The Realm Bled

by Ketch117

Summary

Fate, men insist, is inexorable. So much followed the gift of a crown of blue roses. So many died. There was so much heartache, so much blood and so many tears that together they would have made a great river, yet, in time, the eddies smoothed, new rivers joined, and the tears went down to the great wide unknowable sea, and people forgot how it ever began.

From it's first days to its last days, from the tournament to the battlefield, the story of the fall of House Targaryen. But if you think this story has a happy ending, you haven’t been paying attention…
Lord Quellon Greyjoy was dead, and they carried the body from Pyke in a short procession through the snow towards the surf pounded shoreline. The lands of the ironborn ended here, at this great wedge of granite cliffs jutting out high above the freezing sea - beyond there was nothing but empty ocean. The foam of icy waves lashes the cruel shingle, narrow beaches of ragged bedrock and fallen boulders, polished cobbles and the stringy strands of ice and snow scabbed sand. It was no fit place for men, this barren, wind scoured shores of this hungry, sun-shunned time of the year. The land fought back against settlement and habitation, resisting tenaciously and indefatigably, and leaving them to try and scratch a living off rocks, and so long ago they turned to the seas bounty for survival, and the softer shores of their neighbors. It was the only sort of life Pyke offered, and the only life the men who lived there had ever known.

And now, they brought the corpse of their lord back to the waters. Dead in his bed, long past seventy and only little resembling the tall, powerful man some of them remembered, along with those of his men who had remained with him for his passing. Many had mourned him, but most had been practical, wishing him farewell as he grew feeble and finding new captains, new patrons who would welcome men with such storied names as they. There is only so much time given to a man, and there was no sense in squandering it, not when it can be put to a better use in fresh service.

But they had gathered again, and they walked with him again, one last time, the solemn bier with their broken swords carried before them. The lord's closest friends, those who had captained his ships and had been favored with plunder and land carried the body on a tattered palanquin of broken shields, the body wrapped in the tattered sails of his ship. Quellon had been a big man, but they bore him without complaint. The womenfolk followed the procession, but there was no wailing, no gnashing of teeth. Not for an old man who had lived past his time.

And so the Iron Islands was without a lord. When the season ended and the ships returned, his sons would be named lords after him, he had done that right, and they would think kindly of him, though see his work undone most likely, as was ever the way of sons and fathers. The others were dead, slain in battle or perishing as children.

His bearers followed a path to the water, where a fire burned in a pit hacked into the frozen ground. The waters of the ocean were dark, cold and unforgiving, and a beached storm-battered ship rose and fell with the surge and retreat of the tide. Sturdily built from overlapping timbers and tar, a rearing dragonshead was carved at it's prow. It was a proud vessel and it had carried them through the worst storms the gods could hurl from the skies. It deserved better, but if there was one thing they had learned young on the Iron Islands it was that this world cared nothing for what was deserved.

They clambered aboard, and lay him on his ship. They were strong men, and it took no effort to maneuver him onto a tiered pile of precious timbers and kindling. One by one they slashed their forearms with the broken blades of their swords, cutting deep and spilling their blood over the deck. They dropped their swords to lie around the pyre before departing. One warrior with a winged helm of raven feathers waited until the others had splashed down into the sea before upending a flask of oil over the body. He doused the ships timbers with what remained, and tossed the flask onto the deck. He tugged a tied rope at the minmast, and the black sail unfurled with a boom of hide.

He turned and dropped over the side of the ship, wading ashore and taking his place with the rest of his crew-mates, each with a name as feared and revered as any upon all the Iron Islands. Their lord and captain had died, but his sons would find places for them, or other captains would. An era had ended. When the Kingsmoot was called, Balon Greyjoy would be elected, for the Kingsmoot was
only a formality, and he was a proud, tempestuous and fickle man. Quellon had been thoughtful and considerate, but they had all feared his rages, his fey and deadly moods.

Ten of them took their place, five on either side of the ship, and they heaved and pushed the ship off the sand and into the icy surf, where an icy current seized the ship. The freezing wind caught the sail, and the ship eased away from the shore, wallowing without a steersman to guide it or rowers to power it. The tide and wind dragged the ship away from the land, twisting it around like a leaf on a pond. The treacherous currents and riptides had dashed many an unwary vessel against the cliffs, yet they bore their lords ship out to sea with gentle swells. The raven-helmed warrior lifted a bow and nocked an arrow to the string. He held the cloth-wrapped tip in the fire until it caught light and hauled back on the string. The wind dropped and he loosed the shaft, the fiery missile making a graceful arc through the greying sky until it hammered home in the ships mast.

Slowly, and then with greater ferocity as the oil caught light, the ship burned. flames roared to life, hungrily devouring the rotten meat of the dead man and setting to work on the oily timbers. Within moments, the ship was ablaze from bow to stern, black smoke trailing a mournful line towards the sky. They listen to the hungry roar of the flames, the waves and wind, and watch the silhouette of the burning sail against the horizon. None of them break the silence, though whether bowed by grief, shame at their failings or despair at their futures could not be said. They only watched until the ship finally split apart with a sound like a heart-breaking. It sank beneath the waves and with a final slurp of water sank beneath the waters surface.

Lord Quellon Greyjoy was dead, and the world would never be the same again.
"Gods, now this is country!" Robert declared as he stepped out from behind the tall, silver-barked tree where he had been relieving himself. Robert was a year older then Elbert, and exceptionally large and strong, a lusty good-humored bear of a fellow as dark as Elbert was fair, and as friendly as Eddard was reserved, his skin flushed with heat and exertion almost as much as by rich food and plentiful drink. He was a lord already, his parents having perished when he had been young, however he had been fostered at the Vale to learn something of the ways of statecraft, and to understand the responsibilities and duties expected of him given his obligations. It had been an astute decision, Jon Arryn was held by many in Westeros to be the ideal exemplar of a lord, his realm a model of harmony and prosperity, and though he was never as influential at the court in King's Landing as the Martells, the Lannisters and the Baratheons had been, he nonetheless was admired and respected by most of Westeros. It had taken him six years, but Jon Arryn had managed to curb the worst of Robert's excesses and hammer him into shape, and Robert was beginning to resemble something of a lord, now and again, albeit in a fashion found more commonly before the conquest, the ancient monarchs who had acknowledged no man or god as their masters, who had ruled with a broadsword in one hand and a wench in the other, laughing and roaring and exulting in their virility, proud and fierce as the great beasts of the wastelands of Essos.

Their companion nodded, indulgently. Eddard was plainer, his features long and thoughtful, his eyes dark glittering beads of onyx where a gleam of wry intelligence sparkled. He was of age with Elbert, and he looked deceptively gentle, though his build was flat and powerful, and he was better with a sword then any of the other men. He wore his brown hair shoulder-length, and his cheeks had the beginnings of a beard, past fuzz but still not full enough to properly fill it out. He had been fostered in the Vale along with Robert, likely because Lord Rickard had gone against the long isolationist streak exhibited by most of the northern lords, who had seemed determined to pretend they weren't part of the Seven Kingdoms for as far back as anyone could remember. Indeed, Rickard was known to have developed southern ambitions that needed southern alliances. With his eldest son Brandon everything he'd hoped for (or would be once he learned to keep his temper in check, at least), Rickard had set on Eddard completing his education out of the North, no doubt hoping that his boy would ingratiate himself with the future Lord of the Vale and Stormlands while he was at it. If that had been Lord Rickard's intention, he had proven himself astute indeed, for the three of them were nearly inseparable.

It hadn't always been that way. Initially, Robert and Eddard had found each other incomprehensible, the grim and quiet northern boy who never laughed, and the hearty, good-natured southern lord who laughed loudly and often - some would say too much. Robert had thought Eddard to be sulky and poor company. Eddard had thought Robert to be stupid and most likely compensating for something. But they'd gravitated towards each other over the first year despite this, trading cheerfully exaggerated tales of their homes, and discussing what they would achieve with all the enthusiasm of youth. Then one day they'd gone racing on two of Lord Arryn's favorite horses, gotten lost, made camp somewhere in the foothills when it became too dark to find the way back to the Aerie, and woken up to find the hillmen setting fire to their tent. In desperation as much as anything they'd charged out and cut a swathe through them tribesmen, killing something like ten men between them, half-naked as they were, and gotten clear with the horses and their swords, if nothing else. They'd managed to stagger back to the Eyrie, and belatedly realized that somewhere along the line they'd become fast friends, and remained that way since.

They both liked Elbert as well, with his natural talent for archery and falconry - when he was fourteen he had captured passage hawks and tamed them to sit unhooded and unjessed upon his shoulders, an almost unheard of thing. Jon Arryn's nephew and heir was a little more intellectual than
the other two, a lot more likely to be found with his nose in a book, and represented the perfect bridge of common-sense between Robert's brash impulsiveness and Eddard's quiet reservation and thoughtfulness. And because of the devotion and patience of Maester Luhwin, he was probably better educated than many grown men. There was a growing reverence in him for the faith of the Seven, though it was a reverence that was as yet more the healthy respect of a big dog for it's master; but he tolerated the beliefs of Eddard, because he was fond of the northerner and considered his religion the forgivable quirk of an otherwise fine intellect.

"Well it's soft going now." Eddard commented lightly, though he was of a mind to agree. The day had been warm, and a pleasant breeze rustled the leaves in the trees with the promise of spring for sure this time, not another false start. They had made good time that day and were pleasantly exhausted, making camp as the nearest inn was two hours back the way they came, and enjoying a roaring fire and an evening meal. They weren't roughing it, they'd come well prepared, and Robert had spent an hour while they set up camp stalking a doe, which he had brought down without it so much as suspecting his presence, and butchered it too with the ease of a master huntsman. Fresh Riverlands fruit, good white bread and fresh venison roasted on an open fire were spread out on a cloak in lieu of a table. The other knights of their retinue had to do with a plainer fare, loaves of hard dark bread and less choice cuts of the meat, though there was wine to go around.

Elbert laughed. With his windswept blonde hair and sparkling eyes, the large patrician nose that his family were known for, and a wide sensitive mouth, he looked handsome indeed when he laughed. "You are always foreboding gloomy things, oh companion of my bosom's dearest tenant." He said cheerfully. "Anything from storms to wildlings to poisoned fish. We have good company, horses, swords at our sides and enough wine to keep us going, even at the rate Robert drinks. What's more, this is a land of plenty, and Robert, at least, has a beautiful woman waiting for him. How hard can it be to think of something cheerful?"

Eddard cracked the bone he had been gnawing, and thoughtfully sucked at the marrow. "Spoken like a man who has never had to pass through the Neck. A few days in that place, and you'll be singing a different song, mark my words."

"Ah, you're a lost cause." Elbert said, shaking his head in mock frustration, and turned to look ahead once more. It was well worth it. The patchwork of pastures and forests that lay beneath their vantage point contained all that a hunting man could desire. "And you, Robert? Has our personal little streak of misery managed to infect you yet?" Elbert said, his smile taking the sting from his words.

"Don't be so rough on him, Ned's just afraid if he allows himself the luxury of a smile we won't recognize him." The Lord of Storm's End replied, clapping Eddard on the back in a show of friendly solidarity. "He can't help it. Me, I have much to enjoy. As you said, I have a beautiful woman waiting for me, followed by a tournament I intend to win, and then I'm to Storm's End to claim my birthright and marry Ned's sister." He threw the remains of his meat over his shoulder, wiped the grease off his hands on the cloak the food rested on, and sat back, a man without a care in the world. "With you both along I should hope. Eddard to give her away, and you to serve as my best man. If anyone has reason for upset, it's you, Elbert. You're to be fostered in the North."

"Yes indeed. Late in the game it is, but uncle insisted, and Lord Rickard was said to be favorable. After the tournament, which I shall win at your expense Robert, thank you very much, I am to return to the grim land Ned hails from, where, I am told, they have a thousand trees for every woman, and nothing to fight."

"No hill tribes, and a wall to keep out the wildlings, but picking a fight isn't any trouble." Robert replied. "The Northerners are goodly men, the very best of friends and worst of enemies, but they love a fight. And of course, you haven't heard what they say about Northern girls then." He added,
because he was Robert and he couldn't help it. "Because it's true. Believe me."

Eddard cleared his throat, the smile gone so fast it might never have been, and Robert shook his head and held up his hands in a placating gesture. "Or at least, so I am told." He added quickly and not entirely convincingly.

"That you have to best them to bed them, you mean?" Elbert said, who thought winding Eddard up an excellent source of entertainment, and Eddard's glare turned to him. There was a certain tenseness in the air all of a sudden, at odds with the camaraderie that had suffused the atmosphere mere moments ago.

"How long until we get to the Motte, anyway?" Robert said, changing the subject to try and placate Eddard. The ride from the Vale to Winterfell could take as much as a month's journey, although at the pace they had managed it would barely take three weeks, even with the occasional lengthy stops. Their company were all mounted, their baggage was minimal, and they maintained a pace that ate up the miles deceptively fast. It was good country, and they were in good company, reminiscing and inventing tales and even singing on occasion to eat up the time, except of course when they stopped for meals and to rest the horses. It would have been faster to take a ship, but Robert wasn't comfortable with sailing, and who could blame him?

The valleys they had passed were fertile, the woodlands a verdant green, and they rode past past fields rich with grain, past thriving towns and villages, past hilltop castles whose banners bravely proclaimed the sigils of the Riverlords. A constant stream of boats passed up and down the Green Fork, bearing goods and merchants up and down the Green Fork. Everywhere there were signs of prosperity and industry, the start of new life as spring dawned, though, as Eddard had warned, spring was never certain.

"Two more days to Deepwood Motte, I'd say." Eddard said after a moment. He'd made this trip four times in the six years he'd been fostered, three of those times with Robert, but it was his land and Robert tactfully deferred to his knowledge of it, even if he was in an equal position to gauge the distance. "Then the Neck, and then an open stretch to Winterfell."

"Where we shall meet the Northern company, exchange greetings, and head right back out again, though if Lord Rickard means to follow the sacred laws of hospitality there may be a feast waiting for us." Elbert said. "Then past the rowdy company of the northerners to the less receiving atmosphere of Riverrun, where we can no doubt expect another feast, and watch Eddard's brother be formally engaged, and I can meet this Lysa my uncle is weighing the prospects of." He paused there a moment, looking for sympathy, but there was little to be found. "Although winning her heart will mean competing with Jaime Lannister, and I have no compunctions admitting that I prefer a rigged game. And then to Harrenhal, for the Tournament and yet more feasting, and if by then we're not all too fat to sit on our horses we'll ride to Storm's End, where Robert here will be married, and yet another feast."

"Good food will do you both good. You're both too skinny. Need to put some meat on those bones as padding so you aren't rattled when I knock you off your horses at the tournament." Rboert said, then took a swig of his wineskin. "And what's this about the Tully girl?"

"I haven't even met her yet." Elbert said, shaking his head. "It's hardly a match, just a favored proposition by my uncle. With everyone making alliances, he seems to be determined to get me a highborn girl before I shame myself like Robert did."

Robert ignored the dig at his bastard daughter with the easy air of one who refused to let others judgements effect him in the slightest. Robert was grounded in that regard at least. He was himself, and would never be anything but. "And you're to go see if this match is favorable, is that it? And just
what would you find favorable?" Robert chuckled, then chuckled harder at the look Elbert gave him. "With Ned's brother marrying her sister, that'll make us all brothers by marriage."

Elbert nodded, slowly. He'd thought of it before, indeed he was sure they all had, but this was the first time it had come up between them like this. "I guess it will, at that."

"At least if you decide you do like the Tully girl." That was Eddard, taking it far more seriously then his two friends.

"Picking a woman to marry isn't the same as picking a woman to bed." Robert added as well, a little more seriously but not as seriously as Eddard. "For one thing, once you make the choice, you're stuck with her, so make sure she's keeping you interested. How about you, Eddard? What do you want in a wife?"

Eddard paused, weighing the question thoughtfully and giving it due consideration, while his two friends waited expectantly. Of them all, Eddard was the most reserved where the fairer sex were concerned, though Robert had slackened his own pursuits off somewhat, since he got engaged. Not entirely, both his friends doubted he was capable of that, but he was making some effort.

"Someone exciting." He said at last. "I will never be a great lord, perhaps I'll split off and start my own house but more likely I'll spend my life serving in my brothers shadow. I want someone who can give me something to look forward to and keep my times interesting."

"Good answer." Robert said, and slapped him on the back. "See Elbert? You could learn a lot from this man."

"Maybe he'd get the chance if you ever stopped talking." Eddard replied, and Robert laughed again.

"I agree. Though should I meet such an enchanting creature first, I might run off with her and Ned can have the Tully girl. But women, by turns fair and maddening as they are, can wait. It is the tournament that should fill our thoughts. A gathering like this only happens once a lifetime."

"Don't be ridiculous, there'll be another one in a few years when King Scab bites it and Rhaegar is crowned." Robert said, with a sort of easy disrespect that bordered on treasonous. Robert was a distant cousin of the Targaryens, and so had spent some of his early youth occasionally in their company. The impression he received was not favorable. "And I plan to host a tournament of my own soon."

"That's the spirit. There is always next time, since my immanent victory is a resigned conclusion." Elbert said cheerfully.

"Well I won't be contesting it, though a few others might. You'd knock me flat on my arse right enough if I were fool enough to tilt against you." Robert said, with a rueful shake of his head. Robert was competitive, but he knew his limitations. "But I can't be said to be more then an average lance on a good day, so I mean to distinguish myself in the melee. I'm better suited for it. And Ned here…"

"Swordsmanship." Ned said simply. "In the opening exhibition."

"There you go. We can all win our respective prizes, and keep our dignity intact." Robert said, settling the matter. "Or at least, you will acquit yourselves well enough that I won't be ashamed to be in your company."

"Swordsmanship?" Elbert asked, staring at Ned. "If I did not know the two of you better, I would think you were experiencing something resembling a decline in nerve."
Robert laughed heartily at that. "You missed your path in life. If only there were bouts aside for boasting, you'd reign undefeated for a thousand years."

"What you call boasting I call confidence. And personally, I shall not settle for less than performing feats of mythic valor and gallantry that allow all the world to gaze upon and be awed by my nobility, and so win me the love of my peers and the commons, and match the deeds of my illustrious forebears."

"Perhaps you will. The stories always exaggerate, and follow the same formula. If you believe the tales, our ancestors bestrode the world like giants only to vanish, and have their people claim that they will one day return when the world needs them most." Eddard said softly. "They were all good and just and true and undone by treachery, and they all bear a passing resemblance to each other."

"Why is that, do you think?"

"Because people need hope when things are at their darkest, and because storytellers embellish until the truth is lost." Eddard replied, his voice soft as ever. "Look back, and people are remembered for the good or the bad, and seldom for both. They stop being people, and become lessons, or cautionary tales. Of course, none of those heroes ever do return, if they ever existed. Most likely they got a knife in the back, or fell from a horse and broke their neck, or drowned, but who wants their legends to end like that?"

"Not me." Said Robert, after a moments consideration. "I want my heroes to be gods among men, warriors able to level mountains with a single blow, rescue beautiful maidens from monsters without a second thought, and turn back armies with a word. I want happy endings, every single time."

"You always were a dreamer." Said Eddard, with a wry chuckle, and after a moment the other two joined in. And why not? They were young men, close as friends can be, with excitement and adventure to look forward to, and no inkling of how quickly circumstances could change. Life was a game to them, they didn't know any better, and at long last, it was spring.
ROBERT

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Neck hadn't gotten better since he'd last been this way, Robert noticed. It was bad enough to almost wish he'd taken a ship to Winterfell rather than ridden, though not quite. They had reached the first fringes of bogland about half a week ago, and made their way towards Moat Cailin, the fortress at the northern end of the Neck, and every step had seemed less pleasant then the last.

Something was ending, Robert felt, something he'd come to take for granted would be over soon. He was a man grown and a Lord already, and not long after the tourney he would be married and take up his rightful position as Lord of Storm's End, do what many felt he had been born to do. The friendships that so defined his life would fade - his best friends would be apart, and what a part of him was sure he would remember as the best years of his life would be over. Friends would be replaced with allies.

Since entering The Neck, the treacherous terrain had slowed their pace to a crawl. It was taking three days to traverse a distance that should have taken one. The ground had become damp, and in places boggy and here and there they came upon pools, and wide stretches of reeds and rushes filled with the warbling of little hidden birds. The neck was a vast and steamy swamp, beneath giant trees that clutched around, and with a strong, clinging odour. Creatures from another age bellow in the distance, their howls swirling in the mists that seem to loom over them. Leathery birds swept overhead on creaking wings, and insects swarmed through the air in dark clouds.

They had to pick their way carefully, a misstep in one of the fens would send them to the bottom of a fathom of sucking quicksand, and a wrong turn would lose their proper course and leave them staggering around lost until something befell them. Nothing lived in the Neck, nothing wholesome at least.

In the Neck the Kingsroad was not road at all, in most senses, just a glorified wagon trail which followed the line of least resistance, only a dirt path, though in places it was kept dry and hard-packed, the going was never easy, and while at times they made fair progress, the stretches between ran longer and longer as they went on, their passage becoming slower and more dangerous. The marshes were bewildering and treacherous, and there was no permanent trail through their shifting quagmires. Furthermore, it was shrouded in a ghostly mist, that writhed and coiled around itself, an opaque wall of grey with distant flickering lights bobbing in it's depths.

The flies began to torment them, and crept up sleeves and breeches and into their hair. Marshweed and ghostgrass grew thickly in the reeking bogs, there were no trees for cover, and the rocks were slimy with evil-looking lichen and sprawling vines, all choked by a thin mist. Strange creatures croaked and cried at night, and the air was cold enough to see their breath.

But as bad as it got during the day - and it got bad indeed - the nights were an order of magnitude worse. The sun would set without warning, going from a grey and miserable sort of light to something else straight away, and it became pitch-dark, so black that that they really could see nothing. Well, perhaps it is not true to say that they could see nothing - gleams in the darkness would appear all around them, and sometimes pairs of yellow or green eyes would stare at him from a little distance, and then slowly fade and disappear only to reappear later shining out again in another place.

Although spring seemed to have arrived and it was only cold out of the sunlight, they tried lighting
watch-fires at night, but they soon gave that up. There was nothing like enough wood to be found, and what was to be recovered was wet and green - it smoked horrendously and seemed to attract still more eyes to watch them; so they gave up fires and sat at night and dozed in the enormous uncanny darkness.

Eddard, at least, was in good spirits - at least by the fairly lackluster standards he habitually set, because Eddard was not a demonstrative man. It had been over a year since he had visited his home, and he was looking forward to the experience. Elbert was always on the brink of laughter, even in a place as dreary as this. But Robert was proving poor company and he knew it, which had led to him keeping to himself so as not to inflict himself on his friends, which had only made it worse. A gregarious, garrulous spirit, without company he tended to lapse into sullen silence. He was drinking more then he should as well, and that was contributing to his poor temper, but stopping didn't seem to help either.

Finally, they were past, and the company passed a night in the cold, silent ruins of the once-great fortress, amongst toppled towers and massive slabs of black basalt that were once walls, the stone marked, pitted and crudely hewn. One of the men-at-arms accompanying them, revealing a whimsical bent, sang the haunting refrain of 'Jenny and the dragonflies', the sad words seeming to hang in the air long after the singing had stopped.

Robert had wandered the ancient stones alone awhile, the music having left him in a maudlin frame of mind, then finally rejoined his friends. "Maester Cressan once told me that Mott Cailen has never fallen." He said, making an effort. "I can believe it. Hard to imagine marching an army through here."

"Never from the south." Eddard corrected him, and Robert nodded.

"Exactly."

"I admit, I am growing less then enamored of the north every day. Perhaps I should have considered my other options more carefully." Elbert said, in his usual way that suggested everything was a joke, if you could just find the angle to laugh at it.

"Sign on as a sellsword, you mean. It would break Jon's heart, where else is he going to find an heir?" Eddard replied. It was a measure of how much the two of them had come to see the Warden of the West as a surrogate father that he had become 'Jon' and not 'Lord Arryn'.

"Well, only until something better comes up. Perhaps the two of you can join me." Robert didn't answer, though it had been his idea in the first place. Elbert had laughed when he'd told him a year ago, on the anniversary of the storm that had made him an orphan and a lord at once, and a dark and lonely mood had settled upon him in the late hours. It was, and it still was, a dream of his, an escape from a life that he wasn't sure he wanted, though a dream was all it was ever likely to be.

"I could never leave Westeros." Eddard protested, and Robert only shrugged. It truly was the sort of thing he could have been happy doing, perhaps. In the right company, at least. He needed something to keep him busy, something he could build, to jolt him out of his monotonous life. Perhaps to put it into perspective, make him grateful of the privilege he'd been born into. Or perhaps to escape those very things, those chains of responsibility and obligation that turned men into creatures who scarcely recognized themselves. "It might do us all some good." Robert said once he trusted himself to, scraping his seat around the table to make it a little more comfortable. "Perspective always seems a wonderful thing. But it's not to be helped, we've all done all the growing up we have time for. Besides, you could do a lot worse then Winterfell."

Elbert smiled, honest and artless, its inner part lined with good even teeth. "Says you. They're all so
grim, and I doubt they can brew a decent cup of wine - all the snow would kill the grapes. But there's nothing for it. Since we already have an alliance with the North…” He nodded to Eddard "I can only assume that this is a lesson of some description intended for me. Teach me responsibility, perspective and suchlike."

"That does sound like Jon." Robert replied. "Though if you ask me, he is just looking forward to finally having the castle to himself again, and wants to get rid of you along with Ned and me."

"He can be crafty." Elbert allowed. "Getting me out of the way and passing it off as a lesson is just the sort of thing he'd do. And if I am ever to be as wise as everyone is convinced my uncle is, then I had best listen, yes?"

They all laughed, and the mood improved. "So why not keep it in repair?" Robert asked, genuinely curious.

"Nobody wants the expense. Or the upkeep. It's invaluable as a fortress, but, and honestly, would you want to live there?"

"It's not so bad." Elbert put in, glancing at Robert. "I mean, I'm not saying I'd want it for a summer home, but the trees are actually quite lovely."

"I disagree entirely." Eddard responded. "No acreage attached to the fortress, no smallfolk to work it even if there was, no realistic possibility of attracting decent skilled labor - imagine trying to set-up a blacksmith here, for example. You could only survive if Winterfell offered you an allowance."

Elbert cleared his throat. "Eddard Stark, you have a most dampening habit of practicality! Better to say that it's not so bad if you ignore all it's many less than satisfactory qualities." Elbert amended, his smile losing some of it's warmth. He would be Lord of the Vale, though he was in no great hurry for that day to come, and Robert was lord of Storm's End already. But Eddard was a second-son. His inheritance would be a lifetime of supporting his older brother. Perhaps that would come with some small lands of his own, perhaps a holdfast. But perhaps not. The North was big, but thinly peopled, and in practice the Lords there were more jealous of their people then their territory, while in principle all men were free and could live wherever they wanted, a man would have to be very naive to believe that.

"Kind of you to notice the trees."

Elbert cursed and went for his sword, reflexes honed by deadly ambushes by the tribes of The Mountains of the Moon, and had scrambled to his feet in the same movement, then stopped, feeling quite the fool when he saw Robert and Eddard laughing themselves breathless. The voice had been so close it had almost whispered in his ear, and as he watched a young lad who looked to be about twelve emerged from the swamp.

"Where in all the hells did you spring from?" Elbert spluttered, still too surprised to regain his composure. Now that he could see him clearly, he looked a lot more like a lad just about to leave boyhood dressed comfortably then one of the children of the forest emerging from legend as he'd taken the boy to be in his startled first impression. Indeed on more careful examination the boy was older then he'd first appeared, barely three years younger then Elbert himself, or so he judged, but so short and slim he looked far younger than his years. He had unusually deep green eyes, wearing green-colored clothing save his reddish tunic, all of which blended so well with the Neck that their eyes could have strayed past him a dozen times without noticing. He carried a fishing rod resting jauntily on his shoulder, and a woven basket full of his catch. He bowed respectfully, only for Eddard to shake his head, then shake his hand.
Only then did Eddard answer. "This is my friend, Howland Reed, heir to Greywater Watch. He spent some time in Winterfell when I was young, and we haven't seen each other since, but as we're going overland I wrote ahead to let him know when we'd be traveling through."

"And so here I am. And here I was yesterday and the day before, I might add. But I wanted to see you." The boy replied, eyes sparkling. "And I come bearing tribute." He waved the basket to indicate.

"Well we're on Stark land, so any friend of Eddard's is a friend of mine, particularly one carrying fresh fish." Elbert said, mostly recovered from his reaction. Realizing he was still holding his sword, he put it away and lifted his hands to show he meant nothing by it. "I'm called Elbert Arryn, and I like to think I'm a friend of Ned's as well. But I haven't asked him, in case that turns out not to be the case."

"And I'm Robert. I'm not sure I agree with Elbert about the trees, but fresh caught fish strikes me as a far better thing to appreciate. Bring them over here, I'll bone them while you catch up with Ned." He offered, taking the basket and putting his hunting knife to good use. They were good trout, fat and succulent, and after they built up the fire a little more, they roasted them on a flat metal plate just for the purpose, with some wine to wash it down.

Helping himself to a second piece of fish, Robert conceded that perhaps the Neck wasn't entirely bad after all.

Elbert enjoyed a drink, though he seldom over-indulged. Eddard was still more moderate, and Howland Reed only sipped his - he obviously hadn't acquired a taste for it. Robert enjoyed a drink, he had a taste for all life's pleasures, though he usually only drank if he was not in a mood to stop, and today he was more interested in the Craggonman than the bottom of the bottle. Howland Reed was, in spite of his unconventional appearance, not bad company in the least, and he charmed them all, filling Ned in about what had happened in his absence in regards to a number of people - most of them Robert didn't recognize - as well as shyly responding to Elbert's questions, though he'd let them do most of the talking. It was gossip, mostly, of great interest to Ned but only passing to Elbert or Robert. And so they were surprised when, midway into one of Elbert's stories, they stared around the camp to realize the heir to Greywater Watch had slipped away as suddenly as he'd arrived, vanishing like he had never been.

Long after the other two fell asleep, Robert was lying awake, not really tired, but wondering where his life was going. Soon, he would see Lyanna again, and his life would change forever. And he didn't know how to feel about that.

Robert loved women, and women loved him. It was just the way he was. With two younger brothers - a rarity for House Baratheon - there had been no real haste to get married and perpetuate the family line, and with nobody in a position to dictate terms to him, he'd seen no reason not to enjoy himself, enjoy his youth. Indulgence wasn't doing anybody any harm, afterall. And gradually he'd fallen in love, but not with a woman. Rather, he'd fallen in love with women. And the fellowship of his friends. Music. Cards, good wine and wit. Dancing. Adventure. And all the while, she'd been growing up.

He'd known he was supposed to marry her already, of course. Ever since he'd been ten, and his father Steffon Baratheon had brought him to his study (Robert's study now, not that he had yet schooled himself to think of it that way), and the Lord of Storm's End had patiently explained that the realm was beginning to fragment, that without a strong central authority it would collapse completely, and in order to shore it up alliances were being planned to strengthen the kingdom's bonds among the more powerful lords, and as a direct consequence the power of the crown, and
Robert had feigned interest because he had been ten years old with little interest in anything that wasn’t exciting, active and physically challenging. At ten he’d been interested in hunting and fishing, horse-riding and wrestling, and the tournament his father was planning. His interests had broadened somewhat since then, but his total lack of interest in politics had not wavered.

He’d seen her a few times, a lanky, coltish shape all elbows and knees. But it had only become real one year ago now, when Eddard was making his annual visit and Robert had offered to accompany him. He'd thought he'd known what to expect, Eddard had been telling him stories about her as long as they had known one another, and Ned was by far his closest friend and confidant, and had built up his expectations. But when she’d rode out to greet them and he’d been at loss for words, then she'd challenged him to a race and easily out-paced him, then mocked him about it mercilessly. He'd laughed as hard as anyone, made a few jests at his own expense, then quietly and unobtrusively Lord Rickard had taken him aside and reminded him of the obligations he had, and when he'd said he intended to honor them her father had laughed and slapped him on the back, and warned him of her reckless and wayward ways. He'd laughed at that as well, and said he'd noticed, and the arrangement had been set with goodwill on both sides. He hadn't taken it overly seriously - if they didn't fit together as they seemed to initially, then there was always time to put the whole thing aside without anyone any the worse for it. But as it turned out, that was not the case.

Lyanna proved to be extremely spirited, and far less susceptible to his charms then he was to hers. He'd made excuses to spend time with her, and she'd mocked him for that as well, and he hadn't minded then either - much to his own surprise. Then the two weeks was gone, and he and Ned rode to White Harbor, boarded a ship (not something he had enjoyed) and came back to the Vale. They'd corresponded a little, though Robert had spent a lot more time trying to think of what to write then actually writing. And over that time apart, he found that she'd had far more of an impact on him then he’d realized, and he had often found himself thinking about the girl he barely knew. At first he’d just wanted to get to know her better because she was Ned's sister, then because it was a challenge and finally because of a feeling so fragile, so ephemeral that to think to hard on it would be to lose it, a conception that he didn't know how to put into words. He just hoped he did make sense of it all, he did get to know her better before they were married and there was not getting out of it. But marriage…

He didn’t think he was the marrying kind. He wasn’t the kind to settle down at all, and with marriage looming there was no escaping it. A short life, but a merry one, that's all he'd ever wanted the world to give him, and yet he would never have it. Instead he would have Storm's End, one of the greatest fortresses in Westeros, and it had been held by his family since the conquest. It was his birthright, as were the hundreds of thousands who paid their taxes and depended upon it for protection. He thought about the Great Hall, the ancient rooms built before the coming of the Andals, after the Long Night. He thought of the constant bickering, the accusations, the family fighting, the tedium it all represented being trapped in a life that had no use for him, no use for laughter or adventure. He wasn't a man in the mould of his father, and wasn't suited to being a lord paramount. He had no head for it, and he thought that was unlikely to ever change, but he was born first and so that didn't enter into the question.

Ser Harbert, a fine knight in his day and Robert's great-uncle (he had been fortunate enough to have married his grandfathers sister), had shrugged philosophically at the news that he meant to go through with the betrothal his father had proposed. 'You like her brother. That's more than a lot of couples know about each other.’ And when he'd told him that it seemed a small thing to depend upon the old knight had only shrugged again. 'Marriage has nothing to do with wanting.' He’d said. 'What you want, Robert, is a pretty girl in your bed, but only a fool thinks that they and the wife have to be the same creature.' His advice about confusing love and marriage, cynical though it was, had a certain truth, though a part of Robert, a stronger part then he had expected, was disgusted with himself for even considering it.
Jon Arryn had been blunt as well, but in a different regard. 'I have been married twice.' He told him. 'Once for duty, and once for love. Of the two, with the benefit of time and distance, I preferred the first.' Both men were the closest things he had to a father anymore, and amongst the best men he knew, and if you were generous they were both giving the same essential advice - go through with it, and then try to make some happiness for yourself, whatever it took. Robert sighed. If only it were that easy.

He sighed, and wondered if it was the North that was making him melancholy, or all the wine. He'd been drinking too much, since leaving the Vale, the way he tended to whenever he found himself in this position, a young man with no supervision and no reason to moderate his appetites. Far more then he usually did, and perhaps it was becoming a problem. He'd have to watch that.

But here, in the Neck, drinking seemed the least of his problems.

Chapter End Notes

Anyone who has read the warnings is probably wondering when I'm going to start killing people off. You were promised a greek tragedy, and here I am instead having a bunch of young men talk clumsily about their feelings and insecurities. I imagine you quite reasonably feel cheated.

Don't worry, there will be more death than you can imagine by the end of this story. With any luck there will be other things as well, fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, giants, monsters, chases, escapes, true love, miracles.

But you don't put the cart before the horse. I'm just going to try and develop these doomed characters sufficiently so when they start dying, you actually care, because I'm not enough of a writer to make you feel that way with just a few short paragraphs, and an offhand mention they were just two days from retirement. It's my intention to make you miss more than just a name and a sigil. It's one thing to say thousands died, but I'm going for the Homeric approach - many die, but none die nameless.
A few cottages with thatch roofs circumfrenced the vast and looming presence of the castle that had for so long been not just his home, but had seemed the entirety of the world. The sun was just starting to break free of the clouds, making the whole region glow with early morning light, and the time-eaten buttresses, and broken and lofty turrets acquired a certain brilliance from the same. The foundations of Winterfell were ancient, built by Brandon the Builder in the Age of Heroes millennia ago - Westeros was full of Andal Lords could prove they'd owned their lands for thousands of years, but the Starks went back to a time when nobody had written records at all, because they hadn't yet invented paper.

The castle had grown since those days so distant they may as well have not existed at all, of course, built wider and higher, the keep patched unevenly with moss and black ivy, rising above the knobby fists of knuckled masonry that made up the rest of the castle, cast its long shadow across the lands, while around it rambled towers and megalithic walls and the other outbuildings, the rookery and hall, the foundries and granaries and all the rest. Beneath it was Wintertown, almost an afterthought compared to the fortress, a tumble of stone buildings huddling for shelter in the shadow of the greatest bastion in the North. Glancing at it, one could not mistake the grey and black standard of House Stark fluttering from the spires, announcing to all and sundry that the Warden of the North and Lord Paramount of the same was in residence.

For some years, the castle of the Eyrie had been Ned's home and the craggy landscape had become more familiar to him then the empty north. Yet nonetheless he felt his bones seem to ease, tension he had not noticed unknot. This was his land, this was where he was supposed to be. He had always known that, but returning made him remember. Men called Rodrick Stark's second son reserved, cold, quiet and thoughtful, though in his affections nothing could be further from the truth; and of the great loves in his life; his family and the ancient castle were the first that he would name, his father and mother, both strong and enduring in different ways, whose example had informed his own life in ways too tangled to mention, his wild brothers and sister who had shaped him in other ways; he would think of his friends, and in particular Robert Baratheon, and of Jon Arryn who was the father he had chosen himself just as Robert was the brother; of chivalry and learning and words and life, things he had not even imagined until he'd been sent south; and with them all, coloring them deeper and richer, his empty homeland which he never thought of but which was always behind his thoughts, which informed everything he did and which he loved without need for reflection, which had bound him subtly to itself before he'd even noticed, so that like all Northerners he believed that heaven, too, must lie upon a vast, flat, wind-lashed plain beneath the freedom of the open sky.

His home was grand in it's way, grand with the weight of history, enduring more than beautiful, though not without a charm of it's own. Eddard rode in first, a little ahead of his friends upon his pale horse, and as soon as they were safe inside the castle wall the drawbridge creaked up and the portcullis rattled down and the three of them dismounted their horses and waited to be formally welcomed. Winterfell had known to expect them, of course, but Winterfell was never comfortable with guests. It was never at ease with the formality, the necessity of entertaining and impressing anybody whether they be visiting nobles from other regions or other northerners. The free riders and men at arms who made up their company had dispersed, finding places in Wintertown to find places to stay, so it was just the three young lords.

Near three score ladies and men of the household were standing in rank, and they bowed in a line as the three young men crossed the courtyard, but Eddard scarcely noticed them. His older brother
Brandon Stark was standing there at the head of them, looking splendid in black and grey, a wild grin on his face. Brandon had finished filling out, and in form fulfilled the promise of his boyhood, tall and lean and handsomer than ever, with the start of a beard on his square jaw. Broad as a cypress and near as tall, with a rugged cast on the Stark looks that made him handsome indeed, he looked every inch the born ruler of the North. Brandon grinned to see his younger brother, openly and unreservedly, his big heart had no room for half-measures of any kind, and Eddard smiled back, his solemn face melting into a soft smile for his brother, and the two men embraced and held one another tight.

"You look good." Brandon said when he released him. "Better than me. Either mountain air agrees with you, or something else does."

He had laughed then. A warm sound. A low, rumbling noise which seemed to come from deep within and was as quiet as everything else about him. "So do you."

"I know, I can't help it." Brandon said. There was much he didn't say, for he was like his brother in that way at least, a man who preferred to use his body to express the torrents of his emotions. "How have you been keeping?"

"Well enough."

"I envy you sometimes, imagining what you must be getting up to down there." Brandon continued, shaking his head. "So, are you going to introduce me to your friends, or am I going to guess?"

Ned, still smiling, shook his head, and handed his reigns to the stableboy. "You've met Robert. This is Jon Arryn's nephew, Elbert Arryn. Thanks, Walder."

"Hodor." The stableboy replied, taking charge of Robert and Elbert's horses as well with instinctive ease, and leading them away. Robert's horse was a huge stallion, uncut and aggressive enough to snap at any other horse that approached, but the stable boy kept him docile. The boy was fourteen, and already Robert's size, but with no wits to speak of.

"Pleasure to meet you." Elbert said as courteously as he knew how, inclining his head in something between a polite nod and a courtly bow, although where exactly it fell in that regard was difficult to say. "Ned's told me a great deal, and if any of it is true I daresay you might make passable company. Any chance you'll show me around?"

Brandon gave the southern lordling a thoughtful look, before nodding, his smile widening a touch in a manner that could only be called predatory. "I might show you a thing or two. If you can keep up." There was a challenging quality in his tone, as there always was, but Elbert only smiled to himself, and extended a hand. Brandon took it, and Elbert rose somewhat in his estimation.

He didn't look at Robert. He'd met Robert last year. Robert was two years younger, but looking at them standing together you'd never guess it, because Robert was at least as broad and stood four inches higher as well. Robert had dismounted and was beginning the drawn out process of brushing himself down. "Father's waiting for you in the solar. He'll want to see your friends too, eventually, but he'll want to see Ned first."

Robert wasn't troubled by Brandon's slighting him. Instead he nodded to Brandon clasped hands with Eddard before crossing the yard. "Well, I'm going to see if I can remember my way to the kitchens. I skipped breakfast, and I need something to eat." The Stormlander suggested in a burst of good will. "Coming, Elbert?"

"Lord Rickard ordered that I see to your needs." A tall, gaunt man, who Eddard recognized as
Gelfred Poole stepped out from the crowd, proudly wearing his house sigil and a sword as well. He was as gaunt and hungry-looking as ever, and had almost finished going entirely bald, but these qualities served only to imbue him with a kind of rough authority. "Come with me?"

Neither of his friends protested.

Brandon walked with Ned as he took the stairs up to his father's solar. He had missed this place, and his family, and all else that filled it. But his father had a knack for fining opportunity, and so he had gone to be fostered in deference to his father, and because it had been his duty. And he had become a different man away, he'd grown to admire Lord Arryn's commitment to honor and justice, just as he'd grown to love Robert as his own brother.

Winterfell seemed exactly the same as it had ever been, everything exactly where he remembered it, Eddard thought as he made his way up to his father's private rooms, exactly the same way he had a thousand times before. Was it the same place? Was the courtyard so small, the winding corridor that led to his father's solar so narrow? Or was it he that had grown bigger, not in inches of course, or at least not only in inches, but bigger in mind and in importance, as if his eyes had become used to vaster spaces and his sense of the place he held in the world had expanded? He didn't know, but he felt as small as ever when Lord Rickard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Lord of the North took his seat behind his table in his great chair, grand as a throne. Lord Stark was not alone - he never was - a clerk was placing one paper after another in front of him and Rickard Stark used the quill in his hand to mark each one Stark - leaving the rest of his many titles to be written in later.

Another clerk at his side was leaning forward with candle in one hand and sealing wax in another, and carefully dripped red wax in a neat puddle on the document so that his father might press his ring to make a seal. It was better than any storybook magic, turning wishes into fact. Eddard was a second son, and so as he was growing up Rickard had always kept him separate from this, kept it apart from him. Eddard had always imagined how wonderful it must be to put your initial on a command and know that at once, such a thing is as good as done. He had thought that he would send out commands all day just for the pleasure of it. But the Vale, and the toll it had taken upon Jon Arryn, had taught him otherwise, and now, in secret, he thought himself rather grateful to be a second-son.

Maester Walys saw him first, and inclined his head, and Eddard nodded back, then Rickard looked up and saw him as the clerk took the papers away, and he made a little beckoning gesture, as ever perfectly composed. His father was strong and longheaded, with pouchled, intelligent eyes and a bushy beard mostly grey but striped broadly with black down the middle. He was more grey than Eddard had expected, the beginnings of a hard paunch on his midsection, hard lines around his long face and sharp nose. He was getting old. When he was little Eddard had been halfway convinced that his chest was made of metal, because he always seemed to see him in armor, but now he was wearing furs. Eddard began to move forward, intending to bow as was proper and expected, but Rickard surprised him, pushing back his chair and calling his son around the table so that he could look at him properly, and then embraced him warmly.

"I have missed you, my son. Missed you terribly." He said, and Eddard didn't know how to respond. His father was never a man for showing warmth, usually when he came to the North he spent his time largely with his siblings and any of his friends who happened to have reason to visit, seeing his Father only at the evening meal. Normally, if his Lord Father wanted to see him, he was likely in trouble.

Brandon Stark never argued with their father, he was unfailingly polite and then nonchalantly went his own way; whereas, he, Eddard, deferred dutifully to his father's authority and then found himself resenting both his parent's austere discipline and his own reluctance to rebel.
"How are your lessons going?"

"Well enough, I believe."

"You are correct to think so. Jon Arryn wrote to me. He says that you are bright, and you never make a mistake in the same way twice, and he will gladly take you on for another year, if you wish it. He also tells me that he offered to knight you."

Eddard nodded. "I deferred the honor. It wasn't for me."

Rickard looked at him, unreadable entirely. "Why is that?"

"Too many oaths."

"Explain."

"In all honesty, I resent giving my word, father. So should all men, because oaths bind us, they hobble our freedom, they force us to do things against our interest, against our conscience. And so, if you are going to give your word you should be certain. My loyalty is to my family, my pack. Then to the North. And finally to my friends. And I was not certain if such things were served by taking such vows. And so I decided I will not be a knight." All the world contained no self-proclaimed villains, only regiments of self-proclaimed saints. Victorious historians rule where good or evil lay, and weak lords are a curse on the earth, yet oaths are made to lords, and if there were no oaths than there could not be law, and if there was no law all that would remain was mere anarchy, the rule of the strong at the expense of all else, and so a man, however much he resented it, must bind himself with the law, and keep the law by oaths, and if a man could change lords at whim then he could abandon his oaths with his inconvenient Lord, and so there must be oaths because the law must be immutable. All that was true, yet when weighed in the balance it still seemed hollow somehow.

"I see." Rickard wore an understanding smirk. "Some would say that Knighthood brings opportunity."

"It was my decision."

"It was, and it was not a bad one. Now, listen my son, and listen well. I say this in all earnestness. You were a boy when you were first fostered. Now you are a man. And for this reason you will have all the rights of a man in my house." He put both hands on his sons shoulders and nodded at him soberly. "From this hour on, you have only to say to me 'let this be done', and done it shall be. Or say that 'such a thing is true', and I shall accept it. Do you understand what I say to you?"

"I think that I do, father."

"Good." His father stood up. "Now, the question is, what is to be done with you?"
"I've said I won't marry him," Lyanna said, pulling away from her ladies gentle but insistent primping and fussing, no more successfully than her earlier attempts had been. They gently pressed back into position and carried on like they hadn't been interrupted. "So what is the point to all this fuss?"

Lyanna was starting to feel uncomfortable in her own skin. A year ago she'd shot up in height, her slender body had begun to round and soften a little. Her father had noticed, and sent for Lady Lyessa Flint, who had spent a week or so easing Lyanna through it and explaining what she was going through, which hadn't been all that much of a comfort, really. She was clad only in a kirtle of cream-colored silk, sitting before the reflective glass, surrounded by an impressive array of perfumes, rose water, and cosmetics - kohl and belladonna for the eyes, ceruse to whiten the skin, red ochre lip rouge, marigold balm, some old and some freshly acquired, and none of them having ever seen much use before (at least by Lyanna), and the only time they'd ever all been used together was the time she'd carefully painted her brother's warhorses face on a whim.

She had rather liked that effect, though Brandon had disagreed, and so had the horse.

Lyanna had resisted the changes growing up was imposing upon her as much as she could. By now her father had given her a room full of beautiful gowns that she had worn on the appropriate occasion, and then ignored ever since in favour of breeches. Her father had acquired her a young filly that she had not even bothered to name, preferring to ride Brandon's big war horse that Lord Ryswell had provided him at the end of his fostering instead. And she still dreamed, the way she always had, of excitement and danger and adventures, of escapes and romance and a bit of everything she was missing out on. But what she wanted didn't seem to matter.

Emeline Stout tutted and held Lyanna's tangled mane of hair so tight that it pinched her scalp. Lyanna winced. She was in a bad mood already, and this wasn't helping improve her disposition. She hadn't seen her brother in six months, but instead of greeting him properly she was confined to her chambers to be 'beautified', a task that her ladies were taking very seriously. She felt as if she'd been trapped in her chamber for hours - well, she might well have been, and each moment seemed to stretch longer than the last.

She could barely tell the cosmetics apart, or what was supposed to do what, but Emeline seemed to have a very good idea what she was doing. She had used a brush to put powder on Lyanna's face, put a few drops of something into her pupils that stung awfully and made her tear up, in order to make her eyes seem enormous and give them a wonderful sparkle (that, apparently was what belladonna was for. Lyanna had made a few guesses herself, but not come close), then used a tiny brush to draw a thin line across her upper lids, just above the lashes, to bring out the colour. A red paste was sparingly applied to her lips to give them a deeper hue. Now they were combining their efforts on her hair, twisting her hip length tresses into coils and then braids.

"Why bother to try and attract his interest if I'm just going to reject him?" she demanded, once Berena was done reddening her lips, but Emeline just laughed.

"Oh sweetling. It is when you are going to reject a man that you must look at your most irresistible." She leaned over to wink at her mistress and, despite her ugly mood, Lyanna had to smile. Emeline Stout was the second and late-born daughter of a minor landed knight sworn to Lord Cerwyn, but her father had died not so long ago, leaving his widow to enjoy many and varied bedmates, a habit her daughter had come to imitate. Dark-haired with a comely figure and inviting eyes, Emeline was never short of admirers and made shameless and guiltless use of them. But she was no heiress, when
her father died of an affliction of the lungs early in the winter their modest estates had gone to his only son, Rutger, and what little of jewellery and silver plate her father had managed to accumulate had been used to dower her older sister Marthe, and as for her mother, she had resisted but eventually succumbed to a second marriage. There was nothing left to spare for Emeline, child of miscalculation, and she had been passed over to Lyanna's service when she'd proved too high-spirited for Lady Cerwyn to tolerate, who had offered her to Lyanna's father. The two had been firm friends within what seemed like moments of that. Lyanna had been almost eleven, but not quite.

"Why do people even marry at all?" Lyanna despaired, to which Emeline had offered a wry smile that suited her.

"You know why. It is so there can be children."

"Horses do not marry. Yet there are foals."

"True enough, I suppose." Berena Poole replied, with a telling glance at Emeline who laughed and swatted at her. Born of a solid northern family herself, Berena had already been in Lyanna's service when Emeline came along and had at first resented her. As square as Emeline was curvy and as quiet as she was loquacious, she had struggled to reach any sort of understanding, but Emeline had persisted in drawing her into her confidence and Berena had grown fond of her in time. These days she, like Lyanna, lived vicariously on second-hand accounts of Emeline's adventures.

"Most people," Emeline said, as though repeating a rumour she had heard somewhere "feel it increases their happiness."

"Oh yes, that." Lyanna replied disdainfully. "Marry a man chosen for me, that's sure to make me happy."

"At the very least, I'm sure you will learn to put up with it." Emeline said, a hint of something strange that Lyanna couldn't quite identify passing momentarily across her face. "It's a great honour to be The Lady of Storm's End." Berena added.

Lyanna only scoffed, all the response she would dignify either of them with. There were a lot of things that were supposed to be a great honour, but most of them didn't sound appealing to her either. In all the fourteen years of her life, Lyanna Stark had never had any need to learn the way to make the best of a situation; there had never been any need. She was a daughter of the North and a Stark to the bone, she knew everything about doing her duty to her House; but still, she had always seen that in general sorts of terms, never imagining it quite like this. It wasn't as if she didn't want to get married - someday. And the old gods knew, Robert Baratheon was far from the worst husband she could have been pledged to, but in it's own way that somehow made things worse.

The truth was that though she had striven her wits in the last three weeks (since she had first heard that this was coming), Lyanna could find no clever way to talk her father out of this match and could only pray things went poorly. Every time she thought of leaving Winterfell and being sent to the Stormlands where, from all she'd heard, everyone hid in gloomy, high-walled castles and considered killing each other to be prime entertainment, she felt her very heart hesitate to beat.

"Are you done yet?" She asked, putting a hand up to her hair.

"Nearly." Emeline said, slapping it gently away. "Want any advice?"

"I think I can manage." She replied, in a dry voice that was far from her usual one; that voice was usually cheery and merry and ready for fun.
"Anything worth doing is worth doing better than just managing. It's not ever enough to only manage." Emeline replied, and Lyanna smiled again at that too.

"You look beautiful, Lyanna." Berena encouraged her, sensing the direction her thoughts were taking. As though being beautiful was some great achievement. "Look at your eyes, wide and inviting, the colour of the sea after a storm."

Emeline made an amused sound at the clumsy compliment, but Berena just gave a shrug. "He'll be dazzled by you."

"Oh, good." Lyanna said dully, though glancing at the glass she had to admit that her two ladies had done their jobs to perfection. Her dress was fetching and modest, but very tightly laced, emphasising what little figure she'd managed to acquire, and her slenderness. There was a piece of whalebone nonsense that was meant to further adjust her shape, but it pinched awfully and made breathing a challenge, so she'd hidden it in a place she was reasonably sure it wouldn't be discovered (under Ned's mattress, since nobody had been in his room in months) and had been dressed without it as a consequence, to date her only success in setting the terms. She wore jewellery she had never seen before, amber and silver broaches on either shoulder, a delicate chain between them. And her eyes were indeed wide and inviting.

She didn't know how to feel about the results. On one level, she resented how she felt, how she looked, how this whole situation had been forced on her. But she still couldn't deny a certain excitement at the result that she wasn't too sure what to think about. People had called her pretty as long as she remembered, and she'd always protested that she didn't care.

Of course, Benjen didn't knock. He bounded into the room, dressed up for the occasion in as much as he'd put on a clean holiday doublet and washed his face, but unlike her, he looked himself. He was shorter than her by several inches, his dark hair was beginning to grow long and wild around his face (he was supposed to have gotten it cut) and there was a smile on his face. "I was looking for my sister. But this can't be her, my sister can dress herself, and doesn't need so long to do it."

In the more typical line of circumstances, that would be Lyanna's cue to throw something at him, or make some biting remark of her own. But somehow she instead found herself bizarrely grateful that something, at least something, was the same as it had always been. Her little brother was twelve, and the one she had always coerced into sparring with her, hidden away in the godswood. There were times when Brandon would impose himself to watch them, at times even join them, but mostly it was just her and him, and that might be why he understood her best.

Benjen blinked at her spectacular nonreaction. "Is this a bad time?"

"Not at all." Berena replied, twining gold threads strung with tiny rosebud jewels into her dark hair, to hold them in shape and to catch the eye. "It is the perfect time. Maybe we could do you next."

Emeline laughed, and so did Lyanna, and Benjen made a gagging noise at the idea. "Braid flowers in your hair, and rub rose water into your skin." Berena continued in her teasing tone, and Benjen held up his hand in utter capitulation.

"Do you really need all this? You're pretty without it, everyone says so." He said. "This is for people who aren't, and who smell."

Emeline clucked her tongue. "None of that. All this is simply a way of accentuating her beauty, so that even a little grumpkin like yourself can see it. For her self-esteem."

"My sister has plenty of that as well." He looked at her directly. "Are you unhappy? That's what
Brandon says." That was blunter than Lyanna had been expecting, and more perceptive as well. Benjen was more aware than she had thought.

"It is a splendid match," Lyanna said, her voice sullen at the edges. "I could not ask for a better one."

"But you'd prefer one you actually asked for?" Benjen continued. Perhaps he was growing up as well. "That’s what Brandon says about his ‘splendid match’.”

"Something like that." Lyanna said, then gratefully abandoned the conversation.

There was a polite knock, the door swung open before she had the chance to talk further, and her father was there. His eyes slid over her, and he nodded once, satisfied, then gestured to her handmaidens, who bowed and then left the room in a swish of skirts and a backwards glance. Benjen followed them out, leaving the two of them alone. Her father seemed at times more force of nature than man, his whole aspect vaguely implied the shadowed mists, the gloom, the cold and the icy winds of the naked northern lands. Even his grey eyes were savagely cold. He had married late and had her later - in fact he had just turned fifty, an age in which men were either old or dead.

Not Lord Rickard Stark. Though his joints were stiff and slow to bend on cold nights occasionally, and new injuries taken didn't heal the way old ones did, he was still very much all that he ever was, yet to decline.

He was not alone. Maester Wallys was there at his right hand, dressed in dark robes - a workman's black, the sort that didn't show the stains. The Maester was not overly intimidating looking, yet there was no doubt at all that he could handle himself. He wore his grey hair long, his bony face was clean shaven, and his eyes were deep-set and cold. His hands were callused, once, long ago, the maester had been trained as a swordsman, though she'd never seen anything to make her think he still practiced those skills. His chain was iron and lead, pewter and yellow gold, silver and tin and valyrian steel.

"Your ladies did good work." her father said. Crossing the room, he took a pinch of her hair between his fingers and removed it from the plait, then rubbed it thoughtfully. "But keep one strand askew, I think. Nothing in life has any business being perfect."

She smiled a little at that, but the tenderness was already gone, as surely as if it had never been. Stepping back, he looked over her again, then nodded briskly, satisfied. "Now then, your conduct toward Lord Baratheon must be amiable and gracious, yet neither fulsome nor exaggerated. Do not press your company upon him; a man like Lord Baratheon prefers to have things move at his own pace. Still, be neither coy nor cold."

Lyanna raised her eyes to the grey-bearded face, and summoned her strength for one last helpless try at averting the future she saw looming ahead, a cage, a life spent behind bars, until use and old age accepted them, and all chance of living on her own terms was gone beyond recall or desire. "Father, I am not ready for this. I barely know him, and I have not the slightest yearning to share a man's bed." She had been practicing, preparing herself, but she found it harder to say than she had thought. In truth, she'd thought about it, even been tempted once or twice, but it was all very well discussing matters in the bedroom with Emeline, who treated such matters as lightly as if they were hunting or dancing, but her father was another matter entirely. "And I don't want to leave Winterfell either."

Her father nodded. "That is sentiment properly to be expected in a maiden chaste and innocent. I am not displeased. Still, such qualms must bend before affairs of state. You have had enough time to become accustomed to the idea." She had. She'd known about it since she was around seven, but back then it had been a lifetime, or so it seemed to her. Plenty of time. But now that was past. Now Lord Robert Baratheon was here. Now a date was to be set. And an afternoon was not a lifetime at
"You have months yet before the marriage takes place." the maester said, in his soft, precise way of speaking.

"Isn't there a bridge you should be building or a smallhold you should be inspecting?" She snapped back, lips pursing.

"One might say that is what I am doing." The maester replied, unmoved entirely.

"I can handle my daughter, Walys." Richard said, and the maester fell silent.

Lyanna got to her feet, and put her hands on her hips. Her whole body was quivering with frustration and rage but she forced herself to stay calm, she knew from long experience that her father was neither impressed nor cowed by rages. Already the skin was tightening around Lord Rickard Stark's usually genial lips and his fingers were clenching on his wide leather belt.

"I am not ready. And I don't want to marry him." She fought for words, tried to put her feelings into a way clear enough to dissuade him, but she couldn't get the words to line up in her head. "Father…"

"I am not talking to you as your father, but as the Lord of the North. This match is a carefully considered one, of great political and personal advantage, to The North and to you. The timing is just as good. And perhaps Lord Baratheon can tame you, as I clearly have not. Perhaps I am at fault, perhaps I should have remarried, given you an example and not indulged you so much. But the North needs this, the King has asked for this, Brandon has accepted his obligations, and so will you."

Lyanna had been spoiled beyond belief - her father had no sisters or close female cousins, and no idea what to do with a daughter; so he'd let her run wild. But that relative indulgence was now over.

"I have never heard the like of it - refusing a husband who has been carefully and lovingly chosen. Your brother approves of him, and I trust his judgement. Do you?"

Lyanna nodded, not trusting herself to respond without saying something that she'd regret. Ned liked the man, but Ned wasn't the one shackling his future to him. She'd met him a few times, but he'd always been a distant figure and they'd barely spoken. It was only a year ago that she'd connected him to the man she was betrothed to.

"And if it were not enough that the king requested this, The North needs alliances in the South. That is all that there is to it."

"I talk people, and you answer back in lands, titles and alliances!" Lyanna's skin needled, and her breathing deepened.

"They are one and the same! People are cities, acreage, coastline, taxes!" He stepped forward so that he towered above her. "Now let me make myself clear. This defiance, daughter, has run it's course, and the suits you no better than foolhardiness. I do not want to see any more of either. Lord Robert Baratheon has arrived, and he has waited long enough to see you. If you desire romance and being courted you can ask him to provide it for you, but that's your own affair, and you will obey me on this either way. Love and affection may come in their own time, if you are worthy of them. But they are meaningless on their own, love is something that must be earned - earned with years of partnership, with mutual goals and considered plans."

"Did I wish to marry your mother? I thought nothing of it. Politic, that's what she was. I came to care all.
for her deeply, but I could just as easily have married someone else and come to feel the same way about them. Your mother and I built our 'love', if I must use such a word, as I have built the North, built alliances, and it was better for it."

Lyanna opened her mouth, but her father wasn't done. "Lord Robert Baratheon is here, you can have a minute to greet your brother and then you will welcome him. Is that clear?"

She closed her eyes and thought of horses running wild in the Rills - nominally they belonged to lord Roderick Ryswell, but the horses didn't know that; they thought they were free, and if you were free in your mind, what else mattered?

Let me be free in my mind, as free as the horses.

"Is that clear?" He repeated. He would not repeat himself again.

"Very clear, father."

"You will welcome him?"

"In the manner you have commanded."

"With an open heart?" He pressed, meaning to have his way, in this, in everything.

Lyanna bit her lip. "With an open mind."

He conceded her that much, at least. "That will be enough."
In the shadow of the central keep of Winterfell in the courtyard, two men sparred across what may once have been turf, but had long since been worn away by frequent shuffling feet. The enclosure was out of the way so as not to impede traffic, but nonetheless a not insignificant number of men and women were watching them at it, a few half-clad in armour themselves, but the majority in rude jerkins of leather and heavy cloaks of fur or wool to ward off the cold. It might be spring, but the North didn't seem to be ready to give up on winter just yet, and the air held a sharp and persistent chill.

In most of Westeros, it was the practice among the powerful to keep the servants as much out of sight as could be achieved, for the sake of creating the illusion that the estates ran themselves, but not so in the North - here, Lords treated it as a point of pride to strike awe into any visitor with with a casual display of the extent of accommodation afforded to their household. Winterfell had nearly three hundred men and women who attended to the daily tasks, and fully half that number seemed to be present in the courtyard, though the assemblage were evidently under a rude discipline of their own - they were neither noisy nor drunk. As Robert emerged from the squat building beside the keep slamming the door as he did - Robert was no more capable of making an unobtrusive entrance or exit then he was capable of comprehending the reasons for Ned’s reserve and quiet, and Elbert followed in his wake, the men and women making way with surly obeisance as the two noblemen passed, and closed behind them like some horde of wild cattle, staring after them with earnest silence.

Elbert supposed that the Northerners reasons for making the display were hard to dispute - the obvious power this domestic army demonstrated filled the young falcon with an admiration far greater than the rich satins and brocades that the knights and nobles who attended his uncle at the Eyrie habitually displayed ever managed to achieve.

The exterior of Winterfell was of a grey but dingy stone on which snarling wolves glowered down upon the men beneath, their stone fangs bared. The keep presented a formidable appearance - despite it's age and partial ruin through neglect it remained relatively strong, and the windows - or rather loop-holes - facing towards the courtyard were few, and strongly barred. It was a sprawling place, covering as much land as possible, with high towers and low walls, and the black and massive arch of the gateway yawned between two huge square towers built with sloping roofs so as not to hold allow fallen snow to build up, and from the great, square block of an additional tower on the inner side, the banners displayed the 'Direwolf' of House Stark.

The shield of one of the men sparring likewise displayed the direwolf, black on grey, while the other shield was azure, with five gold fusils painted along the top edge in a line, a device that Elbert did not recognise, though he knew little about the lords and knightly houses of the North. The two men were fighting with blunt tourney swords, heavy boots were stamping and shifting on the hard ground that had been icy earlier in the morning, as thrust and parry whirled the combatants around one another to the clash of steel against steel.

"He's pretty good. Got a knack for it." Robert observed, indicating Lord Rickard Stark's heir while he watched the fight with unwavering attention. Like Elbert, Robert was still dressed in his riding leathers, but they had both freshened up a little - at least they no longer smelled quite so strongly of either horse or of sweat. The steward Gelfred Poole had taken charge of them shortly after arrival, and having arranged them a meal quickly he had been leading them to the sweat lodge to get clean, only for Robert and Elbert to get drawn away.

Robert had also thrown a magnificent baldric, worked in gold which shone like water ripples in the
The two were circling now, the younger trying to force the action close, his blade a blur through the air, and the elder keeping him off with short jabs that he caught upon his shield every time.

"He's quick. And he doesn't hesitate." Elbert agreed, assessing the man's form and making up his own mind. Elbert didn't have the natural advantages Robert possessed, but he had benefited from excellent tutelage and knew he was better than most. "Bit of a show-off, though."

Robert nodded. "And when he thrusts, he leads with the point too much and dips his shoulder too low. He commits everything into every blow, and doesn't know how to hold back something in reserve. Overcommitting is a bad habit to get into." Elbert grinned. It was the sort of thing Ser Edmund Kay would have said, usually to Robert. Elbert could have replied that Robert was exactly the same way himself, that's why he preferred a hammer to a sword, but instead he took a drink himself. Robert was right, of course, the younger man relied on his natural ability too much, and though that alone would make him superior to most, he would be undone against a more talented opponent, and he would certainly lose against a knight of similar ability who had a more rigorous attitude to his training.

"Good advice, my Lord. Perhaps you'll hear it when it comes from someone else?" The older of the two men said, and Robert blinked, not realising they'd been able to hear him commenting on their display. The older man was giving ground as his opponent came after him, but carefully, watching his opponent carefully turning the slashes efficiently away, steel scraping as he parried, the crowd making the occasional sound of encouragement. "You certainly never listen when I tell you the same!"

Elbert finished his own mug of ale and then poured the rest of the jug into it before Robert could finish it off, enjoying the taste more than he had expected, and the warm feeling in his torso despite the chill in the air. After Eddard had gone to see his father, the two of them had been led down to the kitchens by Winterfell's steward, which had turned out to be located deep below the earth, filled by two score servants toiling as hard as the miners beneath Casterly Rock.

The kitchen-hands strained and swore and struggled, their brows oiled with sweat as they practised their craft beneath the hiss of brass lanterns and the sharp eyes of their instructors. The baker, his skin grey after a lifetime spent in clouds of flour, battered his pastry with a blacksmith's unrelenting power. The butcher, his arms scarred by fire and boiling grease, sliced apart a roast piglet with a bravosi water-dancer's precision and flair. The head cook, his face red, his red beard bristling and his eyes savage, strode amongst his inferiors, driving them to greater efforts like so many galley slaves, demanding all that they could give, in one hand brandishing the rolling pin that served as his scepter, and Elbert had doubted the men and women tasked preparing for the night's feast could have been more deferential or terrified of Lord Rickard Stark himself, or even King Aerys.

The steward had left them to have a quiet word with that terrible figure, no doubt preparing for the coming evening, and the Head Cook had dispatched two harried women, who had quickly found them an out of the way corner to sit down in, and brought them dried meat seethed with lentils, a loaf of new-baked bread, some soft cheese, and a plate of raw beets that after trying made Robert look as though his lips were stained with blood, to go with the jug of sweet northern ale they'd just finished
off. Part of the meal intended for the servants, which had surprised him, but not Robert, who had thanked them, and started eating, chewing noisily, tearing the bread asunder with strong fingers and cutting a chunk of cheese with his hunting knife while the steward and the head Cook talked, coming to last arrangements about the feast to be held intended to welcome Elbert and Robert, an irony that had not passed Elbert by.

"Not ones to stand on ceremony, these northerners." Elbert had said to his friend, and Robert nodded approvingly. For all that he took the benefits of his name and blood for granted, he didn't care to be referred to as a knight, much less as a lord. "One would expect that Lord Rickard Stark would take the time to meet his guests, or even just acknowledge us at all. Personally, I mean. Not just put us in the care of an inferior and give us no further thought. I almost feel unwelcome."

"We're on his land, in his castle. He'll do things in his own time." Robert replied. "He hasn't seen his son in half a year, if he wants to talk to Ned before he goes through the motions of welcoming us, I don't see any reason to think worse of him for it."

"Perhaps. But we're allies, I'm to live here for a year and you're to marry his daughter, and we've crossed half the continent to see him. The least he could do is greet us personally…"

"We're outsiders here, Elbert." Robert replied after swallowing. "This isn't our place, and they won't let us forget that we don't belong. The places we come from, they're hardly real to these people, and no more important to them then whatever lies beyond the Sunset Sea." Then he had smiled at the women who'd brought the food, who looked uncomfortable that Elbert hadn't touched his.

"It is only what was cooking for the servants' supper and mine, m'lord, not at all fitting-"

"It'll fill us both up, and that's just what we need." Robert had replied airily. "Thank you very much."

"No trouble, m'lord. no trouble at all." They both curtsied, and smiled, and Robert smiled back. Elbert had finally tried his fare, plain but wholesome, and the two had speculated a little about the hunting opportunities offered by the Wolfswood, before the steward finished his conversation and led them back to the yard in order to get them presentable, where they'd found Ned's older brother practicing his sword-work, and curiosity had compelled them to take an interest.

It wasn't a game. Despite all padding, plate armor (though neither man was wearing all their kit, just enough of it, both having left off their gorgets, plate gauntlets, bevor, greeves, sabbatons and sallet) and careful weapon’s control, practicing against one another could be very dangerous, and men were down all the time with broken fingers or wrists and other injuries. And that was without the sudden flares of anger men could get when something hurt, or became personal. When practice became a duelling ground, and then a wrong move could maim. Or even kill - Elbert had seen it happen, and heard of it happening far more often. The problem was that there was no substitute for it, not when it came to being ready for the real thing.

Their swords flashed once more, and the younger man's slipped past his opponents only to be blocked by his upraised shield, but the older man gave ground at the impact, recovering his footing and catching the following lunge. Winterfells master-at-arms was a lean man, wearing some pieces of an old-fashioned, functional set of armor. It was battered and dull with age, though it was meticulously cared for, and would still be serviceable. Still, it looked ancient to Elbert's eyes, a relic from an age long past. Fashion changed quickly in Westeros, and he had his own set of gleaming fluted armour in the modern fashion, that he intended to wear to the tourney at Harrenhal. His close-cropped hair was in retreat, his thin moustache displayed a scattering of grey, but despite his heavy breathing he was clearly trim and fit. It was a thin face, and a hard one. He wielded his sword with suppleness and surety, his every move bearing the cool confidence of long experience, low, repeating and changing each parry like a mechanism, turning the slashes efficiently away.
His opponent was bigger and equally lean, perhaps a year older than Robert Baratheon's seventeen, but six inches shorter and not so heavy-set. Few were - since his last burst of growth, Robert had begun to carry a weight of muscle that made experienced warriors want to look at their feet in his presence. The young man had thick hair he wore long and tied out of his face, some uncertain shade he would have called brown out of convenience - with contemptuous disregard for his own life and safety he was not wearing a helmet, although he was wearing a few pieces armor - pieces of a heavy three-quarter plate harness in the style of the Reach, slipped tight over his pourpoint arming doublet, though in truth it was also slightly out of date, modified from a set perhaps a decade or so old.

The current preference was for a sloped cuirass that came to a low point, while this cuirass was decidedly full and rounded; for high shoulder pieces, particularly on the left pauldron to help protect the neck without inhibiting the sword arm too much, but there was none here; for large, sweeping couters at the elbow, and there were none of those. Still, the harness wouldn't be terribly less effective than the current fashions, Elbert knew. An enormous buckle, cast into the profile of a running wolf, fastened a belt about his waist, and the scabbard which hung from the belt was gilded across most of its length and engraved with elaborate scrollwork.

The young man's face was handsome, to Elbert there seemed to be pride in his deep grey eyes and a swagger to the curve of his mouth that betokened an innate confidence that needed neither practice nor experience to engender it. He looked enough like Ned that he could tell at a glance they were brothers, but he didn't fight like him at all, Ned fought cautiously and carefully and always exactly the same way. Whereas his swordsmanship displayed a less refined, more primal style than the studied motions of the older man. It was emotion rather than skill which governed his blade, but such was the fire of his passion, the quickness of his reflexes that his guard was impenetrable, his attacks avoided only by the narrowest margin. Steel rang and clattered as he laid onto his instructor as hard as he could, until he overextended on one of his attacks, too eager to land a blow on the older knight, and he found himself off-balance. The older man stepped in close, slamming his shield into the taller youth. The younger man reeled backwards, almost losing his footing, but recovered magnificently.

The older swordsman smiled as he twisted his wrist and blocked a slash from his adversary's blade. "That would have been an impressive feint — if you had intended it as such," he told the younger man, never missing the opportunity to make a lesson like all good master-at-arms.

A smirk tugged at the corner of the younger man's mouth. "I don't need feints to make it past your garde, old man."

The other swordsman seemed encouraged by this display of spirit, rolling his blade across the back of the boy's sword and stabbing the point towards his breastplate. But the younger man lifted his guard and shifted, swatting the thrust aside with the pommel of his own weapon. The older fighter nodded, impressed by the move.

"Well done. I'd think you'd been studying the tricks of the Bravossi water-dancer - if I didn't know you have no patience at all for reading."

The boy jabbed his sword at the older man's left arm above the shield, and then turned his entire body so that he followed through with a rolling slash at the man's right leg. Both attacks crashed against the other swordsman's intercepting blade.

"Why read if there's nothing more to learn, Ser Henri?" his student quipped. "As if reading is any substitute for understanding. Or is it you who has nothing else to teach me?"

The old knight snorted with amusement, then brought his boot stamping down, not upon the hard
ground, but upon his adversary’s foot, still outstretched from his previous lunge. As he danced back in surprise, Ser Henri caught the point of his own blade with one thick leather glove, knocked his student's blade entirely out of line, and then tapped it gently against the young man's breastplate, his two-handed grip and his stance putting the young man’s life entirely in his hands - or would have, had the sword been sharp. "If all you want to do is get killed, then there’s nothing more I can teach you, my lord," Winterfell's master-at-arms declared.

Laughing, the younger man brought his sword whipping around in a stunning display of speed and flourish, sweeping it beneath Ser Henri's blade and shield, the edge coming to rest in such a way that it was clear the blow would have hit his instructor’s groin. "That is a mortal wound, but not immediately fatal. We die together, old man." Smiling, he withdrew his blade, and tossed it to his squire, who caught it deftly and returned it to the rack alongside a dozen exactly like it. The lad was about thirteen years of age, with red hair and a spirited attempt to grow the beard his body wasn’t ready to produce, with several more years of squiring to go before he could attempt a knighthood, but he looked eager, and judging by the worshipful glance he gave his master he was where he wanted to be.

Ser Henri Sharpe sighed as he attended to his own weapon. "I think your father, who I serve, would take small comfort from knowing his son and heir dispatched his killer before he died. He can always find another old man to dole out instruction."

"And he has two more sons." Brandon replied, not in the least concerned. "So what if I do take a few risks? What's life without them?"

"Longer." The swordsman replied, shaking his head. "Lord Brandon, you have as impressive a natural aptitude as I've ever seen, I've seldom had a more naturally talented young man to instruct. If you would only apply yourself to the science of the sword…"

Elbert watched Brandon Stark frown. It was an argument he had likely heard many times and was obviously one that he didn’t appreciate - in contrast to his younger brother, who was not a natural swordsman but had become as technically proficient as he could make himself. "Techniques and schools of sword would ruin me. Tame a wolf and you dull his fangs."

"A tame wolf lives longer," Ser Sharpe observed.

"A wild wolf is happier," retorted the heir to Winterfell, and Ser Sharpe gave up the argument, obviously wise enough to pick his battles. Clicking his heels together, the old knight bowed and withdrew from the yard, while the young man sauntered over to the crowd to drape himself on the fence that separated the enclosure from the rest of the courtyard, where he accepted a piece of fabric from which he dried away his perspiration, then a swallow of cool water, before upending the rest over his head.

"He's right, you know." Elbert observed.

"You think so?" The heir to Winterfell and all the North replied, turning and raising an eyebrow. He'd exerted himself sufficiently to work up the beginnings of a sweat, though the cold had kept it from becoming too obvious.

Elbert shrugged. "That's my experience."

Brandon grunted, stepping back from the fence. "Ned says you're pretty good yourself. Nearly as good as him."

"Ned's kind to say so." Elbert replied. It had been true, once, but Ned worked himself with a single-
minded intensity, and Elbert was more comfortable in the saddle anyway.

"Care to prove it?" Brandon asked, taking the practice sword again. The edge on his smile was positively ferocious.

"I don't think…” Elbert started to say, but didn't get the chance to finish.

“Come on. You asked me to show you around? This is where it starts.” He rolled his neck until it audibly cracked. “With me.”

"Fight!” Someone shouted. Elbert thought it was probably Brandon's squire, although he hadn't see the boy do it. "Fight!” And then someone else added their voice, and it became a chant; "Fight! Fight! Fight!” Plenty were laughing as they joined in, clapping their hands in time.

Brandon looked at him, smiling in a way that bared his strong teeth. Handsome though he was, there was something ugly in his grey eyes, like Eddard's but for the gleam, and Elbert sighed. He'd been expecting something like this - The North might seem another world, but young men were the same everywhere - but not so soon.

He figured he'd have more time, that the young heir would want to sound him out before he made his move. Apparently not.

Robert rested a heavy hand upon his shoulder. "Want me to take this for you? Maybe knock some sense into him while I do it?" He offered, smiling but with a dark look of his own in his blue eyes, an unlikely shade, like the deepest part of the ocean on a clear day in summer. In another person that gleam would be called competitive. In Robert, that wasn't the word you'd use. Not exactly.

Elbert, in all honesty, thought that he would have quite liked to see that. He'd watched Robert fight plenty of times, in training, and in two melees, which the young lord had invariably won since he turned sixteen or so, and once against Mountain Tribesmen. Robert liked to hit hard, to use his great strength to smash through other mens guards and send them sprawling, but he was quick and skilled and knew how to control the distance of the fight, and there wasn't much anyone could do to stop him, unless they had a ballista handy.

But Elbert shook his head anyway. Robert didn't think ahead, that was his trouble. His friend was supposed to marry into this family, and given the damage that Robert tended to do when he was roused, setting him against Brandon was not likely to go well, particularly after Brandon had insulted Robert’s friend - Brandon leaving the yard on a stretcher would not be a good start to the alliance that his uncle had worked so hard to make a reality.

And he was quite possibly going to spend some time in the North, according to his uncles expressed wishes. There was even talk in him spending a year or so here. He needed to establish himself, and this was as good a way as any, and perhaps he could teach the young man (though Brandon was older than he was) a lesson in the process.

"No, I got this." He took a long breath, and then, to a smattering of applause, put a hand on the wall and vaulted it, landed on the balls of his feet, then removed his heavy cloak and unbuttoned his coat, then draped them both over the rail. With the faintest unhappy look in his eye, he looked Brandon over again. Bigger than him, and faster too probably, and wearing most of a set of armor, while he was in his jerkin and trousers and nothing else. The air was cool across his bare skin, but he was used to that.

It reminded him a bit of home.
"Most find they dislike a little to do with me." Brandon said, taking his sword back from his squire with a flourish. Seeing Elbert had no shield, he tossed his own aside, then set himself in a good stance with his weight on the back of his hips, his practice sword in one hand, held back across his body. It looked awkward, but allowed a man to catch a heavy cut and turn it away easily. Despite his affectations, it was clear Brandon knew a great deal of swordwork. But Elbert knew that already, of course.

"Skill with a blade isn’t everything,” Elbert said, watching him carefully. Ser Edmund Kay, his uncle's master-at-arms, who had trained him, and Ned, and Robert too come to think of it, had always used to say that good swordsmen are more predictable than adequate ones. 'For a good swordsman, it's not enough to win. They need to win their own way.' Once you learn how a man likes to fight, he becomes predictable. He didn't really know, but he'd seen enough to make some informed guesses. Brandon liked to control the fight. He liked to show off, to go on the offensive and stay there. He liked taking risks, counting on his reflexes to keep him safe, or else he didn’t care about staying safe at all. Elbert knew he could use all of that, if he kept his nerve.

"Bring it on." Brandon was grinning. Robert was leaning over the fence, propped up on his elbows, watching them intently. Winterfell's master-at-arms was across the yard, where two pages were taking off his armor, shoulders first, followed by arms, breast and back. He too was watching. Elbert swallowed, a touch more theatrically then necessary. He was gambling on having read the young man correctly.

"It’s not just about the blade,” Elbert warned him.

"However you want it," Brandon snorted, and a few of the watching crowd laughed on cue. Brandon's squire wordlessly passed another practice sword to Elbert, a light in his eyes making it abundantly clear he relished what he anticipated was to be Elbert's upcoming humiliation. Elbert took the sword, and tested it through the air, back and forth, then nodded. It wasn't much of a sword, just a length of dull metal, but it fit his hand well enough when he presented it, then brought the blade to rest cradled in the crock of his arm. The stance was deceptively casual, but that was misleading, the position, the balance, the angle of the long blade gave him all manner of options both in defense and attack.

Brandon bared his teeth and shook out his shoulders. He turned his sword and began to step around Brandon. "You're better than me," Elbert admitted, not mentioning the fact that Brandon was in armor and he was not - once you were fighting it was too late to worry if it's fair.

"That's plain to see."

"So again, if we do this it won’t be just about the blade."

"Whatever, whatever," Brandon called, "Just get on with it and fight me."

"I think I'll wait for you to come to me, if it's all the same to you."

Brandon sneered, stepped in line and swung, and Elbert stepped back smartly, the blow falling short of him by a little over a handbreadth. A breathless silence had fallen over the crowd now. He might be a southerner, and Brandon might be the heir to this castle and clearly a favourite, but even the most ignorant observer could tell from his stance and way of moving that he was no novice, and wanted to see how this turned out.

Elbert sighed as Brandon moved back into garde, holding his own sword low. "I've been watching you, I've seen you fight. I can read you."
"You wish."

"Try me."

Brandon lunged at Elbert. Elbert side-stepped, blade down, and putting his weight and shoulder into it punched Brandon Stark directly in the face before he had a chance to realize what had happened. Already off-balance from being caught midblow, Brandon fell on his back, hard.

Elbert dropped the practice sword onto the ground, where it skittered across the dirt. "Like I said. It's not just about the blade. You ought to listen to your instructor."

Spitting blood, Brandon's response was incoherent. The crowd was very silent, all of a sudden. Elbert did his best to project unconcern, but a part of him worried that Brandon would get back up and beat him bloody. It was all he could do not to let out a sigh of relief when he realised that the sound that Stark was making was him chuckling through a split lip. And then Ser Henri Sharpe was laughing as well, a proper belly laugh, slapping his still armored knee. Robert joined him a moment later, then most of the crowd, some of whom were applauding, and finally Elbert himself let out a relieved breath, and managed a smile. That had gone better than he had any right to hope.

"You're mad!" Brandon said, sounding almost awestruck as he got to his feet, and then suddenly he smothered Elbert in an embrace. It wasn't pleasant, Brandon was strong and the metal armour pressed against him uncomfortably, but the heir to the Vale took it in the spirit it was intended, even gingerly hugging him back. Brandon was still grinning and shaking his head, like he could hardly believe it. "Completely mad!"

"It worked, didn't it?"

"That it did. You got me good." He leaned in closer, so that his lips were almost touching Elbert's ear. "Try to do a stupid thing like that on me again, and I'll knock you senseless." Brandon promised, and Elbert had no doubt at all that he meant it, then laughed and slapped him on the back before letting him go.

"Don't worry. I'll have a new trick ready for you next time."

Dinner was served in the great hall of Winterfell, where the hundreds of men and women sat down to eat. The Great hall was hazy with smoke and heavy with the savory-sweet smell of roasted meat and fresh-baked bread, and buzzed with the clatter of plates and the clash of mugs and the scrape of knife on trencher. The fireplaces were banked high; the leaping flames threw strange, capering shadows on the walls as sweating servants hurried in and out. Mistletoe took the place of flowers. The castle's hounds, large and small, barked and scrabbled over discarded scraps and rooted in the rushes that covered the floor.

A great table richly covered with scarlet cloth sat upon a dias a step or so higher then the floor, from the middle of which ran the longer and lower board, at which the domestics and inferiors fed, down towards the bottom of the hall. The whole resembled the form of the letter T. Massive chairs and settles of carved oak were placed upon the dais, where by invitation, he and Robert would be seated with their hosts.

Lord Rickard Stark wore a surcoat and mantle, emblazoned with his family arms, and a wolf pelt as grey and grizzled as his hair, and had his arms clasped behind his back and a dark look in his eye. He had acknowledged them with stately affability, they had lowered their heads in a polite bow and he
had bid the stand tall and then welcomed them, his eyes cold and distant, and then he had said a few words to each of them before offering them both bread and salt, a tradition of guest-right that Northerners took very seriously indeed - in the long winter they had just come through, turning a man away at your doors was as good as condemning him to a terrible death in the cold.

There were places now where the laws of hospitality were a quaint old-fashioned custom only paid lip service out of tradition. Elbert, who came from a land where an hours ride outside a settlement meant you were in the wilderness and at the nonexistent mercy of savages had always found the idea of it to be almost incomprehensible.

A little time passed, all eyes on the Lord Stark, nobody, not his family, his guests or his men presuming to sit until he did so himself. One by one, all of them except Lord Rickard and Ned became restive, fidgeting or glancing around. A few men coughed. Brandon glanced over his shoulder toward the doors ever more frequently. Finally Lord Rickard Stark muttered a few words to what appeared to be a footman, a young man with bushy whiskers pointing pugnaciously upwards, who inclined his head and departed, and another five minutes passed.

Into the hall came a young woman who must have been Rickard's daughter in something between a stumble and a lurching run, as if she had been pushed; in the shadows behind her a face was visible for a instant.

With a grave face she approached the table, followed by the two ladies in her service. She was dressed in a dark blue gown and a fillet of silver, set with tablets of amber. They were dressed in green to complement the effect of the colour, a sufficiently pretty effect that even the men noticed it.

She paused, her face lit up for an instant as her gaze brushed over Ned, then settled on Robert with renewed determination. A steward approached with a tray; Lyanna and her companions each took a goblet of wine, then went modestly apart, where they stood murmuring together, leaving her to make the final leg of her journey on her own. Rickard nodded at her, after which he presented his guests to his family. Lyanna acknowledged Robert's compliments with a bland stare, which Robert graciously ignored, and at last they were all seated, and began to eat.

She still looked a lot like the girl she had been a year ago, at least to Elbert. She was young but already tall, as tall as she would ever grow, and there were still traces of the bold and defiant look upon her face that was the only thing he'd really remembered about her, in their all too brief meeting. *If you can master me, that look had seemed to say, then you can master whatever else this wicked world might bring, but you never will.*

Around her were a few deerhounds that had the same thin, lean bodies, and the same long nose and the same huntress eyes as their mistress. Her dark lashes veiled her grey-green eyes, large in her face with a kind of cruelty in their depths. It was not a soft face, any more than her body was soft, she was, or was growing to be, a woman of strong lines and of high bones, and that made for a good face and a handsome one, but hard, and the years would only make it harder, he knew. What made her beautiful was her abundant hair, so dark it was almost black that fell around her shoulders in a cascade of tumbling tangles, that an elaborate arrangement of braids held in place with silver wire had failed to tame, and her carriage, for she stood as straight as a spear. The hair softened her looks enough that you could appreciate them.

In Elbert's opinion, there have been many women more objectively beautiful than the only daughter of Rickard Stark, but when weighed against her beauty seemed somehow to be a common attribute, scarcely worth mentioning at all. As well as women more intelligent and more graceful, more witty and more desirable, but Elbert thought it doubtful that there was ever a woman so unforgettable as she. Even a year later he remembered the look she had worn.
Lord Rickard sat at the head of the table and glowered, eating in total silence. Elbert was on the opposite side of the table to her and Robert, he was seated between Brandon and Benjen, the littlest Stark young and restless enough to be bouncing on his chair, brimming with a seemingly endless series of questions that Elbert could only try to answer before the next one followed.

Brandon was wearing a tunic of forest green, furred at the throat and cuffs with what was called minever, hanging unbuttoned over a close dress of grey which sat tight to his body. He had breeches of the same, but they did not reach below the lower part of the thigh, leaving his knees exposed. He wore boots that would have reached his hip if they hadn't been rolled down to halfway up his carves, secured in the front with silver clasps, he had bracelets of silver upon his arms and a broad collar of the same precious metal around his neck, as well as a thin diadem to keep his hair out of his eyes. Elbert suspected he was trying to show off.

Elbert hadn't brought anything equally fine to wear, of course, but had made all the effort circumstances would permit. After his short display with a sword, he and Robert had met Ned at the sweat lodge, and once they were done with it and poured a bucket of freezing water over themselves, a tall, hungry-looking attendant had washed their hair and scrubbed them all over with brushes made from the bristles of different animals - badgers for delicate skin, horsehair for the feet, pigs' bristles for the limbs. Laying out a basin of hot water he took a dagger first to Ned's cheeks, then Robert's and his own until they were smooth. Then they had got dressed in the finest clothes they had brought, somewhat creased and rumpled admittedly, but making for a better picture than going around in riding leathers would likely have. His boots were black and shiny and hard-soled so he might click them imperiously, the cut of his clothes was fine, and as sombre and modest as everyone else except Brandon was dressing, they still stood out regardless.

Brandon, for his part, seemed to have made up his mind they were friends, which Elbert was relieved by even if he knew it was likely the northerners way of saving face rather than treating what had happened earlier as humiliation, the way many would. Indeed, Brandon seemed strangely excited by what had taken place, and had even told the story about his impromptu match against Elbert to his father, laughing and shaking his head, to which the Lord of the North had listened to him with a frown, clearly not quite so amused at this turn of events as his son.

No, Brandon was good company, Elbert decided. Like most young men, particularly most young men from the Vale, Elbert loved the hunt, tournaments, horses, gambling, troubadour songs, wine, women (mostly women) and war. And Brandon swore like a sailor, loved spirited stallions, wrote both courtly and bawdy poetry (surprisingly well, Elbert had to admit), had done a share of youthful carousing sufficient for two men, and gloried in any physical challenge. Brandon, really, was a lot like Robert, full of rough innocent fun, impulsive and a little boyish, even somewhat boorish and clumsy, moving towards what he wanted without considering the danger or the cost.

Ironically, his uncle, Lord Jon Arryn, was bored by hunting, had banned tournaments on his land (without special dispensation), disliked horses and rode only the most docile and well-broken of mounts, never gambled or swore, cared too little for music to have any opinion about it whatsoever, didn't drink to excess unless it was a special occasion and even then with moderation, and saw battle as a means to an end, not as a way to test his manhood or the honor of his cause. He did like women, or at least he presumably had once, given that he'd been wed twice, although he hadn't produced any children, and if he'd ever strayed from his marital bed he'd been very discreet.

Moreover, Jon was of nervous disposition, known to flinch at loud noises that caught him unawares, and was rarely without an armed loyal man on hand, though he'd proven a more than capable battle-commander against the Ninepenny Kings, which spared him from the ridicule such a temperament would usually attract.
By then, the roast meat had been lifted to the carving table on big platters - entire roasted boar and deer and cows, all stuffed with herbs, garlic and sweetmeats and swimming in thick, creamy sauces of mushroom and cheese, followed by the grilled forms of the large carnivorous fish that swam in the frigid waters of the Bay of Seals to the north - where they were methodically stripped of flesh until only the luminous white and pink bones were left, bones that were tossed onto the straw-covered floor and fought over by the dogs. Massive wheels of cheese had been brought up from the cellars, the butter was fresh-churned, and there were leeks and carrots, roasted onions, beets, turnips, parsnips. The portions of meat - garnished with mushrooms, cranberries, hawthorn and berry sauce, were taken away on half-loaves of bread to be served to the household, the choicer cuts directly to the lord and his family and guest, while wine bubbled happily through the spigots. A glance showed that Robert was not partaking, and had stopped at a single cup. Still, he seemed to be mostly speaking to Ned, rather than the woman he was here to meet. Elbert shook his head, wondering how Robert could moon over a girl so long and then show her no interest whatsoever.

One pup, young and scrawny with a splotch of white on its brown face, had been whining piteously at the fringe of the mob, unable to compete with the larger dogs, but had picked him as an easy mark and stared at him with its enormous eyes until he'd fed it a strip of greasy skin. It wagged its stub of tail as it bolted the treat, then stuck around hoping for more, until Brandon had threatened to kick it, and it had let out a hurt whine before wandering off.

“The main course is here.” Brandon said, with a commendable grasp of the obvious, indicating an enormous roast on a dish, filling the hall with its marvelous aroma, carried in by six men on something resembling a cross between the litters particularly effete nobles were known to use in the capital so as not to soil their boots on the street, and a cage.

“Is that an elk?” Elbert asked after a moment.

“It is.” Robert replied from across the table. “Must have weighed seven hundredweight, big bull like that.”

“With a fine fourteen-point rack. Seven hundredweight and forty.” Lyanna commented. Those were the first words she had directed to Robert since the banquet began, at least at her own instigation.

He raised an eyebrow. “Bring it down yourself, did you?” Robert had a way of looking at her. As though he was surprised to see her, like he was trying to figure something out.

“What if I did?” She retorted, then meeting his gaze, she lowered her eyes on the table and began crumbling her bread.

Her father cleared his throat.

“No.” She admitted. “Our huntsman Dow did. He’s a magnificent shot.” She paused. “They say you are as well.”

Robert shrugged. “I can bend a bow back further than anyone else, for whatever that’s worth. Not much to a Lord Paramount, or so I suspect. Do you know what bow he used?”

“His own.” She replied, a hint of a challenge sparking in her eye. “A yew sapling.”

Robert raised an eyebrow, but she didn’t elaborate. “Well, we’ve been invited hunting by your father tomorrow at first light. You might bring one down yet.” He said, teasing her gently. She didn’t respond at all.

“Lord Robert,” Rickard Stark began to say. “My daughter is…”
“She is charming,” Robert replied. “She is everything your daughter should be.”

“Good…!” Rickard replied, obviously willing to yield the burden of conversation onto the two of them.

"I hardly know what to say to you." Robert said, when it was clear she wasn't going to say anything else. "I know it gets cold over here, but your manner is so glacial as to seem almost threatening." Robert said, with a chuckle. "Would prefer to be elsewhere?"

Elbert, know watching intently, knew he didn't imagine it. She glanced at her father, before she retuned her gaze to Robert. "My preferences, whatever they may be, seem of consequence only to myself. Or so I have been given to understand."

"I don't believe that. Not for a second. I, for one, find them most intriguing." Lyanna only responded with an indifferent shrug, and Robert scratched his chin. "Meanwhile your opinion of me is a person drab, lacking in any favorable qualities, perhaps something of a bore?" He said it hoping she'd say otherwise, or at the very least bite back.

"You are my father's guest. I would not presume to form that opinion, or any opinion whatsoever."

Robert shook his head, amused rather than insulted, shrugged his shoulders as well, and went back to talking to Ned. Lyanna, now with nobody to talk to, went back to crumbling her bread, look irritated despite herself. "She doesn't want to marry him." Benjen said from his chair, following Elbert's gaze.

"I think he's got the the point by now, yes." Elbert replied. You could do a lot worse than Robert, and he had cousins who had to prove it - it was the lot of noble women to marry for their land rather than their heart. A noble lady will be bedded with any stinking, slack-bellied old goat if it will secure a frontier or make an alliance, it was just a fact of life. But most peasants didn't actually get to do all that much better, so far as he could tell.

"How about you?" Brandon asked.

"I've seen a picture, once."

"I'm to marry Catelyn Tully of Riverrun. A lovely lady, dowered most generously." He replied, as though that wasn't common knowledge, then pushed back his chair and got to his feet. Most people noticed and stopped what they were doing to pay attention, but a few didn't. Two big men, knights Elbert assumed, were involved in some kind of wrist-wrestling contest, their daggers drawn and plunged into the tabletop on either side of the combatants' arms, and they didn't look up from their match even when Brandon banged the table a few times for attention, but at last most of the room were looking at him.

"If I may." He began, then started speaking before anyone could answer. "It is my ernest opinion that musicians, poets and historians are all much the same. They sing of love, they celebrate slaughter, they extol kings and flatter queens, they conjure up virtues from thin air like magicians and called the most commonplace wondrous, but forget those things. Tonight I propose a toast in praise of friendship. And you'll have to forgive me, as this is all off the cuff.” There was a cheer around the assembled revellers, and Robert and Ned clinked their goblets heavily together, then each took a long swig of wine. Their cheeks were already glowing, and their bellies were full of food. Elbert grinned as well, feeling content, full of food and well on the way to drunkenness. He looked across the tables to Rickard Stark, who was no longer worried about his daughter and was smiling proudly at his son, and he raised his goblet in response, but Brandon wasn't done.

"Today we are all gathered in this hall in friendship. None of us are kept apart by long forgotten
bitterness and petty jealousies, imagined divisions and borders, but instead united in a common desire to see this land a better, stronger place. As my father says, stick with the pack. If one man fights the mastodon, he's dead. If the whole clan fights the mastodon, it's the mastodon who dies and we all eat well." A few men chuckled. "To the North, the Vale, and the Stormlands. Allies now, and friends as well, or so I pray." This was met with cheers, and they all drank again.

Perhaps, Elbert decided, he may yet come to like the North yet.
When he woke in the dim hours before the dawn, from the clutch of dreams of ravens and swords and laughter, his heart fluttering like a birds’ wings, he found himself alone in a cold, dark room. The nightmare that had tormented him had begun as a vision of home, the lands of stones and of dykes, of oaks and ash and elm and thorn, of marsh and sea, wavebeaten and wild beneath the winddriven sky, before it had given way to formlessness in the way of dreams, following no logic or direction, and left him as though every single terrible thing that had happened to him since earliest childhood had seemed to repeat itself.

He had slept heavily, but did not feel well rested after that. Still he made a determined effort from the moment he awoke, throwing off the great bearskin rug under which he had slept, and pulled himself up into the biting air - he’d slept naked the way he always did. Winterfell was cold, though not so cold as he would have thought thanks to the hot springs the castle was built upon. He moved across the room, dipped his face into the basin with a grimace like biting into something sour, then rubbed his stinging cheeks and neck vigorously with a towel. The shock of cold was enough to jolt the last traces of sleep from him, and he stretched his muscles to their fullest extent until the joints popped, shivering a little and hissing misting breaths to himself. He cupped his hands and blew into them. It helped a little.

By then the dream was scarcely even a memory, and it would be nothing at all by the time he was dressed. He was not thinking about it, in truth it occurred to him that it had felt almost strange to lie on a real featherbed as he dressed himself hurriedly before the last warmth of the bed was gone - he’d been on the road more than a month to get to this place at the edge of the world, and there hadn’t been a decent inn since he’d crossed into the North. Most nights their party had been put up by peasants, large extended families who lived in shelters - buildings seemed to grand a word, who had a nook or corner to spare, and he’d counted himself fortunate to rest his head upon some clean straw. He’d seen enough in that time to understand that Winter in the North was a time of darkness and death. A fine, frosty morning could reveal the stiff body of an old man, or a child too young to survive a fever. The bitter season meant stews of blood in oats and the earthy taste of old vegetables, months and years after they had been picked. Carrots and onions and turnips all went into broths, with hard cheese or curds of lard when they could get them to help keep out the cold. With bread and eggs and ale the north endured the long winter.

Spring meant far more than green shoots and snowdrops in the hedgerows. Spring meant rebirth, which showed itself in a sense of purpose in the people, in their waking from slumber with new life in their veins. There was laughter to be heard, and whatever was left of the last of the preserved food could be devoured now that they had reached the end of the winter. Fresh meat and greens appeared again in town markets. Graves were dug in the softening ground, small or long, with bodies carried from where they had lain in barns and cool cellars, and the ground was prepared for the first planting.

At last he finished dressing. Robert wasn’t one for excessive vanity, or vulgar displays of his wealth (which was seen as effeminate behaviour in the Stormlands) - he dressed in what was comfortable and practical. Today that meant knee-high boots with silver spurs, two pairs of breeches to keep out the cold, a woollen shirt, a padded leather jerkin, and a short linen tunic. He left his riding sword behind after a moment’s thought - he was used to carrying it around but thought it might give the wrong impression. He did belt on the hunting knife Jon Arryn had given him a little less than a year
ago for his nameday however, and there could be no doubt that it was a knights belt. Finally he threw on his baldric and cloak, and with that out of the way, he went to the Great Hall to see if there was any hope of breakfast.

He found that there was, for the whole castle was suffering from the same sort of nervous excitement which had got him out of bed so early. All traces of the feast of the night before was already erased as though it had never been, and breakfast had been set in it's place. There was to be a morning hunt, he remembered with no little anticipation. Of course there was - and he was looking forward to it. Lord Stark had just come through a long winter, and his stores were likely feeling it, and the feast he'd offered his guests the night before likely hadn't helped. Furthermore, Lord Stark maintained a number of hungry mouths — what with his extensive household and the vast estates, thinly peopled though they were - so it was natural that he should want as many dead boars, bucks, roes, and whatever else they were fortunate enough to find to be salted down as soon as could be achieved.

Robert, not that he’d ever admit as such to his friend, wasn’t much impressed with Lord Stark. From what Eddard had said, he’d expected something like The Father Above in miniature, a mighty figure in whom all the long and noble history of the north had found a worthy testament. But truth be told, the man Lord Stark turned out to be reminded him more of his late father's chief steward Ser Grimoult Penrose - and how a man like that had ever managed to become a knight must have been quite a story, Robert had always thought. Ser Grimoult Penrose was a white-haired man who Robert was sure was the wrong side of sixty, though there was admittedly no way to be absolutely certain, and the wiry old man seemed to ever maintain an expression of deep and abiding irritation, almost pain, as though he could find no relief save by forcing others to suffer it as well. That was the expression that he wore whenever Robert returned home to Storm's End, and that was the expression he wore while Robert roared and cursed him to every hell that he could remember.

But Ser Grimoult Penrose always weathered the storms of Robert's rages in contemptuous silence which only drove Robert to bluster all the more, until the young lord was finally driven to listen to him. Robert's title, that he still thought of, in his heart of hearts, as belonging to his father, meant dozens of estates had come to him, with staff and tenants numbering many hundreds or more likely thousands - Ser Grimoult Penrose had told him that no less than twenty thousand persons were fed daily at the open tables with which he allured to his lands - and his father had kept a close eye on all those holdings. More to the point, the men who ran them understood perfectly the limits of their own authority - and would not move one step further for fear of losing their livelihoods. It was work that Robert did not desire or care for, and though he appreciated the heavy gold coins which Ser Grimoult Penrose provided him with, to say nothing of the tournament he’d arranged him (and what a fiasco that had proven), Ser Grimoult Penrose represented duty, squeezing his chest and wrapping him up in all the smothering laws and rules that he couldn't stand or live with.

Of course, Robert could have had his father's steward horsewhipped if he'd wanted, then tossed off his land for good measure. He'd come close to it, a year ago, when instead of doing as he had been instructed and delegating the task the man had done the opposite and assembled a staff of clerks from most of Robert's estates to assist and educate their young master. That coterie of scribes had accompanied him wherever he rode, all ink-fingers and scrolls bound in leather and wax. And whenever he did try and accommodate them there always seemed to be more to read, until he inevitably gave it up as a lost cause and and stormed off with some of the rougher knights to go hunt for a few days.

Lord Rickard Stark was cut off the same cloth as his father's steward, an insufferably self-important old man who was thoroughly convinced he knew the best for everyone. Fortunately he was not present, so Robert was spared having to put on an act for his benefit.

Brandon was nowhere to be seen either, the young lord-to-be - apparently the 'knez' in the dialect
used in the North, was likely still in the painful and uncertain process of getting over all the drinking he'd done the night before. Robert had been there himself, often enough to sympathize. Actually, he couldn't see Ned anywhere either, or anyone he recognised at all, save Gelfred Poole if you counted that, and a few of the servants whose names he didn't know - he hadn't the chance or opportunity to learn their names. And Elbert, who was sitting at the high table with his plate already set. The kitchens had put together a fine meal, particularly given how hard they had worked the day before.

Robert would say this much for Lord Stark, he hosted a generous table.

"Having fun?"

"Not as much as you, evidently." Robert replied with a smile, sitting down heavily with his plate piled high. Taking his eating knife, a blade about the size of his smallest finger, he selected a mutton chop from his plate and began paring the meat away from the bone, taking care not to leave any clinging to it. "Looked to me like you had quite a night."

"Too good to talk about, thank you." Elbert said with a careless smile, and they both laughed, before his friend turned unwelcomely serious for so early in the morning. Elbert always dressed more like a prosperous merchant new to money then a lord, and today was no exception, he'd dug dug out a scarlet samnite cloak lined with brown badger fur. Robert's cloak today was tan leather outside, ram's fleece within, and far more practical. "It's not so bad out here, I suppose. But it's like you told me yesterday, we're a long way from home."

"It's not so simple as that."

Elbert blinked, not following the directions of his thoughts. "What do you mean?"

"When we came through the Riverlands, we were a long way from home as well, if not quite so much. Yet those castles who offered us hospitality, those villages? Who lived in them?"

"Riverlanders, I suppose." Elbert said with a shrug. "Knights, nobles, peasants, all regular sorts of people. I recall some of their names…"

"Aye, but Stormlanders, not Riverlanders - at least along the coastline." Robert interrupted. "Four hundred years ago my ancestors ruled there, remember, not much different to the Ironborn when all is said and done, bastards bent upon rape and plunder. And there they settled and they never moved again, and now most of those folk are of Stormlander blood. Oh, they might not advertise it, and they talk like Riverlanders, but they build proper castles and ride proper horses."

"Well, maybe so, but…"

"Borders are nonsense - at least most of the time. There are a few that mean something real - this famous wall up north, for example, because that's fiercely defended on both sides. But most of Westeros it's all mixed up together - Stormlanders, Ironborn, Riverlanders and even Northerners who come south of the Moat. They remember feuds that go back hundreds of years, but they speak in a way that would make their ancestors see blood before their eyes. That, Elbert, is what you get to show for long years of peace."

Elbert nodded after a moment, realizing he saw it Robert's way after all. "I think I see what you're getting at." He said.

"And one day, mark my words, there will be no difference between men, no matter where they hail from. Even here. That's why your uncle wants you to stay for a year."

"And why you're marrying Ned's sister."
Robert paused, then nodded his head decisively as though he hadn't. "Right."

"We've discussed this in the past, but it's always come down to politics more than personal feelings. Still, after the marital contract is signed, after the vows are said and you swap cloaks, you'll be sharing your life with a flesh-and-blood woman. Someone you barely know."

Robert sighed, and ran his fingers through his short dark hair. "Good to have you watching my back, but I'll tell you what I told Ned last night - I can do my own courting, Elbert."

"Fair enough.″ He shook his head and smiled. "What are you seeking in a wife anyway?"

"Fertility," he quipped, the sort of answer that usually got him out of further discussion, but then, seeing that Elbert really did want to know, he paused to give it some thought. This wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation, of course, or even close to it, they'd had it coming through the Riverlands with Ned and back in the Eyrie before that with Jon Arryn, and yet it never seemed to settle anything. At last he shrugged. "It has to be someone - why not her? I'd want her to be sensible, not flighty or needy. If she wants to be pious that's her business, but not too much - I've no interest in bedding a septa. What else? She should be educated and worldly, of course..." He replied "but however she turns out, I suppose I'll have to learn to live with it," he finished. "Besides, she's not always like she was last night. We've actually got quite a bit in common."

Elbert paused, looking for a delicate way to continue. "I told uncle I haven't written to Lysa Tully in months because I cannot think of a thing to say to her - we don't have a thing to talk about, an inch of common ground. Whenever I try to open up to her all I get back are polite replies that make me wonder if she even did read my letters - I imagine I'd have more luck talking to a fish like the one on her sigil than I have talking to her.″ Elbert said dryly. Not that it mattered, compatibility was not a consideration in noble marriages - though it did save a lot of tears and hard work down the line. "You know what he said? He said 'the best marriages are based on benign indifference or detached goodwill'."

Robert gave a mirthless chuckle. "He seems to have a different piece of advice depending on who is doing the asking, and what mood he's in. No wonder everybody says he's wise. But I disagree, and I know you do as well. None of us were born for safe harbours, Elbert."

"So what, risk letting our alliance, and The Seven Kingdoms fall apart? Somethings got to hold them together, and it certainly isn’t King Scab.″ He shrugged. "We live in a land where people huddle behind the walls that separate them from one another, where old divisions linger even now."

Robert scoffed. "Don't be so melodramatic. The Seven Kingdoms has come through plague, famine, fire and war. I think it can survive a marriage of missalliance."

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After they’d eaten their fill with still no sign of Ned, the two of them made their way down to the stables, a neat flint and granite building with a decorative stripe of glazed brick and a slate roof sloped to allow the snow to slide right off. It was a cold day. There had been a hard frost overnight and the sun had not had the chance to melt the white from the grass. There was no wind so the whole world was pale, frozen and still. At dawn there had been flurries of snow, but it had not settled.

The stable had a clean smell of hay and horse, and two long rows of stalls ran back into shadows barred with light from the slits above. There was only one groom in evidence, a pleasant looking fellow with gray in his beard, chewing a straw and keeping out of the way. Rusher saw Robert coming, put his nose over the stall door and whickered softly to him.
Dow, Winterfell's huntmaster turned out to be a shrivelled, harassed-looking man, with a distant expression on his face. Like most in his trade, he was more than halfway a butcher - he pursued whichever animals were in season for his master's table, and then once he caught them he cut them up into proper joints. He had to know what parts the hounds should eat, and what parts best distributed to his assistants. He had to cut everything up handsomely, memorise a hundred details about every animal, and any pleasure or excitement he had ever found in this had left him a long time ago - it all came down to him more or less another day in which something would be rode down and then either skinned or flayed and then dragged home to be handed over to be cooked.

Glefred Poole was there as well, and as it turned out he was not only Lord Stark's steward, he was also Winterfell's 'centenar', the man who commanded the Lord of Winterfell's company of seven score archers. Robert suspected that the two offices had made him the richest of all Lord Stark's men, though you wouldn't know it looking at him. He had that precise, dutiful look that professional soldiers assume so easily, and which, from being constantly assumed, eventually becomes natural to them.

"What sort of game do they have in the Wolfswood?" Robert asked, stroking Rusher's nose. His horse tossed it's head, obviously quite pleased with the pampering it had received, and Robert rested his forehead against his horses a moment, with the casual physical display of affection he gave all his animals. Rusher was smaller, but far faster swifter than Hunter, the destrier he'd left behind in the Vale. He wouldn't be riding Rusher on the hunt, of course, or any horse at all, at a trot they'd be alright, but the snow would be liable to ball in a horse's hoofs and render galloping too dangerous, and receiving a boar's charge on horseback was a difficult proposition - a boar could panic a horse, even a warhorse like Rusher, and make it bolt.

More men were showing up now. All had long swords - he was the only man without one, he realized belatedly, some had spears, others had bows and arrows. A few mastiffs were growling outside the stables - the bloodhounds, leashed, had made for the river an hour past. They would flush the boars and run them until the huntsmen caught up and went for the kill.

"Deer and plenty of boar." Gelfred Poole answered when Dow did not, the huntsman busying himself with fewmets. "Mean bastards all of them. One of them killed a bull the other day."

Robert whistled, a shiver of anticipation working it's way up his spine. He retrieved a weapon, a heavy oak shaft with a long iron blade at one end. A crossbar curved to fit against a shoulder was at the other. It had a comforting weight and heft, and he was very pleased. "That's some boar."

"I suspect it's a rogue." Dow replied, speaking up for the first time since he'd acknowledged them, his voice tight and precise. "Likely the sows have banded together and cast him out of the sounder for eating their young - it was a long winter for them as well. But whatever the circumstances, he's exceptionally aggressive."

"How many animals in the sounder?" Robert asked, hefting his spear and deciding it was satisfactory, then resting it on his shoulder so the unwieldily thing wouldn't get in the way.

"Could be thirty or more. They'll gather about dawn at the river to drink, before disappearing for the daylight hours into their hiding places. Most are sows, with a dominant male, and maybe half a dozen younger males."

"Of course sows, if they've farrowed, are dangerous too." Robert said, but Dow didn't respond, he only looked polite until he gave up on displaying his own knowledge - Winterfell's huntsman wasn't impressed by the young lord showing off his knowledge in regards to what was to him a business.

Elbert tried a different tack, bringing up a mighty boar which had nearly slashed him earlier in the
winter, but Dow only stared with his distant eyes. Winterfell's huntsman had been slashed sixteen times by mighty boars, and his legs had white weals of shiny flesh that stretched right up to his ribs. All he wanted was to get on with his profession.

It might not have impressed Dow, but the rest of the hunters had heard, and a blather of boar stories followed - one man spoke about how he had seen a pack of wolves bring down a huge boar by ripping out it's perineum. "Blood spurted like a fountain." he said, waving his hands to help them visualize it. Others nodded. "Better not to take a boar from the front. Tusked heads, bone too thick to smash, curved teeth as sharp as swords…" Gelfred Poole was saying, glancing down at his bow. As the excitement and nervousness increased, the men began drinking, passing around leather flasks of spirits. Robert had made it through breakfast with only a cup of cider, but he wasn't made of stone, and he took a generous measure of the clear grain alcohol that was being passed around. It was so pure it tasted only of cold water, but it did a magnificent job of warming him up, and the men eyed him with respect the way he downed it without so much as flinching.

A half dozen intended to chase deer instead, in a different part of the woods, but there were still plenty excited at the prospect of taking on the boars. One man of twenty four or so - another of Lord Stark's guests named Glover, confessed to the company it was to be his first time, and the men all applauded him and clapped him on the back in good fellowship while offering him what they obviously thought was helpful advice. We're a rougher crowd back home. Robert thought at the display, with a shake of the head. Yet he found himself doing the same, slapping the older man on the back and telling him it was easy enough, he just had to remember to hold on. "That's all that there is to it. Brace yourself, line up your spear, wait for it to charge and then hold on."

Glover didn't look convinced, but Elbert in a show of solidarity slapped Robert on the back, making him stagger a little. "He's right. Just a matter of keeping a cool head and not flinching. It's like hunting rabbits."

At long last Ned joined them, both of his brothers in tow, and his sister as well. Brandon was dressed in rumpled leathers, and seemed to have got over all the drinking he'd done the night before. Despite his squire, he'd favored his little brother with his spare spear, who was holding it without confidence but with plenty of excitement. Brandon was repeating something to him in a low voice, likely a reminder of whatever Brandon had made him promise to let him come.

And Ned was there as well. Ned wasn't a demonstrative man, the small smile he was wearing was as close to a grin as Robert had ever seen him, in four years of friendship sharing everything except women. But he was happy, Robert could tell, as happy as he knew how to be. He raised a hand, and Robert did the same.

But Robert's eyes fell naturally onto Lyanna, who was dressed this morning in boots and leather trews that were strapped tight to her long legs, a leather jerkin over which she wore a green cloak. It was good, practical clothing for a hunt, and it suited her far better then the finery she was wearing, Robert thought appreciatively. And she was smiling, which in his experience was the best adornment a woman could wear. There were many who might not call her truly beautiful, she had too much Stark in her for that. They would scoff at her long face and her sharp features, her body slender and hard as a whip rather then soft as was fashionable, her skin too pale for her dark hair, mostly unblemished though there were sore red spots here and there as the price of youth. Yet he thought he'd never seen anyone quite like her.

And perhaps, he thought, because she is Ned's sister.

"Perhaps you'll bring down a buck this morning. You've certainly come prepared." He said, gesturing at the bow and arrows she had brought with her. She shot him a look that was somewhere
between challenging and frustrated, but didn't reply.

"We have a stag or two in mind. Perhaps you'll join us?"

"That would be cannibalism." Robert replied, and Ned chuckled. Brandon did as well. Lyanna didn't respond.

They mounted by torchlight and followed the huntsman through the misty morning air. The sky was low and midnight dark, though it was dawn. There was frost on the thatched roofs and skins of cat ice on the few puddles that had not been trampled into mud. A drizzle of cold rain fell on their faces. All wore fur riding cloaks, and were grateful for them.

The only place around the castle where the buildings of Winter Town were not squeezed like mushrooms against the wall was on the western side, where a half-dozen miles of desolate, uncultivated land here and there broken by craggy hills or bleak moorland eventually gave way to a dark line of green and gold, the Wolfswood - there were a lot of things named after wolves in the North Robert had noticed - which stretched like a sleeping beast along the horizon.

Cold mists hugged the ground leading towards the forest, a wild, scrubby heath of unkempt grasses and thorns with stagnant pools of water and lumpen, snow-covered mounds of earth. Here and there, Robert could see what his imagination impressed upon him was a rusted sword blade, spear point or arrowhead and the occasional bleached whiteness of bone - perhaps fragments of an old battlefield.

As for the Wolfswood itself, no logging had been conducted in it for generations, despite the enduring presence of heroic stands of old-growth trees that would yield timbers for ships and houses should they be harvested - the Lords of the North had demanded for as far back as history could be followed that harvesters forest many miles further away and hauled lumber down the mountains in order to keep the woods around the castle pristine.

There was good sense to that decision, the same good sense that kept his own woods so well preserved. The practice had been began in ancient times to ensure that they had game to eat in times of famine or during a long, vicious winter (like the one they'd just come through) but whatever the original motivation, it had left a stunning wilderness within an hours ride from Winterfell, vast qualities of beech, ash, chestnuts, ironwoods, and firs stretching as far as the eye could see. As for the woods, they were carefully wild woods, enough to offer fine hunting, but not enough to pose a real threat to an inexperienced rider.

Nor did the Wolfswood generate the ominous, weighty silence that would have suited the place more. The trees and paths were dusted with ice, but life went on. Insects buzzed, small furry animals rustled the grass underfoot, birds called out to each other, and the branches creaked in the wind. In fact, there was noise all around. Gruff orders from the servants to their underlings, banter and laughter amongst the nobles and hunters, the occasional barking of the hunting dogs as they made their way towards the leafy valley where Winterfells huntsmen had reported plenty of game.

There might have been fifty of them altogether, mostly men-at-arms, though a handful of women had chosen to come, Lyanna among them, and half a score of servants brought up the rear. One of those servants sounded a horn to tell the hunters at the valley’s far end that it was time to drive the game down towards the river and another horn sounded in response.

Robert was in high spirits, revelling in the day’s beauty, his own youth and the prospect of a hunt. And, without noticing he realized that he was riding next to Lyanna. She straddled a horse - a pale hackney - properly, he noticed, rather then riding side-saddle.

"So. Ned's little sister is all grown up." He said, in a deep voice. She seemed more at ease - well, a
hunt was a far better place to flirt than an overly formal banquet, with all her family looking on, so he couldn't blame her for that. "When last we met, you were all knees and elbows, as I recall."

"I still have both."

"I noticed." He replied. "And a bow and arrows to go with them. Better for stags than for boars, perhaps you're after the wrong game?"

He watched her bite down on the obvious response, her nostrils flaring a little. "Doesn't seem much difference." She grumbled, loudly enough that he couldn't help but hear.

He laughed as though he'd never heard that one before.

"Ned has been urging me to spend more time with you." She said at last.

Robert looked at her levelly, than grinned and shook his head. "That's a beautiful horse, shaggy as it might be. Got a bit of spirit. Does it have a name?"

"Roussin." She replied after a moment. The horse, which really was a beautiful animal, tossed it's head as though sensing itself the subject of what passed for conversation between them.

Robert snorted. "That's a name for a broken down nag, not a beautiful horse like that. You ought to have given him an inspiring name, like Traveller."

She scoffed right back. "You can't name a horse any better than a child." It was her first response that sounded natural, not forced.

"Well, you certainly seem to be the expert. You look well up there. You sit well." He said, changing the subject a little.

She scoffed. "I'm the best rider in the North." She replied, jutting her jaw proudly. "Ask anyone."

"That's what Ned tells me - though it remains to be seen."

Lyanna scoffed again, obviously feeling a need to prove herself that she couldn't quite express and made no further response. This time, Robert didn't break the silence. She was starting to open up, despite her determination not to like him.

Dawn had broken, and birds of all sorts welcomed the new day with song. The drizzle stopped, and it became light enough to see through the shadows. Scattered amongst the trees were traces of worked stone, of burial mounds or of stone circles, the forgotten remnants of a neolithic time. His father had always liked to say that scratch the surface of even the most pious of Stormlanders, and you'd find a pagan underneath, but he felt nothing. Nothing at all.

Silence had fallen, and he was just turning to ask Lyanna what sort of a place this was, when all at once their ears caught the first eerie baying of bloodhounds as it rolled through the morning mist. Rusher was a fiery young chestnut, always keen for a fight. He skipped from a trot to a light canter following the direction of the ghostly calls. He responded first, but a heartbeat later Lyanna was away, urging her horse towards the distant sounds.

Robert crouched along his horses neck as it broke into a gallop, snorting steam and kicking up clods of frozen earth. He couldn't so much as catch a glimpse of Lyanna, she must have gone a different way, or else her horse had wings. Robert leaned into the fast and furious pace, the wooden pommel jarring his stomach as he compelled the animal on through the trees. The hood of his cloak had slipped back and rain drenched his cheeks. His ears were full of the rushing wind, and his own fierce
breathing, heavy with anticipation. He weaved and ducked to avoid low branches, a small one whipped his face but he barely felt it. It was dangerous, as much for him as the horse, but he didn't even consider slowing his pace.

The bloodhounds, unleashed, had rushed along a track beside the riverbank, barking furiously as they ran. For a moment, through a tangle of oak and rowan, Robert glimpsed a huge humped back in front of the pack. The shape was larger than he had expected. It did not seem to be a boar particularly, it was gone too quickly to seem to be anything. Then it vanished. The piteous scream of a hound followed a moment later. Then a second death howl.

"Two already!" Robert muttered. Behind him, someone put a horn to their lips and blew several rapid bursts, indicating the change of direction to the others. The pack had stopped running and was a swirling fury of snarling, baying and teeth. The boar had maneuvered itself through them and away. Robert dismounted, as three blasts of a horn called the hounds back. Ned was there a moment later, glancing and the blood-splattered hounds.

"How many has it killed?"

"Three or so." Robert estimated, as the rest of the party caught up. Lyanna had already dismounted and was explaining what had happened to her brother, waving her arms exuberantly.

Suddenly the boar from the riverbank broke cover and came hurtling towards them. The group barely had time to grab their weapons and start after it when a second boar came rushing through the trees. The big beasts were remarkably nimble. Mounted men were at a disadvantage, needing to maneuver their way around trunks and duck low branches. Most of them dismounted and spread out in a line, Robert among them.

He started in the direction of the horn, before Robert whipped round as a shout sounded uphill. Brandon was crouched with his spear. Lyanna was beside him, but was glancing down the slope towards the rest, perhaps worried that the animal would escape through the gap between them. And Dow was there as well, eyes upon his prey. Robert moved up the hill to plug the gap, then gently pushed Lyanna back.

"We've cornered it! Two of them!" Brandon called to him.

"One will be a sow," Robert replied "where?". Brandon pointed with his white-shafted spear, but he could still see nothing in the undergrowth.

"There!" Brandon said insistently, prodding his spear towards a tangle of briars. Robert climbed another few feet and at last could see the boar deep inside the undergrowth. It was a shambling dark creature, standing out like a heraldic beast on a city shield in the early sunlight. It was a big old beast with yellow tusks, tiny eyes that were pits of wild ferocity, and humps of muscle under his dark scarred hide. It was pawing at the ground threateningly. It's gaze, weak in the light, was focussed on them, expecting them to move.

Robert knew that muscle could move it at lightning speed and hook its sword sharp tusks with a fatal skill. Robert had seen men die from tusk wounds, everybody who had ever been hunting had, and nothing made a boar more dangerous than to be cornered with a sow. Anyone with any sense preferred to face a boar charging in open ground so that when the boar charged, they might had to drop on one knee and present the boar-spear towards it, to use the beast’s own speed and bulk to drive the spear into his body. The spear was as sharp as a razor, and had a cross-piece about eighteen inches away from the point to prevent the spear from going more than eighteen inches into the animal's chest. Without the cross-piece a charging boar would have been capable of rushing right up the spear, even if it did go through him, and getting at the hunter like that. Such a confrontation
demanded nerve and skill, but not nearly so much nerve as when a man had to charge the boar.

"Well, you found him." Robert Baratheon said, graciously waiving the honour of the kill to Brandon. "He's yours."

"You can take him if you want him." Brandon answered quickly. Lyanna had caught up, and was standing behind him, eyes alight. "Put the hounds on him!" She said excitedly, her eyes bright and her face animated.

"You'll lose the dogs," Robert warned her, shaking his head. "This pig knows how to fight." He moved cautiously forward, judging how best to provoke the beast, then he stepped sharply ahead and beat hard down on the bushes with his spear as though to offer the boar a path out of its sanctuary. The beast grunted, but did not move, not even when the spear blade flashed down within inches of its snout. The sow was behind the boar, watching them.

"It’s done this before," Robert said, anticipation swelling in him. He beat the bushes again, but the briars would not lie flat, nor would the boar be provoked into moving. Lyanna drew her bow back until the string was hard against her cheek, and then she loosed an arrow. The beast jolted, but nothing more, it didn't so much as squeal. Its dense fur, its thick hide and inches of fat had kept the arrow from penetrating to its muscle, leaving the shaft sticking out of it's shoulder.

"Well all right then" Brandon said to the beast, then he shouted something between a challenge and a battle-cry "Winterfell and The North!" and threw himself fearlessly into the tangle of thorns. He leapt to one side of the path Robert had crudely beaten and as he landed he rammed the spear hard forward, aiming its glittering blade at the boar’s left flank just forward of its shoulder.

The boar’s head twitched. It was only a slight twitch, barely even noticeable, but it was enough to deflect the spear blade off a tusk so that it tore a bloody furrow down the animal’s flank all but ripping it open, but doing no real damage, and then it let out a fearsome grunting sound and charged, the spear ripping further along the flank all the way along. A wild boar was capable of coming from a still stance into instant madness with its head down and tusks ready to gut upwards, and this beast was already past Brandon's spearhead when it charged. And he was trapped in place by the brambles.

As it charged, Robert saw certain things about it - the rank mane of bristles standing upright on its razor back, one flash of a yellow tush, the head held low, and the red flame from a piggy eye. The stink of it was horrendous, a caustic animal reek that was like nothing Robert had ever smelled before. The horns had silenced now. Robert could hear the shouts of men and the drum of hooves distantly, but there wasn't time to make any sense of it.

Robert shouted to distract the boar as it charged, then stepped behind the elder Stark and physically tossed Brandon out of the way. He turned to the boar, but before he could do anything with his own spear, even try to set it the beast was on him, and bowled him over onto his back, his spear abandoned, the boar champing at him, it's stinking breath washing his face. From somewhere distant the hounds howled and someone was shouting, demanding help or something - Robert wasn't familiar with the hunting signs the northerners used, and didn't have any attention spare to try and make sense of the voices - it was all he could do to stay alive.

Even he wasn't sure how he had somehow managed to grip both the beast’s tusks - reflex, he supposed, but, straining with every ounce of strength he had, he was now forcing its head away from his chest. Robert was strong, but the boar weighed something in the realm of twenty score, as much as two full sacks of grain, its muscles were like iron ropes and it didn't want to move. Not until Robert was dead, at least. He strained, but made little progress.
Brandon Stark pulled himself to his feet and came from the side, driving his spear deep into the beast's belly. It let out a mad grunt, too mad to feel pain as its blood spurted up all over him and Robert as well. A moment later Dow joined Brandon and together they did their best to lever up and over to roll the wounded beast off him, but then the sow charged and swept Brandon's feet away from under him. He fell for the second time in as many moments, and his weight pulled the spear shaft down and the boar back onto Robert's belly.

The sow vanished, plunging downhill towards the stream. Lyanna shot another shaft after it, but had misjudged it's speed and missed. "Kill him!" Robert shouted, though he was laughing so hard he doubted anyone could make out what he was saying. He was just inches from death, but he was loving the moment. "Kill him!" he called again. The boar's back legs were thrusting and kicking, its spittle was spattering Robert's face and its blood was soaking his clothes, but he was alive and the pig was dying, if he could just hold-out…

Brandon was on his back, his face lacerated with thorns. He scrambled back up to his feet again as quickly as he could and seized hold of his jerking, twisting spear that was still buried in the great brute’s belly, but then Dow plunged a knife into the boar’s neck with the precision of a lifetimes experience, and Robert began to feel the enormous strength of the animal ebb, finally succeeding in forcing the squat, stinking, bloody head away from his ribs. Brandon seized his spear and twisted the blade, searching for the animal's life blood deep in its guts as Dow stabbed a second time. The boar gave one last desperate lunge of its huge neck and then abruptly slumped down. Robert was awash in its blood and spittle, and half buried under its bulk. But he'd survived.

He cautiously let go of the tusks, then dissolved entirely into helpless laughter, caught between relief at still being alive and excitement at having come so close to death. Brandon and Dow took a tusk each and, with a concerted heave, hauled the corpse away from him. One of the tusks had caught in his jerkin and it ripped the cloth as they tugged it away. They dropped the beast into the brambles, then helped Robert to his feet. The three of them stood grinning, panting to get their breath back, their clothes muddied and torn and covered with leaves, twigs and the blood of the boar. "I'll have a bruise there," Robert said, tapping his chest. He turned to Dow, who was inspecting the quarry, then to Lyanna, only for Brandon to seize him suddenly.

"You saved my life." Brandon said, embracing him as a brother, his voice wavering a little, as though he couldn't quite make sense of it. "You didn't even hesitate."

There was the briefest pause, then Robert clasped him back. "And it almost cost me my own. But since you stuck around to get me back out of trouble, I think that makes us even."

Brandon hesitated, then nodded, stepping back. "That was still the maddest thing I've ever seen anyone do."

Robert looked past at Lyanna and saw that she was pale, almost trembling, and immediately he crossed to her. "Are you alright?"

"Me? What about you? Are you hurt?"

"Only scratched." His face and hands were lacerated by thorns, but he was otherwise unwounded except for the bruise caused by the tusk. "I've had worse training, truth be told."

"This isn't the right beast." Dow said, before he could think of anything else to say.

"What?"

"Make no mistake, it'll grace your father's table, m'lord, but it's not the one we came to find. It's far
too small." He told Brandon. "That one was much bigger than this."

Robert couldn't help himself. He laughed again, even louder. His laughter booming so hard it shook the trees, he retrieved his spear, then started down the hill to find the other hunters.

Chapter End Notes

So, for the last the few chapters Orlofthesky, who writes very differently from myself, has been helping me out as a beta. I cannot thank her enough, and if you are enjoying this story than neither can you, because just about everything good in those chapters is thanks to her.
ASHARA DAYNE

Chapter Summary

Life at the capital takes a day off, as Elia takes a day in the countryside with her household. Even that, however, is under something of a shadow.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ASHARA DAYNE

Early that morning, Princess Elia Targaryen at long last led the knights and ladies of her household out into spring. She was lucky that the weather had turned when it had, because it would be near to her last chance. The child she carried had grown large enough to disrupt the graceful sweep of her clothes, and her state forced her to enjoy the pleasures and excitements of spring at a degree of separation, which did not come at all naturally to her. Still, she had no trouble making it so, her household consisted entirely of people that had grown both accustomed and supportive to her sudden flights of passionate fancy, and had learned to take as much pleasure in them as she did. Besides, this was something that they had long been anticipating. There were two dozen of them today, as idle as children, but it was the day made for it. Even the bees were lazy, buzzing and then falling silent as if drunk on flowers.

Of course, it was early days yet as far as spring went, and even the heartiest of her bold young friends would not slip naked into the river today, the way they had the previous summer (scandalizing not a few in the process). But though the weather was cool it was warm enough to ride fast, and to lay a picnic out on blankets, to laugh and to dance if the mood or the music took you (for of course there would be music, they were never without it. Already Ser Quilcy Farring was strumming his mandolin, the insistant sound needing no accompaniment), to go hawking if they had a mind (there were herons by the river which always made for fine sport), or to take in the view of the ocean and luxuriate in the sunshine. Or, inevitably, to flirt and even pay court to one another, provided that they remained in the realm of propriety, or at least were properly discrete.

The lands around the city once you had gotten past the sprawl were rich and fertile, the soil dark and fecund, tilled by peasants (there were no smallholdings within a day's ride of the city, any that had existed once had long since been swallowed up), the sweeping plains open and green. Unlike the thickly forested realm it was a part of, the weather was usually relatively mild, and storms were rare, though rain was not. Still, what here was a warm spring's day was far cooler then she was used to, even after four years in the capital, she was used to a sun that burned even in winter. But today the sky was clear, and though the trees were bare the air smelled of sap working, and the earth was green with young and tender grass. Ivy clothed the walls of cottages and turreted manor houses that were scattered about the gently rolling countryside, and the sound of laughter and conversation drifted on the gentle breeze.

Elia's friends had gotten settled near the stream. A few of the young men had plucked an apple from a nearby tree - somebody's orchard - and began a boisterous game of catch. Lady Ashara Dayne, reclining comfortably in the shade, had taken charge of a number of the ladies and was directing the laying out of the food and finding space and positions for everyone to sit. Spontaneity, with Princess
Elia, often involved careful preparation and a great deal of work. Work usually done by Lady Ashara Dayne - Elia was not the most organised of women, and never had been. It was the opinion of most of those who knew her well that without proper direction she’d struggle to dress herself without getting distracted.

Lady Lemore Jordayn of The Tor, the queen’s bookish secretary who could not be more different from Ashara with her narrow face and rigid deportment, sat behind her, ticking off items on her tablet as they were unpacked and spread out. Occasionally, she would make a sharp observation, and Ashara would respond in kind - they were, after all, childhood friends - the marks of their first teeth had been embedded on many of the same toys, and it was hard, as well as destined to fail, attempting to maintain proprietary with someone you used to splash and wrestle with in the water gardens. Besides, Lemore’s polite and sensible exterior hid a sense of mischief that Ashara appreciated.

Lemore was dressed in pale cambric that she’d had made for her in the capital (though she’d added the elaborate stitching herself) and was wrapped in a heavy cloak that was far too warm, even in the comparatively cool weather so far north of home. She was also wearing a fine golden chain, most likely a gift from one of her admirers or another - she never seemed to have any shortage of men keen to press their suit. As Ashara watched, Lemore kicked off her shoes, then removed her heavy cloak and sat on it, squirming around until she was comfortable. "It is spring," she said with a smile.

And it was. Spring had come first back home, to Dorne where even in such a long winter there were times it was as though it had never left, then it had spread to the Reach and the Stormlands, where peasants got down to the serious work of manuring and sowing fields as soon as the ice in the old furrows had thawed and the ground was beginning to soften. Depending on the wealth of the farmer, from yeomen with stone houses and two ploughs’ worth of oxen or big horse teams, to tiny huts where a couple would harness themselves to a homemade plough and the biggest child would drive it, furrows were cut in the cold ground, and every day those furrows crept north, as Spring too spread North, where there were fewer peasants and more yeomen, but also more farm laborers with no land at all; where big iron ploughs cut the earth deeper to make up for the colder sun. And following it’s arrival, from south to north the earth was turned wherever the hand of man reached.

That wasn’t all that they had noticed - the same sun that warmed the fields warmed the tiltyards, and across the Realm in castle courtyards, or by stables, under the outermost walls, or in the old castle ditch, the hard places beloved to The Warrior Above, where young men and a few women (back home, at least) learned to be hard. Older men stretched aching muscles and warmed winter-stiffened joints and cursed either their fading youth or their blossoming age. Men who lived by war looked at the increase of their waists and worked harder, and their strokes at pell and quintain were quickened by thoughts of fame and glory and the Great Tournament at Harrenhal, that House Whent had all Seven Kingdoms talking about. Tournaments had always been encouraged by kings and all the lords in times of relative peace, as a means of keeping the knights battle-ready and their skills sharp, naturally, but also as a delight to the senses with the magnificent spectacle that they provided. It was only a few months away, now - the third day of the third month of the New Spring, and the events would stretch for seven days - one for each of the Seven.

But on a day like this, even something so exciting seemed too distant to think about. Under Ashara’s direction they spread a mattress of straw, atop of which they spread rugs, and soon baskets perfumed the air around them with the delicious odours of hot flour, butter and honey. It was as good as it smelled, pure wheaten flour and butter from a little east of Goldengrove, and honey from Beesbury. There were candied chestnuts, apricots and plums, a dish of sweet meats, a dish of saffroned cakes, and a beautiful glazed dish of dates, marchpane, marzipan, as well as two big-bellied flagons of wine. They spread the food onto platters, and filled basins with fresh water. There were also whittled sticks and sweet herbs for cleaning their teeth.
There was plenty, enough for a score, or nearly, which would have been fine with the original list, but the princess had made a few last second invites, and there were more than two dozen of them to be accounted for. Ashara frowned, looking down at the two jars of marmalade - the princess's favourite. Princess Elia could eat a great deal of it if given the chance. "Only two jars? We'll have to ration this one, Elia might do for the other all by herself." It was an exaggeration - but not by much.

"Honestly, Ashara, what did you expect? It costs half the earth and isn’t easy to get on short notice - blood oranges all the way from home? White sugar from the Summer Islands?" She tossed her head. "If she doesn’t stop indulging her taste for it, The Princess will have no teeth at all left by the time she’s thirty."

Ashara's lower lip twitched, and she shrugged. "Nobody would notice." She pointed out impishly.

Lemore struggled to hold a straight face for a moment, then she fell to giggling, and a moment later Ashara was doing the same. Conspiratorially, the two of them glanced over at the woman in question. Princess Elia had dismounted from her gaily caparisoned palfrey with the help of a block, a sumptuous padded seat affixed to the saddle given her condition, and was admiring the view of the landscape, her uncle Prince Lewyn Nymeros Martell a decorous four paces behind her, his arms folded across his chest. Even growing heavy with the child she was carrying, she was still a vision in embroidered golden silk, with golden and pearl-studded clasps which closed her gown from throat to waist, gilt slippers and a delicately woven veil the colour of the sunset sky - she dressed in her husbands colors for state functions or formal appearances, but when left to her own devices preferred to wear the contents of the three great chests she'd brought with her from home. She stood in the shade, beneath a flock of starlings who had settled among the tight bare buds of a bare tree for reasons known only to them, and her mare, with its mane like white silk and dark, interesting eyes shook it's head and flicked it's ears (not that she blamed it, if she'd had ears like Babiciea she would have flicked them as well), reminding the princess it had been promised a treat, which of course Elia had not forgotten.

Rhaenys had been left back in the keep (she could recognise a few words though she didn't speak yet herself, and she was crawling with confidence and a bold instinct of discovery, but at her age it was doubtful she'd get much from the experience of a day in the countryside), with Lady Aria Blount, who had been appointed to supervise the princess' upbringing by her grandfather. King Aerys Targaryen had restored to Lady Aria Blount to the lordship of her lands a year ago or so, an inheritance that had been disputed by her cousin many years ago and who King Aerys' father had ruled in favor of, but the lands had been at last returned to her, lands which had been borne by her noble forebears, and which the possession of spared her from the miserable existence of beggary. Why her, Ashara wasn't sure, although she suspected it was because she was wholly The King's creature and nobody else's - he'd never made any pretense of his hostility to his sons wife and her people.

Likely, there was a story there. There always seemed to be.

Princess Elia's protecter and uncle had the dubious honor of being the only one present wearing armor, which couldn't have been comfortable - a heavy breastplate atop a hauberk made from hundreds metal scales in overlapping rows, that clinked and rippled when he moved. His heavy white cloak was thrown over his shoulder where it wouldn't get in the way, and despite the armor he was unarmed save for the knife at his belt, his swordbelt and his famous spear were both with his horse. Prince Llewyn Nymeros Martell had taken the oath and joined the Kingsguard the very day that his niece had married into the Royal Family without hesitation, and it was taken for granted by most that it was Princess Elia he was loyal to, and not her husband or her husband's father. Neither of he nor his charge so much as glanced at Ashara or Lemore.
A pair of loose-limbed hounds had followed his horse and accompanying pages. The hounds leapt around and chased every creature they saw, each other, a squirrel, grey geese returning from the winter migration, even the horses.

"Suppose for a moment, you had been away for five years." Lemore said as the two considered their lady. Lemore turning away and waving an arm as though to indicate all the rolling countryside, the city they were staying in and the distant island fortress where they dwelled and the world it was a part of. "Imagine that you were like a knight in a story, lying under an enchantment in the woods somewhere. You would look around and wonder 'who are they, these people?' You would wonder how any of this had come to pass." Despite the whimsical topic, the two were talking in low voices by habit - The court of Aerys Targaryen was a place where the whisper and the aside had become necessary habits, because you were never alone and most lived amid enmity and suspicion, and treason was suspected of everyone.

Ashara thought that to be a charming idea to imagine, although she didn't say as much. "Some of it, perhaps." She replied, trying to reconstruct an image of the world five years ago, when she had been a child rather than a woman, her older brother was not yet a knight, and royalty was still a thing that glittered from afar. It was more difficult than she had thought it would be, even two years ago the world had been a very different place. Two years ago Elia's husband would have invited himself here along with them, entertaining them with music from his harp or with his stories - back then he had spent every waking moment watching his wife, before she had quickened with their first child, as though afraid she might vanish if he let her out of his sight, even if only for a moment. But now it was he that had vanished, lost amongst his scrolls and books and correspondence with Old Town and across the sea, and rarely would be drawn away from them, even if only to make an appearance at meal times. For the last few months, he might as well have ceased to exist. And Ashara had not failed to notice how Elia had become in his presence.

Even six months ago, the world had been a very different place, or so it seemed to Ashara. "I imagine I would." Ashara allowed. "And if a witch woman should emerge from the woods and carry me away to enchanted sleep beneath hill and dale for five years, doubtless I won't know what to make of wherever I find myself. However it turns out, I don't think it'll be whatever we're planning on."

Lemore gave her friend an arch look, as Ashara neatly stepped out of the bounds set for the nostalgic game. But before she could move to bring the conversation back on course, like black buds unfolding on the tree the starlings opened their wings and fluttered and sang, stirring everything into motion, air, wings, and music, the entire tree seeming to shake to the sound. Ashara couldn't help but smile at it, seeing in them some small gesture towards the future, ready for spring, ready for the world that follows this black world of winter, a world of the possible. A world in which Elia can be princess of Westeros, not just of Dorne, a world where Ashara can be Ashara. For an instant she could see it, and then she couldn't, the moment and the insight it represented was fleeting, then gone. But insight, once you have it, cannot be taken back.

"It could have been different." Lemore declared, when Ashara didn't say anything else.

"Everything could." Ashara shrugged. "It turned out how it did, and that's life."

"You never think about the past?" Lemore asked, in a tone that made it very clear she don't believer Ashara's answer.

"I never talk about it." She laughed, though that was not entirely true. But she preferred to look to the present rather then dwell on what had happened, or what might have been.

"Oh?" Lemore replied. "Then what shall we talk of instead?"
"How about the present?" Ashara suggested.

"And what are the pair of you plotting this time?" Lady Catalina Allyrion, younger sister of Lady Delonne Allyrion asked, having approached silently and chosen that moment to join them, now that the work seemed to have been done and it was clear she wasn't going to overhear anything she could gossip about. She sat sprawled like a boy, her barrette pulled low over her large dark eyes, and without asking took a handful of new cherries which she began to chew with a satisfied air. She'd been watching the young men fencing with their swords and bucklers, bold, flashy moves to best display their skill and agility, that had Prince Martell rolling his eyes but not actually getting involved. Catalina would likely have joined them, though of course, this wasn't home and that would be neither acceptable or decorous, and anyway the spectacle of it would have all the young men hesitating and protesting, and take away all the fun.

"Too early in the day for intrigue." Ashara replied, shuffling over a bit to make space. Catalina made no move to assist their efforts to prepare the picnic. Instead, in the interest of keeping her hands busy she had taken one of the half-sewn shirts that they were supposed to find the time to hem, that they might be given to the poor children supported by the princess' charities. Nobody had shown much interest in that, and Ashara rather doubted that they would. That was work for wet days, work for being shut up with little to pass the time. Not a day like this. It was beautiful, as Springlike as could be, like a scene in an illustrated manuscript. The thickness of the rugs and the straw beneath it insulated them from the coldness of the earth.

"How about gossip? I've got plenty of that."

"Too early for that as well," Lemore replied primly. "This is a morning best spent indulging in joy and fantasy. We can do all that when we go back to the Red Keep this evening."

"Well that's no fun." She replied. "How about a bit of both? I can tell you what I heard, and you can decide if it's intrigue or gossip."

Ashara shot a glance at Lemore, whose eyes sparkled. "Don't you know?"

"Honestly, I've never been entirely sure what the difference is. Nobody ever told me." Then, because she couldn't keep it bottled up another moment, "Lady Blackmont…"

"We call her Larra, mostly." Ashara interjected, doing her best impression of the tone Septa Elvira put upon when chastising one of them for letting their standards of mannered courtesy slip. It wasn't much of an impression, really, though Lemore's lips quirked.

"Said that the queen has had Cersei Lannister meeting with her in private at mealtimes. Perhaps waiting on her." It didn't provoke the intended reaction, or much of a reaction at all. Lemore shrugged, profoundly uninterested. Almost all of Princess Elia's ladies (and many others) had, since The Hand of The King had brought her to court and given her a household of her own (rather grander than the queens, much less Princess Elia's) and absurdly generous allowance, made an effort to befriend the young girl. After making her acquaintance they'd all decided that the less they had to do with her the better.

"Not particularly important, I don't think. Her mother used to wait on the queen as well, remember. How old is she again anyway? Fifteen? Barely a child."

Ashara, who was seventeen and felt that there was a world of difference between those two ages, enough to display a healthy amount of condescension, nodded her head. "Perhaps she misses Casterly Rock. Didn't the King relocate the Royal Court there, once?"
He had, for three years, but they'd been children then. "Well, I don't like the idea of the two of them plotting. The Queen isn't much fonder of us than her husband." Lady Catalina concluded.

"Will you eat chicken?" Ashara asked her, changing the subject before it could stray to dangerous topics. For all that they were comfortable and beyond the cities limits, they were still in King's Landing. This was a dangerous place, one where you could never entirely relax or let down your guard, and the topic had skirted too close to conversational subjects that it was better to avoid, no matter who you were, or who you were with.

"It depends."

"On what?"

"On what else there is."

Ashara seemed satisfied with that answer, for all that it verged on rudeness. "Then I think we're ready. Tell the servants to start laying plates." Ashara announced, finally allowing herself to relax.

At her word, Mael the queen's man stepped out from behind a tree and bowed politely, and with more formality than the occasion warranted. He snapped his fingers, and six other men and women, assorted maids and valets moved with the precision of dancers to lay out the meal. They were done in the amount of time it would take a man to run to the river and back.

Ashara touched his arm, a little above the elbow. "You work miracles, as always, ser." She told him.

He bowed, obviously pleased. "You are too kind, milady." He said, voice a little rough, before he and his team melted back into the trees out of the way, and Lemore summoned The Princess and her friends to lunch.

By now Elia was barefoot, lightly clad with her veil gone, her hair hanging free - even back in Dorne she had tended to let her hair down out of its coif at the least excuse, though Ashara could hardly blame her - if she'd had hair like that she likely would have too, and Elia had her arms bare in the sun as well. Her eyes were the color of woodland honey, neither brown nor gold. Her nose was thin, her cheekbones sharp, her mouth wide. Not a beautiful face in the strictly aesthetic sense, perhaps, but her smile contained all the brimming mischief of a girl and the allure of an experienced woman. Lady Maria Fowler, the youngest of Elia's ladies, had her hair down too - not in imitation of her lady, but for exactly the same reason, because she liked it. The young men were of course fully clad - this wasn't Dorne, and this wasn't that sort of party, though they wore simple homespun tunics like peasants or working men.

Once Elia sat carefully, patting the mound beneath her unlaced stomach, Lady Maria Fowler sat next to her and the princess pulled the girl to lie down with her head in the princess' lap, where Elia could stroke her hair, and the young girl could gaze up at her with adoration. She was a beautiful girl, though unlike Lemore her kinswoman she was not overly blessed with brains, and she was fortunate that Elia had taken her under her wing as she had. The carafe of wine that had been passed around was half-empty already, but their spirits were full.

"I have heard that Dragonstone is to be renovated." Lady Larra Blackmont said conversationally, helping herself to a few of the cherries.

Elia nodded, then waved her hand before returning it to its place and continuing to stroke Lady Fowler's hair. "There is talk of it - my husband intends something a bit more like what Summerhall allegedly was. Gardens - on terraces and courtyards, open air and high ceilings. And fountains - since we already have the pipes. A place of comfort, instead of a fortress against an enemy that no
longer exists. Of course, it will come to nothing. There isn't the coin."

She paused a moment, and became a touch more serious. "I'm only telling you this in strict confidence, but if the Lord of the Underworld himself was to manifest in The Small Council's chambers tonight, and offer to grant once again the Great Miracle credited to Hugor of the Hill and breathe life into the noble dead in exchange for fifty thousand gold dragons - a very reasonable sum as I'm sure you'd agree, The King could maybe get his hands on a third of it all together - if you gave him a month to do it."

Lady Lemore blinked, then blinked again. Her fingers twitched, as if she longed to glance down at her slate, and the comforting, balanced world that it represented. All of them lived on their wits and their debts to an extent, but this was another matter entirely. "It's gotten that bad?"

"It's gotten worse," Elia replied primly. "And will get worse still. All of you that have creditors" as if any of them didn't, living in the capital was expensive even if you didn't have to attend on the princess every day. "would be well advised to work out as favourable deals towards repayment of credit as you can before it's more widely known. There's talk in The King's Council of a new tax targeting the Reach's first harvests - now that it's spring that seems the most sensible recourse, but the treasury is all but empty."

"So when we return to Dragonstone after the next heir is born, it will be not to find workmen hard to task making it a place fit for habitation, but the familiar sight of uninterrupted damp, dark stone?" Ashara said, affecting disappointment.

"Quite so! So take the best while you have it - it is spring, and we only get to enjoy it until the tournament Lord Whent as arranged for our pleasure!" Then she and Ashara met eyes and they grinned foolishly.

"It's a shame, though." Lady Manwoody said. "It would have been nice."

"If only we were in charge, eh?" Elia said solemnly. She raised her eyebrows and grinned at Lemore. "Then all a matter of things would be better."

“Ah, if only…” Lemore took a large swig from the carafe, not bothering with her goblet, set it down resolutely on the blanket. “Well, we’d have done a good job anyway.” She insisted, and nobody argued.

"You drink too much. Water your wine." Lady Fowler suggested, but Lady Lemore only winked and passed her the carafe.

After they'd eaten, they danced. They wove wreathes of flowers, and danced in rings, and sang old songs that were not favoured by the Faith. It was the music of Dorne they played, and the music of Dorne they danced to, to the sound of the citer, the accompaniment of shawms and a slow, rhythmic drumbeat, dipping and stepping, clicking their fingers, twirling and stamping their feet to the beat with both passion and dignity yet with a freedom and inhibition, all of them proud of who they were and where they were. Lady Catalina, who amongst the numerable talents she attributed to herself considered herself a trobairitz sang an aira of her own composition, and they all did their best to sing along when it came to the chorus - some notably more skilled than others - all of them had been trained, at least cursorily, but that alone is not a gauge of ability.

At last, as the sun began to sink, they were all flushed, and warm, most of them down to their kirtles and with their hair loose, and all of them barefoot in the grass. The air was soft enough for them to feel comfortable in this state of undress, but only a little - winter’s arm had been dreadful and long and the bite of a chill was close. A few of the knights were calling for wine, but of course it had been
drank dry hours before.

"You arrange everything so well, Ashara." The Princess said, taking her hands in her own. "I hope you had a pleasant day as well."

"I am easily pleased," Ashara said, and the two women smiled at each other, as if enjoying a private joke.

They left packing up to Mael and his men, moving over to their horses who had enjoyed the day at least as much as they had. A trio of grooms had rounded them up, brushed them down and saddled them, and one by one they were led over to their owners and mounted. A few were unable to manage on their own and required the services of a page with a mounting block to step up off in order to bestride their horses, and then again to pull their gowns back down to their boots, but Ashara waved their offer aside and mounted into the stirrup. She lifted her skirt, one hand gripping the top of the saddle's pommel, the other the reins, then she swung up, one long bare thigh flashing bare for a moment, though nothing she had to close the door to wash, so what of that? She felt the thrill of exhilaration of being horsed that she always felt, and trotted ahead.

Back, they rode three abreast, with the Elia flanked by Lady Ashara and Lady Lemore. Behind them, Lady Maria rode between two young knights, her head back, laughing. Elia noticed, of course, and she smiled, mischief in her eyes. "My ladies, I must ask a favor of you." she said conspiratorially. "I think it best we ruin their fun - she's betrothed, and if she wants to break it off better she makes the decision after weighing it up - and it's far too early in the season."

Ashara smiled back. "Leave it to me." She straightened her back and gave her horse a check, turned in her saddle like a commander in a tapestry, and waved a hand above her head.

"My friends, I issue a challenge to you all!" she replied, in her best impression of the pompous herald whose job it was to announce visitors to the Court, Ser Pole. It wasn't really any better than her impression of Septa Elvira, but at the very least it got their attention. "Let us race to the Old Gate, and see who best displays their worthiness!"

Ser Aron Santagar, one of the young men laughed aloud. He was medium tall, slim and supple, elegant in flowing white shirt and trousers and in curly red shoes. A falchion hung at his sashed waist, and his face was dark and narrow, eagle-nosed, sporting a pointed black beard and gold rings in his ears that suited him well enough. Ashara had only a little experience of kissing, not that she had any intention of furthering it with Ser Santagar, and she loathed facial hair, but such was life, she thought with resignation. Beards, pointed or forked were the fashion of men north of home, and those who lived at court were as susceptible to trends as anyone else, and Ser Aron more than anyone. Many thought him almost absurd, though Ashara was the sister of a man many called the best knight alive, and knew that for all that he dressed to shame the court dandies and his tones were low and cultured, he would prove a nasty customer in any fight. "What is the forfeit?" he called out cheekily.

"A kiss!" called the Princess before Ashara could open her mouth, and Ashara didn't have time to glare at her friend before she gathered her horse under her.

That had everyone laughing. One of them blew a horn, and they were away into the fading spring light in a riot of colour and noise, the last of the sun on brilliant greens and blues and bright scarlet, gold and silver.

But Ashara's kiss was never in danger. Her sand-steed seemed to scarcely touch the road as she skimmed along, and the only Prince Llewyn Nymeros Martell, who was taking it easy given the condition of his charge was any match for her as a horsewoman in Elia's household – Ashara rode
with her back straight, her shoulders square and her hips relaxed, and both Ashara and her horse (Rocco) seemed like a single creature as they led the excited pack of young courtiers along the road. They crossed over the bridge, and up the long hill, recently lined with fine houses now that so many wealthy had moved in since the district became desirable, all the way to the gates of the city that were closed by royal decree at sunset, but in practice usually much earlier.

Ashara touched her crop to the closed gates, first of all the pack by two lengths, and Lady Lemore, surprisingly, was second, flushed and delighted at her own prowess.

"Lemore!" The Princess cried in delight as she arrived a little behind the main body, her uncle at her side. The princess steering her horse over to them, reaching over and kissing Ashara's forehead, a brief wet fission. "You've improved! One of your splendid young men has you riding with him?"

"Yes," she said modestly, finding herself blushing despite herself.

Elia beamed at her.

The gates opened, a few Goldcloaks standing at attention while ogling the ladies, and a figure announced its presence by clearing it's throat as loudly as it could. "Are you the Princess of The Seven Kingdoms and the Lady of Dragonstone, or has some wild hussy who has stolen the Princess' horse?" snapped a voice from inside the gate, and Septa Eliva emerged, a reassuring, stout shape, short and almost as wide as she was tall, dressed in dark clothes and with her head warp tight, making them all conscious of their own states dress. Doubtless she'd been waiting there for them all day. "Do you want to be seen looking like that? Put your hair up, my lady. And put some decent clothes on."

That might have worked on Elia when she was a little girl, Ashara didn't know. She hadn't known her then. But Elia only smiled at her beatifically. "I could say yes, yes I do wish to be seen this way." She pondered aloud, and raised her arms so everybody could see exactly what she was talking about. And it was the mark of her household's loyalty that nobody snickered or muttered anything, for all that there was a lot to see. "That I do want to be seen like this, admired like this. Or I could say I am as much myself, as much a Princess of Dorne and of Westeros in this state as I am fully clothed. But I won't say any such thing, because you are right. Uncle, if you wouldn't mind?" Without hesitation, Prince Llewyn removed his white cloak and draped it over her, tucking it under her chin and covering enough of her to satisfy even the most prudish septa.

"There." Elia said. "Now, we'd best get back to Court. Or else we'll miss supper."

Chapter End Notes

And at last we get to the other players. A few things are alluded but largely left as subtext (like Ashara and Elia briefly being hostages of the Kingswood Brotherhood) - some of which will be examined in more detail later. Next chapter shouldn't take me quite so long as this one, hope to see you then.

My Beta, Orlofthesky, appears to have vanished. I only hope that wherever she is, whatever she is doing, it's what she loves. But she managed to give me one look over this chapter before she did, and fixed a lot of things I overlooked, so I thank her for that.
Chapter Summary

The wages of sin have been paid, but King Aerys' honest advisors and parasitic cronies (difficult to tell apart at the best of times) alike are just getting started for the day, as they play for advantage against one another and try to divert the King's wrath, while the question remains - just who is running the kingdom?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

THE HAND OF THE KING

King's Landing was gloriously upset and disordered with the distractions of the day. The streets were almost empty, but beyond it's gates, what was normally a field of communal-land (land that was entirely worthless, in other words) stretching just beyond the mud gate, where a few cows and goats were allowed to graze indifferently and birds pecked at the grass that had been nourished by the blood of patriots, state criminals, and fallen court favourites, was today covered with people who had brought with them an air of tense excitement which had given way to a kind of holiday mood, a sort of outlandish gaiety. Perhaps it was intended to be, meant as a perverse sort of tragic show and offered by the king to his capital for their amusement - you could never be sure. But likely not, it was to be expected. Executions always drew crowds, especially when the sun burnt strong and a swift breeze wafted away some of the more pungent odours, and the popular opinion of the magnitude seemed to find an unhealthy fascination in the magnitude of the crimes that had been committed in this instance and the high station of the men to be called to account for them, an attitude that Lord Merryweather privately couldn't help but find to be a little obscene.

For a few short hours, social divisions that men lived and died by were blurred, if only a little. Tramps mingled with townsfolk who had brought their families with them, painted and powdered prostitutes had made their way out of the alleys that wove their way from the Street of Silk where they undertook their profession. Guttersnipes wove their way between people's legs to the front, more interested in spectacle than lifting purses. Beautiful ladies in furred surcoats, in search of violent emotion, clung to their gallants, uttering little nervous cries if they thought anyone was paying attention, or scoffed and sneered at one another while they secretly envied those who they affected to deride.

And to round things off, the beggars had assembled in all their tawdry glory, with their lank bellies, hemp-like hair, bottled noses and jagged teeth turning yellow or black. It was a sound resolution - executions might draw out the worst in people, but they also had a tendency to help a man find his charitable impulse, and even the hardest heart could not fail to see them when they roused themselves in a vast multitude from starving in the gutters in this way, though many were used to finding it in themselves to ignore people who stretch out imploring hands. One woman, a Westerlander from the look of her and obviously prosperous, judging by the feather of what could only have been a peacock that she wore fastened to her turban by an agraffe set with brilliants ordered her men to distribute some alms, which they did with a careless toss scattering the coins underfoot. True to form,
the beggars fell on each other over the handful of coins, kicking, gouging and biting and scratching and uttering blood-curdling sounds, like wild animals. A few of the watchers turned from the spectacle they'd come to see to observe this, nudging each other, and calling out encouragement or mockery, much to her obvious shock at their behaviour. One or two even went so far as to place bets.

In another part of the crowd, one of the gathered beggars with the unlikely name of Bedlin, who styled himself a storyteller, broke away from his fellows and perched on an overturned barrel in order to report just why good king Aerys felt the need to castigate the men in question with a public spectacle, describing a litany of sin that would shame even the Others themselves in whatever icy hell they dwelled within. The crowd laughed, anyone with a lick of sense could tell that Bedlin was a born liar and a cheat as well, whether personally acquainted with the man himself or not; that even his name was pure invention, and that he was twice as fit for the scaffold - or the executioner's block - as those being ushered on from this life.

"So what'd they do, anyway?" One burgher asked a cloth-merchant the whims of the crowd had deposited together.

"Does it matter?"

They and most of the other men fell silent, with an expectant air as Lord Owen Merryweather stepped to the edge of the platform. He had a mean look about him, like he could knock you down, and like he just might. He'd been quite a soldier in his youth, though he'd gotten slow and heavy after a bad break in a grand melee had left his sword arm permanently weakened and forced him to hang up his blade - for the better, in the long run. Lord Owen Merryweather was now around fifty years old. He possessed a laborer's body, stocky and useful, and like most of King Aerys Targaryen's court he always made an effort to dress well - today in an expensive gown of rich material cut in such a way as to better display his wealth at the breadth of fabric. He had dark hair, though it was greying, and because of his pale skin that burned and peeled in the sun but never got any darker people often assumed him a northerner. He wasn't - the device he wore 'a grey shield embroidered with a spilled cornucopia', a sigil not associated with any martial distinction of his family but because a toadying cloth-merchant of a great-grandparent had extended unlimited credit to a profligate Tully second son, who had settled the sizable debt by elevating him from the commonplace and making the man a lord of somewhere obscure. Nobody had heard of him or paid attention to his family before he came to Court.

The silver spurs on his high-heeled riding boots clinked as he stepped up onto the raised platform above the crowd, and bowed to the masses, raised a hand to the people who were leaning from upper windows and balancing on garden walls beyond the field to see him and the execution, and then stepped back, leaving them all with the sense that they had seen the cast of players and the opening scene of a traveling show, but whether what would follow was to be a masque or a party, a funeral rites or the baiting of a wild animal, nobody could say yet.

Enough of an effort had been made that it looked more like a masque than a real event, court entertainment. The scaffolding had been covered with cloth and the King's Justice had been given a new, clean hood, leaving no doubt that the men about to depart this life were considered important, but it was nothing you couldn't see here, every day, every hour, though normally not requiring the oversight of any of the King's Counselors - even the Lord Commander of the Goldcloaks had other things to occupy his time, more important work to do. Anyone so inclined could have kept time by the executions were they so perversely minded - like a water-mill grinding along steadily, regular to the hour; 'treason, sedition, chop', 'treason, sedition, chop', with a constance that was almost monotonous enough to stop being frightening. Varys the eunuch, the strange, simpering foreigner who nobody was sure where the king had found or why the king trusted had called it 'pretty
persuasive politics’. It was hard to disagree.

Ser Oswell Whent was alone, paying the proceedings no mind whatsoever, or at least appearing to. He was occupied watching the crowd from where he sat on his horse. There could be no mistaking him, his family's device, a sigil of dark renown that stood out sharply against his white surcoat and white armour, and the visor of his helmet raised, revealing an unusually sharp nose, and morose expression, tiny lines of irony about the mouth. He was handsome enough, in that gallant, haughty way the very best of knights were always depicted which owed nothing to the idiosyncrasies of their actual features, but looking at him, one couldn't help but feel he was appreciating without enjoying some joke at the expense of everyone else. The knight was the only man here who hadn't chosen to be - save the guards and the man who swung the axe of course, another tangible expression of the power of the King, that reassured the people that this was good and right.

It might have surprised Ser Oswell - if in truth anything did, just how much Lord Owen Merryweather, practiced courtier of no definite title (though he was one of the most favored names in consideration to be the next Master of Ships for all that he wasn't much of a sailor, in point of fact he barely knew one side of a boat from the other. In the Court of Aerys Targaryen, it was not what you knew, but who you knew, and he had the fortune to be very closely acquainted with Septon Maynard) had private sentiments which echoed his own. This summer, Owen Merryweather had privately vowed, he was going to settle all of his affairs and return home. Moreover, he was going to stay there. He will read and write on wet days, hunt when the weather is fine. Entertain guests when they visited, if it pleased him to do it. Maybe even pray. He found that what he wanted, more than anything, was to retire from the relentless, mundane obligations of his office - disputes of vassals they demanded he settle; complaints from Septons about brethren in other dioceses, the grudging observance of payments of taxes, the thieving, the fighting, the work, work, work. And letters arrived daily, penned by eloquent hands. They reported upon taxes collected and evaded, court gossip, the views of the realm expressed by shop keepers and farm labourers and news of fights within the faith over jurisdiction and taxation, and all the minutiae while the king busies himself receiving homage and taking hostages from disobedient vassals. All the while keeping peace between The King and the Crown Prince. He was sick of all of the relentless work.

Owen Merryweather was one of those rare men who could not afford to be anything besides brutally honest with himself. He had first come to the Royal Court in the hopes of making his fortune, and thanks in no small part to Septon Maynard, (who had risen to heights far beyond his humble origins as the son of a butcher, and always carried his former master along with him), that is what he had done. He had benefited more than enough from his position for one lifetime - greedy men, afterall, ended up like the gentlemen whose ends he was overseeing. But he never spared himself in the king's service, he knew his worth and merit and made sure of his rewards: offices, perquisites and title deeds, manor houses and farms. He was useful to Septon Maynard because he had ways of getting his way; he would charm a man or bribe him, coax him or threaten him, he would explain slowly and carefully until it is understood that ambitions are better served by listening to him, and he would see it got done.

And so he neglected to mention to The King that with the advent of spring he had bought another mansion. He had gold and silver plate for his table and was in the process of extending his bestiary - he now kept a lion and lioness (gifts from Lord Tywin, who was not above bribery himself), and was negotiating the purchase of a pair of ostriches - which would be unique in Westeros. He hadn't seen one yet, but it was said that they were birds taller than a knight in armour, that they did not fly, had feet like a camel and laid eggs only during a solar eclipse. The female would need sand for her nest, but there were beaches aplenty, he would have one dug up and transported if it was needful. He'd done well out of his loyal service, and he'd be the first to admit it. Now, he wanted some time to appreciate it properly.
He was so caught up in his fantasies of the life within his grasp that he almost missed the approach of the two condemned. The sound of hooves and the rattle of the cart were swallowed by the excited sounds of the crowd, a steady hum from which no single voice could be picked out. They parted slowly before the cart, drawn by two horses that had been caparisoned gaily. And standing on the cart, trying to maintain their balance with difficulty were two men who none of the crowd likely recognised, but they booed and jeered anyway. A few even threw things.

The guard driving the cart, at least, treated the men fairly, with surprising civility, even differentially, or as much as could be afforded. At the foot of the steps to the gallows, he untied their hands, one after another. The taller of the two, Ser Escot Greene, nonchalantly scratched his arse and without hesitation began to climb the steps. He was quite young, with a bulbous nose and no chin to speak of. His eyes were wide set, and seemed to question everything. Even in rags, he looked lordly.

The crowd was now holding their collective breath for him. A moment later Lord Guime Bushy of Greenwood followed him up. The man was short and portly, but not fat; he had a cherubic face and a shock of bright red hair. Lord Bushy had a small castle that was comfortable enough but of dubious worth as fortification. Owen Merryweather had visited it shortly after the man's arrest - the roof was in poor repair. He also had 1,300 acres including what was left of the Greenwood, mostly filled with sheep and tenants, the sheep producing serviceable wool but gristly mutton, the tenants shepherding and sheering the sheep, all together worth just under twenty one silver stags per acre per year. Around a quarter of what he'd get with that same acreage under the plough instead, Owen Merryweather had figured out - he was good at sums - and far more if it were more properly developed.

One of the steps creaked suddenly and began to sag. The young lord stumbled, nearly losing his balance, and clutched at the steps to keep from tumbling over. "Outrageous!" he exclaimed. "This has to be fixed! Or these stairs will kill someone!" A weak attempt, perhaps, but you had to appreciate the attempt at humour, even if his voice shook a little. Some of the crowd obligingly chuckled, others looked shocked that a man like him would presume to address them. The King's Justice only glared at him in silent condemnation, and shifted his grip minutely on the blade. Lord Bushy swallowed and made no further attempts at levity.

Once the two of them reached the gallows, two of the executioner's inferiors in leather vests grabbed each of them roughly. The King's Justice, not that he merited such a grandiose title, watched the condemned through the slits cut in his hood. Once he'd been the King's Hands bodyguard, at least until he'd been caught boasting that it was his master who truly ruled. The king had his tongue ripped out with red-hot pincers - perhaps proving that, on some level, even Aerys himself knew that there was more truth in the man's statement than he could allow himself to admit.

"Are the condemned prepared?" Ser Oswell Whent rasped - a good bit of theatre that. Even here and now, the knight made for an eerie, sinister figure who nobody was entirely comfortable around, so when he commanded the dozen goldcloaks jumped to obey. There followed a muffled roll of drums, and the two men were shoved forward. Naturally, the crowd made the expected noises of derision as they shuffled slowly to platform, the block of wood in the centre stage, the King's Justice who looked more scarecrow than man, tall and fleshless, a skeleton wearing a rather loose old coat of mail, black with grease, which hung in folds about his belt, and a black hood over his head. He was a familiar figure, he had been given his position by Lord Tywin Lannister and had never missed an execution since. Once he had been a knight, but of course nobody remembered that now. But there was ever a demand for his services, The King kept him almost as busy as he kept Owen Merryweather.

"Can we get on with it? I don't have all day." Lord Bushy said, loud enough that he almost quelled the slight tremble in his voice. The crowd roared it's approval.
"No, I suppose you don't." Ser Whent replied, once more ceding the stage to Septon Maynard's most senior and trusted adviser. Owen Merryweather let the tension build. He knew well the power of silence.

From the crowd came a few incoherent cries. Women standing in the first row pretended to weep and lament. Adults lifted children in their arms or put them on their shoulders, in order that even the smallest child would not miss the upcoming spectacle. The executions assistants rolled a stump into the centre of the scaffold covered with cloth. A wicker basket designed to collect the severed heads were placed before the block. At the foot of the scaffold four ragged urchins held out a scarf to collect the blood in - there was a great demand for souvenirs of this type, and good money to be earned.

Satisfied, he began, his face as carefully blank as a fresh painted wall. "Lord Bushy of Greenwood and Ser Greene." Owen Merryweather intoned, and there was silence now, as everyone strained to listen to him, not wanting to miss a single word. The anticipation in the air had been pulled taut as he unrolled a parchment on which the bill of execution had been written so as to refer directly to it. It was signed in The King’s own hand, and sealed by the same. "You are both traitors and miscreants, too good to be so and too bad to live." The wordplay had occurred to him the night before, and he was pleased with how it came out. "Citizens of King’s Landing and people from the surrounding countryside," he continued, "notice is hereby given that Lord Guime Bushy of Greenwood, and Ser Escot Green in his service have been found guilty of all crimes, offences and misdeeds of which they have been accused." He paused a moment, letting that sink in. "I will not dwell overly upon their pernicious lives, yet to leave no question of the rightness of your execution and to wash the blood from the hands of our beloved sovereign Aerys, second of his name, here in the view of men some causes of their deaths shall be unfolded, namely; treason of the state and dishonouring the establishment of the nobility through perjury, usury, and theft - to the effect of forty thousand gold dragons misappropriated, association with enemies of the state, spying, and plotting against the life of their rightful sovereign. In light of this, The good and Rightful King Aerys Targaryen has decided that the accused receive the following punishment – First, mortification of their coat of arms - a thick black line through their shield, so all might know their shame. Second, confiscation of all property, both movable and immovable, including lands, forests, serfs, castles and manors, and finally, your heads smitten off. Let justice be done!" He stepped back, his part in the show done with.

The executioner raised his oversized weapon. It was heavy, requiring a two-handed grip, almost four foot in length and a hand span broad, round at the tip, a double edge. Lord Bushy, head down, flung wide his arms, a sign of his consent, the signal that the blade could fall. There was another roll of drums, suddenly silenced, and then the thud of the blade, first once, then again and a third time: a sound as domestic as chopping wood. The head bounced into the straw and there followed a scarlet spurt of blood from the strangely stumpy neck, that was soaked up by the sawdust. The black-hooded executioner placed the great stained blade to one side and bending down he lifted the head by the thick curly hair and held it aloft, so that all gathered could all see the strange mask-like thing, the teeth bared in a last defiant grin.

That would have to do, as far as justice was concerned, Owen Merryweather thought as Ser Greene was pushed towards the block and the King's Justice replaced his grip on the blade. There wasn't going to be any more.

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The pleasant morning had given way to a cheerless afternoon, with the wind veering down from a
hard blue sky, which made him grateful to be indoors. The Red Keep was a maze of the back stairs and passages - some of the corridors came to a stop for no clear reason, others continued on without leading anywhere, while certain rooms could only be reached by passing through half a dozen others. A man could live his whole life within the keep without really understanding it - or so he'd always suspected. Even passing in the most direct route to the Council chambers took him a long, roundabout walk.

He passed under the dark beams within a gallery, which hung a row of shields with the colourful figures of heraldic emblems and the coats of arms of the Seven Kingdoms. A practiced eye had no difficulty in differentiating between the old faded coats of arms honored by older kings, and the newly promoted families from the reign of King Aerys Targaryen. The latter had vibrant colours which had not yet faded and you could not detect the slightest sign of woodworm.

He found himself muttering an old piece of doggerel he'd heard once, which had remained with him all this time, apparently never worth the effort of forgetting it. "The Knights are Dust, their Arms are Rust, their Souls are with the Gods, we Trust." He smiled, and almost chuckled, before he passed a green shield with a fresh black line over it, and he heard the thud of the blade, and thought 'treason, sedition, chop'. The orphaned shield of House Greenwood made for an arresting reminder of just how suddenly death could visit anyone.

Fortunately for his mood, Septon Maynard intercepted him along the indirect path that eventually led to his destination, accompanied by his usual entourage - a guard of the Septon's household (a big, dangerous looking fellow with no device on his functional cuirass), two Secretaries with their hands overflowing with papers, and an additional man to hold his purse. The Septon was the worst great church officer imaginable for his time - for as far back as history could recall there had been periodic occasions when the Faith as a whole would be seized with a sudden passion for humility, for modesty. The High Septon himself apparently helped his servants carry furniture and he liked to lay out his own vessels when giving service, and with some reluctance but with will Septons from Oldtown to Gulltown, from Sunspear to The Wall followed his lead. They stripped themselves of ornament, hid their chasubles, sold their golden ciboria and offered alms with a generosity that was almost embarrassing. But every movement has it's detractors, and there could be no doubt that Maynard - wearing over twenty pounds of woven gold (paid for by his hated enemy The Hand of the King, Tywin Lannister), gem-encrusted rings and the great chain of office heavy around his neck all vied to proclaim the wearer as a man of vast wealth. His left eye trembled - sheer age - but his right eye was merciless.

"And was your morning as terrible as you had feared?" He asked Owen Merryweather indulgently, giving him a surprisingly warm and beatific smile. There was much about the septon that was remarkable, but his smile was gentle and warm and would soften any heart.

"It's all a matter of perspective, I suppose." Owen Merryweather replied, handing the Septon a scroll.

"Ah?" The septon glanced at it once, and his lips twitched. He only seemed to give it a single casual glance, but the moment that had taken had been all the Septon required; he was only interested in the figures at the bottom. The Septon believed in numbers with an obsessive and fervent conviction which he had never displayed for the gods. "Excellent, Owen. You never disappoint." He didn't use Lord Owen Merryweather's title, but he never had, even when he was a nobody, and Owen Merryweather knew better than to be offended. Now the wheel had turned, and it was Lord Owen Merryweather of Longtable who used the honorific, but he respected the great man sufficiently not to feel resentful in the least. "However, as for our dear deceased…" He made a tutting noise, shaking his head as he quickly skimmed the inventory of all the lands and holdings the morning's fallen lords had possessed. "A fine mess the Riverlands would be, without the wool trade, eh?" He tutted again. "Still, I don't much care for mutton, Owen - certainly not the stringy sort that is all that they ever
produce."

"And on that subject - will you be attending tonight?"

"Of course. I never turn down a meal, Owen, you know that, certainly not from your tables. Though if we're not careful, we may be tightening our belts. Did you know that hoarders in the Reach are deliberately driving up the price of grain to make a profit?"

He knew already, of course, and likely from the same people who had informed The King and his councilors. By now, most of the city knew. "Personally, I'd hang the lot of them."

"Do not be so bloodthirsty, my child. I know but of a single part, in aught that pertains to the state, and the Many-Pointed Star counsels forgiveness." Septon Maynard replied piously. "Besides, the first harvest is planted, but it will be poor. The price of wheat will rise to a dozen stags a quarter, and what is the laborer who earns only two a day to do? And even that isn't in, and the profiteers are moving already, not just in The Reach but all seven kingdoms." It used to surprise Septon Maynard, that one man would allow another to starve and make a profit - and such a small one as well.

Owen Merryweather was of a more cynical disposition. And he had ridden away to war, not once but twice. That had cleared up any remaining misconceptions he'd had about the nature of man. "It is a shame that the king's subjects should starve." Owen Merryweather replied carefully, not wanting to upset his master.

"True. In fact, make note of that! We'll put it to the king's grace and pardon this very morning." The Septon replied, decisively. "It is better not to try people, not to force them into desperation. Make them prosper, out of superfluity, and they will be generous. Full bellies breed generosity, which is to the benefit of all! Whereas the gnawing jaws of famine brings out terrible things. But it's spring, Owen. Spring. Good times are coming."

"We all pray so, my lord."

Septon Maynard was not so distant as he acted. For all that his path to wealth and power had been a slow one, he had walked it and was enjoying the benefits now, as more and more every day King Aerys Targaryen came to rely on the good Septon. Maynard never troubled his liege the way others did, or complained of the king's behaviour or the policies he was asked to enact. He just got on with things, made exacting notes and wrote everything down, quietly gained influence and took control of many state duties before anyone had so much as realised it, leaving the king free to lavish money upon whatever had caught his fancy that day. Even now, King Aerys was unconsciously deferring to his advisor, this son of a butcher, seeking opinions that Maynard was only to glad to give.

Or rather, Septon Maynard, Most Devout, Master of Coin. Although The High Septon was too secure in power and in position to bow to pressure, even from the king, he had acknowledged Owen Merryweather's mentor as among the 'Most Devout' in exchange for certain considerations - which was far more than he deserved, the worldly, arrogant knave. Then King Aerys had appointed Septon Maynard as Master of Coin, immeasurably increasing his power and making him the enemy of The King's Hand in a single stroke. Tywin Lannister hated for The King to listen to anyone but himself, and the councilors he appointed, and even they got the rough side of his tongue. Maynard had grown to great for the Old Lion's liking.

"But we were discussing the disposal of the lands? It is spring, let's talk about how to pay for it, the cost of charity and the cost of justice. It's all we will be talking about today - the cost of everything and the value of nothing." The septon folded his arms across his chest. His robe was gorgeous with cloth of gold, and pearls at his collar and sleeves caught the light as the old man moved.
"Lord Darry has agreed to purchase the lands as they are, my lord." Owen Merryweather updated him.

"Already? Never afraid to take advantage of another man's misfortune, that one." The Septon replied, completely brazenfaced. They were all profiteers of one stripe or another. "Well, I trust you to arrange disposing of this land and the goods that come with it. Be generous to Lord Darry, the King likes the man - though keep in mind that we've already spent the money." He continued, handing the scroll back to Owen Merryweather, who inclined his head as he accepted the task.

The lands had been valued already. There were clerks adding and checking the figures behind little doors in Septon Maynard's estate, just as they checked everything: farming profits, interest on loans, revenues from fiefs. He had grown rich and powerful through their betters inability to count, and carried Owen Merryweather up with him. "I'll take care of it myself." Owen Merryweather promised.

Septon Maynard nodded, he had expected no less. "That would be for the best. And maybe bring young Dickon" he meant Dickon Riche, another of the septon's protégé's "with you, the lad's got a good head on his shoulders, and he's from that way." As they both happened to be, of late The King had bestowed much upon that region. With that taken care of, he extended a hand imperiously, and one of the secretaries handed him another scroll. "It'll be a long one, today, Owen." Septon Maynard continued. "Very long. We're all at cross-purposes, as always." Septon Maynard's smile became a touch impish. "It should be better than a bear-bating!"

Owen Merryweather was spared having to come up with some sort of reply by their arrival at the Council Chambers. "The sele of the day to the two of you." Ser Harlan Grandison said politely as they approached, his closed visor muffling his words to an extent. He looked as neat as a newly forged sword, his harness was clean and polished, with a white brigandine in place of a breastplate. The knight was an older man, his long moustaches faded to almost pure white, his head nearly as barren as the shell of an egg.

Septon Maynard stepped past the old knight unchallenged - one of very few considered above suspicion (his secretaries were afforded the same, but his guard and the man with his purse were left outside), but Owen Merryweather unbuckled his sword and set it in a rack in the anteroom outside the audience chamber. Two of King Aerys' guards then searched him, as thoroughly and intimately as if he were a servant they'd seen drop one of the king's silver spoons down the front of his shirt. Had he been a woman, matrons would have done the same.

He felt no humiliation. The guards were doing their duty, and doing it carefully. And King Aerys would have had them boiled alive if he herd they'd let anyone outside that very small number (small enough to count on one hand) who he trusted completely through unchallenged. "Pass on, milord." One of them said at length.

Owen Merryweather spent another moment adjusting his clothing, then followed after his patron as unobtrusively as possible. There were more or less the same number of people as usual sitting on each side of the long table, while the fire on the hearth crackled and filled the room with the familiar odour of burning wood. Familiar men, quick and ready with figures, quick to seize control of an argument or twist it, quick to seize a point, men who had been chosen carefully, men who were competent enough, but would never be able to challenge the king.

His eyes fell naturally upon The Hand of the King, Lord Tywin Lannister, who had proven the exception to that rule. The lord of the Westerlands was one of those rare men that have the certainty of being part of history while still alive, because they have made it - who are acknowledged as great even by those who hated him. The Hand of the King was tall, broad and blond, with a pointed beard
and a thick moustache that was darker than the rest of his hair, and a grave face that Lord Merryweather had not once seen smile. He had neither gained weight nor lost muscle since he was a young man, his shoulders were broad as his stomach was flat and hard, and his vestments were of fashionable cut, but subdued beside the flamboyance of the other noblemen, even understated. With a conscious show of disdain towards the Septon, he ignored his entrance entirely in favor of leaning down to scratch Loyal, his favourite wolfhound.

"If you’d taken the wolf, there’d be more meat for you, too,” he told the youngest male hound, then gave it a mock-cuff, which prompted the younger hound to whine, looking up at him with the kind of worship that dogs reserve for their masters. It was easy to mistake him for something he was not. But his eyes, green and flecked with gold, didn't fit the rest of him. They were the eyes of a banker, or a clever merchant. Or a bad priest. Or a great lord.

Across the room, facing his Hand was the King himself - Aerys Targaryen, second of his name, who had taken care not to surround himself with any of the trappings of royal majesty - any chair that he chose to sit upon was by definition a throne since it contained the king's fundament, this one which was raised upon a dais but was not throne-like or surmounted by a canopy, was far less awe inspiring then the famous chair of swords. The King was dressed in a manner very similar to his Hand - somber clothes, without ornament. And yet there was no playing down the state of him.

Aerys was a man in his late thirties, quite a bit younger than Owen Merryweather, or for that matter anyone else in the room except Lord Tywin. His features were long and lean and angular, his hairline, which retreated towards the crown of his head, accentuated the impression. His cheeks were sharp and hollow, his nose thin and sharp, his hair and beard a snowy tangled mess, the only thing about him that didn't seem to be sharp. The fingers that gripped the armrests were nearly as slender as quill-ends, his fingernails long and sharp and uneven, putting Lord Merryweather in mind of the talons of a bird. His eyes glittered, the color of dark bruise and more than a glint of crimson - not a reflection, but the result of some cold fire burning within, but Lord Merryweather was used to all that, they all were - just as they were used to his rages and his silences. Still, he felt no small relief, as the signs seemed to indicate that today was going to be one of the kings better days, his appearance, wild and strung out as it was, seemed to say 'sers, we are here today in council to do business' - that the King was in a fit state to work. At his right hand stood Ser Gerold Hightower, captain of the Kingsguard and by tradition afforded a seat on the council as well, not that he had much use for it. But the right side of the table was, as usual, empty.

All gathered had gotten used to that empty space as well. By right and tradition the members of his The King's family were welcome to attend council, but they seldom did. The marriage between Aerys and his sister had always been one of milk and wine, but now neither of them were thriving to their mutual expense. The Queen was not regaining her vitality or spirit. The court physicians that Grand Maester Pyrcelle had assembled were at their wits end - failure was not tolerated for long by the King, and excuses tended to bring out the worst in him. The queen drank listlessly the tonics they proscribed - melissa cordial to purge melancholy, elderflower for the heavy hearted and vervain to strengthen her nerves. She picked at her food, sending most of it away. She refused to leave her quarters or walk in the open air. She even refused to play with her cats. Nobody spoke about it. Well, men only talk about queens to call them shrews or whores. Men were depressingly regular in that regard.

And as for the Crown Prince, he was nowhere to be seen either - he seldom had been since he and his wife had chosen to take up residence on Dragonstone instead of the Red Keep, even when he was in the capital as he was now. Doubtless he was by a window somewhere with an old book, in a world of his own, while across the castle the state of the kingdom was being discussed.

Septon Maynard selectively assembled a pile from the papers carried by his secretaries, and spread
several charters out before him. Of course Owen Merryweather scanned them over his patrons shoulder. It was nothing special - a routine act of patronage, remitting taxes for a citizen in the Vale (where the Septon owned extensive estate) in exchange for his agreement to pay rent to the local sept in perpetuity. It ended with the traditional form of address; 'To the King’s faithful followers and mine'.

"Well, now that we're all here at last." King Aerys said, as the Septon settled into his chair and Owen Merryweather positioned himself behind him. His voice was rather high and thin, and a peevish expression was just possible to make out beneath his wild hair and beard. "Perhaps today we can make some progress, though I doubt it. My councillors, and my Hand in particular, are so slow in getting anything done." Aerys continued. "There's always a reason why I can't do this or that." He grumbled.

Lord Merryweather let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. He could usually tell when the king drifted into delusion. He couldn’t do anything about it, of course, but he could tell. Today, King Aerys was as matter-of-fact as if talking about the weather. He was, if anything, more matter-of-fact than if talking about the weather, for he rarely had anything to do with it. He was a creature of the palace, and came forth from it as seldom as he could.

"And on what matters is it that the king wishes to make progress?" Lord Tywin Lannister replied, sitting up straight and meeting the king's gaze levelly. "Of the collecting of the subsidies and taxes, the outstanding revenues from the Riverlands and from Dorne, and the state of the treasury and the outstanding debts?" At this statement, Septon Maynard cleared his throat and shuffled his papers - it was he, in his role as Master of Coins who controlled the exchequer and who advised in regard to the imposition of taxes, fees, rents and impost, and it was he who ought to be consulted on such matters - but neither King nor Lord Paramount acknowledged his interruption. "Of the shortages of grain and the growing possibility of famine that the arrival of Spring has done little to offset? Of the trade war between Pentos and it's neighbors that keep costs down, but create shortages? Or perhaps the league of the lords and landed knights in The Reach and the demands they have put towards you?" Lord Tywin Lannister had a deep, commanding voice, and couched his statements in biting, crisp accents, as if each yielded an unassailable truth - those who disagreed or presumed to interrupt (as Septon Maynard had) earned sideways glances of studied contempt. Yet still he managed to talk in such a manner as to imply that these matters were only the most minor he was currently seeing to resolution, and that the King was only interrupting him.

"Famine?" Aerys Targaryen replied. It took Owen Merryweather a moment to decipher the King's expression; it was a curious blend of amusement and pity, the sort that Owen Merryweather might have worn himself had his ten year-old grandson come out with some very naive way the world worked. "Do not waste my time with trifles, Tywin. There are always more peasants, and there always will be. If you must trouble me, try and do so with something of more substance than a few hungry peasants."

Tywin inclined his head so the king wouldn't see him narrow his eyes, his body-language projecting his view that such things could wait in the manner a wound could be allowed to fester, but the King was ignoring him now. "The state of the Treasury is of concern, however. At the moment my mind wanders; I could not sleep last night for dreaming, but nonetheless I have devised a solution." He waited expectantly a moment.

"And that is, your majesty?" Grand Maester Pyrcelle duly replied. The Grand Maester was a portly gentleman of undistinguished appearance, with hardly any greying curling hair left, and a short thick beard framing a round pale face. He looked concerned. It might have been anything, from starting a war, to reorganizing the harvest, to setting his household to gathering seashells by the shore. With Aerys there was no way of knowing beforehand - no one could tell what he would come up with
next. A lot of people had guessed wrong over the years. Not many of them had ended up better than the recently deceased Lord Bushy and Ser Greene.

Tywin raised an eyebrow. "And just what is this radical proposition, your majesty?"

"How much gold is in the treasury?"

Tywin turned his green eyes on Septon Maynard, and raised an eyebrow. The Master of Coin cleared his throat, and shuffled his papers until he found the correct one, then started to read from a vellum scroll. The other councilors - all of whom rarely looked forward to anything the Master of Coin had to say, were frowning. "The treasury is empty, your majesty. There is enough in it only to cover the necessary expenses between now, and the first feast of Spring, no more. Our financial reserves have been reduced to a critical level."

Aerys turned slowly. "And why is that?"

"Because, your majesty, the revenue from taxes does not easily accrue from a starving people. Because the Lords, as you will be the first to realize," said Septon Maynard, unaware that his voice was rising, "refuse to pay the dues which they have agreed. Because the loan from the Iron Bank has been exhausted by the uprisings over the last two years, that have required the arming and the maintenance of a fleet, and your own adventure to the South."

Nobody met the king's eyes. Over nearly two decades, Aerys had fought a savage little war over the Stepstones to hold on to the gains that had been originally made warring against the coalition of tyrants, madmen and adventurers called the Ninepenny Kings, all for the sake of holding on to a territory that - in Owen Merryweather's view, wasn't worth having in the first place. The King had fought it with great determination, as if the rocky islands were stuffed to bursting with rich farms and silver mines, instead of scrub-pine, bare rock and seagulls. And then, after all that wealth spent fighting, ships lost and time wasted he'd thrown over the war with no gains to speak of. Aerys was a law unto himself.

"Your Majesty," Septon Maynard said trying to fill the silence, "I can tell you what you want to hear, or else I can tell you the truth. Which would you prefer?"

With King Aerys, the question had no obvious answer. Aerys had punished plenty of men who'd tried to tell him the truth. Whatever fantasies went on in his mind must often have seemed more real to him than the world as it was. He wasn't stupid. People who thought he was commonly paid for that mistake in short order. But he was… strange. He muttered to himself before coming out with something that astonished Lord Merryweather; "Hmm," said the King, leaning back. "That does not make for good hearing." Owen Merryweather never would have guessed the king had such a gift for understatement. "Still, there is profit in sight. I intend to impose port taxes at Sunspear and the other ports equal to those I have demanded of Lannisport; so far they have gone comparatively unscathed."

"A formidable program." replied Tywin steadily, even stolidly, as though it were of no matter to him whatsoever. Septon Maynard, who'd opened his mouth to protest, closed it quickly. "As a tentative measure it may go some way towards alleviating your expenses - however in the long run it will hurt trade - which is already weak as a consequence of what is occurring in Essos." His supporters - The Master of Laws and the Grand Maester both nodded.

The Council was rent between King Aerys Targaryen and his Hand, Lord Tywin Lannister, thought Lord Owen Merryweather, surprising himself by the banality of his thoughts. There was never a time when the two were not fretting about the safety of the country, and empty chests in the treasury. There was never a moment when they could agree what should - what must, be done.
Westeros had paid through long years for the growing resentment between the two men. But in spite of his growing separation with the only minister capable of commanding in his stead and of directing the policy of his reign, Aerys had kept him on.

"Some small and modest amount, perhaps." Aerys replied dismissively. When he moved, it was without rhythm as well as slightly uncoordinated, so that he spilled a little wine almost every time he raised the cup to his lips. "No, we shall rely for funds on that method best known as 'Old Infallible'. Taxes! Squeeze them till their shoes squeak!" He bared his teeth in what might have been a smile. "I shall dictate laws which I know my subjects will break; then I will fine them large sums, which they must pay or be turned out of their own castles." Tywin's lips tightened, just barely perceptibly, and his nostrils flared, but King Aerys ignored him. "Septon Maynard, if you please?"

It took his patron a moment to find the scroll. "There will be a new tax levied upon each able-bodied peasant. One silver stag for all those aged between ten and fifty. Half that for all those beyond the age of fifty or under the age of ten."

"Be cautious, your majesty, lest you be named a tyrant." Lord Symond Staunton spoke up, with gloomy satisfaction. The Master of Laws was a scholarly gentleman who admitted to forty-nine years, with silver-gray hair, disdainfully arched eyebrows, a short silver-gray beard, and features of fastidious distinction. He tirelessly worked to codify the judicial systems of the land, reconciling regional differences and making the laws universally responsive. In spite of that, the old man's moods were mercurial, and sometimes his points of view as well, since he liked to consider an issue from every side, and tended to argue with its proponents in order to test the strength of their concepts.

If that was the extent of the protest, Owen Merryweather suspected that King Aerys would have his way, this time. King Aerys waved an arm imperiously in Septon Maynard's direction. "Continue. The rest of you, listen carefully, for it concerns all of you."

Septon Maynard didn't need to shuffle around papers this time. He promptly unrolled a scroll and cleared his throat. "Let it be herewith noted that there shall no longer be granted provisions for the peasantry to pay with service, and shall no longer be granted any exclusion of taxes."

Owen Merryweather was schooled well enough to remain quiet, though the statement provoked an expression of outrage from the assembled noblemen. Even Lord Lucerys Velaryon, Master of Ships who was very aware of which side his bread was buttered looked too uncomfortable to endorse it. Tywin, however, had no such reservations. "You majesty cannot be such a fool as that." He said. He almost raised his voice. The declaration brought protests from every quarter, the room descending into a bedlam of commotion as everyone talked over one another, trying to make themselves heard. Lord Symond Staunton even went so far as to yell "You can't be serious!", an outburst entirely unlike the man.

It was Tywin who had caused the commotion, and it was Tywin who called for silence, and when he got it, he ceded the floor back to his sovereign. "I shall not suffer the Royal Treasury to be impoverished by greedy nobles trying to aggrandise their personal fortunes by declaring half their peasantry their bondsmen!" Aerys announced, the effect rather ruined by the way he screwed up his face. "If they cannot cover the expense, then they should not retain them in their household. Put them to work in the fields. Increase the harvest and yield - maybe put an end to this talk of famine you all seem so concerned with. Every man at work behind the plough is a creator of wealth, rather than a drain upon resources."

"But your majesty…" Lord Qarlton Chelsted, another of Septon Maynard's more promising protégés began. "In a time of famine…"

"They can work or they can starve." Was Aerys Targaryen's indifferent interruption, firmly closing
the matter. Then he smiled. "Now, gentles, that accounts for the treasury. Is their any further business worthy of review?"

Chapter End Notes

This was a difficult chapter - I've come to rely on my beta, and without writing is difficult for me at the best of times. Furthermore, most of the characters are essentially my inventions - some few have their characters extrapolated from scraps of canon - Septon Maynard seems to have been obsessive-compulsive, from which I extrapolated he's good with numbers, but they're lucky if they have even that much to work with. Still, I hope it's up to standard, and I'm sure I'll get told if it's not.
Everybody talks to themselves, either directly or in private. Elia talked to Ashara. She was the princess’ listening post, a ready, always attentive audience for gossip, speculation, tears and troubles. It was a position not without it's responsibility, Ashara was aware - it was an understanding, a trust, that Elia hadn't extended to anyone else, and one that Ashara strove to be worthy of, though even this relationship, had it's limits, dark corners and hidden places where Elia didn't want her. There had always been a few, though Ashara seemed to encounter them far more often since the birth of her daughter. Something had changed in her friend, something no longer fitted the way that it once had.

Another thing that everybody did - whether they ever realized it or not - was choose who they were loyal to, choose their master. Everybody served someone, put someone before themselves whatever their reasons might be, even those few who fancied that they did not. Everybody, whether it was her brother Arthur - who had made his decision young, and in a more final fashion then most; whether it was Hand of The King Tywin Lannister, who despite The King's public suspicion has labored tirelessly in his service at the expense of all else; even the King, in his own way, served future generations, served grandsons and great-grandsons of his line who were yet unborn. The King was terrified of posterity, of the world that would come after him, and of the thought of his legacy a lesser estate for his children and grandchildren to inherit then the one that had come to him.

And these men were fixtures, the axis around which the world revolved around, but when they were no more the world would replace them. Though it is not proper to think so, they are lords and kings and princes, such men lived before them and such will still be born afterwards. Ashara was loyal to Elia. Even beyond her family, it was Elia who had made Ashara, Elia who had found her a place where she mattered, recognised her quick wits and seen her potential, who trusted her and confided in her, and so it was Elia who Ashara was loyal to. Completely, and without exception. Ashara preferred to live in the present rather then dwell in the past, but she was grateful to the Princess in a way that she thought that she could never have hoped to be able to explain - if not for Elia, had she not been sent to court she would have been brought up by someone else and thus have become another Ashara with another life. The Ashara who she is now is someone that she is quite pleased to be, and she is someone she never could have become without Elia's careful work shaping her. It is goes beyond the opportunity for advancement, the recognition and importance, the trust and lessons she has received. It is something understood rather than said aloud, something that doesn't have a place in this world run by rules and laws and honour, by the class a person is born into, by the strong at the expense of the rest. Her father and mother may have brought her into this world, but it is Elia who showed her how to live in it.

Perhaps it was a kind of obligation. But Ashara didn't see it that way. Obligations, gratitude, debt - it all added up the same, doing something for someone. But it was as much for yourself as the other person, each time you do something for someone else you did it for yourself as well. At least, so it seemed to her.

It was a mild spring day in the gardens. Birds chirped. They were high enough above the stagnant stuffiness of the city, fanned by a fresh offshore wind. Beyond the city was Blackwater Bay, the harbour dotted with colourful sails, and beyond that was the sea; grey-green, sparkling in the
morning sun, flecked here and there with the white dots of sails.

Two days ago, they had ridden beyond the city for a day in the countryside, and she had been herself, uninhibited - and so had Elia. Today, the princess of Dorne was composed. She sat primly on the marble bench, very still, with her hands folded in her lap, as if she were sitting for a portrait. If Ashara tried to sit like that, she would fidget, or yawn, or try to catch the eye of anyone she could see, or she would go too far and make faces, and it would look assumed and artificial, like she was contriving to appear something she was not. But Elia settled into it naturally - she was a real princess, as naturally royal as her husband. A year ago they had praised her, called her the most beautiful woman in the world - and it had not just been hollow flattery. But she had fallen pregnant twice since then, and it had taken it's toll - her features had preserved their beauty, but had lost their vitality and health. Her nose was sharper, her eyes more sunken, the dimples, which a year ago had shown in the corners of her dusky cheeks, had become little wrinkles.

Now they say Elia is sickly, that she is weak, that she is frail, that she is unhealthy. Those who say that do not know her. What is strength? It meant fixity of purpose in the face of everything. It meant enduring what could not be changed. It means having the strength to live with what limits you.

The three of them sat around her, skirts spread like pressed flowers on the swept marble floor. Ashara breathed deeply, appreciating the fragrant smells of the rows of flowers that the gardeners had managed against all odds to cultivate all through winter. Elia had preferred to be outdoors for the last three months, ever since Grand Maester Pyrcelle had subjected her to a final long and intrusive examination before finally pronouncing her recovered from the birth of the princess, a confinement that had lasted half a year. Since then, Elia had preferred the fresh air as much as possible, and the Princess was never alone, she went everywhere with attendants from her household. It was quiet, save the distant sound of many voices from the Chapter House where an impromptu itinerant Council was being held.

Today Elia had two of her ladies accompanying her in addition to Ashara, to lady Blount and to Septa Elvira - Lady Lemore Jordayn, Elia's secretary and Ashara's oldest friend as well as great-niece of the famous Seneschal Jordayne, who was dressed in a deep blue gown with very wide sleeve that only reached her elbows, and a veil of silk attached to the upper part of it, which could be - at her pleasure, either drawn over the face and bosom after the Dorneish fashion, or disposed as a sort of drapery round the shoulders as it was right now. She also wore midnight-blue stockings that she rather daringly showed through a slit at the side of her gown (all the way up to the hip!), and fetching slippers with gold-embroidered toes and gold laces. She was embroidering a counterpane to keep her hands busy.

Lady Lemore was likewise certain of her loyalties - Lemore, the third daughter following four sons - was possessed of a title which in practice meant less than that of chamberlain or equerry. Lady Lemore, who at home had no future at all, a slim, bony thing, shy and easily startled who preferred books to people, hanging around the castle where she was no good to anyone. Elia had given her a life, and she owed everything to her.

The other was Lady Erin Yronwood, the richest heiress in Dorne (saving Princess Arianne) and the Princess's chief maid, who like Lemore took her cues from home, wearing an under-gown and kirtle of pale sea-green silk, over which hung a long loose robe of fine wool. She sat peeling a winter apple with a silver knife, and her hair was a halo of brown and red and gold around face, with it's long nose and wide grey eyes with lashes so long that sometimes she could lick them - a carefully cultivated effect. Erin Yronwood had a curiously volatile character - amounting almost to heedlessness, which permitted her to pass instantaneously from abject misery to an absurd optimism - she could suddenly stop weeping because a bird was singing beyond the wall - who believed in signs, every kind of sign, and dreamed as unceasingly as other women stitched.
Today Elia was wearing the colours of the family she had married into instead of her own, a gown of red and black pinned with a silver dragon at the hollow of her neck. Her pregnancy seemed more prominent today, the swell of her belly more evident. She was unescorted - Elia didn't need a guard in the palace, but Mael was lurking around unobtrusively in case the desire came on to them to send for something.

The five of them, Ashara and Elia, Lemore and Erin, Septa Elvira and Lady Blount were all watching the other princess - the princess of all seven kingdoms, not simply of Dorne. At the moment, the princess was occupied crawling all over the garden. For all the pain to bring her into the world, Ashara doubted that there had ever been a healthier, more delightful infant, eleven months, and already so energetic, bubbling with it like a cauldron over a hot fire. The little princess could go surprisingly - sometimes alarmingly - fast. And if she found anything she thought was interesting, it was liable to end up in her mouth before her mother or her nursemaid or anyone else could take it away from her. Little Rhaenys didn’t appreciate her mother’s vigilance any more than she appreciated the vigilance of her mother's friends, or of Lady Blount. As far as she was concerned, everything she could crawl towards was supposed to go into her mouth. How could she tell what it was if she couldn’t taste it? She fussed and squawked when Lady Blount took things away from her, and her chin wobbled, but would quickly find something else to fixate upon.

She had been named Rhaenys, a woman who might be remembered romantically here, but in Dorne it was a name remembered only with fear and with hate. Her father had named her that, while his wife had lay in her own blood, insensible and feverish, having lost more blood than the maesters at her bedside had insisted she could survive. Perhaps he'd meant it as a grand gesture, a way of burying the past, of reconciling what had separated them - for what's the point of breeding children, if each generation does not improve on what went before? But she could only guess, he rarely confided in Elia any more, so Elia could not confide in Ashara for him.

But even though that was her name, none of them ever called her that; each of Elia's Ladies-in-Waiting and the rest of her Household besides had their own pet name for the little princess. Some of them were quite inventive, others less so. They all adored her, despite her ill-omened name, despite - or perhaps because of how the princesses grandfather and his entire court and household had made their displeasure clear. And despite the fact that her father had not defended her.

The little princess might have had a Targaryen name, but she was Elia, her reflection, her in miniature save for her Targaryen eyes that seem a trifle too late for her tiny scrunched up face, and that she was rather more robust then the princess had ever been. She had the same up-tilted nose, firm chin, rosebud lips, and wide eyes. Her coloring had hints of red, but that was thanks to her Tully grandfather, who'd had red hair. Save the coloring of her eyes, there was nothing of Rhaegar in her at all. Her skin was precisely the same shade of warm brown as Elia’s, her hair, grown unequally in in thick tufts, would be the same lustrous silky black, and even her smell remind Ashara of home. Of Dorne.

Lady Lemore who was widely known as sensible - which seemed to mean that any of them could cry on her shoulders when they needed to - for all that she had a whimsical nature that loved stories and ballads about impossible ladies in towers or tied to rocks or lost in woods called the little princess Water lily, Ashara called her Nightjar - for the birds that sang softly in the evening at Starfall, when the air was still and the sun was beginning to set behind the Red Mountains. Lady Erin called her Sunbeam, andLady Larra Blackmont, back home in Dorne now and likely to stay there, had called her Marmot, though she had called her that as a term of endearment. Septa Elvira called her Rhae, an acceptable diminutive of her name by the common tongue but not in any way correct in Valyrian (not that the septa would care if she knew), and her mother Princess Elia Targaryen called her Yarouche, an old Rhoynish word that meant, simply, precious thing.
"Fuss all you like," Lady Blount told her after one rescue in the nick of time. "You can’t eat a dead wood beetle." By the way the infant wailed, you would suppose she was liable to be stunted for life if she didn’t get her fair share of dead bugs.

"Give her highness here, if she’s hungry." Elia requested, taking her daughter. Elia never commanded anyone to do anything, she made a careful point of that. Princess Rhaenys settled a little as her mother rested her against her shoulder, though her face worked furiously. Elia calmed her by rocking her gently, back and forth, along with some finger play and gentle tickles. When she was settled, Elia cleared her throat, and everyone turned away decorously while Elia undid her lacings, and retrieved a small brown nipple, which put an end to her daughter’s complaints. She sighed.

Behind her, Septa Elvira, made a face.

"What? Now you frown if I sigh?" Elia asked without needing to turn around.

The septa harrumphed. Her free hand fingered the seven-pointed star she wore at her neck. "If you must, try and be a little more circumspect. You sound like a whore pleasing a customer, mistress – if you’ll pardon the crudity of an old woman…"

"…who’s known you all these years," Elia completed the sentence. Indeed, she’d had Septa Elvira since she was weaned - Septa Elvira was almost fifty, an epoch in those days, with a disdainful eye and a sharp tongue - too old, in Ashara’s opinion, to remember what it was to be young and bursting with life. And yet, she was fond of Elia, and Elia obviously felt the same way for all her strictness and rigid outlook on life. "Well, thank you for your instruction, I had no idea. What do you know about the sounds whores make, Septa?" Elia asked, sounding so innocent you would have thought she was genuinely curious.

"Now, my lady!" Elvira began, stepping forward, wagging a finger, but Ashara couldn’t help herself and let out a giggle, then a moment later so did Lemore and Elia, and then they were laughing. Even Lady Blount looked amused. Rhaenys couldn’t have understood, but she laughed too, letting go of the nipple and dribbling milk as she did and waving her arms in imitation of her mother. Elvira, giving up on any hope of injured dignity in the face of that, stepped back, and lowered her hand, shaking her head. "Have it your way then, mistress."

Rhaenys squirmed. She didn’t go back to feeding, a little of the milk dribbling out of the corner of her mouth. Now she wanted her mother to put her down and let her crawl around, to explore the interesting shapes and textures of the gardens, to find new places where she’d never been before. To her, it was exciting. Elia said, “No,” to her daughter anyway, adding, “You’re not going to get to eat any bugs out here.”

Rhaenys attempted to protest, but she yawned instead, and Elia got to her feet, straightening her back as she did, and putting a fist into it to relieve the tension a little, before handing her daughter back to Lady Blount. All her ladies remained sitting despite the fact that the princess had stood up - this was an informal day, not high court, and they were all friends. "Well, I suppose we know now why you can’t sleep at night, little one. You’re wearing yourself out quickly, and sleeping through the day!"

She told her daughter as her nurse took her gently, her chin against Lady Blount’s shoulder. "Tuck her in to the crib in my room, if you wouldn’t mind. I’ll check on her shortly." Elia instructed.

"Your highness." Lady Blount was thirty-seven, with quiet hands. Her forehead was smooth but curiously narrow, her eyes were bright but too close together, her mouth was sarcastic; without being altogether hideous, there was nevertheless apparent that quality of ugliness which is imprinted by a wicked nature.

"And if it’s not too much trouble, soak some bread in goat's milk, honey and cloves. She'll be hungry
again soon." Elia continued.

Ashara would have wagered that Lady Blount had already intended to do that of her own initiative, but she inclined her head politely, dipped in a brief curtsey without disturbing the princess, then departed.

"She's getting to be a handful, isn't she?" Erin Yronwood said, shaking her head, and looking over her shoulder at the departing woman and her royal charge, before she disappeared behind the rose bushes.

"Well, she's a princess. If she didn't want to have it her own way, she'd make for a poor princess." Elia replied proudly. "Or did you mean Lady Blount?"

"You know she spies for the king?"

"You don't say?" Elia replied, faking astonishment, which was rightly considered an excellent joke. "This is King's Landing, everyone spies for someone. I am sure the Hand is spying on me, as is the Master of Whispers, and probably a number of other people. At least I recognise Lady Blount - the king doesn't concern himself with subtlety." If she had any further thoughts about entrusting her daughter to the woman, she kept didn't give any indication.

"I am afraid it will be a busy spring for all of us." Elia continued over her shoulder as she moved over towards the edge, where she could look down at the city that stretched below them, all the way to the bay. The jumble of roofs made for an almost pleasant view, when seen from such a height. Spring was her favorite season, same as it was Ashara's; the season of picnics, of frolics by the river, or eating fresh fruit, wearing flowers, walking barefoot… and tournaments. Ashara had been only fourteen for her last spring, and she had hoped to get more out of this one. "We will only have to take it one day at a time. And there is quite a lot to concern ourselves with today."

"May I say, you look as if you are ready to spit on your hands and begin work." Lemore told the princess.

"Perhaps I am. Erin, are you as knowledgeable about religion as you are about history?"

Lady Erin Yronwood bowed in her seat. "Religion is nothing but history, your highness."

Septa Elvira nodded approvingly, but Elia frowned. "Well, it is to concern us for the next fortnight. Since the King had his spiritual reawakening, it his intention that the Spring Feast be a time of solemn reflection - as is traditional."

"Is it?" Ashara found herself asking. It didn't sound right to her.

Elia shrugged, a little helplessly.

"Well, kings tend to get their way." Ashara conceded. "And with the queen - "

"indisposed." Erin interrupted before Ashara could say the wrong thing.

"- we're to host it in her place?"

"That is what the king requested." Elia nodded, the previous impression of helplessness growing more evident. She had no idea how the spring feast was habitually celebrated, and was inventing it essentially from scratch - and had only two weeks to do it. "Well, I suppose we'd best begin with a letter to the High Septon. Lemore?"
"Ready, your highness." said Lemore, and she produced, not the expected horn inkwell, but instead a young page clad in Elia's livery, who had a heavy leather bag on his shoulder. He knelt and offered her a lap desk and a roll of parchment, which she gratefully accepted before he bowed to the princess, and departed back to wherever Mael kept him stashed when he wasn't in use.

"There you are." The voice was deep and husky, very much the voice of a musician, and it cut Elia off from dictating the letter before she could even begin. For a moment, as Ashara turned, the prince met her eyes. They were old eyes in a fine-featured, youthful face.

Rhaegar Targaryen was tall, broad-shouldered and slim-hipped. He wore his long hair bunched and pinned at the nape of his neck and, for an obscure reason he'd never explained, affected to dress in borrowed styles - though always with his own mark upon it. Today he was dressed in a beautiful robe, crimson grosgrain so deep and rich in colour that it was almost black, lined with embroidered sarcenet along the hems and foxfur around the collar, tied at the front with a white sash and a silver knight's belt, both contrasting boldly with the dark colours of his clothing. It was the habit of Rhaegar to wear red every day, just red, always red, but he varied it - varied the weaves, the weights, the degrees of dye and pigment according to weather and to caprice, but always the best, he would never settle for less then the very best clothes, the very best reds. Even the rings on his fingers were rubies and blood diamonds, garnets and fire opals and zircons in delicate silver settings. The overall effect was faintly reminiscent of the Magisters of the Three Cities, though the heavy knight's belt of linked silver and steel plaques around his hips and his high leather boots went against this impression, to say nothing of the long, archaically fashioned blade that he wore at his hip, which taken together were sufficiently martial to offset the rest.

To Ashara's discerning eye the effect was tasteless and gaudy, and did not match his sensitive face and long-fingered, almost delicate hands, yet he flaunted it anyway, since it emphasised how he stood apart, how he never could quite belong or feel comfortable in any company. Even that of Ser Arthur Dayne, and Ser Barristan Selmy, the two men he was closest to in all the world, who he trusted before all others. Ser Myles Mooton of Maidenpool, The prince's former squire and the son of a court favourite accompanied them as well, though it was hard for any man to shine in such company as that.

The ladies all rose gracefully and curtsied as he crossed over to his wife, Lemore pushing aside her table and parchment. Lady Erin's lips moved as she watched him. She too was assessing the crown princes attire, estimating the length of the fabric, the cut of the cloth, the quality while Ashara's unschooled eyes saw only colour and texture.

"I thought I heard your voices. Seele of the day, my love." Rhaegar told Elia, taking her hand bringing it gently to brush with his lips, then pulled her against him as if they were newly wed, smiled down into her face and kissed her nose.

"Do you have a command for me, Your Highness, or is this a private visit?"

"I haven't decided yet. It is good to see you. And your ladies as well. Ashara - we are all informal today. Erin. And… Lemore? I find you… you are dazzling. Which, if I may, is not how I am used to seeing you."

"If the occasion is right, your Grace, I'm not adverse to make an effort!" She said with a fetching curtsey, lifting her hem to show her ankles and a hint of dancer's legs. The comment was so at odds with her usually severe demeanour, downcast eyes, and ever-present stylus ends and wax tablets that Ser Arthur Dayne shook his head in amazement, Ser Barristan snorted and Ser Myles Mooton, who had been quite enamoured by the secretary from time to time and might have been one of the gentleman paying her court if she'd had any interest in him, felt that feeling rushing back, as he found
his throat a bit tight and his face flushed. Prince Rhaegar only raised his eyebrows, and politely kept
himself from asking just what the occasion might be.

"Well, it is fine to see you all, although I note the lady I was hoping to meet is nowhere to be seen. I
thought she was accompanying you?"

"Sadly you just missed her." Elia replied, a touch playfully - displaying such genuine emotion that
anyone save Ashara probably didn't see the hurt there. Things between them were not what they had
been - and likely never would be again. "She is indisposed for now."

"A shame." He sighed. His deep eyes passed over her ladies a second time, before gently focussing
on her wife, and sliding his hands down on to her stomach, leaning her weight against him. After a
moment, Elia relaxed into his arms. "So when is this precious one due?"

"In the summer," Elia replied. "And more than that…"

"Yes?"

"I think he will be a boy."
Rhaegar's head jerks up, his face filled with joy. "You do? You have signs?"

"Just intuition. Women's fancies. But I think so. I hope so."

"Ah, my dear, you are a good wife. You are my beauty. You are my only love." He holds her
tightly. "Before you know it, he will be a young man standing taller than you, and we will have to
consider what sort of a king we have made. His name will be Aegon - it's been too long since we
have had an Aegon in the family, and he will be as wise and as beautiful as his mother."

"So we may hope, though we have more immediate concerns." Elia replied, twisting out of his grip.
"My ladies and I were just concerning ourselves with the upcoming Spring Feast."

"Good that somebody is. I admit that my knights and myself were concerning ourselves with
Harrerhal. It's lord Whent's show, of course, but..." He shrugged modestly. "Well, we'll all do our
best. We've been at the stables, picking mounts. Nothing but the best for something like this, of
course."

"We live in marvellous times," Ashara breathed. Since she'd first heard it mentioned, her imagination
had been afire with excitement at the thought of the Tournament at Harrenhal, so much so she almost
didn't notice Erin Yronwood narrowing her bright blue eyes at the Crown Prince.

Ser Myles Mooton looked at her and shrugged. "I expect all times are marvellous to those who live
in them, Ashara."

Ashara couldn't think of a response to that which wouldn't make her sound childish, so she ignored
dignity entirely and stuck out her tongue. He only shook her head.

"I worry, there are times I think she won't notice when I am not around. Or she will forget me, when
I'm gone." Rhaegar told his wife - then continued before she could ask him what he meant. "After
our son is born, I intend to take a few months, set them aside for errantry. I want to be away from the
court for a while and think of things that matter and not things that are of the everyday." His gaze
had wandered away from her, and he was watching the ocean again, the reflection of the light
lending his eyes a vagrant gleam, wayward and wild and bright. "I want to ride between towns and
castles without stopping, to rise at dawn to pray, to visit septs and holy places and, whenever there is
no religious house for me to spend the night, I want to sleep under the stars and seek out The Seven
in the silence.” He smiles. “I have to have silence to hear the voice of Seven Gods,” he told her. “And silence to write songs of my own. And silence to be myself.”

“But you will come back?”

“I haven't yet left! But I will. Within a few months. I could not stand to be long parted from you, my love,” he promised her, then kissed her, a quick peck over before it had begun, and stepped back to his men, who left with him. Ashara watched them leave. Elia, she knew, at times felt envious of their masculine freedoms, for all that feminine wiles were often more effective than male bluster. Entering a second pregnancy so soon after her first, she was confined to narrow indoor pursuits. The men would talk jousts and tournaments, of life and the politics of the court interspersed with enthusiastic discussions about whatever they wanted to discuss, they would cement alliances, brag, show off, and vent their excess energy in vigorous exercise.

Elia would talk to their wives, daughters and wards. She would talk to her friends. She would wander the corridors, or the gardens. It was Spring, but there would be few days in the countryside for Elia.

Ashara's brother, Arthur Dayne the Sword of the Morning was shaking his head. "Could that poised young woman with the lovely ankles be my sister?" he asked the other two men, his voice carrying. "Need they pluck so much of their foreheads and show quite so much leg?" Ashara wondered where he got off, acting such a prig.

Ser Barristan Selmy only laughed, unabashed. "When I was coming to manhood women wore sacks in layers. I would be a liar if I said I didn't prefer the modern taste."

"Your husband, highness, doesn't seem to be facing the same challenges as the rest of us." Erin Yronwood said when the men were gone.

"How so?"

"Not two days ago you warned us of the dire state of the Realm's finances. Yet your husband still seems to have acquired a new robe."

"Likely a gift." Lemore said, recovering her table and her scroll. "People are always giving The Prince gifts."

"And there were three new stones on his fingers." Erin continued. "And he had a fitting a week ago. No. Your husband, at least, is getting money from somewhere."

Chapter End Notes

And we finally meet Rhaegar Targaryen. That means I've finally introduced (most of) the main characters. Took me long enough, right? Also, we meet Rhaenys Targaryen.
Chapter Summary

Being the best is a lot of work, as the Kingsguard has good reason to know. You spend all your life struggling and striving, and what do you get back? More struggling, more striving.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ser Barristan Selmy was taking exercise. Age had not prevented him from swinging his sword at a pell – or at the other four men-at-arms he’d carefully selected and instructed to spar with him that morning, that he’d worked his way through. He liked to vary who he crossed blades with, to keep himself from getting too comfortable and set in his ways. This week, Ser Barristan Selmy had been at the pell seven times already. His back ached. His shoulders ached. His wrists ached. His hands burned.

But nobody becomes a great knight simply by wishing it, and when he was ten, Ser Barristan had decided he would be the greatest knight in the world, and since then that had been all that had mattered to him. He trained constantly. Ser Barristan had spent most of his adult life in his white cloak, and there were times when he gazed at the arches of blue sky, felt a light breeze stroke his face and remembered distant spring days when he had competed in the tour use with the elation of youth, taking ransoms beyond count and winning every prize. He had ridden in the entourages of kings and queens, life pounding through him with the speed and the strength of a galloping horse. Yet all it had amounted to was a small grain in a great mill. While he saw to his duties, the wheels of history were turned by the constant bustle of officials and messengers, clerks, priests, soldiers, servants, and hordes of supplicants, their pouches draining of silver as they sought to bribe their way through ushers and stewards to the King’s ear.

Bleached sunshine lit the day, and imparted enough warmth that he felt hot and uncomfortable as well as exhausted. Ormun, a young but talented man-at-arms who might just have the makings of a great knight if court didn't spoil him first, backed out of range and raised his sword in submission. "Well cut, Ser Selmy," he said - everyone was all knightly courtesy while they had live swords in their hands, it was one of Ser Willem Darry's rules, and Barristan thought it to be plain good sense. He would have recommended such behaviour to any man-at-arms - heightened awareness deserved heightened courtesy.

Ser Barristan grinned at the acknowledgement, but only inside his visor where it wouldn’t show. In that moment, all younger men were the enemy.

Ormun didn't say anything else - he wasn't a knight, and chivalry was a closed company. But chivalry’s day was coming to an end, or so Barristan thought despairingly as he glanced around the courtyard. Ser Laban of Griffin's Roost, he noticed, was late to the drill. He looked tired, and he moved slowly, and he leaned on the tall stone wall surrounding the courtyard and watched the knights and men-at-arms at practice. Ser Barristan suspected it came from a prolonged bout of drinking the night before, yet he could relate. He felt as if the world had been altered or made suspect somehow, and that he’d only just seen through it. As if now that he had, he was afraid that he might
never see it made right again for however long he lived. Or worse, as if he did see it right at last, as if
at long last he saw it as it had always been, would forever be - now that his basic illusions were at
last exhausted.

Of course ser Barristan was not really looking at the tiltyard and the men putting themselves through
their paces, chivalries last meagre inheritors, he was instead imagining all the courtiers who infested
the castle that were nowhere to be found. It had been different when he had been a young man, in
the days of old king Aegon. But his son and grandson were lesser men. They lacked his will, and his
greatness of spirit. Sir Barristan was uncomfortable with that thought, and couldn't have said here it
came from, yet it was his, and he'd had it, and he believed it as well, Seven help him.

More and more, he seemed to live in the past, in the memories of what had come before. Ser
Barristan had never been much of a reader, learning had never come naturally to him. But he had
made the effort, and often found himself glancing through the pages of the White Book, where the
deeds of his predecessors had been recorded. It was a great legacy to live up to, but it's beneficiaries
and protectors grew fewer. A day would come, and come soon, when moss would grow in the tilt
yard, when swords and armor would rust where they lay forgotten, and men of blood would no
longer be respected or honored. The days to come would be the days of the moneylender and
creditor, the days of landlord and book-keeper, of the swaggering adventurer; of sophisters,
economists, and calculators; the days in which the merchants and bankers would sit together to
decide the future, with kings and lords as their servants and waiting boys, and the glory of Westeros
would be extinguished for ever.

And they had taken their first steps into that world now, what he was seeing here was only the
beginning of a bitter descent that would leave them all less then they were. Men who measured their
worth not where it mattered, but in whether young money counted for more than old blood. Whether
control of a river counted for more than how many smallfolk worked upon their estates, or how
many soldiers they could field. Less in honour, less in accomplishment.

At last, Ser Barristan opened his visor with an audible click and looked at the younger man — not so
young, really, almost of age with Ser Arthur Dayne, and flicked his sword in a precise salute as
though his bones weren't aching with fatigue, then lowered his blade. Ormun looked visibly relieved,
having obviously taken the knight's reticence for some sort of rebuke. Then he put down his sword.
There were risks, training with live steel, but it was only by playing with sharp weapons that a man
would lose his fear of them. "You saw what just happened. And just like that, the fight is over and
you are dead." Ser Barristan told him.

Ormun shook his head. "Yes." He conceded after a heartbeat.

Ser Barristan frowned. "You know what the worst fault of most knights is? The one which kills
them?"

The man-at-arms shrugged. "They don’t listen?" he said.

Despite himself, his frown turned to a small smile. Perhaps youth wasn't entirely wasted on the
young afterall - though there were times when he thought it was just as well that The Seven Gods
kept the truths of life from the young as they were starting out or else they’d have no heart to start at
all, and others where he thought that he'd gotten old enough that he was beginning to mistake his age
for wisdom. "That's not a bad answer. But no. It is that they think they are much better than they
really are, and they are not careful. You have only one skin. Only one life. And if you are careful
with your blade, you can win many fights against men who should have killed you. Do you know
what I did to you? Really did?"

Barristan found his gaze settling on Scully, thick waisted and careful, and Tomas. Both were old
soldiers, unknighted men-at-arms who had been in harness for decades. They circled and circled, taking no chances. Ser Barristan thought he might fall asleep watching them, but thought that a knight could learn more from watching them then watching most flashier knights. "Showed me how much there still was to learn?" Ormun asked.

Ser Barristan didn't answer, he just sighed, nodded to his opponent and sat down on the reinforced bench in his amour, signaling for water, which one of the pages provided after a few moments in a ewer. Ser Barristan drank deeply. It was a warm day, for so early in Spring, but it was not the heat of the day that made him thirsty.

There was no sense in worrying about it, of course, the world would change, the tide would come in or it would come out. There was no sense in his worrying about it, that was not his charge, but the king's. And it was not for the likes of him, to try and influence the king. The white knights were sworn to obey the king's commands in all things, to guard his life down to the last breath in their bodies, to keep his secrets, counsel him when counsel was called upon but to keep quiet when it was not, to defend his name and honor, to never judge him and to fight in his name when required, but that was all. King Aerys always had at least one of them by his side. Usually, they would guard the rest of his family as well, his sister-wife, his sons. But today, all his esteemed brethren only Ser Llewyn Martell was with him as he paced around his chambers fretting about things - ser Grandison had been on duty all night, and was taking his ease in the White Tower. The Lord Commander, Ser Gerold Hightower was cutting at a pell, looking far from his usually wise, composed self. Ser Gerold was older than Ser Barristan, his hair and beard were snow-white before it's time, all cut to the same length, making a frame for his face. He was strong as a bull, so that's what they called him - the sword looked like a toy in his great, scarred fist and the breadth of his shoulders left no doubt that the epithet was well-deserved, but he looked more like an owl, or so Ser Barristan had always thought.

Ser Willem Darry was master-at-arms, but it was ser Gerold who they all looked to for guidance and direction, and everyone knew it including ser Willem Darry. Ser Gerold was a great knight, at home both in the battle-camp and the court, he knew how to roister and how to be refined. And despite rivalry in feats of arms being encouraged among knights on the practice field, and the existence of a clear and present hierarchy, the atmosphere was comfortable and the jesting largely without teeth. It was ironic, sir Barristan pondered. Whereas the court itself was a constant battlefield of wits, where the wrong word or an unwise alliance could destroy a man and one’s enemies were never met face to face, for, as often as not, the killing blow was to the defenceless back, that training for war was so comparatively calm.

Ser Oswell Whent had sent a squire for his war sword and was pacing. In contrast to the careful purposefulness that Ser Gerold possessed, Ser Oswell Whent moved like a greyhound, all long legs and stride, with the sort of athletic fluidity that came naturally to him, as well as to Ser Llewyn Nymeros Martell, and to Ser Arthur Dayne. Ser Barristan strove for it; it was the mark of the very best men-at-arms.

Ser Rodric Vivar had talked of a due order of chivalric effort. He had said that 'he who does the most is worth the most'. And he was quite specific about what 'doing most' meant. Fighting in a tournament was better than not fighting; traveling to fight was better than fighting at home. Fighting in war for your lord was better than any tournament, fighting far away from home was better. Best of all was fighting for the gods, in a cause untainted by the uncertainties of people, but it was enough, most of the time, to fight for your king, who it was up to the gods to choose, not up to the man. Ser Rodric Vivar, whom had fought for his king and who Barristan had helped kill during the Ninepenny Wars, didn't invent those ideas. Those ideas were as old as knighthood. But he had codified them for all - for the fighting class, the ordo of chivalry. He'd been as much a scholar as a knight. And he'd lived by them, for better or worse.
"There are times…” He started to say to nobody in particular, then quieted himself and shook his head. Without much thought, his eyes settled on Ser Arthur Dayne. The Sword of Morning was by himself. He had steel gauntlets and his arming coat on, but he was merely playing. It was something Ser Barristan had seen with troubadours and musicians - or the Prince, of course, and his famed harp with the strings of spun silver. They simply played an instrument, making odd sounds, slapping the sounding board or thrumming the strings to see what new sound that they could find. Arthur Dayne was like that with his celebrated greatsword Dawn, blade as pale as milkglass as he swung it this way and that.

Ser Jonotor Darry was not neglecting his training, but rather than putting it to practice he was conversing in animated fashion with his brother Ser Wilhelm Darry, about The Master-At-Arms of the Red Keeps notions of sword and spear play. Both were great knights by any measure, but Willem Darry was still coming into his own, growing in confidence in his own methods, and experimenting in how to teach them to other people. With his left hand Ser Jonotor was twisting his greying whiskers, while his right rested on his sword the entire time, as if he wanted to hide the ornate pommel of the hilt from his brother's eyes. The Master-At-Arms was gesturing avidly as he made a bearlike shuffle, trying to impress the idea on his brother. Willem Darry had florid good looks running to flesh at the jowls. His tunic buttonholes gaped with the tension from a paunch, but he moved easily and he was solid rather than flabby - his brother was small and sinewy. He had the approval of both the King and Crown Prince, which, ser Barristan was aware, was something of a novelty in the royal household these days - even if Tywin Lannister didn't feel the same. The king and his Hand were quarrelling again over appointments and policy, but ser Barristan had small interest in that dispute for it never went anywhere and it impinged little on his daily life.

It was a familiar sight to see the two brothers together discussing this, ser Willem was as avid for weapons as a young septon was for his gods, and he approached the study of them in much the same way. Sir Willem, when he talked about arms, actually described his own, personal theory of fighting, a theory of how to train, much like the way the theologians with whom Ser Barristan had discoursed with as a young man had theories on the divinity of the Seven who were One, or the separation of spirit and flesh, or the nature of blessings administered by Septons. Today, Ser Willem was attempting to impress upon his brother his idea that the forming of the first cross in a fight determined all the actions that followed until the two combatants broke apart, or one was hit. And the process by which the combatants came together in the first place.

Ser Barristan had been knighted at ten, and had fought for his life enough times to lose the epithet 'The Bold'. Now he was cautious, depending on what painfully won experience had taught him worked - basic principles, mostly - and in all those fights he had never thought of any of those things. But Ser Willem did, all the time. It was like he wanted to reinvent swordsmanship entirely from scratch. He would stand watching them, purse his lips, shake his head, and Ser Barristan would wonder what it was he was doing wrong? Another day, he had suggested that they fought to music - because fighting has a rhythm to be exploited, of course. It made Ser Barristan shake his head, but he couldn't deny the effectiveness of the lessons.

Ser Whent's war sword had at long last arrived, and he took it from the page and attacked his pell ferociously, raising splinters and then cutting them away. The Lord Commander Ser Gerold Hightower saw what he was doing and redoubled his efforts in silent competition, the two trying to display themselves to best effect. But wood chips were not particularly satisfying, not in the mood they all seemed to be in, tense, impatient.

After a moment, the bench sagged just barely perceptibly, as Ser Arthur Dayne sat beside him, still carrying his heirloom blade unsheathed. Like many brilliant men, he tended to ignore the rules when he felt like it. Most men would have strutted with such a magnificent sword, using it's lethal beauty to enhance themselves, but Ser Arthur did no such thing.
"Woolgathering, Selmy?" Ser Arthur asked the older man, grounding the point of his weapon as he did. Ser Arthur was a young man, with fair hair and an open face, with kind eyes and a reliable or faithful expression, that could be taken for stupid or gormless but actually suggested he was a good learner who enjoyed being alive and sincerely hoped others felt the same way. It was only his eyes that went against this impression, the same old, sad eyes as the Crown Prince. He grinned, exposing even white teeth marred by a missing incisor. "You look miles away."

"You have my measure." Ser Barristan admitted, a hint of a smile playing at his lips. "Though perhaps not so far as that. I was musing on the future of knighthood."

"Then I've interrupted you. My apologies." Ser Dayne replied. "Has Rhaegar" Barristan thought it unseemly to refer to the crown prince with such familiarity, though he was used to it, "told you who will have the pleasure of joining him at Lord Whent's tournament?" Even when the king had left his keep, it had been unusual for more than half their number to compete.

"That's a long way off yet." Sir Barristan replied, a little regretfully. "Don't worry, you'll have the pleasures of court and the Spring feast that Princess Elia will have your sister organise to tide you over before we ride to Harrenhal. After that, a tournament will seem easy by comparison, I promise you." He was silent for a moment then asked, "Can I assist you with something?"

"Perhaps, though speaking of my sister, I wonder. Do you think I haven't noticed, the way you look at her?" Arthur asked.

Ser Barristan didn't deny it. Of course, Ashara was very comely at seventeen, honest and seemingly artless yet still much practiced at coquetry. He wasn't much to look at anymore himself - crow's-feet around his pale blue eyes, hair and his beard having turned to salt-and-pepper, and there wasn't a thing to make a man feel older than an infatuation with a younger woman - particularly one a third of his age. Perhaps if he'd met her as a young man things would have been different - but he doubted it, he'd never had any skill at such things, never been good at expressing himself with words, or with anything at all save his sword, and he doubted she would have noticed him. As it was she wasn't much besides fantasy and occasional mild regrets. There wasn't any sense in wishing things were different. They weren't, and never could be.

It was not that he never felt tempted. But there came a time in a man's life where temptation stopped seeming so serious, and became merely foolish. Childish, almost. Afterall, a man was only as good as he was. The difference between a good man and a bad one was as simple as that. "If you are accusing me of betraying vows that we both hold dear..." he let his voice trail off.

"I have put you out of temper." Arthur said, with a sigh and holding up his hands. "I mean nothing by it, I only wonder. What happened to us? Once, we loved our comrades in battle - and our families, sometimes. We didn't expect to love our wives, although some husbands were lucky. We lay with women for sport. Now everything's upside down. The troubadours songs are all about romantic love. All the new shrines to the Mother and the Maiden, and not just in The Reach where you expect that sort of thing. The world has changed..."

Ser Barristan was too struck by the similarity towards his own train of thought to respond, though he didn't think a growing romantic tendencies about women had much to do with it. But Ser Whent, who had put aside his sword with satisfaction, took it upon himself to reply.

"You sound" he said, taking a dry and deliberate tone that from another man would have sounded patronizing "like a fisherman, new to the realization that fish stink, boats make his stomach heave, and gulls give him a headache. And do you know another thing, Arthur? Life is too bitter already, without finding new reasons to make it so."
Ser Arthur looked at him for a moment, as though trying to decide whether or not he was being mocked, before he sighed and shrugged. "Well, perhaps I am. Perhaps this is nothing new." He sighed. "This land is hard on people. You can't stop what's coming. It isn't waiting for you to be ready for it, and it's vanity to think otherwise. But…"

"But nothing." Sir Whent said, and now, he was serious. "Our place is to serve."

Arthur's lip curled.

Ser Gerold Hightower, still at the pell, lowered his sword and turned, entirely composed, to look at the younger man. "This is something you need to get out of your system, I see."

"What would you know about it?" Sir Arthur snapped.

Ser Gerold's calm and carefully neutral response only provoked Ser Dayne all the more. "If you prefer to fight, and spare discussing this, say so." The Lord Commander said, then gestured to Dawn, naked in his hand. "But not with that. You shouldn't use sharps while you are so emotional."

Ser Dayne bared his teeth, then tossed his weapon to one of the squires without a word and stripped away his doublet, opening the lacings as fast as his fingers would go. Ser Hightower was slower, more sedate, even purposeful.

Out on the ground, packed hard as steel, the two Kingsguard, naked to the waist, were circling. Ser Arthur Dayne moved first. He seized one of Ser Gerold's arms, and the older man took control, wrapped him in a tight embrace and held him gently. It didn't seem to take the Lord Commander much more effort than a man boning a chicken.

"You good?" He asked. He hadn't even bothered to throw the smaller knight.

Ser Arthur struggled loose and leapt away. His eyes narrowed. The two gathered themselves quickly, The White Bull Ser Gerold Hightower breathing deeply and calmly, Arthur Dayne cool and watchful. He feinted to his left, and when Ser Gerold shifted his footing he came from the other direction swift as a swooping hawk.

Ser Hightower responded quickly but he managed to land a fist, a glancing blow, no more, at the older man's temple. Still, his fist opened the skin there, and Ser Gerold bent lower, his expression of mild pleasure becoming one of joyous ferocity, a trickle of blood falling down his face like a dark ribbon and gathering in his beard.

"Uh oh." Ser Oswell Whent muttered to Ser Barristan, so low it was scarcely audible. In the training square, the crack and clash of steel had faded as the other men who hadn't already paused in their training to stand and watch. This would be something worth spectating.

Ser Gerold caught Arthur's wrist and then turned and threw him, face first. The Sword of Morning landed badly, he rolled, but The White Bull was atop him before he could right himself, caught an arm and forced him none-too-gently back to the ground. "Yield." Ser Gerold told him. But he was a second too soon. Ser Arthur turned inside the grab and spun under Ser Gerold's arm, avoiding the dislocation of his shoulder and getting back to his feet.

He didn't get far, Ser Gerold locked his arms around Ser Arthur's head and rocked him back and forth gently but irresistibly. "Yield." He repeated. The fight was over now.

But The Sword of Morning had other ideas. Ser Arthur bared his teeth and swung his feet forward in a way that made the other men wince for his neck, got a purchase, and tried to free his head.
Ser Gerold didn't hesitate. He let him go right away.

Quick as a viper, Ser Arthur got an arm under the Lord Commander's left arm as he let him loose, passed his head through, and attempted a throw.

Ser Gerold Hightower bellowed in real rage and hooked Ser Arthur's foot, kneed him ungentlely in the balls, then kicked his feet away. Ser Arthur whooped as the Lord Commander dropped him roughly to the ground. Ser Arthur fell, and did not get up.

“You stupid fuck!” Ser Gerold Hightower bellowed at his prostate form, sweat and spittle dripping off him. It was warmer than it had been, but The White Bull radiated heat from twenty paces like an oven left open. “I could have broken your fucking neck, left you maimed for life! Left you a fucking cripple! I had your fucking head in a lock, and I might have broken your fucking neck, like a dry twig! And you wouldn’t yield! What sport is that? You stupid fucking…”

Ser Arthur Dayne didn’t answer. He lay on the hard ground, face up, hands clasped between his legs, panting. His right leg lay at an odd angle.

“Fuck.” Ser Gerold said far more quietly, running a hand through his white hair, perhaps regretting his outburst. What Sir Arthur had done had been mad to the point of foolishness, and far from chivalrous, but it was hard to stay angry at such a pathetic sight. “I didn’t mean to hurt you so badly. Just teach you a bit of a lesson, give you a thing or two to think about.” He reached down and grabbed his fellow kingsguard's hand. “Come on. We’ll get some wine into you. You’ll be pissing blood for weeks to come, but you’ll feel better.”

Ser Arthur Dayne swallowed what was left of his belligerence and allowed the Lord Commander to drag him to his feet. The moment his legs were beneath him, he screamed and collapsed.

Ser Arthur Dayne, Sword of the Morning came to almost immediately. The other knights were clustered around him, staring down. "What were you thinking?" Ser Barristan was asking Ser Hightower, though he was still looking at sir Arthur. Ser Whent was shaking his head. Ser Arthur Dayne stuttered something, and ser Hightower was pulling his shirt back on. Neither wanted to answer. It is surprising how quickly the greatest cause can become a petty squabble when you have to relate it to a third party.

"It's his ankle. It wouldn't take his weight." Ser Willem Darry said at last.

"Not after the way you kicked it out from under him, no." Ser Whent said to the Lord Commander, shaking his head. "Get the Grand Maester. He should take a look before we try to move him." The page who’d retrieved his war sword headed away to take care of it, and a couple of others went to find a stretcher.

"Of course, we can't blame you too much." Sir When continued mercilessly. "If you'd given him his own way, he'd have broken his own damn neck, and standing would be the least of his problems."

"True enough." Ser Barristan agreed.

Arthur gave his superior, who was staring down at him with an expression that could best be described as concerned, a shaky smile. “I think I’ll need a cup of wine. Maybe two.” One of the squires brought him a dipper of cold water, and he drank it gratefully.

“You had that coming.” Ser Barristan told him, and ser Arthur nodded, suddenly embarrassed at his behaviour.

"It was a good fight." Ser Arthur told the Lord Commander. His jaw was clenching with the pain,
and his face was pale, but he seemed almost himself. "I guess I got what I deserved for cheating. Sorry about that. I'm not myself."

"Really? I never would have guessed." Ser Hightower patted him on the shoulder carefully. "If you're going to cheat, learn to do it better." He suggested, and managed a smile. "Though it's not so bad. If I know you, you'll be limping in a week, and dancing in time for Harrenhal. Just you wait."

There was a cough, and the knights turned. Sir Barristan's eyes widened, as he saw Ser Llewyn standing there, his white cloak and white armor leaving no doubt he was on duty, his face carefully expressionless. Something about it silenced them as effectively as the King's presence would have.

"Shouldn't you be guarding the king?"

"Ser Grandison is dead, brothers." The dorneishman replied. "He passed in his sleep, not an hour ago."

Chapter End Notes

I was trying to write some male camaraderie between people I know almost nothing about - and was reluctant to invent too much about, since - in spite of everything - that scene in the first book with the Kingsguard is I believe to be one of the most powerful things that GRRM has ever written. These are people bound by their sense of honor. Of course, this is to be expected in a shame culture where reputation is everything.

We know that Ser Whent had a dark sense of humor, and that Ser Hightower is the one with always ready with the wise advice, while Ser Barristan - well, he wasn't a young man during the rebellion either, remember. He's the one who has given me the most to work with, I suppose. The plot moves forward a little - Jaime's inclusion in the Kingsguard looms. One or two chapters left to be told in King's Landing, then we'll have our first interlude and the story can go back to Winterfell for a bit. Finally, too all those people who have spared the time to comment, thanks so much. They do more to inspire me then you will ever know.
There was a round tower with a weather-cock on it, and a stone exterior staircase that wound up the
tower, two hundred and eight steps. The weather-cock was a rooster, it’s beak an arrow that pointed
which way the wind was blowing.

Winterfell was a sprawling castle, and had many towers. This one was named after the library it
housed, which occupied three entire floors and stretched beyond as well. The highest room,
however, had been converted into a comfortable solar, where Lord Rickard could at times be found
normally when he wished to avoid company, but at times because he wished to consult a text, to
review the words of foremost authority on some subject, or to draw on some obscure point of
precedent, history or law, and needed references. Many a time he and maester Walys could be found,
talking in low voices as they discussed something only obvious to the two of them. But tonight he
was not so occupied, he wasn’t even at his desk, instead staring out through the tall, westward facing
arched window, at the evening sky, or at the distant twinkle of light that was Wintertown.

The window had missing panels – some had been replaced with clear glass, others in horn, and a few
by weathered bronze. The fading sunlight outside cast the missing panes into sharp contrast – the
horn was too dull, the clear glass too bright, the metal almost black and sinister against the light. But
there was little to see save the light. Blizzards there were so much a fact of life that every peasant hut
had its doorway facing south or southeast, away from the direction from which the bad weather was
likeliest to come, and so facing away from the castle, a structure said to be as old as the Wall, as old
as the North itself. And Lyanna was part of that legacy, she thought, thinking on how many centuries
the unconquerable tower has withstood. It has changed hands by succession often, by siege once, by
treachery twice, but never, she had learned as a girl, by assault.

She sat beside him on her own chair, neither of them facing the other. Their backs were to the fire.
Between them was a simple stone table, with a whorl-necked decanter of wine and a knife for
separating sheafs grouped roughly at its centre. They were enclosed by walls lined with learning,
with philosophy, with records, with facts and with figures and with poetry that drifted or danced, all
bound in place by flax and calfskin and the cold weight of ink. “I do not know what to say.” She
said at last. They had gone hunting again that day, for the third time since Ned and his two friends
had arrived, since her betrothed seemed to enjoy it so much. It had only been a small, intimate hunt,
unlike the huge one that had been arranged at the start of the week. Her hounds had brought down a
pricket, a young male without antlers, though to hear Robert praise the dogs you would have thought
they had chased down the Wild Lord of the Forests itself. Then the moment she had dreaded had
come, and her father had taken the young Lord aside and there had been an exchange of betrothal
gifts. Now it was done, she was pledged, and her future decided. Her father had received a silver
clashed ivory horn - the tusk of an elephant - an heirloom some descendant of Robert’s had brought
back from some impossibly distant place that she would never see, and it had been presented to her
father was the tangible confirmation of her inescapable future.

“I do not know what to say,” she started again. “Except to say that I am unhappy. I am unhappy at
what you have decided for me, I am unhappy about how far away my home seems already though I
have not yet left, and how I regret that it is so.” She’d had all day to find a way of phrasing what was
on her mind. Now she found herself trying to fight an unexpected enemy. Tears.

After a brief silence, without going to her or even turning to look, Rickard sighed. "I am sorry you
feel that way. I know you don't believe me, but I am. But it is not a thing you should tell me, because
it is a thing nobody can come to terms with for you. That is something for you to settle." Despite his
age, Rickard’s face was smooth, almost devoid of wrinkles, for the Warden of the North rarely fell
prey to extremes of emotion.

"And who should I admit my unhappiness to if not my father?" She asked.

Rickard looked at the evening beyond the gleaming panes of the leaded glass window, then at the candles, then turned in his chair to look at the fire, as if searching in those places for an answer. Not once did he look at her.

"Happiness…” He said slowly, as if tasting the word, and finding it unfamiliar, as though it had changed since last he used it and he was only just noticing. "Happiness is a thing better made then searched for - nobody can make it for you. What is happiness, daughter, if not to conform to one's destiny? If it is not learning to say yes? Always to fate, and - sometimes - to men?" 

"You think you can reason with the heart?" She replied rhetorically, as if there could be no answer save the one that she had made up her mind was the correct one.

Rickard sighed. The heart, she knew he was thinking, was like any other organ - you can weigh it on a scale, measure it. Buy it - with some patience and care. To anyone save the person who listened to it, it was entirely unremarkable. The problem, she thought, was that he had forgotten what it was to be young. "Do you think any of us are?" He told her. “I am not marrying you to a man, but to a lord. I am not sacrificing you, Lyanna, but neither do I need to tell you what we owe to our lives and our positions and that we are not born to succumb to personal sorrows. We do not lead our own lives, but those of our kingdoms, and it is there alone that we can find content… if we conform to our destiny."

"This isn't me." She said. Her little hopes and daydreams didn't mean so much, perhaps, but despite his advice her father had always taught her to measure herself by her ability to do the things she'd said she would do, they were her. They were Lyanna, not Stark. She dropped her eyes, not wanting her father to see the resentment in them.

“You sound so sure of that.” Rickard said, and for the first time, he met his daughters eyes. “So sure of who you are.”

“Why shouldn’t I be?” Lyanna took a deep breath and tried to find some control. She swept her hair back from her face, and frowned ferociously. Anger was better than tears, or so it seemed to her. The fortress breathed louder in the evening, or so it seemed to her as she waited for him to reply. The oak pillars seemed to relax into the ground with comfortable creakings, the huge fire to hunker down gently in it’s own silken ashes, and the corners came quietly alive mice and moths and the whisper of spiders spinning their webs. But her father held his silence. At last he shook his head, and finally he turned in his seat and looked at her. She was so close, but he didn’t stretch out an arm, didn’t offer her comfort. He only looked. Then he sighed, and his answer was disappointing. “Because who you are should not be decided so quickly. All you know is what you have seen. What you have been told. You have a life to live yet, perhaps not the one you dream about, but…." He told her.

“And what would you know about it?” She drew herself up, and waved defiantly at the books collected over untold years.

Rickard sighed. “My father Roderick. They called him the Wandering Wolf. I used to listen to his stories, they filled my dreams, once. But I am a more… practical man, than my father. For all his stories of treasure and glory, do you see a single gem he brought to us? A medal, from some distant potentate? A proclamation from some king, thanking him? No. I am who I am, Lyanna. More than my children, it is The North that is my legacy. I am content in roads, and farms, in writs of patronage, and of trade, in charters and alliances. I am content in knowing I will leave the North a better place
than I found it. It is my duty, and a duty I take most seriously. And it is your duty too. Yearn for adventure, but remember your duty."

“And what if it is not what I want? What is I yearn for something more than a cage, one you have grown so used to that you have mistaken for the world?”

“You’re a woman now, Lyanna. Not a girl. I cannot tell you who to be.” He sighed. “I can only advise you to keep from foolish thoughts. Foolish thoughts lead to foolish deeds. And you know either are awful.”

I'm not going to start crying again, Lyanna told herself. I'm going to stay angry. I'm going to wind up the anger until it's thick enough to become rage, and then... what? She was already angry, but that wasn’t enough for her. Not then. She wanted to really lose her temper. To shout at him, to vent all the helpless anger and frustration that had been growing in her for what seemed as long as she could remember. But it wouldn’t do any good, any more than it ever had. “If you were my mother,” said Lyanna instead, “I could tell you everything that’s in my heart. You’d see that I ought not to go away.”

“I’m not your mother,” said Rickard. “I suspect that’s just as well, I don’t have the temperament for it. But if she was still with us, you’d find her as difficult to shift as I am.”

“I get down on my knees to you,” she said. “Please, let me decide for myself.”

He looked down at her. “You might as well get off your knees. I’ve made up my mind, even if you haven’t. That will have to do.”

She got up quite cheerfully. “You’ve made up my mind, too. I was in some doubt, but now I know what I want. I’ll go. You really should have let me consider things myself. But now I don’t wish to behave myself. I want to be as different as possible from you. I dare say I can manage it. I want—”

“Stop talking to me that way,” said Rickard. “You have lost your self-control entirely.”

“Oh no, not entirely,” said Lyanna. “But it wouldn’t matter. You are going to control me, if I understand you.”

“You've given me no choice.”

“By force. Your wits against mine.”

Rickard sighed. “If you like.”

“My poor mother!” said Lyanna. “Well, it’s not such a bad prospect, after all.”

Her piece said, she satisfied herself as best she could by getting to her feet, and storming out of the room. Her father didn’t watch her leave. He silently turned back to the window, and returned to his silent contemplations as she stomped her way down the stairs.

Once she got to the base of the tower, she took a deep breath and blew it out. She didn’t feel calmer, exactly, but with the high surge of her emotions subsiding a little, she was able to admit something to herself... admit it, and then voice it aloud. “I meant what I told him.” She said. And then, she said the next thing. “My life is mine, to do as I will. I am Lyanna, and if she is not the daughter my father wants, that is something he will have to learn to live with.” Her own boldness surprised her, but also scared her. That, she knew, was something she could never take back, even if she was the only one who heard it. Still, it had felt good to say it. The important thing was, she’d made a decision. What that decision was, what it meant, could wait.
Spring was late coming to the castle. An icy, rain-laden wind was threatening outside the thick walls of the keep, threatening to blow the new pale leaves from the trees and spitefully assailing the cornflowers and lupin and phlox and her favourites, the delicate blue silkflowers blooming tentatively in sheltered corners of the ward. It wasn’t just the weather that was making the winter bitter and delaying the spring, it had made things she usually quite enjoyed into a chore, and keeping her indoors when she longed to roam. Even the flowers that had been freshly gathered and tied in bunches around the courtyard seemed to be sapped by the wind. From across the courtyard, she could hear the ringing of hammer on anvil.

Lyanna pulled her cloak tightly around her and made her way towards it on a whim. Winterfell had existed long before the reckoning of any history, and had grown with the slow conservancy of the First Men across the unknowable mists of the past. It was all ancient - the immemorial masonry: the towers, the tracts, but all that was left of the original structure, so Maester Kennet had concluded (Maester Walys had taught her when she had asked) was the cyclopean wall of unmortared stones that girded the First Keep, a squat and round drum tower which lay on the other side of the Library Tower and wasn’t much more than a ruin. Nobody had any use for that tower, any more then they had for the lichyard where the Kings of Winter entombed their favored servants beneath the earth, and both were neglected ruins. The wall, however, was still part of the castle’s outer fortifications, fourteen feet high and equally thick, with terraces on the inside from which those who had built it could hurl their flints at invaders. All along the outside of the wall they had embedded thousands of sharp stones in the scraw, each stone pointing outward. They had also built an underground treasure chamber which was also a subterranean passage for escape; a passage that led under the wall which only one person could crawl at a time on their hands and knees - if they didn’t mind the wet, the dark, or the feeling of the earth pressing against them, almost as if it was squeezing.

It was past this untidy wreckage of centuries that Lyanna crossed the courtyard, the stables to her right side and the main courtyard to her left, passing extensions and adaptations - passing ogham stones commemorating some long-dead king taken to be used as the foundation of towers built by Andal Hands, bastions built atop older fortifications, her home as long as she had known it. Winterfell towered above the little village of Wintertown huddled in it’s shadow.

Lyanna’s stomach rumbled softly, she hadn’t eaten since breakfast, hunting in the Wolfswood had eaten up most of the day and she’d avoided dinner. But rather then cross the courtyard to the kitchens as she’d been intending, she found her feet had a mind of their own, and took her past the stables and into the forge without quite knowing why. Perhaps the cheery light called to her, promising a respite from the chill air, or perhaps she simply wanted time to recenter herself. There was a blade buried in charcoal that the smith, Andre, held with tongs. A boy was pumping the bellows, harder and harder until the blade glowed. Satisfied, Andre retrieved it, took it to the anvil and began hammering.

Andre wasn’t a northerner, something immediately evident in a thousand tiny ways. There was no hair left on his head save a sparse grey fringe around his ears, but it had once been blond, and his eyes were a grey-blue. His face was as brown and wrinkled as well-used leather, with a stiff beard growing right up his cheeks almost to the eyes. She stopped at the entrance and watched him work. He’d noticed her, but hadn’t said anything, or acknowledged her at all. The work was complicated, she knew - Andre was happy to explain his work to curious children, if they didn’t interrupt him or get in the way too much, and lent a hand when he asked them to (and ask he would, no matter their station). The hammering on one side had to be equally matched to the other. Stretching the metal made it too thin. Cracks appeared. Pieces broke off. And though the metal could always be reheated and the pieces folded back in, frustration led to hard blows where subtle were required - and subtle always seemed to take too long. But to Andre, the work seemed - if not precisely effortless, then at least direct.

These days Mikken did most of the work, and Andre simply observed. But tonight the journeyman
was nowhere to be seen, and you’d never have guessed it.

“Andre, why are you a blacksmith?” She asked at last, as Andre thrust the freshly forged blade into the trough. The water bubbled and steamed. He pulled it out again, rivulets running, made a satisfied noise, then placed it on a bench. She couldn’t have said why, but the answer suddenly seemed terribly important to know, in light of her own realisation about her life and future.

Andre absorbed this for consideration, without pausing his labor, retrieving a basket of ore, and crushed it, preparing it for smelting. She could see the mould on the bench next to the completed sword. It seemed to Lyanna that his slowness processing the question wasn't due to him being simple, or the task taking his concentration, but more to do with the sheer magnitude of the question, and the limitations inherent to speaking. “My family’s been blacksmiths since my great-grandfathers days. Maybe longer.” He replied at last. “That’s why I’m a blacksmith.”

It sounded almost like an evasion, to Lyanna. “Do you like doing it?”

He didn’t need to think of an answer this time. “Never given the matter much thought.” He replied, in what she was sure was perfect honesty. Yet the idea was so entirely alien to her that she wondered if he wasn’t having a laugh at her expense.

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is, around the same time I learned how to walk, this” he held up his hammer “was pressed into my hand. I hit the iron in front of me before I could decide if I liked it or not. Shaped it. After that…” he shrugged. “Well, there were other things to think about. I got my own shop, and convinced Edna to marry me, and of course I was busy trying to improve, to be better at my craft. I moved here, because I’d gotten proud. I had my life to live, I was too busy living to question it, to ask why it was.”

He shrugged again, then turned back to his work. “Then one day I woke up an old man. Simple enough.”

“And if you could? If you could be anything?”

“If you do one thing, it's a given that you'll miss other things. That's how it is, that's… life.” He shrugged. “Who can say how it would have turned out? But I can take ore, and smelt it. I can pour it into a mould. I can fire it and hammer it and temper it. I can shape it into something that is real, and useful, something that will last. I make things which allows others to live their lives.”

The boy was working the bellows, and Andre watched the ore become molten metal. “That’s enough. For me.”

For a while, she watched him, watched the sparks fly off the metal, as he tirelessly shaped it. Finally, she had enough, and stepped back out into the courtyard. Andre didn’t even look up. It couldn’t be that simple. It just couldn’t.

“You need something?”

Lyanna did, but it was clear that Andre wasn’t a man who could help her find them. So she apologized and left, though she quite appreciated the heat of the forge on a cold evening like this.

The evening meal was done with, and the kitchens closed for the night, but that was no impediment at all to Lyanna, who’d had Brandon’s bad example to emulate when it came to taking what she wanted, and had a mind for something sweet. And she knew just the place to get it.
Lyanna was surprised when she found her youngest brother in one of the castles big, subterranean store-rooms. Winter had left it much depleted, but ghosts of all it had held could be sensed, it smelled of oatmeal, ham, smoked salmon, dried cod, onions, shark oil, pickled herrings in tubs, and there were still sacks full of oats and wheat and barley, and barrels of coarse ground flour used to make heavy black bread. Strings of wild onions and garlic dangled from the rafters, and bags of old vegetables filled the shelves. It also smelled of hemp, maize, hen's feathers, sailcloth and milk - the butter was churned there on Thursdays - and seasoning pine wood, herbs drying, the glue and varnish used by the fletcher, charcoal, fleeces from the mountain sheep, and the pungent smell of tar. Other storerooms held the rest, all much deprived. Benjen, and a not inconsiderable portion of the castle’s children had come in and made themselves comfortable, sitting on the bundled fleeces and eating apples. They made for an eclectic mix, all together, but children could overlook differences that adults could not. She had just finished telling them about Arsleif, a strange chieftain of the Inner Lands (at least the way Old Nan told it), who once became King of the Bearfolk, after wrestling with the bear-champion and throwing him ten times before supper. Now, they were in the middle of an argument.

“How’s that?” Her little brother called, sounding at once plaintive and belligerent as only children can. “What do you mean ‘that’s the lot?’ You can’t end a tale there! We want to know what happened next!”

“The sun’s gone down.” Old Nan replied infuriatingly reasonably, sitting on a chair with a fleece over her legs like a blanket, and quite settled despite the dreadful, riotous uproar the children were making. “It’s time you were to bed. When you start to yawn and grumble tomorrow over your chores, what will your parents say?” Old Nan was the castle’s nurse, and storyteller. She was more than that, however. She was a source of mental nourishment to all the Stark children, not to mention the children of the servants as well - she was a sort of guide who gave them what little culture they were ever to get, and they responded to her like hungry puppies anxious for any kind of eatable. Maester Walys had taught them to read and write, to add sums, to recognise the noble families of the North and of the rest of Westeros as well. He had taught them history, and about the world, and running a grand estate. But Old Nan had taught them to be Northern.

She had taught them about birds - which ones were lucky and which should be avoided, the difference between the wind rustling the leaves and the whispers of the old gods as they passed, how to recognise the evil eye and how to dispel it, and how to tell if the Evil Eye came from a witch, or from mischance. She had taught them how rings of mushrooms marked places where the children of the forest once lived and how some of their magic lingered, as well as any number of things of more practical use, such as how eating charcoal could settle a stomach, how to recognise badger dens and tell north by the moss on the trees.

“Alright. How about this.” Old Nan began, as though the compromise was being drawn out of her, and she had no interest in it at all. “One of you is to hurry up to the kitchens and fetch me some buttermilk to wet my throat. While one of you does that, the rest can decide what story I’m going to tell, for I shan’t tell everyone’s tale today, even were I to spin yarns until morning. Agreed?”

Clearly that was eminently suitable, as the children began to yell again, each trying to outshout the others.

“None of that!” She shouted over the top of them. “Whisht! I told you to pick what story to be told, not to start that! Now, what’ll it be? Is it a moral tale that yer after?”

"No, no. No morals. I like stories about fighting." Benjen replied fecklessly.

Old Nan drank a big gulp of her white whisky and spat in the fire. “Fighting,” she said with disgust.
"And how would kids like you be talking about that, will ye tell me, no bigger than sitting hens?"

There was a moment of silence, that struck Lyanna as almost reverent. "Meve" Anna squeaked before anyone else could, seeing her chance. She was the youngest in the audience, and had been nicknamed 'squirt' owing to her very unimpressive height and the casual cruelty the very young were capable of. She was near the back of the crowd, stroking a puppy which she had somehow managed to coax into falling asleep on her lap. She was too young to work, but nonetheless she spend most of her days in the castle’s kennels with her father and was trusted to take the castle’s hounds out every day for walks, to pull thorns out of their feet, keep cankers out of their ears, bind the smaller bones when they got dislocated, to dose them for worms, keep them isolated and nurse them through periods of distemper, and arbitrate their quarrels as a neutral party. “Tell us about Queen Meve, who married a mysterious man because he stole the giant's magic horse!"

“No chance!” shouted Connor the brewers son, then quietened a little at a glare from Old Nan. “Wipe your nose before you open your mouth, Squirt, you’re drooling like a dog! And I want to hear about Black Robin, who went a-robbing and beat up…"

“Tell us how sheep were made!” Tomund demanded, and his best friend Alyn nodded in agreement.

“No.” Said Benjen, who seemed quite recovered. “No. If we’re to hear one more thing tonight, it should be a proper Northern tale. Tell us about the great Conan who was enchanted to a silver chair. And once he sat on it he was stuck, and they could not get him off. Until Brandon Giant-Hewer heaved him off by force, but it left his backside still attached to the chair, and then his wife had to stitch on piece of skin onto his bottom — but it was sheepskin, and from thenceforth the cloaks worn by his men were made from the wool which grew on Conan!” He couldn’t even get through that much without giggling. And a few of the crowd were nodding, or giggling as well.

Old Nan cleared her throat a few times in a way that made Lyanna feel thirsty herself, and one of the children obligingly got up to fetch her drink. Then the babble burst forward from all the children all at once.

“I want to hear about Queen Meve!” Anna squealed again.

“Me too!” Said Jenna, in a touching display of solidarity. “I want to hear about her and her love for the mysterious man who stole from the giant! How they doted on each other! But be sure it’s a happy ending, not about fighting.”

“Quiet, you silly thing, we want war and fighting!”

“Tell us about Edric’s Magic Sword!”

“About Owen and the battle at the wall!”

“Yes, Owen! The one with the Ice Dragon!”

“Tell us about Adara!”

“Yes! Adara and the Ice Dragon, not Owen!”

“Black Robin…” Connor tried again, but got very little traction.

“The Wildling and the bear!”

Lyanna had recovered a wizened apple from the barrel, and was eating it carefully.
“Well, if you can’t decided, I’ll decide for you.” Old Nan announced, and though she hadn’t raised her voice she seemed to drown out the arguing children. As a one, whole audience made a rustling noise with their rumps, as they settled down, crowding the old woman in a tight circle. For a moment, Old Nan sat calmly in the quiet, until Alyn returned with her drink. She took it, no more then a sip, then set it down, and seemed to suddenly have an intensity about her. "There was a king in it one time," said she, and they listened, their imagination filling in for the parts of the story that Old Nan didn’t tell. The tale of long-past, forgotten times unravelled and flowed. And the children listened, and Lyanna listened as well.

"There was a king in it one time," said she, “and this king, what do you think, was called King Connor Stark. He was a great whale of a man, taller than any giant or so his friends said, though his enemies said he was a giant, just pretending to be a man. I don't know who was right, but I do know that he and his wives and all their children and all the rest of his relatives lived with him at a place called Tara of the Kings, with all their knights and his knights ladies and children. The was before this castle here was built, before the Wall even.”

Jenna opened her mouth to dispute this impossible fact, but Anna shushed her before she could. Lyanna leaned against the wall, and settled herself to get comfortable. “Now, Connor wasn’t the man he was when he was younger, but he was still called away to battle the Skinner Kings of the Dreadfort, and Vladislaus Bolton was the worst of that bad lot. Now, he’d fought Connor Stark before, and he knew, even with the Umbers helping him, because you see, the Umbers and the Starks weren’t always friends, that he was no match for him. But he had a secret weapon.”

“The Witch of the White Moor.” Jenna breathed, almost without meaning too.

“That’s right.” Old Nan said. “She was a giantess, or maybe something else, but whatever she was she was something old, not just in years, but out of the old time, the Old Night as people call it. And she had come from a long way across the Sunset sea, the only passenger on a ship, a special ship made of the fingernails of the dishonoured dead. That was long ago, even then, though unlike the rest of ’em she’s still around these days. You won't see or hear her, but when she gets peckish she’s known to creep to houses, reach through windows and snatch children, and then to suck all the juice out of them like a plum, so that come morning their parents think it’s the cold that did it. But back then she was wicked as ever, and she’d found a place of her own among the roots of the mountains, worming her way deep, deep, deep in the earth, where she could hear the whispers of dark things that lived far away from the sun. Now, she was no friend of Vladislaus Bolton, but then she was no friend of Connor Stark neither, and so for reasons only she knows, she gave him a way to kill his enemy.” She paused, to take another drink, and there was a small clamour of questions, comments, pleas and encouragement from the children, which Old Nan ignored with magisterial disdain.

“Now, she knew that though King Connor was getting old, and though Vladislaus Bolton was a powerful fearsome warrior himself, that he was no match for him. So she told him that if he did as she asked, she’d help him. All he had to do was lure King Connor into her lair, into her deep cavern beneath the mountains. And so, when the armies lined up, Vladislaus Bolton ran. He ran like a rabbit bolts when it sees a hound coming its way, leaving his army and his gathered allies to die, and with a great cry King Connor was pursuing him, stopping only to hack his way through a thousand of Vladislaus’s knights.”

“Now, King Connor was so big that one of his strides was three of Vladislaus’s, but Vladislaus was wiley, and he ran amidst the trees, so Connor had to navigate his way through them, and was slowed. He led him on a long chase, the sun rose and fell three times. They’d long left the battle behind, and King Connor’s men were feasting and taking prisoners and wondering where the leaders had gone, until at last they came to the cave, and of course Connor plunged recklessly in. And of course the Witch was waiting for him. She caught him. She chained him to a table, chains even he
wasn’t strong enough to break, and then handed Lord Bolton a knife, and told him to finish it. But Lord Bolton laughed. ‘He’s gone, and that’s what I wanted. If I killed him, I’d be in your debt, witch, and that’s something I know better than’ because wicked though he was, Vladislaus Bolton was no one’s fool. Then, as she raged, he sunk the knife into her breast and walked out of the dark whistling, very pleased with himself. He’d lost an army, sure enough, and armies aren’t exactly easy to find, but for the price of it he’d gotten rid of his enemy, and the witch as well, and with Connor done with he was the most fearsome warrior in all the North.”

“Of course, whoever heard of a witch that really died? She awoke a year later and slithered away, eventually managing to pull the knife from her breast. As for Connor, well they’d woven him a trap from which there was no escape. He couldn’t break the bonds of course, but still he tries, and that’s why sometimes the earth shakes and rumbles. It’s Connor, heaving against his chains, trying to break free, with no idea he’s been down there for so long, that the world’s forgotten him. Now Vladislaus, he usurped Connor as king, until Connor’s son grew up and avenged his father, but Vladislaus took the secret of what he’d done to the grave with him. And the Umbers, they found little reason to love the Bolton’s once they were kings, for they proved as bad as they’d ever been, and so they fought along side Connor’s son, and one of them even married him. And so ever since, they’ve wore a giant with broken chains in remembrance of Connor Stark, and they still do to this day.”

It wasn’t until Old Nan stopped speaking, that Lyanna realised how lost in the story she’d become. She tilted her head back, and drained the last of the buttermilk from her clay cup. The children all watched her owlishly, as waiting for more.

“He should have been cleverer.” Benjen said at last. “Not gone charging ahead, and getting himself killed. I wouldn’t have done that, I would think what was happening, whatever.”

"But it was chivalrous.” Lyanna said. “He was brave.”

“Well, it was no good to him, but it was grand!” Connor the brewer’s son said, quite chuffed to learn his name was the name of an ancient king.

Benjen began to fidget with his toes. “Brave it might have been,” he said eventually. “But it did no good.”

"But he was trying to do the good."

“But he didn’t.”

“Did any of that really happen?” Jenna asked, who was by nature a critic.

“There’s no good story that doesn’t touch the truth.” Old Nan replied, which wasn’t an answer at all, then got to her feet. “Well, that’s that. Off to bed with you all.” And with only a few token complaints, they did as ordered, trickling away. It must have been later than she had realised.

“Why didn’t you come to dinner?” Benjen asked her, as she retrieved a second apple. “Father told Robert you were indisposed, but he was lying, and they both knew it.”

“I wanted some time by myself. And dinner was the only time I could sneak away. I’ve had people all around me since they arrived, and it was starting to feel stifling.”

“Oh.” Lyanna loved him for that response. Ned would have tried to convince her she was wrong to feel the way she did, Brandon would have called her foolish, but to Benjen, her reasons were good enough for him - any reason was good enough for him. “What will you do when we go South?”

“I suspect I’ll think of something.” She muttered, then paused. “We?”
“Father says there must be a Stark in Winterfell, but he’ll remain behind so that I can go. He says I should get a look at the South, see how they do things.”

“Oh.” There didn’t seem to be much more to say. Benjen was excited about their journey south, the adventure it represented, and she couldn’t blame him. She’d been excited as well, at least until her betrothed had arrived. But ever since, it was hard to recapture those feelings herself. The thing she had been looking forward to all year had transformed into some terrible deadline that she was dreading.

“Why do you hate dressing up so much? You’re pretty. Everyone says so.”

“Hush. I’m not pretty. I’m scrawny and pointy.”

“Pointy all right.” Benjen agreed. “But you scrub up well, and your betrothed seems taken enough with you.”

“He’s just doing what he has to. Same as me, as father decreed and nothing else.” Lyanna sighed. She should have fought for her freedom harder, but she knew that was doing herself a disservice… just that she had lost little sleep over it, that much was true. It had been a long way away, until, all of a sudden, it wasn’t.

“Right, and I’m a child of the witch of the white moor, Lyanna.” Benjen replied.

“You’re a demon child, is what you are.” She meant it affectionately, or at least she had thought she had meant it affectionately, but it didn’t come out that way. It came out as vindictive and resentful.

As the youngest child always trying to live up to his older siblings, Benjen could be sensitive to criticism. He fumed a little, then glared at her. “You know, you’re really selfish.” He told her, with the frank honesty of the young. “You’ve been avoiding Ned after not seeing him for a year, because you want to avoid your betrothed, and taking it out on everyone else.”

Lyanna bristled defensively. “It’s not…” she stuttered, then took a breath and composed herself. She’d been getting a lot of practice at that lately. “You don’t understand.”

“Wouldn’t that be easy?” Benjen shot back. “If nobody understood you? If it was everyone else at fault?”

Lyanna rather thought that this wasn’t far from the truth - if a little understated, but that’s not the sort of thing you can say and expect to retain any sort of moral vantage on everyone else, so instead she folded her arms and frowned. “I don’t want to get married.” She said, looking at him. “Not to some friend of Ned’s just because he’s rich and powerful and father wants a piece of that. Not to anyone.”

“Why not wish for a horse that can outrace the wind and to never grow old while you’re at it?” Benjen replied. He’d probably meant to sound the way she had wanted to sound earlier in the conversation, but just as she had it came across as patronising and dismissive, and before she had realized what she was doing she hit him, striking him across the face.

She’d hit him hard, and since Benjen was smaller than her and not expecting the blow, he fell back on his rump. He was more surprised than hurt, at least physically. Truth be told, she was as surprised as he was. She’d hit him before, of course, but this was different, somehow.

She was halfway across the courtyard when the adrenaline wore off and the full gravity of what she’d done caught up with her. She wanted to go back and apologize, but it was too late for that. She knew it. There was no taking what had just happened back. Instead she walked the rest of the way to the stables.
Usually, Lyanna quite liked the stables, but all the unfamiliar horses had disturbed the calm familiarity of the place. Of course, the unfamiliar horses she could deal with. It was the only person with them that put her back up.

One thing that she had discovered she had in common with Robert was their shared love of horseflesh. He was an authority, of the true kind, who never pretended more than he knew, and in the saddle he was nearly as good as she was herself, which was to say, better than almost anyone else she’d ever met. It was quiet outside. There should be the noises of the town, and the castle, but somehow there wasn’t.

“Feeling better, then?” He asks. Despite the exertions of the day, he looked serene and composed. Robert’s nose was thin and aquiline, his lips full and merry, his eyes bright with mischief and merriment. He was fine to look at, she supposed.

It took her a moment to realize what he was alluding to. But Lyanna, as the only girl in a very male household, knew her way around this one. She gestured vaguely to the side, shrugged, and said ‘woman’s problems’. Just as she’d anticipated, Robert cleared his throat a little, and looked uncomfortable. “So what are you doing here?” He asked, changing the subject as quickly as he could.

“Looking for some peace and quiet.” She told him. “Benjen is mad at me.”

“I can sympathise. My brother constantly feels that way about me.” Robert replied. “But that’s to be expected, we’re very different people.”

Love … love is a powerful force, but sometimes, plain liking is the easier emotion to distinguish. And she did like Robert, much to her own surprise. She didn’t feel the way she was supposed to, helpless, skin-tingling passion, but Robert was good and generous and he made her laugh, and that was worth having. Just not what she wanted. But nobody had asked her. Nobody had asked her who she was, or what she would be, they had decided for her, and that included Robert.


Robert looked interested. "My father always said not to hit people who couldn't hit you back." he said, not at all reproachfully. "Servants, septas, children. He could be a hard man, but he had some good rules."

A hot answer came to her lips, and she spat it out rather than speak it. She looked away. And back. It occurred to her that he was offering her good advice, and she was refusing to listen for no good reason save the sake of being obstinate.

"He was right." She sighed. "I shouldn't have. I wasn't really angry at him."

"Tell him that. He'll think better of you for it then if you never hit him in the first place."

“That easily?”

“I told you I’m always at odds with my brother, didn’t I? Trust me, it’s the thing for it.” He grinned. When Robert grinned, he seemed to transform somewhat. He always looked roguish, but when he grinned he seemed almost dangerous. Lyanna knew dangerous men, her father had no shortage of them. And Brandon fancied himself one as well, she knew. But the danger that Robert represented was very different, yet no less real, even if it was harder to decide exactly what it was. "More Baratheon wisdom. Though not from my father this time."

"You know, that's the second time you've ever spoken of him. And the first time was in this
conversation as well. Whenever we talk, you don't ever say a thing about your father. What was he like?"

Robert shrugged, his face uncharacteristically still. She thought he wasn’t going to answer, so much so that it was almost a surprise when he did. "My father was a lot like The Father. The Father Above, I mean." Robert replied with a distant look on his face, and an unhappy, self-effacing smile. "They were both busy somewhere else."
Throughout the first month of spring, heralds dressed in the livery of House Whent and quartered with that of the Crown Prince had seemed to be on every road, accompanied by trumpeters and pages, men-at-arms and tallymen and assorted others. They appeared in the market squares of towns, at the crossroads of villages and at the entrance gate of castles, or the main entrances of manors or forts.

And once they arrived, the trumpeteers announced their presence with their long instruments, from which hung pennons embroidered with red dragons which shook as they blew the fanfare, while all the while the heralds would be making a show of unrolling their parchment scrolls and then, once they were sure they had everyone's attention, puffed up with self-importance, they would proclaim in powerful voices something to the effect of:

"Harken! This is to be made known to all princes, lords, knights and others gently born and to all others, wherever they be of this kingdom or of any other provided that they are not banished enemies of our lord the King, whom may the Seven Preserve, that on the third month of spring, before the great castle Harrenhal, there will be a great festival of arms and most noble tournament, which will be contested by the gallant and brave in appropriate harness, helms coats of mail and horse armor, in accordance with ancient custom." And here the herald would pause, and sweep a beady eye over the assembled, as though searching among them for the worthy face of a future champion before clearing his throat and returning to the scroll.

"Furthermore, let it be known that the leaders in this tournament are the most high and mighty prince Rhaegar Targaryen, by whose presence I make known to all princes, lords, knights, squires and others gently born of the said territories and of all other nations whatsoever, who wish and desire to match arms so as to acquire honor, and at said tournament there will be rich and noble prizes presented by the ladies." Again he would pause, and clear his throat loudly at the excited whispering that would break out, until once more all eyes were fixed upon him again.

"Moreover, I announce to all princes, lords, knights, squires and others gently born who have intention to participate that they will be required to be present at the said place of Harrenhal and take up quarters there on the fourth day previous to the tournament. And this I make known by order of my lords, the stewards and so I crave your pardon."

Then the heralds would snap their beautifully illuminated parchment back into its roll, the trumpets would sound again, and the party would be back on their horses right away, already racing to their next destination and not even stopping to extort from the peasants - perhaps stopping to wet their throats at the watering hole, and they would be gone, the urchins running beside the herald's escort as far as the outskirts of town bombarding him with questions that he disdained to answer before finally stopping and just watching as the party rode on to cry his news elsewhere.

Before dispersing, the villagers would get over their fascination with the colour and shake their heads at each other. Those who fancied themselves leaders would make sure they were overheard saying variations of 'If our lord goes to this tournament, it's us that will bare the cost. He'll take his lady and all his household along. They'll have all the fun, and we'll be stuck paying the taxes to cover it.' And they would all nod gloomily and made dire predictions as to how it would turn out.

Nevertheless, more than one of them caught a scent of opportunity. And while joining in the
complaining with the rest, was thinking something along the lines of: 'Suppose the Lord took my oldest with him - as a stableboy perhaps. He'd certainly get a good tip, and perhaps even some future position in a household. Perhaps I should talk to the septon, bring him a skin of that ale he likes so much, and ask if he won't put in a good word for my lad.'

But that was nothing at all, when compared to their betters. For the next six weeks, the tournament was the main preoccupation in every castle. The young dreamed of astonishing the world by their first exploits.

'You're still too young, wait another year! You'll have plenty of opportunity!' came the cautious advice of those that had lived longer, greybeards who'd won their spurs at other, forgotten opportunities for valour (at least, forgotten by all save for them). But the youths only shook their heads, and thought of Barristan the Bold, knighted at ten, and wouldn't hear a word of it. 'The son of our neighbor at Hollowgrove' or Whitehill, or Stonehall, or any of a number of estates, names and titles 'who is the same age as myself will be going.'

'If the lord of Hollowgrove' or Silvercrag, or Pussywillow, or any of a number of estates, names or titles 'has gone out of his mind, or if he can afford to chuck his gold away, then that is his affair.' They replied, conveniently forgetting their own youthful posturing and follies.

That Spring, there were many boys impatient to become orphans.

But in spite of there well-intended cautions, and although they carried it better, old men's memories were stirred. To listen to them, you might have thought that men were stronger, armor heavier and horses faster back in their day. That men were more chivalrous, more inclined to be brave and true, more alive, more vital. More.

'At the Tournament at Storm's End, given by Lord Steffon Baratheon, the father of the current Lord…' One would tell an old comrade-at-arms.

'At the Great Tournament at Casterly Rock, hosted by Aerys Targaryen the King, Seven keep him, when he moved the court there a while…' Another whispered to an old rival

'At the Tournament at King's Landing, the last one held by Old King Aegon Targaryen, while Duncan the Small was still prince…' One reminded his brother, who of course didn't need the reminder, for he could see it again when he closed his eyes.

Across the Seven Kingdoms, Lords and landed knights usually far more sensible borrowed from the merchants against the next harvest, mortgaged their woods to their neighbours, and took their silver to the nearest moneylender or factor to pay for plumes for the lord's helm, muslins and silks for the ladies dresses, and caparisons for horses.

Not all were so occupied - there were hypocrites, of course, just as there always is, who complained 'What an expense and trouble we're being put to! How much pleasanter it would be to stay at home! But we simply must appear at the tournament for the honor of the House. Since the Crown Prince himself has sent a herald to the very door of our manor, we should certainly displease him if we failed to put in an appearance.' Needless to say, none of them would have missed what they affected to deride for anything in the world.

So everyone was put to work regardless of their involvement, hammering iron, sewing mail onto leather jerkins, training horses and practicing in parks from which the birds fled in terror of the knights practicing their charges and chivalry, the shock of lances going home and the great clashing of swords. Petty Lords would devote three hours to fitting their basinets, take their blades off the wall and swing them at imaginary and easily vanquished adversaries.
The local lords organized smaller tournaments at home to get their hands in and ready themselves. And the older men, puffing into their mustaches, judged the hits as they watched their juniors knock each other down, all the while shaking their heads and swapping stories and reminiscences about days gone by, all the while imagining the spectacle that the coming days promised. After which everyone ate a great deal, and drank a great deal, and swore life-long friendship and brotherhood. These war-games, taking one estate with another, in the end cost as much as a real campaign would have, and the first post was yet to be hammered into the ground outside Harrenhal.

And even the Lords Paramount, from the North to Dorne, found their attention focused on this event that promised to be a grand spectacle unlike any other.

But as ubiquitous as all this was, there was more going on than most noticed. The Royal Mounted Messengers made their way in the wake of these tidings, riding hard from the capital, to all a manner of destinations, small men on fast horses riding hellbent for leather, dressed in black, with flat leather pouches they wore strapped to their chests beneath his clothes, pouches that only carried news of less vital importance, which could be without fear entrusted to paper or manuscript. The really important, secret tidings - those on which a great deal depended - were committed to memory, and must only be repeated to the intended recipient. Word for word - careless talk, afterall, cost lives.

'But who needs mounted messengers now, master Arnan?' People who recognized him would occasionally ask, when they met him at a way station or a roadside inn, and there had been years when he had been too busy wondering that himself to come up with a satisfactory reply. 'Even the fastest man would take close to three weeks ride in order to make it to Winterfell if he started from the capital, nobody could knock that off faster. But how long does a raven take? Only a few days, or not even that.'

And Arnan would only shake his head, grumble a little, and never mention that - when the moment comes to spend three days and nights in the saddle, riding a hundred or even two hundred miles along roads or sometimes, when necessary, trackless terrain, then it is needed. Of course nobody sat in the saddle without respite - a man can endure a great deal but a horse less, so there are times when they dismounted and rested. But, Arnan knew, that when it's time to get back in the saddle after too little rest, when your arse makes you want to cry and there's twice as far to go yet, those are the moments when a man can't help but ask himself if there wasn't a better way. Ravens can get lost, but horses can go lame, one was as bad as another, and there were maester's at every court these days - even many landed knights had one in service.

It had been different in Aegon's day - Aegon the first, that was. Back then the Maesters had taken holy orders before they forged their first link. Back when they kept the rabble out of their ranks, and were therefore fewer. Arnan wasn't old enough to remember those days, of course; just the end of them. To him, Aegon was always the old king, not the unlikely king, good king Aegon who many had hoped would reign forever.

But of course he hadn't - nobody ever does. And suddenly, hardly knowing what to think, Arnan - and those others in his trade, found themselves experiencing a revival. Arnan was thirty-eight years old and small, though strong and wiry, he possessed the useful body of a labourer and wasn't afraid of hard work. More importantly, he could handle any horse, and had a memory that had never let him down. He could have found other work to support his wife, to put a bit of money away for the dowries of his two yet unmarried daughters and to continue helping the married one who did laundry but whose husband, the sad loser, was reliably unreliable in business ventures. But Arnan did not and would not imagine any other job. He was a royal mounted messenger and that was the end of it, even if being a royal mounted messenger was of no earthly use to anyone.

And then suddenly, after a long period of being practically forgotten and humiliatingly idle, spending
his days quartered in the Red Keep waiting for instructions that never came, Arman was again on a racing horse in the center of great things. And the highways and forest tracks between the great centers of lordly power once again echoed to the sound of hooves. Just like they had under Old King Aegon (who most nowadays didn't even remember), before the maester's spread so far, and messages began to travel to and fro.

Arman knew why, of course, even if that was privileged information. He saw a lot and heard even more, and he'd have to be a very dull fellow indeed not to draw some conclusions from what he saw and heard. Unlike ravens, who never had much of an idea of what they were carrying, even the most loyal of men couldn't erase what he has worked so hard to memorize. He knew why the Prince had stopped communicating with the help of maesters - because the news that was being carried was meant to remain a secret from them. The prince had suddenly stopped trusting the grey robed men, stopped confiding secrets in them.

And so had the king.

There were limitations to what anyone could tell you - even a Royal Messenger. He didn't know what had suddenly caused this cooling off in the trust between royalty and their advisers and wasn't overly concerned about it. He regarded royalty, and most of those born with titles at that, as incomprehensible creatures, unpredictable in their decisions and deeds - particularly when times were becoming hard. And the fact that times were becoming hard was another thing that he had noticed - though most anyone could have told you that - but if you travelled the land from castle to castle, from town to town, from kingdom to kingdom, then how could you miss it? Not that he'd shared this with anyone. He considered it unprofessional for a messenger to have an opinion he wasn't asked for.

Arman stood up in his stirrups and looked around. Down at the foot of the hill the a river sparkled, meandering inland. Built six hundred feet up upon a chalky spur above the town of Oaldes, roughly between the Westerlands and the Vale. At this point the river described a large loop through rich pastures; the castle they called Acorn Hall held watch and ward above the river for twenty miles up and down stream. Though the mighty citadel had seen better days, it could still startle the eye and defy the imagination, one of the the most imposing relics of the military architecture of the Stormlander kingdom in the Riverlands.

Arrec Durrandon had built it over two years, in defiance of treaties, in order to cow his subjects and defy his enemies. Seeing it finished, standing high upon its cliff, its freshly hewn stone white upon its two curtain walls, its outer works well advanced, its portcullises, battlements, its thirteen towers and huge, five storied keep, he had cried "What a gallant castle!"

It hadn't been ten years before Lord Hoare took it from him, together with the whole of the Riverlands.

Now the fortress stood battered by winds, drenched by the mists, built to accommodate two thousand soldiers yet now holding less then one hundred and fifty, above a quiet valley which had little need of guarding. Yet it was there his duty brought him, and so it was there he would go.

Arman was not the only unusual figure to be found in that unlikely place. In the afternoon, once Arman had seen to his horse, delivered his message and then pulled his protesting body onto the back of a fresh horse to bring the reply, ser Symon Haigh, of the Maidenpoole Haighs (both of them), rode into the town, and then trotted his horse back and forth along the road. His squire, a daft boy with a slack jaw and puzzled eyes, watched from a distance, from outside the towns outskirts. The squire held Symon's lance, and should any country gentleman in the town accept the implicit challenge of Ser Symon's mocking presence, the squire would give his master the lance, and the two horsemen would fight on the pasture until one or the other yielded. And it would not be ser Symon. He was as
skilled a man-at-arms as any in the Riverlands, in any estimation.

And perhaps the poorest.

His skill at arms was less on display then his poverty. His destrier was ten years old, hard-mouthed and sway-backed. His saddle, with it's high pommel and cantle which held him firm, had belonged to his father. while his hauberk, a tunic of mail that covered him from neck to knees, had belonged to his grandfather. His sword was over a hundred years old, heavy, and would not keep it's edge. His lance had warped in the wet winter weather, while his helmet, which hung from his pommel, was an old steel pot with a worn leather lining. His shield, with it's escutcheon of a pitchfork, was battered and faded. His mail gauntlets, like the rest of his armour, were rusting, which was why his squire had a thick, reddened ear and a frightened face, though the real reason for the rust was not that the squire did not try to clean the mail, but that ser Symon could not afford the vinegar and fine sand that was needed to scour the steel.

He was poor.

Poor and bitter.

Poor and bitter and desperate, which could be a bad combination when taken together.

But most of all, he was ambitious.

He was good. Nobody denied that he was good - so good that no less than Ser Denys Arryn had offered to ride a circuit with him during the great tournament at Storm’s End, and it had been a proud moment for all that he’d turned it down - for he’d been young and proud already, and wanted to make it on his own - thought that opportunities like that would always come. His present circumstances testified to the consolations of that decision. He had qualified at the tournament at Casterly Rock, and received a gilded drinking vessel filled with coins from the hand of Lord Tywin Lannister. At Storm's End, he had received a purse of forty dragons and been presented with a fine new sword no king would have been ashamed to own. At Highgarden it had been fifteen dragons and a fine saddle, at Rainwood it had been an exquisite suit of armour, and where were all these trophies and ransoms now?

In the hands of bankers and merchants who had a lien on the pitiful crumbling tower Ser Symon had inherited two years before, though in truth his inheritance had been nothing but debt, and the moment his father was buried the moneylenders had closed on Ser Symon like hounds on a wounded deer, and between them they had bled him dry.

"Marry an heiress, or a widow,” his aunt had advised, the only other member of the Maidenpoole Haighs, and she had paraded a dozen women for her nephews perusal, but Symon was determined his wife should be as beautiful as he was handsome. And he was handsome, he knew that. He would stare into the looking glass that had been his mothers and admire the reflection. He had thick fair hair, a broad face, clear eyes and a short beard, and ser Symon was not going to throw away his good looks on some wrinkled hag just because she had money. He would marry a woman worthy of himself - preferably a rich one; but that ambition would not pay the estate's debts, and so ser Symon, to defend himself against creditors, and sought service with a lord.

But the realm had been at peace too long, and adding a stranger to their households, even a skilled one, and proven less enticing then he would have liked. Now, he was out of options. Harrenhal was two months for now, the greatest tournament in memory, and, he knew, his last hope. He trotted down the street again, even lifted a fist, but nobody stirred from the inn, and at last he turned his horse and trotted away, rueing the missed opportunity for some light sport and to collect a ransom.
Had the man whose arms were on display taken the bait and rode out to meet him, doubtless it would have given Ser Symon an unpleasant surprise. But nobody would have expected to find him there, in a little tavern by the side of the road. His life was comfortable enough, of course - Lord Roran Buckler had a sufficiency of money, yet no equerry ever came to whichever inn he happened to be staying as he made his way through the Riverlands in order to invite him to dine with the local lord. If there was a small tournament in the area, and there usually was, the host would wonder how they could avoid inviting The Lord of Bronzegate and invent some pretext or claim ignorance - little better than an outlaw despite a title which ought to have entitled him to the place of honour, and blood that should have assured him better still. And the captain of the garrison or local bailiff would intimate a cold request that he move on, for his infamy was widely known.

And Roran Buckler would shrug his broad shoulders and continue on his random way, accompanied by his single servant, Tom, who was a decade younger than his master, a bad character and throughly deserving his face, which was the sort of face that was born to be hanged. Indeed, Tom’s solitary virtue was his utter devotion to his master, and in reward for this rare and valuable quality, Lord Roran Buckler gave him back something that was a greater satisfaction than even his high wages - the intimacy of a great lord in adversity. During their slow journey the two spent many nights together playing dice at a table in the corner of some wretched tavern, and when either of them needed a woman they would both go together to one of the numerous brothels, in which there was always a selection of plump whores - which was the way they both preferred them.

Most men in his position, with his vast collection of vengeful enemies would not dare to travel even the King’s Road without a retinue of at least sixty armed servants, but that was and never had been his way, he scorned other men who set themselves against him in the same haughty disdain of a man secure in his power that he always demonstrated, even before he’d risen so high in the king’s estimation long ago. Though he had grown thinner, the crease had sunk deeper into the muscles of his forehead, and his preoccupation with wickedness from morning until night that even carried through his dreams had permanently marked his features, he was much the same as he had always been, only more-so. It is said that a strong man is one who can see his mistakes. But perhaps a great man is one who never sees them, never entertains the slightest whisper of self-doubt or recrimination.

"The important thing," Lord Buckler believed, and had confided to Tom again that morning, "is to go on living: if you can last long enough, the day will come when you will win." And the death of his many enemies was what sustained him - the King who had unlawfully cut him out of inheritance for the sake of greased palms and continuity of name was dead, his former Hand had died through misadventure at the end of the previous year, the dead kings councillors were dead or soon to be that way. The Old man of Hightower was still alive, but he would outlast him, and his crop of sons as well. He could do nothing else.

It was that hatred which sustained him. And he would go on hating as long as he lived. Wherever he happened to be, it was hatred that awakened him with the first ray of light filtering through the shutters of his unfamiliar room. Hatred was the salt in his food and the sky above his road. Hatred was the pulse of his heart. Though he disdained guards, as he traveled across the countryside his household grew around him. They were an eclectic bunch for a man related to most of the Great Lords of Westeros - Lord Tully of the Riverlands was his cousin, The old Man of Hightower was his uncle, Lord Tyrell and Lord Baratheon were both his nephews, and before his fall from grace most of them would have admitted to the connection as well. But like calls to like, or so it is said, and there could be no doubt of his character when you saw those he called friends.

He had recruited a shady council and his clerk who he took into his confidence when Tom wasn’t available for the task, a defrocked septon who knew more about spells than he did about litanies and works of charity, and the fallen priest had assured him that by writing the name of his enemy in blood and stitching it into the lining of a cloak he would wear, all the while reciting the Warrior’s
prayer backwards and burning the necessary sacrifices, it would be possible to assure their pressing
and lasting defeat. Lord Roran Buckler, who had always possessed a faith in magic and spells that he
didn't have for people, had acquired those things, at great cost and effort, and achieved them as well,
but so far it had not taken effect in any demonstrable form, and Lord Buckler was beginning to lose
patience. When he did, it would not pay to be that septon. And there was Jack, who had no great
name but was fond of acting otherwise, a Stormlander like Lord Buckler and a former soldier as
well. A man of blood, this self proclaimed knight was many things to many people. He claimed to
have once served in the retinue of Steffon Baratheon until forced to abjure the realm for killing a
pregnant woman. He'd fled to the reach, and joined the popular uprising, then betrayed them to the
forces of Lord Tyrell. He had later assumed the name Lylner, married the daughter of a squire and
posed for a while as a physician. Yet mischief does what mischief is, and he too found himself drawn
to Lord Roran Buckler, who he saw as someone who could elevate his ambitions.

An eerie, sinister figure, Jack had prowled the roads of the Riverlands ahead of his master, about his
masters business. Sometimes he called himself an agent of the Old Gods and preached hotly against
the powers-that-be. On occasion, he would slip into a town - rumour had it that he'd murdered two
Dorneish merchants from their enclosure Fairmarket a fortnight ago, though it was only rumour.
Others claimed he'd begged in King's Landing, or that he'd been seen in the company of mysterious
men from Essos, who didn't speak anything of the Westerosi tongue and wore livery of dark red and
a badge with depicting a crow flying against a light blue field. Ragged mercenaries were no unusual
sight in the Riverlands, but this cohort was special, well financed and armed. They called themselves
the Windblown, and were reputed to be master bowmen, very skilled with the arbalests hanging by
leather cords from their saddle horns. These windblown were seen here and there, in small groups,
but mostly in the Saltspans and Crownlands, far from the man Jack, and far from his master. Still, no
one dared accost either of them, as they made their slow way that would bring them, just as it would
bring thousands of others, to Harrenhal…

Chapter End Notes

Funny story, I was originally going to tell this chapter entirely from a raven's
perspective (maybe with our one-eyed former spymaster hitching a ride at one point),
but ultimately I decided against it, on the grounds that a Raven's observations wouldn't
do much to set the scene, and wouldn't overhear anything useful.

Besides, it lays suggestions of the Maester conspiracy tinfoil hat nonsense, and points
out that any reasonably competent spy ring wouldn't dare use ravens since your
message gets seen by far too many people. So I just left it all as implication. We'll see
what you all make of that.
That morning, king Aerys Targaryen, second of his name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Ruler of the Seven Kingdoms and all his ancestor Aegon’s inheritance from the Wall and the Sunset Sea to the Broken Arm of Dorne had - in a fit of pique, ordered ser Barbot boiled alive in a kettle. It had taken time, but one of sufficient dimension had eventually been produced from the Red Keep’s kitchens. It was an enormous brass pot - far too small for a man, of course, but he’d been forced into it anyway, after they’d broken his arms. Ser Barbot’s screams and the kettles whistling had produced a sound quite unbearable to hear.

For all that Lord Qarlton Chelsted had noisily left the council chamber in protest of the King’s decision he still - after being pressed only a little, accepted an invitation to dine afterwards at the same table as his adversaries, after Lord Merryweather had found him, expressed his regret at the morning’s incident, assured him of his deep and abiding affection and reminded him that they, and in particular Septon Maynard, were counting on his company. Lord Qarlton Chelsted was a drunkard and a glutton, but he had a quick mind, and quicker wits. He looked as if he had a cushion up his tunic, which he frequently wore unbelted to give himself more belly room. Despite his size, he was nimble enough on his feet and had a quick eye and hand - useful for sword fighting, but even more so for dice and games of chance where the rumour was that he cheated. It wouldn’t surprise Merryweather, the man didn’t have much of an income of his own, though a year’s service to Septon Maynard had gone a long way to fix that. He was in a jovial mood despite the mornings unpleasantness - his hawk had made several kills during the hunt, and his dogs had helped course down a hare. The dinner promised to be excellent, the wine plentiful, and his favourite court whore had promised him a soft bed for the night. He had lost at dice with the Crown Prince, but Lord Merryweather judged that to have been deliberate and he wasn’t too much out of purse. The pay-off was a place basking in the warmth of Rhaegar Targaryen’s favour.

It was small and intimate - as far as feasts went, anyway. It was held at a mansion recently acquired by the crown - that morning, in point of fact, now that it’s prior occupant was no more - chosen because Septon Maynard desired to see what state it was in before he handed it back to the crown, and because it had all the necessary furnishings for a banquet.

The Septon sat at the head of the table, and Lord Merryweather sat facing him. None of the others liked him much - save Septon Maynard, who was warmly tolerant of anyone and everyone, one of the qualities that made him such a great man. They saw him - Lord Merryweather - as dour. Though Lord Merryweather felt that any man who’d spent so much time dealing with King Aerys had earned the right to be dour, not that he thought it prudent to say so, helping himself to the tart green muscat wine of Peake which he had acquired a taste for.

The fate of people and lands, of kingdoms and nations is made like this, by men in small rooms forcing themselves to talk about inconsequential things rather then confront the matter at hand. You could forget the coronations, the pomp and processions. Forget the great and powerful all meeting together in a room, forget titles and oaths and decrees. Forget armies and forget speeches as well, while you’re forgetting things. This, this here, was how the world really changed - a little at a time, so that when anyone took notice it was already done. So why do we pretend otherwise, then?

Well. Better to ask, how was he to explain it? That the strength of the Realm isn’t in border fortresses and the soldiers that man them, not even the great castles and seats of the Lords Paramount. Not even King’s Landing itself, and the million souls that called it home. Not from castle walls, but from counting houses, not be the sound of the trumpet or the bugle, but the click of the abacus, not by the sword but by the scrape of the pen on the page of the promissory note which paid for the sword and
with it the soldiers tack in a single stroke, his provisions and his uniform. The world is run from a 
trading office in Pentos, and another in Braavos, through which thousands of ships of silk drift west 
and return with other goods, which turned the wheels of trade and the flow of goods. The world is 
rung from places he could never have imagined as a little provincial nobody in the Riverlands, of 
noble title or otherwise. Kings come and go, empires come and go, but there was a permanence to 
wealth, and to trade.

Most of the invited councilors were here, with a few exceptions. The presence of soft-faced Lord 
Symon Mooton, lord of of Maidenpool, son of a traitor, who had climbed the tangled branches of 
politics’ thorny tree back into favour had swaggered through the door, accompanied by his friend 
instead of his son - the Stormlander, harsh-faced Aegon Lonmouth, who was tall and long-limbed, 
his brown hair patched with grey at ears and temples. Deep creases fanned from his eye corners and 
gaunt hollows shadowed his well-defined cheekbones. But the most severe of the group was 
ser Armond Connington, veteran of a dozen campaigns; his grizzled red hair turning somewhat 
yellow with the years twisted and grew askew where scars marred his scalp, a deep chest and wide 
shoulders. His chin was heavy and determined, his aspect rugged, his nose short with wide nostrils. 
He too had not brought his son and heir.

On the other hand, more surprising than the absences was the intimidating presence of Lord Tywin 
Lannister, who seldom fraternized far preferring his own company. Septon Maynard looked rather 
affronted, as though his rival making an appearance upstaged him. As always, Lord Merryweather 
thought, it was an education to see Tywin Lannister baffled by having to speak to a common man, 
who is not an ostler or a carter, but a fellow advisor to the King, helpless in the face of his own 
condescension. He'd grown a beard, which only added to the gravitas and charisma of a man already 
endowed with more than his share.

But perhaps the most surprising aspect of the dinner was the number of children present. Owen 
Merryweather had two daughters by his third marriage, who were seated with their fellows, nearly a 
score of the brats, all of who were destined to marry each other to serve the political strategy and 
territorial interests of their parents, who themselves had all been married in a similar fashion. There 
were exceptions - Lord Tywin hadn't brought his daughter, for all that she was at court already, a 
rare beauty and in search of a husband now that the hand had surely come to terms that his ambitions 
to a royal marriage were not meant to be. His heir (recently knighted) was at Casterly Rock, getting a 
feel for his future, but by some caprice throughly out of character he had brought his misshapen 
youngest along with him. Lord Lonmouth's son was in the capital but not present either, yet these 
exceptions were all.

The other surprising aspect - to anyone not familiar with the ways of the Great - was how well they 
were able to put aside their loathing for one another. Indeed the meal opened in comparatively good 
humor. They were all relaxed, allowing themselves to let down their guards to an extent. Of course, 
despite long association the few enough of them were easy with each other and, as the banquet 
progressed, each tended to assert his views with ever more vehemence, until they began to resemble 
caricatures of themselves. All the while, they lorded it over those beneath and groveled to those 
above, save twin, who acknowledged neither King or God as his superior. Such was life in King's 
Landing.

The first course, a mince of olives, shrimp and onions baked in oyster shells with cheese and parsley 
was followed by a soup of tunny, cockles and winkles simmered in white wine with leeks and dill. 
Lord Lucerys Velaryon's only son, at least his only son who he had acknowledged, Vaemond and 
his betrothed, the youngest but most generously dowered of Lord Ardrian Celtigars's crop of children 
had discovered - and were now demonstrating - a touching friendship for each another. The six year 
olds ate out of the same tureen, the young lord's face scrunched up in concentration as he carefully 
selected the best morsels of the stew for the six year old who would be his future wife, making every
effort to search diligently though the sauce until he found one, then putting them into her mouth and
smearing her face in the process. The other children were not accorded such freedom, chained by
propriety and their parents rigid instructions, and so much envied them their betrothal and the
freedom it seemed to offer.

The main course arrived long before they finished eating, a lightly poached breast of chicken sliced
into a cream sauce with taragon, served with a fine aged cheese imported from the Vale and intended
no doubt for the Crown Princess, but which he had managed to acquire by some unknown means.
He chuckled a little to himself at the thought of Septon Maynard's men waylaying the Dorneish for
the sake of cheeses, but didn't doubt any of them would have done it, if there was some advantage in
it.

Tyrion Lannister, seated at the head of the children's table as a courtesy to his father - or at least out
of fear of offering him insult, ate nothing. Children are more sensitive to their elders feelings and
moods than is often understood or acknowledged, and all too often exaggerate what they sense. All
of the other children turned their backs and made a show of avoiding him. Merryweather felt some
small sympathy for a child made solitary by his monstrous form who did not know how to play,
living alone with the servants. The runt had probably never seen so many people gathered in one
room, or heard so many voices, and he looked with a mixture of terror and admiration at the constant
succession of dishes placed on the huge tables.

He was only five, and believed himself unloved - young though he was his intelligence was
sufficiently developed and his mind subtle enough to pick up the cues; how eyes passed over him
with horror or disgust, how when he asked a question nobody answered him. Who could blame him
his reserve?

"I'm surprised you aren't opposing this. You objected strenuously last time The King decided to raise
the fees and tariffs paid at ports, to say nothing of this new tax of his." Lord Lucerys Velaryon was
tall and thin with a lantern jaw, strong nose that had been broken at least once, and eyes that even
when focussed on a particular matter missed nothing on the periphery. He spoke slowly, measuring
the words, which at first seemed an attempt to lend himself gravitas but was actually his way of
controlling his speech impediment - when he got excited he tended to trip over his own tongue and
stutter. The Master of Ships was a fine man - though aware that he owed his position largely to his
family name, and connection to House Targaryen. He knew where his bread was buttered.

"You have to pick your battles." Tywin replied shortly, uninterested in explaining himself or his
reasons for doing anything. Earlier in the year, Tywin's advice had been to increase the comercial
privileges of the cities, and instead of demanding subsidies from them to offer them grants.

But Maynard had opposed it, as he tended to reflexively - and they'd supported him rather then the
Hand of the King, and so ultimately the Kingdoms had borrowed against their revenues, revenues
that had been lost due to the situation in Essos, and now the treasury was bare. It would be different,
Owen Merryweather thought, if the Government were a team, but the fact was that they're a loose
confederation of warring tribes, who never seemed able to grasp the fact that justice and peace were
necessarily expensive.

Even now, they were asking his master how this had happened, on his watch. What had happened to
the revenues, to the tithes and annatcs, to the subventions of the Faith and the new emerging
merchant class?

How could there be less, when less charity has been distributed, when no wars have been made, and
when no great undertakings have begun any more than new buildings constructed? Where has all the
money gone?
And Maynard had only shaken his head sadly. 'The money was never there.' He'd told him. 'It was spent long ago. This kingdom is a hole in which we all toss money into. Other people for preference, but in our own, if that's all that's to be had'.

"The King's solution, typically clumsy though it might be, will buy time for a more long term solution." Tywin was saying. "Let him have his little victory. Life is so much easier when kings think they've achieved something; it stops them fretting, and their little temper tantrums." That, apparently, was another lesson in the way the world worked - it takes longer to do things quickly, it's more expensive to do them cheaply and it's more fair to do them in secret. He wondered if Ser Barbot would have termed it as a little temper tantrum.

"And what do you propose as a longer term solution?" The Master of Ships asked, tucking his hands inside his furred sleeves, which were fuller than normal, serving to increase the space he occupied. Lord Merryweather had already taken note of the ornate brooch pinning his cloak when he arrived, and the golden rings adorning his manicured fingers. Lord Velaryon had an eye, and a taste for luxury, but so did many at the court. A man of station had to support his dignity by external appearance - unless he happened to be all powerful the way King Aerys was and therefore was allowed to do as he pleased, or sufficiently overwhelming of presence the way Lord Tywin happened to be. "A long term solution is something we all desire."

Lord Owen Merryweather had been around the powerful for most of his adult life, and had come to certain conclusions. Men who loved power were not only dominated, as is generally supposed, by an appetite for wealth and honors and recognition - he had an endless appetite for all those things himself, as did most men. No, what they were above all influenced by was an objective taste for the creation of events, for controlling their occurrence, for acting upon the world with effectiveness and most of all for being always in the right. To them, mad as it was, wealth and honours were no more than the signs and tools of their influence.

"I believe we are covered, at least in the short-term. The Most Holy has agreed to extend the kingdom a loan, in exchange for a number of considerations." Septon Maynard was making a face, at the thought of having to go with his hat in hand to the man who had all but destroyed his promising career in the Faith.

Tywin didn't smile, but there was a certain smugness to his habitual frown that suggested one anyway. He poured himself a goblet of arbor gold, and took a mouthful, rolling it around to appreciate the flavor before swallowing. "A half-measure, if even that, committing the care of the Kingdoms to the cure of those physicians that first wounded it. There is a ready explanation for the Realm's current state.” Tywin claimed when he was sure he had the attention of all present, his stentorian tones couched in biting, crisp accents. As he spoke, his gaze fell on Septon Maynard, so that you could almost think it was him he was talking to. “And that is the legacy of Aegon the old, whose naive mishandling of the Realm might yet be it’s ruin. Do you know how many peasants labour on my lands?" He asked rhetorically, then continued before anyone could offer an estimate. "In my grandfathers time, those kerns were his to dispose of as he deemed appropriate. And the Realm prospered."

“The King doesn’t share your convictions. He feels that all men are entitled to their freedom, though it benefit them not at all. It was why he rejected your proposal out of hand at the end of winter.” Maynard reminded him gently. The rest of the council were listening. The King tended to enjoy anyone who acted at his hands expense, and made many of them had done so, but Aerys wasn't here, and Tywin was, and so they only listened. If Merryweather were any judge, he thought it likely that many of them privately agreed with the argument.

Tywin only grunted, saying far more eloquently than any words ever could that the king was as
changeable as a weathercock and that it remained to be seen just what he believed. “You can dismiss my warnings, but Westeros depended upon serfdom, and when Aegon freed them it upset the balance. What followed was tremendous starvation and the collapse of much of the nations trade - in the old days the landlords had at least had incentive to keep their kerns alive - they could be trusted to act for their own benefit, but after the emancipation why should they?”

Nobody responded, uncomfortably glancing at one another as they tended to when Tywin raised the subject. “It’s all nonsense, anyway; the peasants will always be slaves - so will most of the rest of mankind, of course, but it is particularly evident in the example of peasants.” Tywin added, and finished his goblet of wine with every sign of enjoyment. Like all men who have exercised power for a long time, Tywin had come to identify himself with the country, and to consider every attack made upon him personally as an attack made upon the interests of state. And while at times he was not far off, Merryweather was quite aware that Tywin was prepared to act against the interests of the kingdom as soon as its direction was taken out of his hands.

Serfdom had been imposed on the Seven Kingdoms by Aegon the Conqueror - something that tended to get left out of the popular retellings of history, which meant that they became the property of the nobles and land-owners, who could buy and sell them, hire them out, starve them, lash them, imprison them, take their goods, beasts and womenfolk whenever they chose - in fact, do anything short of maiming them permanently or killing them. They did those things, too, of course, but it was officially unlawful.

The serfs had been just like the slaves in Essos - worse off, if anything, for they hadn't seemed to realise they were slaves. They could be flogged with rods and whips up to ten times a day, or the knout, if the lord wanted to make an example, they could be banished to the mines or the oars of a ship for years at their landlord's whim - all he had to do was pay the cost of their transportation. They could be made to wear spiked collars, the women could be kept in harems, the men could be drafted off to the army so that the owners could steal their wives without embarrassment, their children could be sold off - and in return for this they were meant to be grateful to their lords, and literally crawl in front of them, calling them 'father', touching their heads on the ground, and kissing their boots. Aegon the Old King had been halfway a peasant, so his enemies claimed, but he had seen them emancipated, at least to an extent. The Result? Instability.

"Well, regardless, I'm sure we can all agree that our priority is assuring that nothing else like what happened this morning need happen again." Septon Maynard said after a moment.

Tywin Lannister picked up the pitcher, and poured wine into the septon's goblet deliberately. "I wish that my own goals could be so easily defined. Alas! They depend on such ineffable considerations as justice, the redressment of old wrongs, and the thrust of history."

Maynard let out a little chuckle. It was indulgent, almost patronizing. "I do not envy you your maze of uncertainties." He replied. "I simply try to take each day as it comes. Ser Aegon, what do you advise?" Asked the Master of Coin suddenly, in order to give the appearance of continuing the conversation at hand. Aegon Lonmouth started. He made an excellent chamberlain, overseeing expenditure and managing the royal household with precision, but his mind was not capable of any great flights. King Aerys saw him every day, but hardly ever spoke to him, unless it was to command him to open a window in his chambers. He was so devoted a servant of the crown, and so dazzled by royal majesty that, when the king spoke to him, he could not help but approve. That Aerys was mad was not apparent to him, he was the king, and so he would lavish upon him all the zeal and effort that his body possessed.

"I should think you both raise fine points, noble lords." Tywin scoffed, bit Maynard smiled. As his father had been a butcher and his mother the daughter of a sacristan - to say nothing of his three older
siblings who had gone on to lead thoroughly unremarkable lives - Septon Maynard always heard the word 'noble' with considerable pleasure when it included him, even in such a backhand way.

"These considerations, you mentioned." Symond Staunton asked, sounding a little suspicious. "What were they, exactly?"

"A seventh seat on the Small Council, to be filled by one of the Faithful." Septon Maynard replied piously. "Just as Saintly Baelor promised."

"We already endure one priest, must we endure another?" Tywin growled.

"Perhaps not." Lord Qarlton Chelsted said, looking thoughtfully at Septon Maynard, perhaps remembering a time before King Daeron the Good forbid pluralism in government offices. Even if he wasn't, doubtless everyone else was. The idea was ludicrous, of course, Septon Maynard and the High Septon were known to detest one another. Still…

Tywin looked at the man, and his lip curled slightly. He didn't say it, but he didn't need to. His green eyes promised that he would not allow that to happen. Not while he was counted upon as Hand of the King. Septon Maynard met that cold gaze levelly. Astoundingly, there wasn't a hint of fear there, not even a glimmer of bravado. Septon Maynard just stared back at Tywin Lannister, and neither backed down.

The meal continued. What followed, in order, came a service of broiled quail stuffed with morels, served on slices of good white bread, with side dishes of green peas; artichokes cooked in wine and butter, with a salad of garden greens; then tripes and sausages with pickled cabbage; then a noble saddle of venison glazed with cherry sauce and served with barley first simmered in broth, then fried with garlic and sage; then honey-cakes, nuts and oranges; and all the while the goblets flowed full with the best wine.

“Fine hunt today,” said Aegon Lonmouth. “Your falcon flew particularly well, I thought.”

“She did, didn’t she?” Qarlton Chelsted replied, looking up from his plate. A meal could wait on a discussion about the prowess of his falcon with knights whose approval he sought. Aegon Lonmouth had not been awarded with a title in the Small Council, but he was a known confidant of the King, and had been richly and generously provided for.

The talk and the wine flowed easily as the men dissected the day’s sport and Qarlton Chelsted found himself being courted as if he were of great importance, which left him flattered and a little bewildered. Usually he had to do the chasing, and as a solid, indolent blockhead, a lifetime of the indifference of princes had not prepared him for the attention of the three court favourites.

"I do not know. I do not listen at keyholes," Lord Qarlton Chelsted was saying to Symon Mooton, in regards to the Spring Feast the Princess was planning, unable to suppress a tone of pride "even when it would be to my benefit."

"Perhaps they’ll ask Lord Merryweather? Doubtless he could arrange it. They say he is in trade, you know.” Owen swallowed a barbed reply, and wondered where the man found the gumption to insult him at a meal he had provided. Recently, assessors had discovered rich deposits of bog-iron in Oaldes, not far from Maidenpoole, and he had requested that Merryweather discover the costs involved in the construction of a foundry. The figures, as submitted, seemed remarkably high, and had since been convinced that he was trying to cheat them all. Although Lord Merryweather did not dismiss the jealous mutterings of the likes of Symon Mooton and Aegon Lonmouth, he set them to the back of his mind. He had more immediate matters to concern him than their petty scheming.
"You might as well give up on those ambitions. He's already disposed of the property - he'd disposed of the property before he even executed them. Maybe before he even decided to execute them. And the king won't change his mind. He never changes his mind, not for anything, even when half of the even Kingdoms is against him…” Lord Lucerys Velaryon was saying to Lord Aegon Lonmouth, then suddenly he broke off, glancing at the Hand of the King.

His gaze fell again to Tywin Lannister. The Hand of the King sat alone, his cold gaze unsettling. He had no circle of eager supporters, and had not ventured anything since outlining his extraordinary goal of reducing the vast majority of the Seven Kingdoms to explicate bondage. Yet, somehow, it seemed to Lord Merryweather as if he were plotting over there, preparing a future from which both he, and his master would be eliminated. He certainly didn't spare so much as a sliver of attention for The Master of Ships, but nonetheless, he corrected himself. "Unless of course – suddenly – he does, and everything is upside down and he is determined on the opposite course and no-one can persuade him otherwise."

"But when does he change his mind?" Aegon Lonmouth asked his unlikely advisor. "Why?"

For Vlaryon shrugged. "In a moment," he said. "In a heartbeat. But never that you could predict."

"How does anyone manage? With a changeable king? With a slippery king?"

"Some don't," says Tywin Lannister shortly, listening after all.

Lord Merryweather was startled as, guessing the direction of his thoughts, Lord Riche patted him on the shoulder. "If it were me, I'd think about spending some time away from Court. The Septon relies on you, as does the king - though he doesn't know it. Still, you're working too hard."

"Soon." He replied. He meant it, he'd promised himself after all, he'd made a resolution a week ago when Ser Greene and Lord Bushy had gone to their early but unlamented ends that he would leave soon. There were advantages to his own estate beyond the relative safety and the chance to enjoy all he'd tirelessly worked to acquire. There was also comfort. There was a widow who lived near the Dragonpit who he visited from time to time - and on those days he dressed himself up with a rather guilty air. And there was his wife, of course. But Lord Maynard preferred to hunt his own land, where the pickings were better and at little cost, when he'd last visited he'd noted how a number of children in the neighbouring villages had already begun to resemble him. If nothing else, it was better than ending up like Ser Barbot, or Ser Green, or whoever it had been a fortnight ago. Only Lord Tywin seemed able to keep track. Lord Tywin, and Ser Illyn Payne.

"This is a warning. The King is fond of your master, but he doesn't know who you are. This is how people get killed. When they're stories don't fit."

"If the king gets in into his head that I'm to blame for whatever befalls us next week, there is no corner of the world, or hole I could hide in where he wouldn't get me, Lord Riche. I'll take my chances, like we all do."

Looking up, he noted that he was not the only one being reprimanded. “You could try being less extravagant and do more to watch your back,” Armond Connington suggested to Septon Maynard, his tone low and insistent. “I'm the King’s Marshal and head of my family, but I would be hard pressed to dress myself like a prince of the realm. What must the Most Holy think when he sees you robed in ermine and purple?"

Septon Maynard drew himself up haughtily. "I don't wear either - I haven't the right. I wear white, and I wear gold, which anyone can wear who can afford it. And I don't see why you're so bothered about my clothes. I dress as appropriate to my station. To both of them. If I were in trade, I'd attire
myself as appropriate to my circumstances, the way we all do.”

“You don’t want to see,” Lord Connington replied with laboured patience. “Maynard, you’re a rich man. However your wealth comes from the purse of your master, who cannot keep its strings closed. For all the store the King sets by outward show, he’s suspicious, and grown worse over winter - and worse, you’re a septon, and the Faith is attempting to return to a more humble display. Charity is in fashion, not largesse. The sight of you clad like a magnate must sour his digestion even without the High Septon railing against vanity and luxury. At least wear something sober and plain when you’re in his presence, representing your master.”

Lord Merryweather gave a slight shake of his head, warning him that he was pushing too hard, but Connington didn’t notice.

“I dress myself out of my own coin, not either of my lord’s.” Septon Maynard’s tone was haughty, and gritty with anger. “The only gifts of clothes I receive from him are the usual ones, at namedays and religious festivals. The rest I earn myself, on the estates I am entrusted with from the generosity of my clients.”

“I didn’t…”

“You don’t know the first thing of poverty. As a young man, in seminary, I had to sell my cloak to make ends meet. It was winter, and that cloak was the only thing I owned, the only thing I had - not even a name. And in that moment, I swore that I would never be in that position again, and I’ve worked at what I do best to keep that oath. Yes, I accept largesse from my lord, but I earn my keep; I’m no squanderer of his coin.” Septon Maynard swallowed and made a conscious effort to relax his clenched fists, but could not quite summon up his usual benevolent smile. He knew that when he had time to think at leisure rather than reacting to the moment, he would find much of what Lord Connington was saying to him made sense.

“Then you should make it clear to the King, for he has come to suspect that the money from his son’s coffers all drained into yours. His health’s been poor since he took up with religion, and his temper as sour as verjuice since he lost found his piety and since…” He trailed off suggestively.

“I will not go justifying my expenditure to ward off petty gossip,” Septon Maynard said curtly. “Fasting and denial do a body good, if the king’s in ill-humour then he should look to himself for the reason. I have no intention of imitating poverty out of false modesty, no matter that becoming the fashion among the Faith - as though they aren’t burying their valuables beneath their altars. As for the King, either he knows my nature by now or he doesn’t.”

“You cannot count on that for ever,” Connington said.

“No, but it suffices for now.” Septon Maynard turned to face the lords anxiety and censure. “I can look after myself,” he said. “I’ve survived the mêlée of court intrigue thus far.”

“You’ve been lucky,” Connington muttered darkly.
ASHARA III

ASHARA

The new Dorneish horses were superb. Rhaegar and Elia watched in admiration as the two mares - gifts from Elia's brother, of course, were put through their paces by their master in the stables courtyard. Prince Llewyn Martell was sleeping - each of the knights had taken a turn in standing vigil for their fallen brother, and his turn had been last night. And Ser Dayne was guarding the king, which meant the two of them were as close to alone as they ever were.

It had been a warm day. Perhaps the first truly warm day of spring, and Elia bathed in the last rays of sunlight like a lizard on a rock, seeming almost to give forth a glow of her own that bathed her ladies and even the knights around her. She was seated in a corner of the courtyard, sheltered by the castle wall. Too weak as yet for much walking, she could at least spend the day near roses and marigolds, with knights and ladies to talk to, or - when the talk failed - with the sea to look at, and the city beneath. She was dressed in black again. Her hair was bound under an ornate gable hood with bilments of gold, and pinned to her breast was a pendent with three drop pearls. She looked unhappy, and in need of a distraction. Ill though she had been over the last week, with cramps and an upset of the stomach, Elia kept her beauty. Hers was the kind of loveliness that owed less to outer form and coloring, less to a tall, proud body, to a chiseled face, to a miraculous aureole of hair, than to some excitement of spirit within. Even in health, Ashara had seen for herself, that woman was never at peace - no more than any other flame. Her controlled dignity was an achievement. For Elia was every inch a princess, doubly so, and a deserving to be emulated. She was learned and pious, charitable and gracious. She took a warm interest in everyone who served her, cherished them for themselves, and was full of praise.

Clearly today, however, Rhaegar other distractions to occupy himself than his neglected wife. His focus was on rubbing the neck of his splendid new mare - Governatore he had been named it - which had just dazzled them with it's splendid display. He was dressed for riding, beautifully tooled leather the colour of spilled wine, and silver spurs on high boots. And a sword, of course, he always carried a sword. Elia was with him, but he hadn't spoken to her since he dismounted with flair after sailing through the air on the back of the sand steed and dramatically called for wine. He accepted an offered cup, and soon he was surrounded by admiring women - not Elia's but the wives and daughters of the king's knights and counsellors, chatting and joking with them all. Still, in spite the tension between him and his wife, they were always courteous and friendly with each other. One common bond was their daughter, on whom they both doted, and they shared an interest in learning and music. Occasionally, she even heard them laughing together.

"I can scarcely believe there is still a month to before we depart." He said all of a sudden, to nobody in particular. "I've spent the better part of a month picking out armour and horses and deciding who is to be riding on my team." Then he looked at his wife."I'm just glad you're coming. I was inconsolable when you missed the last one. Ser Buckler the Younger would never have unseated me if you'd been watching my back." He looked sharply at her as he spoke, and when she smiled he seemed pleased. He watched her for a moment, apparently enjoying what he saw, and with the air of being content in his own house.

"My love, don't you think these tournaments have served their purpose?" Elia broached carefully. "The men take them so seriously. Won't they always breed trouble? And the expense…"

"You’ve spoken of this before, of course. No, I believe they are useful."
"For what, Rhaegar? Nobodies fighting for any useful purpose, even if the jousts are good training, and…"

"They still are, Elia. I know your opinion - I do listen to you, and I’m truly sorry that I can’t agree with it. I’m glad we are at peace. But we never should have been if we hadn’t known how to fight."

"I’m glad of the peace, too,” she said earnestly, “but can’t we go on to more important business now we are through with wars? Peace isn’t the end, is it? Isn’t there something else to proceed to?"

"I believe, my love, that peace is itself progress. If the tournaments serve no other purpose, they keep the men in health - they are fine exercise."

"Exercise! Men get killed in them."

Rhaegar sighed at that. “Yes, they are rough at times - I admit it. But men get killed accidentally every day, even though they never enter a tournament."

"When you speak of health, you refer to their bodies, I suppose,” said the Princess Regent. “Your knights are sinking into habits of gossip and irritability."

"Some will gossip and some will be irritable,” he replied equinomably, as though it mattered not to him. “There are always a few small people. It’s no use minding them."

"Not even when they talk against you - your own men?"

"They don’t."

"Don’t they! When I was in the garden the other day Ser Oswell Whent and Ser Richard Lonmoumouth came with some others to ask after my health. For sheer lack of anything important to talk about they told me you borrowed heavily from Septon Maynard against your own revenues from Dragonstone, for the tournament. And then Myles Mooton told me you road a course and were unhorsed by Tywin Lannister’s son, whose only barely a knight. There was a time when none of your men would have admitted that to themselves, not even if it were true. Now they seek me out in order to tell it to me."

Rhaegar’s expression suddenly became very still. “They told the truth.” He said, his voice flat and oddly without tone.

Elia sighed. She looked fragile for a moment. She had nearly been married to that boy, when she was the age Ashara was now, but Tywin had not allowed it - ambitious as he was. “I was hoping that they lied.”

“No, though in truth, they exaggerated things a little.” He said, gesturing as though trying to calm her down. "His father invited him to court a few days ago, and I wanted to meet him when he arrived yesterday. After hearing what Ser Dayne and Barristan had to say about his actions against the Kingswood Brotherhood…” He sighed, as though regretting that he hadn't been involved, though from what Ashara had heard at the time he'd been more preoccupied with his letters despite his wife having been taken captive. "… well, I wanted to test his mettle for myself without letting him know who I was, so I borrowed armour from good Ser Jon - we're about the same size, and rode over with my visor down and challenged him. In truth I wasn't expecting what followed - well, I wasn’t ready, but perhaps it would have made no difference. He'll be a greater knight than any of us, one day."

Elia sighed. “I’m very, very sorry, Rhaegar.”
“Oh, I’m not. It’s of no consequence.”

“On the contrary. You discredit yourself by silly behaviour.”

The criticism was gentle, but he didn’t acknowledge it at all, laughing it off as though she were being foolish. “Silly or not, I’m glad I did it. A man should let himself go once in a while. If I were such a stickler for the proprieties as you are, I’d be equally a victim of nerves. You’re too repressed.” He sighed. “No, I don’t mean that. You are still weak, Elia; I’ve tired you out. We’d better talk no more of this now. Before I go I want to tell you some happy news.”

The courtyard was virtually empty by then. Save for Elia and a handful of her thirty maids-of-honour and her dozen young knights hanging decorously back. For all Elia cultivated an informal household and had done all in her power to befriend her ladies, she was still the Crown Princess, and virtuous and decorous behaviour was required of them all, particularly on occasions like this. Just like precedence was given to certain members of her household, for they were the wives of the highest peers of the realm. In spite of that, they all managed to be merry, and enjoyed their frequent diversions despite their social divisions. And yet, there were times when she missed her quiet life at Starfall, and this was looking to be one of them.

"Oh?"

"I have heard that there are to be elections in Oldtown. A new septon, elected to be counted amongst the Most Devout. And it concerns you, actually - since there isn’t a representative in the Prince of Dorne’s Household, that's likely where he'll be dispatched."

The queen had always been of spiritual tendencies, there were rumours that she had once had the ambition to be a septa - and given who her parents had decided to marry her to who could blame her for that, but since Aerys had undergone his spiritual awakening the business of the Fate had become the business of the court - and Elia, for all her personal piety, had to be very careful whenever the subject came up.

"Who is he?"

"Maynard called him Septon Matyn, and claimed he was formerly a student at the citadel. That's all I know, I'm afraid - my head is still full of this tournament."

"That wouldn't be a good idea."

"No?" He sounded surprised to hear anything of the sort. "Well, if you say so."

He didn't look convinced. Elia waved at Lady Lemore, and all the ladies removed themselves from the stands and moved up to the royal couple. They all curtseyed, lowered their eyes and waited for him to give them permission to rise.

"My husband was asking about Septon Matyn." Elia told her ladies.

"A studious man from The Vale. A third son of one of the secondary houses, Belmore, I believe." Lady Catalina Allyrion began. On first impressions she didn't look like much, she was flat-chested and thin-faced, with an extra fingernail on one hand which she tried unsuccessfully to hide with long sleeves, and broad shoulders. Yet she had eyes that sparkled with humour, a cloud of dark hair, and a flair for fashion. She drew all eyes in her cleverly designed attire, even those who affected to follow the example of the king where the Dorneish were concerned. Though they might as well have saved their efforts, she had her eye on a many already. "His parents sent him to the Faith."

That was the way it was still done in The Vale, at least in a lot of the older Andal houses. The heir
inherited the land and title, the spare was encouraged to find his own pathway to fame and fortune through a life of arms, and if there was a third child then he was given to The Faith - no matter how unsuitable he might be for a life of prayer. It was a somewhat elaborate length to go to in order to assure that all the wealth and land didn’t get divided up, but the Lords of the Vale were even more conservative in regards to their traditions than the other lords and nobles of Westeros. “He’s another of Maynard’s proteges, eager to demonstrate his worth - and Maynard is eager to get his man into the Prince of Dorne's Household to promote his own interests, and the interests of the Faith if he has any time left over. He'll have a keen mind, I'm sure.” It went unsaid that if she did allow it, he would have to have a change of allegiance. Princess Elia had no issue with her household seeking advancement, but never at her expense, or that of her families either.

Erin pursed her lips. "How old is he?" She asked her friend, before remembering that she really should have asked the princes permission to speak.

"Thirties, so not in his dotage like half of them. I have spoken to him in passing, but haven't gathered any particular impression yet." That was Catalina's knack - she could talk to someone for five minutes, and remember everything about them.

Elia nodded. “Dull, then. A young man would be trying to make an impression of you, the fact that he couldn’t manage to make himself memorable is a strike against him. Still, if he’s competent that can be forgiven.”

Prince Rhaegar, who had been listening with a distracted air, frowned at Lemore. "If you'll permit me to ask, Lady Lemore; do you know as much of religion as you do of history?"

Lemore inclined her head modestly. "Your Highness, religion is nothing but history."

Rhaegar laughed aloud, but the Elia frowned.

"Why does your mistress disapprove so strongly of the Lord Merryweather's cousin Matyn as a member of the Faith's inner circle?" Rhaegar asked. "From what I've heard, he seems a sober, hard-working fellow. Perfect for such a task."

Lemore raised an eyebrow. “I'm sure I am not the one to discuss this with the Prince of the Seven Kingdoms,” she said.

Elia leaned forward in her high-backed chair and put a gentle hand on her back. “It’s alright, my husband asked you.” She told her reassuringly.

Lemore hesitated, then she shrugged. “Septon Matyn is one of the leaders of an intellectual movement.” She told them, in the voice she reserved for the great number of otherwise intelligent people whose company she appreciated yet who seemed to have no interest in history.

Rhaegar nodded, as if that information told him everything he needed to know. “Well, that sounds promising.”

Lemore raised both eyebrows. "Not necessarily. He studied to be a maester before he decided to become a septon instead, but he forged seven links in his chain. He and the other Reformers – as they call themeselves – have taken the position that the worship of the Old Gods is tied into the veneration of demons, that their worship is heresy of the worst sort, and that those who follow such heathen practices should be burned as witches." She folded her arms. "That they promote lawlessness, anarchy and rejection of rightful authority, and so work against the interests of the kingdom, and it's laws."
There was a stunned silence.

Rhaegar leaned forward. “Why in all Seven Kingdoms would anyone believe such a foolish thing?” he asked. He sounded genuinely surprised.

"I can't comment on that, your highness."

Lady Blackmont decided firmer measures were required. "With your permission, highness, I can. More than that, I can give you a politic answer, an intellectual answer, or a pragmatic answer. Whichever suits you best."

Rhaegar breathed. "Well, with all the cynicism masquerading as wisdom I'm bombarded with every day, I can't imagine a little more will hurt. Let’s have pragmatic, for all love."

Lady Blackmont tried to Elia's eye before she went on. "Old Town was once the centre of the Faith. With their abandoning of The Great Sept, it's felt that it should have retuned to the Starry Sept, not relocated to the Vale by many. As the Citadel – the centre of learning, especially modern learning – was formerly an extension of the Faith and retains strong links to it to this day, it serves their interests to slander any rivals, real or perceived. As well as potentially give them an excuse to force the current High Septon to step down."

Rhaegar nodded. ‘Well, best to know. I’m sure he’ll be difficult – look at the Hand of the King and his heavy-handed policies - can you imagine how things would be if my father did as he asked? But Lord Tywin does get things done. Perhaps this man of Maynard’s is from the same mould.’

Elia looked baffled. "My dear, you just heard Larra say he’ll try to spark a holy war between the worshippers of the Old Gods and the New?"

Rhaegar patted her hand absent-mindedly. "Don't fret, love – Maynard and myself know what’s best for the realm. The Faith want to fill their absent stations. This man sounds very intelligent, he just needs an outlet to express it. Your brother will find him a help at council, and we’ll simply have to show him the kindly light of those who worship the Old Gods.” He nodded. "We're fortunate to have you, Lady Lemore - your learning lights your mistresses household like a hundred candles, and mine with a thousand."

She curtsied at the compliment. Rhaegar did not stay long after that. “I’m afraid we’ve been talking too long,” said Rhaegar. “I’ve been thoughtless, as usual.” He made his excuses, put down the half-full cup, kissed his wife gallantly on the hand and departed. The rest of the hangers-on trailed after him. Once they were all gone, Elia let out a long sigh.

"Well, this is just not acceptable.” Elia told them without preamble. At least she didn't look in need of a distraction anymore. Then she paused. "Where is Lady Fowler?"

"She's missing again." Ashara heard someone say. She thought it was Lady Catalina Allyrion, but she couldn't be sure without turning around to check. There was no doubt who she was speaking about, at least.

"She always seems to be,” Lady Manwoody added. She was twenty-two and had served her Highness faithfully since she was thirteen, which was why she enjoyed her privileged position. Though Ashara had known Elia longer, Lady Manwoody had come to King’s Landing with her, and it was Lady Manwoody who had helped Ashara acclimatise to her life in the capital. She had always dressed very plainly - much to the amusement of the ladiesmaids and laundresses of the Red Keep. Left to her own devices, even at grand events she tended to default to dark, shapeless woollen gowns, over equally shapeless kirtles, all very practical and not flattering in the least. All the servants
of Elia's household had known when she had met a man she liked - even before she did, because her shoes had begun to be more pointed, her gowns had begun to fit and even be of silk. But in spite of that, her essential tastes remained the same, she wore a simple, dark blue overgown over a matching kirtle of no great distinction and with plain buttons and not so very many of them.

In contrast, Ashara Dayne wore a magnificent brown wool kirtle that Elia had given her for her last name day, which fit her so well as to turn men’s heads wherever she walked. It was not quite indecorous, but the bust and the hips lay on the edge of too tight and the long line of buttons of fine gilt silver on the sleeves were worth her allowance for a month and more. It was a bit more… daring, than what she would have chosen, but she found she liked it. And even if she hadn't, it was a gift from the princess, so she would have worn it anyway.

"Well, as far as she knew all we were doing was looking at horses. No need to reprimand her." Elia said, with a sigh, though she was frowning.

"She's not all who's missing." Ashara pointed out, using her chin to indicate the door through with the Crown Prince had just departed. "Who's he meeting this afternoon? Does anyone know?"

"The Hand of the King."

Although she felt an initial surge of surprise at this revelation, in truth Ashara had been expecting to hear something to that effect. Since the mystery of where Rhaegar had been getting his money had been raised, they’d all been surreptitiously watching him. And recently a steady trickle of messengers had been visiting the Crown Prince’s chambers, some at very unsociable hours. Ashara wasn’t a party to what their letters contained anymore than she was a party to the confidential conversations between Elia and her friends, but she had taken note of the way their contents set Prince Rhaegar Targaryen on edge and, even if she didn’t know why, and while she didn’t know what was being sent, she recognised many of the seals, including those of Lord Lannister and Lord Tyrell. Even Septon Maynard, processing around the court with his ever-present ostentatious train of followers and a spiced orange pressed to his nose to keep away the smell of common humanity had visited Rhaegar privately, a few times. There had been clandestine meetings with all a manner of people, to which she had not been a party either, but of which she was well aware. Filled with misgiving, she kept an eye on Rhaegar, and wondered if she should tell Elia what she was afraid of and whether Elia already knew without needing to be told. One thing was for sure, if what she suspected was right then she couldn’t see how this could end without all sides losing.

"We'll concern ourselves with that later." Elia told her. "Septon Maynard has a man in mind, and so does The High Septon most likely - the two wouldn't agree with each other out of spite. Someone find out who he means to endorse, because as it happens, I haven't made up my mind yet. But when I do, I shall get my way."

Septa Elvira's lips pursed, and she sniffed. It was a good sniff – it managed to suggest that priests themselves were not always good people - much less High Septons, but that she’d weighed up the matter and ultimately decided in his favour, far better than that bureaucrat in priestly vestments who Aerys favoured anyway. Ashara raised her brows. The business of bargaining for favour and position was hard apace. Everyone from the lowest scullion to the Crown Prince, everyone except seemingly the King, knew that Septon Maynard was a wily one. His reputation for gathering around him men of rare and keen intellect was likewise renowned. "That one's as twisty as a rattlesnake dancing with an octopus," Lemore said. "What is he expecting to get out of this?"

"And why now? There are supposed to be seven of the Most Devout, though there have been five for six years now."

"Well, I can only speculate, but imagine it's because they have a candidate in mind now. Or rather,
Maynard does, and so the High Septon is endorsing someone else as a consequence.” Lemore replied, and after a moment's consideration Lady Blackmont nodded. The High Septon of the moment had been elected to head the Faith as a compromise candidate, an old ivory-tower intellectual no threat to anyone who'd previously been content writing books nobody ever read arguing obscure points of moral philosophy. He was never meant to exercise any real power.

But the world is more complex than we often imagine. That the good men and women of The Faith were being manipulated by a feud between two men was true, and while Old Town had reason to resent being passed over as the seat of the Faith in favour of the Vale and the loss of stature that had followed, while being pressed mercilessly by the King's Taxes targeting all of Westerns' ports, The High Septon, and Septon Pierre as well, who loved Old Town and had made many friends at the Citadel, were both providing value for money. In particular their assistance to the Citadel, which would bring students from all over The Reach and even all over the Seven Kingdoms, and Septon Pierre, himself one of the most famous theologians since Baelor the Blessed, would add enormous lustre to the founding.

"Why would such a movement exist?" Ashara asked, genuinely confused. "I understood that the Faith claims that since the Old Gods don't exist, worshipping them can't do any harm."

"Not at all. That's a very dated theology, my dear," replied Lemore before anyone else could. "In actuality, the Faith makes the distinction between worship of the Seven and the Old Gods as largely irrelevant, with the Old Gods serving as reflections of the world and power of nature. As such things are the creation of the Seven, they simply worship the True Gods at a degree of separation."

"Poppycock!" snapped Ashara, who was tired from a life of being patronised by her father and didn’t intend to let Lemore Jordayne get into the habit. "What a load of rubbish!"

"It's a compromise, and it's one that has kept us free from holy wars for thousands of years. In that sense, at least, it's value cannot be understated." Elia said, smiling in wry amusement. "When you think that the septons the Andals brought with them refused to cross the Neck to the North to save their souls, saying that if the Northerners were to be admitted to any of the Heavens then they wanted no part of it for themselves, well you have to admite it's hard to fault with their reasoning."

That prompted giggling, and Elia pushed herself to her feet - though she tired easily at the moment, she was too proud to lean on any of her friends for support. She spoke a few words to Mael, who inclined his head and led away the horses, then stretched. The sun was setting, and the days warmth was almost entirely vanished. At that moment the bell rang in the cloister for prayers, and they retired to Elia's apartments, where an oak-panelled room had been fitted out as a chapel.

The alter was covered with a rich pall and frontal of cloth of gold, and the seven pointed star was of obsidian and encrusted with precious stones - gifts from her husband. A young man began to say the divine office, and they all obligingly lowered their heads. Ashara kneeled in her accustomed place. But she didn't listen to the service - for her part, Ashara never knew what to pray for, so she tended to leave that up to the Gods, and spend the time thinking instead.

After the service, Elia returned to her chamber, the ladies following two by two (in no particular order), Ashara accompanying Margaery Horsman, a pretty young woman with blue eyes and a dark wiry curl escaping from her hood. She was in a mood to talk, and so Ashara indulged her, listening as Margaery took her into confidence about how she intended to ask Elia's permission to get married. Some girls, Ashara thought, had all the luck.

The gallants had not come chasing in Ashara's wake, and she lacked the boldness to be forward and make eyes at them, as Lemore and Catalina Allyrion did. Some of her fellow ladies were so pretty that they did not even have to try - the men came flocking. But Ashara was known to have the
friendship of Elia (who kept her busy), had a great name and the greatest knight in the world for an older brother. Those two qualities tended to scare her admirers away, or at least keep them from approaching her. Here she was, at the capital of the Seven Kingdoms, she was seventeen, and hadn't even met anyone, much less the rest of it.

The evening meal had been set, and the ladies got on with it. Elia was in a pensive mood, obviously fixed on what her husband had confided in her, and quiet, quite unlike herself. Ashara took another bite of her rabbit, grateful that Elia had her own cook, and she didn't have to eat the bland food that the northerners seemed to enjoy.

"Well, it seems we need to take the offensive, on this." Elia said at last. When she spoke, everyone stopped their conversations to listen.

"Your husband has made up his mind. So has Septon Maynard."

Elia nodded. "Quite right. So we need to go over their heads." She replied. "Tywin Lannister."

Nobody replied. For as long as Ashara, or anybody else, could remember, Tywin Lannister had been the king’s chief adviser - king in all but name, many said. And for all that the king seemed determined to thoroughly alienate him by whatever means he could, it was difficult to argue otherwise. Though he had no part in the pomp of the court, only the king dared go against him. At his word, Rhaegar and Maynard would fold, there was no doubt of that.

"How do we get him to do that?" Lemore asked, chewing on her lip.

Elia shrugged. "We'll just have to find something he wants. Before the Spring Feast and the new offices are announced."

Ashara didn't say a word. She just thought of Cersei, with a household equal to the Queen's, much less Elia's, and wondered.
The Spring breeze was blowing gusts of warm dust through the narrow, arched window, the sunshine beating through the tall windows onto her auburn hair as she brushed it carefully. It was pleasant, but when the sun sank it would turn cool and damp again within the thick, dark walls of ancient castle. The red-velvet footstool on which she was resting her slender feet was threadbare; the gold tassels at its four corners were tarnished; the embroidered silver leaping trout and nine black bats were worn and faded, the timber was scuffed and it's varnish uneven. But it had been her mothers, and so sentimentally held onto as a consequence. She could order another one, of course, a fine new piece, but that wouldn't have the same memories, it would not have been to the same places, it would not have been the same.

Her mother had been lady Minisa Tully, and had died in childbirth some five years ago, trying to give Lord Hoster a second son. Her mother's health had never been strong, and the baby had perished along with her, and it seemed to Catelyn at times that something in her father, something small and all but unnoticed but nevertheless unimaginably precious had perished alongside his wife. Her mother had always been so calm, Catelyn thought, remembering her mother's soft hands, her warm smile. She would have been better at this.

Still thinking of her mother, Catelyn looked down at the old footstool that had lain on the flagstones of every castle in the Riverlands, one month in Stone Hedge which had passed in a whirl of scrapes and childish games with Lord Bracken's daughters that had been friendly but earnestly competitive, another in Seaguard where Lord Jason Mallister had arranged a tournament - just a small one - and broken four lances with her uncle but ultimately fallen to the Blackfish (and if there was a finer knight in the world, you'd have had a world of trouble convincing her of that), another in Eserick with the Erenfords which had past so slowly it was as though time had stopped entirely, and this last - and first - month of spring in Blackwood, for her father rarely stayed more than a week or so in the same place, at least, when he could help it, and Spring, as he'd told her a number of times, meant trouble.

Less than a week ago, they'd been at the Twins - camping, rather than lodging - for her father had little use for Lord Walter Frey or his estate, and though Cat had been taught to see beyond her first impressions, she hadn't much cared for the old vulture either; yesterday they had stopped at Eserick; today they were at Blackwood; the day after tomorrow they would set out for Stone Hedge again and then back home. Which would be a relief, as Catelyn found that though variety might be the spice of life, she missed her home dearly. To her, it had seemed that the moment the snow had thawed, and travellers had begun struggling through the muddy roads again, her father had made his plans and uprooted himself and his household to bestride his realm.

Unlike Riverrun's orderly household, Castle Blackwood functioned in an atmosphere of organised chaos and the food was atrocious. Lord Blackwood's impatient palate was far from a gourmet’s - as far as he was concerned, bread was bread and if it was a trifle burned or somewhat gritty it didn’t matter. Any complaints - not that many made them - were met with raised eyebrows and short shrift, as far as he was concerned what was good enough for one was good enough for anyone else. The same went for his household wine, which had a reputation throughout the Riverlands. 'Like drinking mud,' her cousin Ser Otho Whent had confided in her a week ago, when her father had turned his progress this way. Not that she would know, since Hoster Tully had prudently brought his own supply and a servant who knew how to care for it along with the extensive other travelling arrangements.

For most of her life, Catelyn had been treated as the heir of Riverrun, and even though that was no
longer the case, she was still included in these arrangements - the footstool was not alone in her travelling collection. She had a few dusty tapestries that had belonged to her mother, a collection of cutlery, and more dresses than she could keep track of which constituted her travelling wardrobe, all of which was forever getting packed into the travelling-chests and getting unpacked once again; as well as the curtained bed, which had begun to creak whenever she shifted her weight and was forever being taken down and put up again somewhere else, that bed in which Catelyn took sometimes her lady-in-waiting, Jeanne Ryger, great-niece of Riverrun's captain of guards and a year younger than she was, when the night was cold. Jeanne Ryger was a tall woman, with regular features, an honest face and quiet hands, and made a good and discrete confidant. Without her skills at listening, Catelyn sometimes feared she would go mad.

And it was thus they journeyed across the kingdom, through its green countryside, it's rivers and it's lakes and its melancholy castles. All around, life was stirring, Catelyn could again hear the songs of thrushes, robins, larks, wrens and sparrows on the roads and riverbanks.

Lord Hoster Tully was a restless man, with a need that was almost pathological to be riding somewhere, and he made every possible effort to be known personally to even the least of his vassals. He told her he did them honour by staying with them, by hearing what they had to say, and that as little as a few friendly words was enough to assure their loyalty and kept them in line. Perhaps it was even true - to an extent, but like all truths it's seeming simplicity was deceptively complex - it wasn't just a matter of looking over his subjects shoulders and listening to them complain, the actual purpose was reassuring them all, offering guarantees or whatever else they needed in order to believe that their lord had their interests at heart. And with the Riverlands the target of both the king's attentions and his policies of intervention, Hoster Tully often had to go to great lengths to convince them of it.

She was still young, but she understood that though it was spring, though the snow had disappeared, whisked away by a warm wind blowing from the south, though the migrating cranes and herons, lapwings and golden plovers had begun to return, though the ice on the surface of the lakes had melted, and though there were fish returning to the rivers to spawn, that there was precious little grain on the barges that again drifted up the rivers from town to town, and what little there was, was not for distribution but for storage. That between hunger, and these new taxes, a famine seemed inevitable, and that her father was the one they looked to for resolution. It seemed counterproductive for a feast, even a modest one, but it would have been a terrible insult to refuse it, so there was nothing for it but to suffer through it.

"You look very fine, my lady." Jeanne Ryger said with a curtsy. Catelyn smiled in acknowledgement of the compliment, but flattery was commonplace in her world, and she paid it no mind.

"Juana, help me dress carefully." she asked her other companion, who moved over to help without hesitation. Two days before, the first lambs had been born in a sheepfold hard under Blackwood's hill. It was very early for such births, but had been taken as a good sign from the Gods - the Old Gods, who were worshipped here. She'd watched, with her ladies and their hosts as the firstborn of those lambs was sacrificed to ensure that the rest of the lambing season would go well. The little beast’s bloody pelt was nailed to a willow beside the stream and beneath it, and by the next day, a wolfsbane bloomed, its small yellow petals the a sign of what was to come in the dawning spring.

In a corner of the room three maidservants were embroidering a counterpane for Lord Blackstone's bumptious wife, an offshoot of the Blackwood's with lands and a keep of their own, who was playing chess by an open window with the heir-apparent of Blackwood. A little farther off, the Lord Blackwood's second son, who had had his seventh birthday three weeks earlier, was making a bow
from a hazel switch; while two little girls who were either his nieces or cousins (Catelyn wasn't sure), Isabella and Alienor, respectively five and two, were sitting on the floor, playing with rag dolls. Lysa was nowhere to be seen - she seldom seemed to want to come on these grand tours of the Riverlands, and whenever she did, she spent most of the time indoors. The older son and heir-apparent, Jorn, was a boy of eleven; he had a rather long, thin face, and was by nature reserved rather than timid, though he nearly always kept his eyes on the ground, but when they'd spoken he'd showed himself clever and even passably witty.

As for his father, well Lord Blackwood had been all courtesy. He fed them the finest dishes, housed them in the most luxurious rooms, and was an attentive host. He spoke lengthily to her father about their shared memories, of his plan for a stone sept based on the beautiful one at Fairmarket, and of his desire to set up 'neighbourly relations', but he didn't speak of the famine. Instead, they all trod on the thin ice of pretence and the new year was rung in on creaky but glorious bells. And then, just the day before, her father had lost his temper - a rare thing, and most memorable as a consequence. Everyone knew he had one, but few had ever seen him put out with it. She had been in the salon with her ladies playing drafts, and she had been winning too, when she had heard him bawling at the front door, and came out to find him standing in the hallway, fulminating at two fellows outside on the steps. One looked to be a septon of the mendicant sort; the other was obviously prosperous, but beyond that had nothing to suggest his station or his profession.

"… effrontery, to seek to thrust yourself between me and my people, and tell your lords to what they should do on their own lands!" Hoster Tully was roaring in his deep and thunderous bass, and it sent cold shivers down the spine of everyone present, and echoed, strange and terrible, through the castle and the night. For more than ten years, since the first battle of the Stepstones to be exact, when he had rallied his army and forced a victory, Lord Hoster Tully had never been known to shout, though he growled on occasion. But now it flooded out - an enormous man, in every sense, not least in his temper - usually he was genial enough, in a gruff way, but he had become grotesque in his rage, towering like some bearded old-world god.

"Merciful Gods, you are fortunate I am not so impetuous as my father, for that's all it is that restrains me from cracking your skull between my teeth! Or setting the hounds on you! Who are you to make demands to me? Who are you to presume to instruct me how to dispose of my lands - my lands! - to offer me terms like we're haggling over a horse? Have you no souls to cure, you priest fellow, and you, malingerer, clerk, merchant's catamite, whoever you are! Shouldn't pen-pushing or pimping be enough to occupy you? Ah, but no - you have your agitating, have you not, you seditious scum! Well, agitate elsewhere, before I reconsider my temperance! Get out of my sight and get off my land - both of you!"

Her father had always been a big man, one of the biggest she'd ever seen; yet tall as he was he was broad enough to appear squat, and it wasn't all muscle. He'd grown heavier over the years, steadily and unstoppably, a big man who had once been strong rather than powerful as well as clever and enterprising, but was now dropping into the mire of his own wealth. He was fat now. He was going to get fatter. Still, there was a hardness to his heaviness, he was heavy like a barrel, not a balloon. His head and face were just a mass of hair of that curious colour of cider mixed with water common to red-headed men when they start going grey, trained to his shoulders and in a splendid beard that rippled down his chest. His eyes were fine under huge shaggy brows, the same blue as hers, for all that they were sadder. You would never have guessed from the glossy colour of his hair, and the ease with which he moved his huge and heavy bulk that he was approaching sixty.

He was not alone, although his two usual advisers, Maester Kym and Ser Robin Ryger, had shrank back from him, even as the two he confronted stood their ground in the face of his rage, risking their health - maybe their lives, in confrontation, his advisers caught off guard by their lords fury. Hoster Tully had a powerful voice, but he seldom even raised it much less shouted, even when he was
commanding his men, and they both feared what this might entail. Ser Robin Ryger had bright red hair and a moustache that he wore long, he wore the emblem of a rooster on green and white, and had been the head of Lord Tully's guards for as long as she could remember - not her father's best man but certainly his most tenacious. There was just no quit in the old knight at all, he'd keep coming until he found a way. Maester Kym, however, she didn't like very much. He didn't seem to want to have anything to do with her either, though it was difficult to tell, usually he barely moved at all, or breathed, or even blinked, oddly expressionless. Her sister Lysa had suggested that the maester was like a Lizard Lion, one of the big ones that lay on the banks of the Green Fork past the Twins, sunning themselves and moving only once a day or so before suddenly opening mouths that seemed large enough to swallow a horse. The really terrible ones with vestigial third eyes.

Still, for all that he'd never done her a wrong turn. Him and Ser Robin made for unlikely friends, but they were and always had been, and she doubted anyone knew her father better than the two of them - and from their glances they didn't know what to make of it better than he did.

"We are no subjects of yours!" cried the man of unknown providence defiantly, shouting back, though his voice didn't shake the keep the way his lords had. "You do not order us, lord though you might be." Catelyn had flinched, wondering how a man could so badly misjudge his situation, and Hoster Tully's face reddened perceptibly as he started forward, almost as red as his hair and his eyes widening alarmingly, but the septon got between them before her father could get his hands on the smaller man.

"Lord Tully! A moment!" He was game, that one, and either out of surprise at being dressed in such a way, or out of respect for the man's calling Hoster paused long enough for him to continue talking. "Hear me, I implore. You are a just man, and surely it is little enough to ask. They'll starve!"

"Look you," Hoster Tully replied contemptuously, finding the restraint to hold himself in. "Your on my land, your subject to my laws, and the laws of my vassals as well. How could it be otherwise?" He took a deep breath. "If Lord Merryweather orders you to butcher your sheep and ready your lands for the plough, then that's what you do. Even suppose I did intervene, and offer you special dispensation - or permitted someone else to, what would happen then? I shall tell you - within a day everyone else would object that they didn't get preferential treatment! Before the week was out, you would have all the priests and other parasites from Fairmarket to The Twins bawling at my door: 'We cannot pay the tax, oh Lord, and we're starving; pay our taxes for us and buy us grain from the Reach, as you paid for so-and-so.' And where does that end? It's the King taxing you, take it up with him, you won't get it from me."

"But -" the priest was beginning, but Hoster Tully cut him short.

"You would tell me that the Faith would pay for them all? Aye, The High Septon would find the money - he puts his revenues to better use than his predecessors did. And where would he get it, do you think? Ask the Gods, perhaps? He would do it so that he could creep among my towns and villages, he's as greedy for land and influence as a dragon is for gold! I know him well, and he's no better than the King, or this Lord Merryweather you despise! So get hence, priest, out of my sight, and take your usurer with you before I forget myself!"

"And the men who are starving, then? Have a little pity, Lord Tully!"

"I have explained!" roared Hoster Tully. "By The Father who Judges All, as though I owe you that much! Get out, both of you!"

He advanced, hands clenched, and the two of them went scuttling down the steps of the Great Hall. But the more argumentative of the two who'd already pushed her father further than it was safe had to have a last word, which he shouted over his shoulder. "You are nothing but a tyrant! You have
forgotten you have responsibilities as well as privileges! You and your kind think you can live forever, by oppression and torture and theft! Lord of Riverrun? So you call yourself, but your land, is now leased out by another! I pronounce it! Like to a tenement or pelting farm, worse, like a back alley whore, you've committed your lands to the man who cut them up with inky blots and rotten parchment bonds, and allowed shameful conquest of your own lands, which compass no longer anything save your head!"

That had been a little too much. Hoster Tully seemed to go mad. He flung his cap on the ground, foaming at the mouth or coming close to it anyway while the two malcontents scampered off for their lives. It took him almost an hour to simmer down, but at last he ordered wine (his own), and sat in Lord Blackwood's solar drinking it, his head was thrown back and stroking his beard with a nervous gesture which, in him, was a sign of irritation. Though he hadn't mentioned it since, neither to her or to anyone else, she could tell it weighed heavily on him, just as it did on her. All was not well in the Riverlands, and that was far from the only sign.

That evening, just before the evening meal, she joined her father and asked him what was to become of the two men. He'd only sighed, and shrugged. "What's to become of any of us?" He sighed again, a drawn-out, melancholy sound. "Priests. In my youth, as I recall, they could be relied upon to only show up where they were wanted, and keep themselves content with useful tasks. They studied books and instilled knowledge in children, treated the sick, took care of the poor, the crippled and the homeless - fine contributions, you can be sure. And better yet, they knew better than to get mixed up in politics."

"What would it have hurt to negotiate, my lord?" Ser Robin asked, his voice heavy with sorrow. They went on talking in low voices, for the whisper and the aside had become necessary habits when you were never alone.

Her father, his anger apparently long passed, turned his great head to look at the smaller man and shook it, his beard brushing against his robes. He was well within his rights to refuse to answer such an impertinent question. Indeed, no one but Ser Robin would have presumed to question the Lord of Riverrun's decision at all. "Robin," Lord Tully said, putting his hand on his friend's arm affectionately, "tell me - are there any vast stores of grain that I'm hoarding? Have I robbed my own people? Do I raid their lands, or anyones lands for that matter? Are their accusations just?"

"No," Ser Robin answered, his eyes meeting those of his sovereign steadily.

Lord Tully sighed. As he talked, the lord of the Riverlands was walking up and down the room, working off his useless agitation. The jewels hanging from his clothes quivered at every step he took. The rest of them followed him with their eyes, turning their heads from side to sides he paced. "No. You have seen the harvest. You know that what little money remains in our stores we will spend to lay in what we can, as seed crop, and hope the next one is kinder to us. It's Spring now, so there will be another harvest, at least. That's all we can do. The king found Lord Greenwood a traitor, and attainted his line. It is within his rights to dispose of his lands as he will. If Lord Merryweather sees more profit in grain than in mutton, then so be it. I only hope he's right, for it's sorely needed."

"Why not tell them this?" Robin asked earnestly. "Tell them the truth! They will understand:"

Lord Tully smiled sadly, wearily. "No, they will not understand. How long have they lived on that land? How long have they worked it, how far back have they been buried there? They have become its children." He shrugged. "And now the king gives the land to someone else, and suddenly all they know is changed, and they're faced with starvation. What else can they do? No. They have a right to be ignorant. Knowledge only means complicity in guilt; ignorance has a certain dignity."

Ser Robin frowned, but Hoster Tully continued patiently. "They want to believe, my friend. More
than that, they have to believe. It is their only hope for survival - that someone can help them. They have nothing, turned out of their homes and villages, nothing except that hope. And so they are willing to fight for it. I understand them." The old lord's eyes dimmed for a moment, and Cat - staring at him in amazement - realized then that his anger had been largely feigned, a pantomime for their benefit.

"Now they can return to their wives and their hungry children and they can blame the callousness of their lords. And that will help them forget their hunger, for awhile at least."

"But to go this far! Surely, we can share what little-"

"My friend," Hoster Tully said softly, "by the Smith's Hammer, I swear this - if I agree to their terms, we would all perish. We'd all of us starve."

Robin stared at him. "As bad as that?" he asked.

Lord Tully nodded. "Aye, as bad as that. I'm not spreading it around - it'd cause a panic or worse. And I swear you to secrecy. The harvest was disastrous. Our coffers are nearly empty, the king is bleeding us dry - the tax on their heads would be ruinous even if the harvest hadn't been a disaster, and now we must hoard what we can. With what we have, maester Kym and I calculate that we can make it - barely. Squandering it the way they're asking -" He shook his head.

Robin stood pondering, then he lifted his head, his dark eyes flashing. "If that is true, then so be it!" he said sternly. "Better we all starve to death, than write off entire villages. Then condemn people - our own people to starvation. I haven't a gift with words, you know it, but he said it - we have duties as well as privileges!"

"He did. And they were noble words, my friend," Lord Tully answered. "You can't eat noble words, though. You can't drink them or wrap them around your feet or burn them in your firepit or give them to children crying in hunger."

"And what of those whose family do starve? What about them?"

Hoster Tully raised an eyebrow. "They will cry for a month," he said simply, "then what little we have will be stretched a little less, others will eat their share of the food that. And wouldn't the ones who don't make it want it that way?" With that, he turned and left the Great hall, heading for the battlements once more to be alone with his thoughts.

That night, she'd felt uncomfortable at the evening meal, which for a change was largely excellent. It had seemed to last forever as course after course was brought out - light fish in buttery sauces, rich rolls of pork stuffed with wild mushrooms, soft-fleshed peacock with sweet onion, until even Ser Robin, a man who loved his food, pronounced himself 'as stuffed as a boar at the feast he's served at.' Lord Blackwood smiled in satisfaction and waved in one final course - a giant pastry braid studded with nuts and dripping with honey and elegantly twisted over itself.

So many, had so little, and here they all were eating so much.

"It's not we who starve." Lord Blackwood said, sensing the direction of her thoughts. "But our people. There will always be enough on our tables, come what may. I shock you, Catelyn?"

"Not shock." She replied. "I am just not used to people saying so openly what they mean."

"Surely all else is a waste of time?"

"You are right," Catelyn agreed. "The truth should be enough, but maybe it is just that, at times, a
little honey coating is nice."

There was a moment's pause in which Catelyn feared she had overstepped the admittedly faint mark of manners in Blackwood's court, but thankfully Lord Blackwood was not one to offend easily and he just laughed again.

But the mood didn't go away. The mood had remained with her all night - for the first time in her life, Catelyn had struggled to sleep. Despite being bone-tired, she couldn't make it through the night without waking twice, and that morning she had lost her appetite completely. She didn't feel much better now. What she needed was someone to cheer her up.

Almost the moment she'd had that thought, as though she'd summoned him with her desire, a man entered the room. He was a large man. His sleeked-back hair was a deep chestnut that would be fox-red when it dried and his angular features were dappled with freckles. He rapidly assessed the occupants of the main room out of pale blue eyes, his hand hovering close to his sword hilt more out of habit, then any intent to come across as threatening. Two squires who had been drinking quietly in a corner rose to attend him, as did her sister. Lysa was certainly a pretty girl, dimpled and delicate, with long auburn hair. Timid, though. Prone to tongue-tied silences and fits of giggles. She was almost Cat's age, but she looked younger, and the great cloak of stiff linen that had once belonged to their mother and that she'd chosen to wear only exaggerated the effect - Lysa looked too small for her clothes and jewellery, just like a child arrayed in its mother's gold dressed up for play and, just like a child pretending to adulthood, she carried herself with a self-absorbed solemnity to defy her innate lack of dignity. Producing the puppy that had been tucked under her arm, Lysa thrust it at him. "This is Diamond," she announced, by way of a greeting. "She's my new dog. I'm glad you're back."

"So am I." Ser Brynden dutifully tussled the pup's silky ears. His nostrils filled with the smell of the pup - a mingling of mild urine and baby fur. It opened its little jaws and nipped his finger with its milk teeth. The word 'rat' came to mind the way it had come to hers, but like her Brynden he carefully kept it to himself. "For however long I'm back."

"Are you fighting with father again?" Lysa asked, some of the pleasure leaving her face as she prepared to pucker her chin in sympathy.

"No. We never stopped. We never really do, we just find new ways to do it." Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her into a hug, before letting go. "I'm not staying long. I'm to head south, bound for Highgarden in a fortnight, and I'm only stopping here because I have need of good knights. There's a rebellion in the South - just a small one, and lord Tyrell has his first lance already laying siege to their border towns." His gaze ranged over the swords worn by most of the young men, and he winked. "If any of you has a mind, I'll take you on. I can't promise riches, but likely you'll acquire them." Then his eyes returned to her sister. "You know, I got you something as well."

Lysa held up her hands eagerly, and Brynden's lips twitched, as he reached into pouch, and removed a cameo, which he placed in her hands. "It's made in Dorne." He confided in Lysa, then his eyes settled on her, and she fancied they brightened a little. "Cat. Do you have a new dog as well?"

"No," Catelyn replied. "No, I don't have a dog."

"Well, thank the seven for that." Lysa pouted, but the expression melted as he affectionately rubbed her head, then stepped past her to embrace Catelyn. One of her ladies sighed. There was no doubt that her uncle was a fine-looking man, muscular, lithe and alert. He kept himself fit with games and exercises and inviting himself to any battles or tournaments the length and breadth of the Seven Kingdoms like a common hedge knight, and had so far resisted any tendency to stoutness though his fortieth birthday was close at hand; he had an athlete's constitution.
They all loved her uncle. He was often absent, since he and her father were always in conflict. He himself had never married. Indeed he had never really settled at all, anywhere. Riverrun was his home, yet to Catelyn even when he was there he seemed like a visitor. He had rooms, but kept little furniture there and scant comfort. He rode errands for her father, or for the king, or anyone who had need of a good sword and a strong right arm, travelling the length of the Seven Kingdoms to resolve problems with other kingdoms, or else to attend tournaments, and he seemed happiest when he was thus kept busy. Doubtless he had his reasons - his personal reasons - but Catelyn didn't know them. She only knew that at times her uncle had to be lonely, though he never complained.

"You're so stiff, Cat." He told her, as they embraced, before breaking away and looking down at his niece. Catelyn managed a brave smile. "Warriors wounds, girl - don't get so worried on my account. I'll be back in time for Harrenhal, and you or Lysa will have to lend me a favour to carry just like always. Don't worry about me."

"It's not… it's not that." Catelyn replied. "It's… father says there isn't enough food. That villages are going to starve."

For a moment, something flashed in her uncles eyes, but it was over too quickly for her to identify it, or even been to sure she'd seen anything at all. Brynden looked uncomfortable, but he sighed and nodded, a gentleness in his eye. "Aye, well, it's not the sort of thing you can fight, is it? My brother does what's best - love him or hate him, he does that much. But the harvest squeezes, and the King squeezes, and even the Gods take their turn. Don't be scared, little Cat, we'll get through it."

"It's not that." Catelyn replied. "It's not us, it's…"

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