control the swords, we control the crown, we control the royal court and the broken Faith, no matter how uneasy they are. It is up to us to make it right and to make it whole and good again.”

“Aye,” Robb said, reddened face filled with resolve. “Let us be done with this for good. We’ll help you, father. You don’t have to bear the burden alone.”

“Together,” Jon declared, a feeling of excitement swelling in his chest.

“Gods, I’ve raised you boys well...” The icy mask returned to Eddard Stark as he came over and pulled them into his embrace. “Fine. Let us talk war and then peace.”

The three of them clustered around the table, and the Lord of Winterfell pulled out a Crownland’s map and marked the enemy and ally positions with ivory figurines pulled from his war chest.

“The last foe in our way,” Lord Stark’s voice grew wistful. “The last obstacle to peace. A Blackfyre, backed by Dorne, the Golden Company, and some of the weakened Stormlords.”

Robb leaned forward, frowning at the unused elephant figurines. “Wasn’t the Golden Company famous for its war elephants?”

“Such beasts struggle in the cold and consume as much forage as scores of warhorses each. Besides, they were forced to eat them when I denied the Golden Company supplies through the Sea of Dorne.”

“A pity,” Robb said, more amused than regretful. “I wanted to see if Grey Wind could scare such beasts into trampling through the enemy lines.”

“Elephants or not, assaulting Aegon’s fortified position across the river will be hard and bloody, even with the aid of the lancers—they can’t charge through the ditches, sharpened stakes, and palisades,” Jon noted. “Even if we try to cross and surround the enemy, they can force a battle while our army is split. Quite the thorough preparation.”

“Jon Connington and Barristan Selmy are no fools,” his father said, eyes turning stony. “And because they know they’re no fools, they knew the odds are against them and will seek to provoke us to a costly assault.”

Robb scoffed. “We can just wait them out, let them come to us or starve in the cold. We can afford it, and they can’t—we have the land, the food, the supplies by virtue of fishing, squeezing the Northmarch, the sea trade and King’s Landing’s overfilled granaries, while they have the Kingswood and a long baggage train that will be bogged down the more it snows...”

The three of them remained in the pavilion late, and even Lady Stark joined them when darkness fell, leading a small squad of servants with platters laden with warm dinner and strong ale as she joined them in planning, contemplating the many challenges facing them, both within and without, all the way to the Hour of the Wolf. She also pulled Robb away, softly reassuring him about his wife.

There was an irony there—Lord Stark was more a father to Tommen, and Lady Stark seemed to have become the mother Myrcella never saw in Cersei.

The next day, they sent an envoy across the Blackwater Rush. It was time to get a measure of Aegon, Barristan Selmy, and Jon Connington in person.

Author's Endnote: Whew. I wanted to jump straight into the Aegon confrontation, but that would ignore so many things in the process that I couldn't just ignore or push aside. I realised that Garlan deserves his due yet again, and the short Garlan PoV I planned somehow ended up with 3k words. I wanted to squeeze the Aegon confrontation into this chapter, but 9k+ words later, it would be too rushed.

Now, the board is officially prepared, and nothing stops me from the final boogaloo in the next chapter.