A Farmer's Tale

by alltheuntold

Summary

A 30 year old American farmer is sent to the world of ASOIAF. Follow as he tries to create a life for himself.
I thought I should try to write some of this down. My name is Michael Dunwoody, and I don’t know where I am, or how I got here. I was a 30 year old farmer from Iowa, but now I am in a land unknown. I suppose I was born here anew, like some story, but I know not of any purpose. I was born to a new family, and like any child, I only have some fragments of my memories as a toddler. I lived with my mother and my father’s family mostly while my father travelled nearby as a merchant. However, my new mother died when I was 4, and my uncle passed me off to my father and said that they could no longer keep me in their home. My father decided to move to a place called King’s Landing in order to better provide for us. I helped my father as much as I could, but by the time I was 14 he had died down at the docks. This world is so harsh, I didn’t even know until the next day, because when he did not come home at night I had to go looking for him. Apparently, he slipped on the docks, and a box crushed him.

Even now, I can remember the feeling of being dumbfounded. His body was already disposed of, and none of the other merchants wanted to waste time talking to me. I remember waiting for a government official to come by, or for someone to help me sort through some sort of legal paperwork. But nothing came.

Before this I knew things were different here, how could I not? But it really struck home for me. I realized I didn’t have anything tying me here, and I didn’t have the heart to try and claw my way to the top of the merchant class in this cruel, lawless world. I sold off what I could, and decided that I wanted to be a farmer again. I know I could do it better than anyone else here, they were all very medieval here. But I also knew that these smallfolk had no rights, no liberty. I was stuck, for the Reach had the best farmland, but was already filled with farmers. I could try the Riverlands, but I don’t want to die.

It seemed to me that everything boiled down to that. I wanted a good life, and to not die. Since coming here, I was constantly fearing death. There was sickness, hunger, bandits, cutpurses, lords, and fighting. As a merchant’s son, I had seen the map of Westeros many times, and while I wasn’t very knowledgeable about current politics, I knew the general history of the kingdoms. I knew without dragons (DRAGONS?!! This still astounds and frightens me), that war would come eventually. I knew not when, but being so close to the throne with no natural defenses the Riverlands was probably a death sentence. Similarly, the Crownlands was the same and much too close to a line of rulers that were mad (I mean, drinking wildfire? Seriously?).

My only real options were the Vale or the North. I was skeptical of the Vale, I knew that they were plagued by mountain tribes, so I knew there might not be room for me. And the fact that I would have to demote myself from a merchant to smallfolk. To be honest, I didn’t even know if that was possible. In the end, I decided to make my way north through the Vale, and if need be then onwards to the North. The North seemed to be frontier-esque, like early America, with a harsh land and harsh life, but apparently, they have different customs there. I know it’s not correct, but the talk around King’s Landing carried that vibe. But I knew if need be, my mother was a Northerner by blood. So, with that in mind, I decided to head out.
Sometimes it is easy to forget I am not on Earth. When I was walking through the woods on my way northwards, it looks the same as anything you would find on earth. But like dragons and wildfire, something comes along and slaps you in the face. The Eyrie. It was a cloudless day, and I could see it perched atop the mountain from a far. The stories I head described it, but I thought the mountain wouldn’t be that large, and that peoples varying descriptions of measurement failed again. I was wrong. I was insane to see, and frightening to be honest. How many were forced to make that, and how many died? I know that Westeros had banned slavery thankfully, but for me, even serfdom is a bit too close for my liking. I find that is the name of the game here, my fear. My decision to leave King’s Landing was rooted in fear, and even my life daily is filled with fear. Will I eat today? Will a wandering lord take his cruelty out on me? These thoughts plagued me, and I did my best to avoid others.

When I passed through Gulltown, I picked up an older workhorse, and a beat-up wagon, which thankfully had new wheels. The cart is simple, so I still must walk, but I have unloaded my pack into the wagon, and have been able to slowly collect items for my new life. I managed to get a basic bow and some arrows from King’s Landing, along with a knife and a hatchet. I have been lucky to avoid bandits I think, I still don’t know what my odds are, but I keep my money hidden best as I can, and avoid roads as much as possible.

So far, I have not found any places to rest my head, but I do have the beginnings of a guitar for myself. It is times like this I am thankful for my father’s insistence that I know how to do things myself. My old father that is, the one I was born to on Earth. The Vale is a beautiful land, and the mountains are gorgeous. I never visited any mountains on Earth, but I did see photos on the internet. All I can say is that they are definitely better in person, they are quite humbling, and they speak of power.

Re-reading that last sentence, I laughed at myself. It seems I am getting the hang of writing in English again. Westerosi, or the Common Tongue, is quite like English (structurally at least), both the spoken and written portions. So, I am confident that no one can read this and decide to hang me as a demon. Which is quite comforting, as writing this now is very cathartic. At least now in my old age, if someone was to hang me there would be people to mourn me.
Prologue: Part 3

It was a bad day all around. The Vale turned out to be quite full, both with peasants and attentive lords. I was able to pick up 4 younger cattle for a good price, and they seem to be a different breed than those in King’s Landing. The locals don’t have them named, so I’ve taken to calling them Highland Cows. Creative, I know. That’s about all the good news. I was travelling along the northern coast of the Vale, keeping away from the mountains and any villages, but as I got closer to the Riverlands, the amount of people increased. And with those people, bandits.

When it came down to it, I was lucky I suppose. I had left my horse, cattle, and my two new dogs harnessed in the woods, while I went off to hunt. I had success in bringing down a deer, the first time I had in almost a week, so I was in a good mood. I had yet to unstring my bow, as I kept it slung over my shoulder, so I could drag the deer back to camp. However, as I neared, I could hear a course laugh and some talking. I dropped the dear, and grabbed an arrow, one of the few I had remaining. And did my best to sneak up to camp, and when I finally was able to see the clearing, my heart sank. I saw two men going through my wagon, and both had swords. One of them even had a few bits of armor.

Now by this time, I was a bit hardened against death. Much more so than I had been on Earth, because King’s Landing was a brutal place. However, I had never actually killed anyone myself. I was terrified. I knew that these men were like to take everything I had and would probably stab me while they were at it. I knew that. But I still had these thoughts, these doubts, should I kill these men? Did I have the right? Surely prison would be good enough? Even as I though these things, I knew they were foolish, and that I needed to act.

The one with armor had is back to me, standing on the ground in front of the wagon, while the other was standing on top holding my prototype still. I laid out a few arrows on the ground in front of me so I could fire quickly. I had never tried to rapidly fire before, but with all the use that I had been getting out of my bow the past few months, I prayed my skill would see me through. I grabbed my first arrow, and drew back and aimed for the man on the ground. His back was unarmored, and my aim was true. I knew that these men were like to take everything I had and would probably stab me while they were at it. I knew that. But I still had these thoughts, these doubts, should I kill these men? Did I have the right? Surely prison would be good enough? Even as I though these things, I knew they were foolish, and that I needed to act.

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I drew my fourth arrow and cautiously approached the first man. I could see his hand trying to move, but he was otherwise motionless. As I walked around him, I could see him looking at me. He was in great pain, but quickly dying. It looked like my arrow must have hit his spine, because though he could move his mouth and hand, nothing else seemed to move. Blood was dripping out of his mouth, and he was making a crying noise from his throat. Tears ran down his face, I almost froze at the sight, and was drawn in by his pain. Instead I drew my knife and gave him what mercy I could offer. I slowly stood up and looked around when I noticed that everything seemed strangely quiet. I looked over to my animals, and saw the two dogs seemed to be barking.
In a rush, my senses came back to me and I could hear the barking. I fell to my knees and vomited. My head felt like someone stuffed it full of cotton, but my nerves felt on fire. I couldn’t make sense of it. I know not how long I laid there. Eventually I noticed, the dogs had gone quiet and darkness started to fall. I forced myself to stand, and move on. I wouldn’t let this beat me, I had won. I had killed, and I had earned my place in this world. I would not rollover for people like this, I would carve out a place for myself. Welcome to Westeros.
Westerosi knew how to build castles. When Winterfell came into view, I marveled at its size and construction, and I could only hope my presence would be welcomed. My nervousness in the time leading up to this moment only increased, and my stomach felt like it was revolting, but I forced myself to continue. I still wasn’t sure how to approach this, but I felt Winterfell was the place to go to see where I could make a home for myself. Just in time too, word in the passing towns was that spring should be approaching, and I wanted to get to my new home and make the most of the season (or rather what past for seasons in Westeros).

As I approached the castle, the guards at the gate perked up and approached me, “Hold there! State your business.”

“Looking to talk to someone about buying a farm or some land, but I don’t know who to talk to.”

The guards looked to each other, then shrugged. “Wait here, I’ll tell the Castellan you are here. He’ll sort you out.”

As the one guard walked away, I walked back over to my wagon and started to give some feed to my animals, which had grown to include some chickens and even a couple of pigs. I ended up waiting for a little over an hour, which didn’t help my nervousness, but it was understandable as I wasn’t very important.

I saw an older, important looking man walking over to me, and I straightened up to greet him.

He waved off my greeting, and cut straight to the point, “So I hear you are looking to buy land? Which lord do you serve?”

“Well Ser, my father was a merchant down in King’s Landing, and my mother was a Lady’s maid before she was let go. My mother, who was a Northerner, died when I was but a babe, and my father only in the past year. I had hoped to leave the crowds of King’s Landing and set myself up on a nice quiet farm.”

The Castellan grunted his understanding, “Ah, wanted to get away from those Southerners’ eh? So, coming back to your mother’s homeland then. Blood will always tell. Well, there’s not much space around Wintertown, you’d have to go pretty far.” The Castellan looked thoughtful.

I interjected, “Well Ser, I had hoped to find some land north of the Stoney Shore? Possibly south west of the Wolfswood, along a river?”
The Castellan looked thoughtful, but quickly came to a decision, “It’s possible, but not my decision. I will speak with Lord Stark tonight about it. Come back tomorrow mid-morning and I’ll have an answer for you then.”

With that, he strode off back into the castle. I spent the night outside the town, and when I came back the next morning, the Castellan looked happy enough. He told me that Lord Stark accepted my location, and I pulled out my map, and he marked my new home for me. There was no need to buy the land, so long as I swore fealty to Lord Stark. Since there were not many people in the area, I didn’t have any set borders. Though he mentioned that might change if more people moved there, though I wasn’t very worried.

He told me that there was a caravan headed off in two weeks to collect some taxes and deal with other issues. I was free to follow along with them a part of the way.

After I thanked him and swore fealty, I headed back into town to buy what I needed. He had mentioned the closest blacksmith, and other tradesmen, to my new home and it was quite distant. So I was determined to try and buy everything I needed.

From a new wagon, to nails, and other tools, I gathered everything I could. I was determined to not forget anything, as I knew I would not be able to get it for a long time. The next two weeks passed quickly.

When the caravan finally set off, and I was headed towards the rest of my life, things were finally beginning to look up for me.
Act 1: Chapter 1

Fifth day, Sixth Moon, 228 AC
I wiped the sweat off my brow as I finished loading the barrels of vodka into the wagon, in preparation for tomorrow’s trip. As I looked around, I felt a surge of pride for my work as I looked at my new barn. It was a work of art, at least as much as I could make it, and it was large as well since it held my cattle, draft horses, and my stills. It had been 3 years since I arrived at this abandoned farm, and winter was finally coming back. I had placed an order for a cast iron stove last year, when I had made a trip to White Harbour and finally found someone who knew what I was talking about. It was weird talking to someone who vaguely knew what I was talking about but was skeptical of its purpose since this type of iron was so weak.

A call from outside shook me from my thoughts, “’Lo?! Michael, you there?”

I called back, “Just inside the barn, hold on.” I walked outside and closed the door behind me. I looked about and saw Koryn standing near my house.

“’Lo Micheal, you ready for tomorrow?”

As I walked up to him, I gave him a nod and said, “Yep, I’ve got the wagon loaded and my food ready. I aim to set out after day break, so hopefully I will be in Deepwood Motte and my order will be waiting for me. You got the list of what your parents want me to pick up?”

Koryn rolled his eyes and chuckled, “Yeah, I got it here. They was fighting over what they wanted, but they want, red and black dye, half a stone of that total, and they wanted a saw like you got.”

Koryn handed out some coins to me, and said, “I’ll be by tomorrow morning to watch after your farm.” He paused for a moment, and then looked me in the eye, “Say, my ma and pa seem pretty excited about something. That wouldn’t have anything to do with you now would it?”

I coughed at the unexpected questions.

“Well, now you have to keep this quiet you hear? I’ve gone and got your parents blessing to wed your sister. I was planning to ask her when I got back, I want to pick up a few things to make everything nice and special for her.”

Koryn gave me a huge grin and pulled me in for a hug. “It’s about time, goodbrother! We was waiting for you to ask for two years now!”

I gave a polite cough, and responded weakly, “I just wanted to get to know her better before we wed. ‘Sides, I wanted my farm good and ready before she moved in.”
The smile had yet to leave Koryn’s face. “Well, Nyra is going to be very happy.” He shook his head in wonderment. “Ever since you moved in, life’s been looking up. You moving here must have been the will of the gods. That threshing machine of yours is doubly blessed, and the money you threw around when you first got here was much appreciated too,” he said with a wink.

I had hired some locals for manpower when I first moved here to build up the original barn and home, so that I could get out of the elements for the first time in a year and have some comfort. It allowed me to get some of my crops planted so I would have food for the year, and the time to build some real buildings. My log cabin, looked like one of those classic full log cabins, it was a beautiful thing and could only be completed when my sawmill was finished. The sawmill however, was quite frankly, awful. I had high hopes for it, since I knew roughly how to build one, and if I had all the pieces and just needed to put it together, I am sure it would have been perfectly fine. But trying to make everything from scratch myself? I’m getting frustrated thinking about it even now. It worked, and I was able to make timber fine enough, but it was basic, looked awful, and not as efficient as I had hoped for. But, it was still better than attempting it by hand.

I shook those thoughts from my head and gave Koryn a wry grin, “I find money is always well-liked. Time for a drink before you go?” He nodded his ascent, and I went inside my cabin and grabbed two cups and a small jug of vodka. As I came out, I found him sitting on a chair on the porch and I sat beside him.

As I poured the drinks I said, “Yes, life is good. I still remember the face on Lord Stark’s man when he came to collect the taxes last moon. He was so confused about how much grain we have him.”

Koryn laughed, “Aye! It took a few years for that new farming rotation you showed us to pay off, and when we went together for the first time two moons ago with that big load, he almost didn’t have room for it!”

“Least he was smart enough to not complain!”

We gave a cheers before downing our cups. I poured another for each of us as Koryn spoke again, “Yes, know that we can make more than we need my ma really wants some of them dyes to brighten up our clothes a bit. Really do something special. I think she just wants to show off a bit, maybe try and get me ‘n Zane a wife. Da is already getting ready to set up a new farm for Zane backing on ours. ‘S why he wants that saw, make things a bit easier. He’ll talk with you soon enough about seeing if he can use that sawmill ‘o yours.”

I gave a nod. Koryn was always on my back about marrying, but the truth was he had two name days on me and was still un-married.

I responded, “The dyes are smart thing then. That’ll get all the girls lining up for you, eh? And tell your Da, that he can use the mill long as I can keep a portion of the scraps. Always good to mix into the fields.”
Koryn nodded at that, “Thanks Michael. Well I should be off, this vodka of yours always hits me hard. I’ll see you when you get back, aye?”

I waved to him, as he strode off back to his home. As I moved about, I thought of my hopefully soon-to-be wife, Nyra. She was quite beautiful, even by modern standards, with blonde hair that contrasted my black hair and ice blue eyes to my brown. She was average height, but it was her wit that made her stand out to me. In a place, where there was no education, she was a jewel. While she didn’t know mathematics, or have a complex understanding of how the world worked, her mind was quick. When I had showed her my sawmill, she quickly grasped the possibilities. She was able to speak her mind clearly and was kind and considerate. Over the past three years, we had gotten to know each other, as I had helped her family on many occasions and vice versa. I was excited to share my life with her, the life that I had carved out in this land. The North was a harsh, but beautiful place. The summer snows were very interesting. It wasn’t that the temperatures dropped below freezing constantly, though it did probably drop to 41-50 degrees overnight occasionally especially closer to Autumn, it was when the wind came blowing in from the north bringing the snow and cold wind.

I was finally content with my life. My last major object was the cast iron stove, and then my home be ready for my wife. I had delayed over the years marrying Nyra because I had wanted a true home for her to move in to. There was also the fact that she was the same age as me, and even in this world if she was capable of marrying over five years ago, it felt wrong for me to marry a child, even as a child. Later that night, in front of the firepit, I took out my guitar that I finally finished and started to play a soft song to end the night.

“Listen to the wind blow, watch the sun rise. Running in the shadows, damn your love, damn your lies...”
Eighth day, Sixth Moon, 228 AC

The tavern I was in, was fairly dingy, but it was as high-class as Deepwood Motte had. The tables were well used, but the floors were clean and there was plenty of light.

The man sitting across from me grabbed the proffered cup from my hand and threw back the shot of vodka. He let out a good cough, "'Ye were right, that is strong! Gods, the taste isn’t too bad to boot!"

I tried to hide my pleasure, but it was good to hear the appreciation. I gave him an appreciative nod and replied, "Perfect for the guards coming in after a cold night, warm them up a bit, get them relaxed, and they’ll spend more coin."

The innkeeper looked contemplative and muttered, "That they might." He continued on, "But they might not like it, it is new. Then I have barrels of this vodka I can’t sell. Mighty risky."

Damn. I continued blithely, "Well, there is a lot of coin to be made though. Sell a shot for a halfpenny, and you can earn at least 20 stags of the barrel. Seems like a lot of money to me."

The innkeeper nodded and gave a small smile, "Aye that it does. How often can you supply me with it if need be?"

Here I gave a small shrug, "Nothing more till winter is over, but come spring if winter isn’t too long I could maybe get you another two more barrels."

The innkeeper didn’t look impressed. He gave a rude snort, "If’n this sells like you say, that won’t be enough." He drummed his fingers on the wooden table, and then filled up another cup and shot it back. "Here’s what I can do. I’ll give you 3 stags per barrel, and come spring you come back with another two and we talk about how much more you can give me and a new price?"

I thought on that, for it was not as high as I wanted, and wouldn’t even start to pay back the time I spent getting the still working, or all the waste. I responded, "How about 3 stags per barrel, and two smaller barrels of wine?"

The innkeeper snorted, "Ha! 2 stags each and two barrels of wine."

"5 stags total and the two barrels of wine?"

The innkeeper mulled that over in his head for a moment and then gave a nod. We clasped hands and he turned around and shouted out, "Boy! Come grab these barrels and put it in the back!"

As the innkeeper’s son took away the barrels, I started to load up the barrels of wine the boy brought out. It was a good trade, and I knew the innkeeper likely foisted off his worst wine on me, but that didn’t matter much. I was going to try my hand at brandy, though unlike vodka, I had never tried to make brandy before.

When I had finished loading up my wagon, I started walking down the street to see the rest of the market. It wasn’t very large, but the aroma’s wafted around the street as each merchant had their wares out on display. It was a hot day, but it was clear that autumn was here, and people seemed to enjoy one of the last few hot days before winter.
I picked up a few goods as I walked past, a few new work gloves, and I even splurged on some whale oil I had found. I had also gotten a kitten, as I wanted to make sure no mice got into my grain stores. I had been lucky so far, but I really didn’t want to rely on that. The seller showed me the mother, and she looked well fed and healthy, and he said she was excellent at catching small pests like mice. I was impressed enough to buy a kitten, but I was going to wait and see how well she turned out before I bought any more.

Deepwood Motte was actually quite tranquil, as far as towns in Westeros went, and the heavy use of wooden architecture gave it a unique feel from a lot of the other stone castles that were spread throughout Westeros. The streets were just dirt, but well laid out with plenty of space. The main merchant street had quite the variety of different professions, and there was an open field at the end for travelling merchants to hawk their wares.

As I came to the end of the street, I saw the more temporary stalls of the travelling merchants. As I was looking for the man I came to meet, I heard a voice call out, “Ragnar! Over here!”

I turned my head and saw a tall, broad-shouldered man walk out from behind a wagon a few stalls up. I raised my hand to greet him and started to walk over.

When I had come North to start my new life, I realized I needed a name. My Westerosi parents named me Micah by some twist of fate, but I had no last name. My new mother however, always called my father Raggy, since he collected the brightest and most colorful rags he could find. He always liked to brighten up our home as much as he could. I had decided I wanted to start using my ‘real’ name again, but I wanted to honor my new parents. I decided to go by Michael Ragnar, since I wanted to honor them, and well -to be honest- I wanted a tough sounding name. I figured a Viking name would be good enough.

“’Lo Kiran, good travels?”

Kiran laughed as we clasped hands, “Aye! We made good time up the Kingsroad for once, and it was nice and warm the whole way here! No bandits bothered us either, though we always kept watch! I won’t be no Sleepy Jack!”

I nodded, knowing how miserable travelling in the cold and rain was. As we walked to the back of the wagon I questioned, “So did you manage to get everything?”

He gave a nod and said, “Got everything you wanted, even that damn heavy monster you wanted.”

I gave him a grin, “I warned you it would be heavy. Any problems with the sugar?” I had hoped to make some rubbing alcohol to help stave off any infections I might get, and I knew the general idea of how to make it. Although with the costs of sugar, I was probably not going to have very much.

“The sugar was there waiting, but the merchant was none to happy. Seems he thought you were going to get it sooner.”

I rolled my eyes, “Damn fool, I told him it was like to be a year before I picked it up no matter how quickly he could get it.”

Kiran opened the wagon and started passing my things down to me as I loaded them into my wagon. I had gotten some pots and pans, my stove, some piping for the chimney, and my sugar. I had gotten Kiran to move them up to Deepwood for me last year, when I had visited White Harbor. Kiran was a travelling merchant who would, if paid, pick things up and deliver them to another city on along his stop. He was like a medieval UPS. He was quite expensive, but he was insured and had guards. The insurance thing took me for a loop when I first heard about it. I didn’t think such a thing existed here,
but apparently it was a fairly big thing in Braavos, and cities that did a lot of trade with them usually adopted insurance in some manner.

After I had paid him we stood and talked for a bit, mentioning that it seemed everyone throughout the North was preparing for winter. It seemed word had passed from the lords, that winter was guessed to be only two years this time, though the summer was three. He laughed at me when I told him this was to be my first winter here and called me a summer child. Eventually I had to move on since I had gotten everything I came for and I wanted to be out of the town before night fell.

I had found a small piece of amber in the previous year in the forests by the coast, a leftover from a raid perhaps, and I had taken to carving it in my spare time. I didn’t really know how, but I tried to cut it like the classic diamond shape. I had purchased a basic bronze necklace that I wanted to attach it to, so that I could gift it to Nyra for my proposal. So, I carved as I rumbled down the road, passing beneath the sun-soaked trees, and let myself sing a quiet song.

“*Oh, to live on Sugar Mountain, with the barkers and the colored balloons...*"
Fifteenth day, Sixth Moon, 228 AC

The sun had past the midday point quite a while ago, but I wanted to finish the painting. I had made the iconic red paint for my barn and had made the first application a few moons back. This was to be the final application before the winter hit, and by the time I had finished the sun was well into its descent, so I went for a quick dip into the river before my dinner.

Tonight, was to be the night. I was going to propose to Nyra, and I planned to take her to the nearby cliff to watch the sunset. I had a picnic basket, blanket, some food and my guitar. I had a few serious relationships back on Earth, mostly throughout college, but a proposal was new territory for me. If she accepted, I hoped to be married by the end of the month. With winter coming, there were so many tasks to do, and having another person to help would be very helpful. Not that, that was the only reason.

Pigs needed to be killed, and fences repaired. Unfortunately, these coincided, as Bofur, my male pig, was an aggressive bastard. Even worse was his latest offspring weren’t quite big enough to succeed him. I was trying to breed the best pigs possible, using basic scientific breeding, but since there weren’t many better pigs around me I was limited to picking the best of the bunch. Oh well, I must work with what I have and not what I want.

As it got closer to winter, my list of tasks seemed to grow by the day. I wanted to get an area setup for brick-making ready for use come spring, make my dirt path a bit wider and flatter and less prone to flooding, get my maple syrup tools ready, and the tasks multiplied each day. I keep telling myself, I am just over-preparing for my first winter, and that this all won’t be necessary. I tell myself that, but I don’t think it’s working.

I swam around the river after giving myself a quick scrub with my homemade lye soap and thought of my winter barley. It was a new type of barley, I think, for I knew what winter planting of barley was, but this was different. I had talked to others, and they said that if you planted barley in the autumn before winter it would grow a bit throughout the winter. According to the locals, the start of the maturation of the crop would indicate that winter is almost done. The barley seemed to receive a sort of signal (or as the locals claim a message from the gods) and would begin its final maturation. I was nervous to rely on something so ambiguous and weird, for unlike regular barley it had a much shorter stalk, and the seed had to have more space before them.

Then, according the everyone else, once the final maturation process began, you plant turnips and garlic so that they will be ready to harvest at the same time once spring truly arrives. I was very interested in how these plants truly differed from the ones on Earth, but I didn’t have anything to check. They seemed to be close to the Earth versions, but different somehow, possibly due to the length of winters?

Finally, I could delay no longer and got out of the river, dressed, and began to walk over to Nyra’s farm to pick her up.

I was a bundle of nerves as I walked through the trees, anxiety and happiness wrestled in my stomach, but I continued to her farm. Eventually, I could see the farm through the trees and when I got closer I could see her standing in front of her house looking like I felt.

Either she guessed what was happening or someone told her. No matter, the show must go on.
I called out to her when she noticed me, but my voice cracked, “Nyra! How are you?”

She responded quietly, “Good, good. So, uh, where are we going?”

I gave her a somewhat confident smile and replied, “My favorite spot, so that we can have some food. Come on, I’ll show you.”

She grabbed my arm and we began walking towards the cliff. It wasn’t a huge cliff, but I figured it was a good 30 or 40 ft. What it was though, was the best spot to view the sun set over the ocean. As we got closer to the cliff, she seemed to realize where we were going, and her nervousness seemed to fade away and her walking picked up speed. I let myself enjoy the moment as we approached the edge.

I laid out a blanket and started pulling out some food. She helped me set everything up, and we both sat down nervously.

For a while we said nothing, just ate and watched the sunset while enjoying each other’s company.

As the sun started below the horizon, and the sky was lit in its orange glow I turned to her and cleared my throat.

“Nyra… We’ve known each other for three years now, and I’ve enjoyed every moment I’ve spent with you. I know you to be a smart woman, a kind woman, a beautiful woman,” I paused for a moment.

Her eyes were bright with tears as the sunset lit up her face.

I continued, “You drive me to be the best I can be, you are the woman I love. Will you marry me?”

She was smiling as the tears ran down her face. She whispered, “Yes” and came forward to give me a kiss.

We sat cuddled together as the sun finally sank below the horizon, enjoying holding each other in our arms.

She turned in my arms, and asked me, “Will you play me a song my love?”

I hummed my agreement though I warned her, “I will, but that means you would need to move.”

She laughed, “It might not be worth it then. But I think I can live for a moment, as long as the song is sweet.”

As she scooted out of my arms, I reached over and picked up my guitar. I had prepared the perfect song for tonight. I started to strum softly as I began, “If everything could ever feel this real forever, if anything could ever be this good again.”

We spent the next few hours singing and laughing and enjoying life. By the time I brought her back to her farm, it was dark, and we were tired, but as I kissed her goodnight she promised to stop by tomorrow to talk about the ceremony.

I walked back underneath the cloudless night, the moon shining down on me, and it felt like I was walking on clouds.
Act 1: Chapter 4

Thirtieth day, Seventh Moon, 228 AC

Jess was cooking up a storm in my house, while I had escaped outside with Koryn. I had made my preparations last night, and I had gotten my best clothes clean and the cloak for Nyra ready. Jess oversaw the feast preparations before she went off to help Nyra. She had roped in another farmer’s wife, Tyna, for help, and the two of them had taken over my house.

I sat on the porch with Koryn and just enjoyed the day. Soon enough I would be standing in front of the Heart Tree, but for now I was trying to keep calm and relax. Koryn tried to keep me distracted and was doing a fair job but my mind kept drifting back to the upcoming ceremony. I was going to get married!

Koryn and I were playing some checkers, as I had made it in some of my non-existent spare time to help spare me boredom come winter. I started with checkers, since it was a fairly basic game that didn’t need numbers or the like. When Koryn understood the game, he came to like it and we played together when we could.

After an hour or so, talk eventually drifted back to farm work and Koryn asked me, “So are you all set up for Nyra’s dowry?”

I nodded and replied, “I’ve expanded the chicken coop to accommodate the geese and made a new stall in the barn for the sheep. It will be good to finally have some goose feathers for the bed and blankets.”

Koryn laughed, “Aye, I bet it would. Still can’t believe how badly you sleep!”

“Well we all can’t have a lot of geese, can we? ‘Sides I’m used to it; the road coming North was plenty uncomfortable, and there just isn’t enough time.”

Koryn grunted his assent, “True. What are you doing with your sawmill? Looks taken apart.”

I looked over at the sawmill and saw what he meant. The wheel was taken off, and a lot of the gearing was taken off and stored elsewhere. “I’m a bit worried about the spring flooding. It’ll be my first winter here, and I think it should be okay, but I’m not going to risk any of the expensive things.”

Koryn nodded his understanding, “The bank looks like it’ll hold, but you can never tell.”

“Yes, I’m worried about the supports for the building itself. We’ll see come spring, but I might make a better one on the other side of the river instead.”

Koryn looked incredulous, “Another one? What’s on the other side?”

I replied with amusement evident in my voice, “I might build a ditch on the other side to carry the water away from the river and build the mill away from any possible floods. I think I got a good spot picked out.”

Koryn rolled his eyes, “Only you would consider building another giant building. You sure you got no Stark blood in you? Sounds like Bran the Builder come again.”

I laughed, “Nothing so grand as Winterfell, but something big enough to start sawing for others. Make some coin, eh?”
We laughed, talked, and drank away the next few hours. Finally, midday came, and I went in to get dressed. My house smelt strongly of clam chowder, bread, and assorted pastries for the wedding feast. It was delicious. Jess and Tyna had made the recipes on my suggestion, and coin, since I wanted to make this truly special. The clam chowder was a new recipe to them, as were the pastries. The pastries used white flour, which was much more expense than whole wheat and had fruit in them. I knew Nyra would love them, as fresh bread was one of her favorite foods.

I got dressed quickly, grabbed my cloak for Nyra and exited my house. I started walking with Koryn to the Heart Tree. Unfortunately, it wasn’t very close to my home being about a brisk 30-minute walk, but there was a path the entire way. When I got there, I saw that Nyra wasn’t there yet.

I walked around to some of the others that came and greeted them and thanked them for coming. All told there was only four local families from nearby farms, as well as a few people I was friends with from the fishing village.

The Heart Tree itself was certainly breath-taking. Definitely not Earthly, it was a curious thing and it made me think on why I was here. This was the place of the old gods, were they real? Did they bring me here? I grew up like a lot of other Americans believing in God, if not necessarily actually going to church, but this was a world without God. Was it possible? Was I supposed to become the first Christian priest? I laughed and dismissed the image of me in priestly clothes.

I suppose I should have connected with the Faith, but it felt to me like it tried to imitate God and felt fake. Were the old gods the answer? I had tried not to dwell on these thoughts for many years, as I had yet to receive any sort of sign. With trouble, I drew myself back to the present.

I didn’t have to wait long until she came into view. She looked beautiful walking underneath the sunlit canopy, in her white dress and heavy woolen cloak. She gave me a radiant smile when she noticed me.

Her family also came by in their nicest clothes, all dyed, and they certainly made a sight amongst the other families.

All the others went and stood off to the side, making a pathway to the tree for Nyra to walk.

I stood nervously underneath the great Heart Tree, and watched as Nyra and her father Ethan, started to walk towards me at the base of the tree.

I gave a reassuring smile to Nyra, and a confident nod to Ethan.

Ethan started the ceremony, “I am Ethan, son of Bran. Who comes to marry my daughter Nyra?”

“I, Michael Ragnar come to marry your daughter Nyra.”

Ethan looked to his daughter, “Do you accept this man as your husband?”

Nyra responded in a clear voice, “I, Nyra daughter of Ethan, accept Michael Ragnar as my husband.”

She reached out her hand towards me, and I held on to it as we kneeled before the Heart Tree. We both bowed our heads and gave a silent prayer. I prayed for a good life for my wife and children.

After a moment, we both rose, and I moved behind her and removed her cloak. Koryn came forward and took the cloak and gave me mine. I placed it on her shoulders and gave her a light kiss.

I then picked her up in my arms and started to carry her all the way back to the farm and the feast.
This was a tradition I was not looking forward to, it was going to be a long trip.

As we all walked, I leaned down to Nyra and asked, “Comfortable?”

She laughed bright and clear, “More than you I bet!”

I laughed, it was tiring but it felt good to have my wife in my arms.

She asked, “Why don’t we sing for everyone to pass the time? Might take your mind off the walk.”

I raised an eyebrow, “How about your favorite?”

She smiled, “That would be perfect!”

“You’ve got the love I need to see me through. Sometimes it seems the going is just too rough…”

We sang and laughed as we walked back to the feast. By the time we arrived, we were all hungry and I was exhausted. I put down Nyra, while Jess and Tyna ran about serving the food.

As we all ate and drank, stories were passed, advice given, and there was a festive atmosphere throughout the area. The clam chowder was a hit, and Nyra loved the pastries. The next few hours were spent in merriment, and laughter.

Finally, as the sun started to dip below the horizon, someone called out “Bedding!”

Another tradition I was not looking forward to. It seemed Nyra was of the same mind, for she stood up and pulled me out of my chair. She then jumped into my arms and shouted out, “I think we can do it on our own!” She leaned to my ear, laughed and shouted, “Run!”

I laughed as we ran into the house and shut the door behind us. We could hear laughter outside. I looked to her, and we both looked nervous. This was not my first time, but this was my wife. My wife!

As I approached her, I leaned down and whispered “To the future, my love.”

She just smiled seductively.
Sixteenth day, Twelfth Moon, 228 AC

Damn, it was cold! And I was an idiot. I had forgotten to take into consideration what I would do to keep clean in the winter. During the warmer years I could just bathe in the river. But now that winter was here, and the river was covered in ice I was left wanting. Currently, Nyra and myself were just using a bucket and a cloth to wipe ourselves down. The frequency of even that surprised Nyra though. Coming from a modern American household, bathing everyday was standard practice, especially after sweaty and stinky farm work.

Nyra thought my obsession strange but humored my all the same. Originally, she was worried I would get sick from such frequent bathing, especially in the winter. I could see where she was coming from, since many people in earlier centuries thought the same. I had to explain to her though that it wasn’t the bathing that was the issue, it was being wet and cold that was. Well that, and dirty water.

I had decided to go with a sauna, for the solution to my problems. I had visited one once, and I had seen them on TV, so I understood the basic concept. We’ll see how good it’ll be. So far, I had the wall set and I was just finishing the roof. Soon as the roof was done I was going to rig up a fireplace and try and have a metal tray type thing on the roof of the fireplace to hold rocks and water. I was nervous, but the more I built it; the more I could see it completed in my mind.

This whole sauna mess was just a result of having no paper or parchment. Parchment was way too expensive, and I couldn’t quite remember how to make paper. I remember you mash things and add water, then press it. Rags maybe? Or was it wood? Just another thing to add to my list.

A list I wasn’t actually able to write down. Perfect.

Still, I was learning and Nyra was a huge help. There were a lot of little things I was doing wrong, but I was getting better. Last week, one day had dropped in temperature something fierce. It hurt to be out there, but unfortunately, I had to since I needed to feed the animals. Nyra told me it was common practice to leave additional feed inside the livestock area for days like that to make it easier.

Eventually Nyra called from the house that it was time to eat dinner. It was already pretty dark out, with just enough light left to see, so I put my tools back into the barn and locked it up before heading in. Trudging through the snow wasn’t too bad, though it wasn’t very high yet. It wasn’t perpetually snowy as I had first feared when coming North, and there was usually quite some time in between snowfalls so that I could do some shoveling to clear the main paths.

When I entered the house, I could smell the stew and bread, though it was tinged with a unique smell. As I kissed Nyra and sat I asked her, “Finished making more of the drystone?”

She nodded and replied, “I noticed that the one in the cellar was nearly used up. I’ll take the used one to the pigs tomorrow.”

The drystone was an interesting creation. Definitely unique to Westeros, it was a mixture of a plant, simply called *uhrplant* (which apparently was Old Tongue for dry), limestone, milk, and ash. It helped keep stores fresh and unspoiled. I had yet to figure out exactly what it did, but it seemed to suck up moisture like a sponge and then spread something through the air? It was very interesting, especially since once it was fully used the pigs would eat it. Waste not, want not after all.
After we had finished eating, we both cleaned up, before settling down in front of the fire. I started carving a spindle for my rocking chairs. I was trying to build two rocking chairs for Nyra and myself, but it was pretty slow work. I had never built one before, but I had watched The Patriot, so I knew they were tough. I just hoped that was a somewhat accurate depiction. My wife loved the concept when I described it to her.

Nyra meanwhile was hand spinning some wool while she sat. For a while we just worked without saying anything, with just the cracks of the wood burning to break the silence.

Eventually, Nyra broke the silence. “I’ve been thinking about what you are always saying. About doing things better. I’ve got an idea about this wool. I was thinking something like the sawmill maybe, to make things easier?”

I looked over at her and saw she was a bit nervous about voicing this. I gave her a reassuring smile, “Hmm, that could work but maybe something smaller? The sawmill’s wheel will move a lot of weight.” I knew the rough outline of a spinning wheel for cloth, but not the specifics. I was curious as to what she would think up.

She became thoughtful, “I would still want it to be spun the same size, so smaller would work I think.”

“Well, take your time and think it through. Think of the motions you do now to spin the wool, and what other kinds of motions might work, and how to do it best. We are almost out of wool anyways, so maybe save some to work on?”

She smiled at me, “I will. Will we have more sheep next summer?”

“Yes, I’ve planned to expand the fields by more than half next summer, so we will be able to have more sheep.”

She looked impressed, “You said you wanted more land, but half?”

I continued to whittle my spindle while I responded, “Well, I’ve had a good piece of the other pasture for 3 years now, and the soil looks about ready to be planted. Remember me and your father talking about the crop rotation?” She nodded so I continued, “Well the soil can also be used by the trees differently than crops. So, I’ve been planting feed for the animals that helps make the soil a bit better.”

As she started to put away the spun wool she replied, “Ah, so will you expand the other pasture next summer then as well?” I nodded. “So, we will have a lot more food than we need?”

I nodded my assent, “We will. We can start our family soon enough, and this will give us some coin too. I always want to try and give my children a better than I had.”

She looked at me from across the room, “Children eh? I know you want to try and wait until spring, so how about you come over here and we try and practice a bit?”

My heart beat a little faster, “You don’t want to hear the rest of the Han Solo story?”

She gave me the look. Ah. Well, practice makes perfect right?
Second day, Sixth Moon, 229 AC

I slowly woke and felt my wife laying beside me. It had been nearly a year since we were married, and it was a very welcome feeling. She looked peaceful sleeping amidst the furs and pillows. It was a weird sensation sleeping in furs, pretty comfortable too, though not as much as my old bed in America. Not wanting to disturb her I gently eased my way out of bed and went to start breakfast.

As I was getting the fire going, Nyra woke up and kissed me good morning. She dressed quickly and went to attend to the birds and get some eggs for breakfast. I started dicing potatoes to fry since we still had bread leftover. By the time Nyra was back, the potatoes were almost done, and I began cooking the eggs.

Nyra began laying out my clothes for me while I cooked and said, “It’s not too cold today. Will you finish with the fence today?”

Over the past few weeks I had started to stake out and build the fence for my new pasturage. I replied, “Depends on the ground I guess. I still need to get a few posts in but digging through frozen ground takes forever.”

When we sat down to eat I mentioned, “I also want to go visit some of the nearby farms today. I talked with them before our wedding about expanding their farms and using some of my machines. I wanted to see if they were still interested.”

She nodded, “How much will you charge them?”

“Not sure yet. I was thinking five stones worth of wheat each harvest? With how much more they can expand their land, they can easily make that back.”

She looked uncertain, “Five stones sounds like a lot, really depends on how much more they can harvest.”

I replied, “Hmm, maybe I’ll start off at five and let them talk me down for this summer. Increase it the summer after?”

She agreed it was a good idea and began to clean up the dishes. I went and got dressed and left the house to start my day. It was a warm one today, below freezing still, but warm none the less.

As I entered the barn I began to let the animals out to the pasture. Luckily there was only a light dusting of snow from last night, so nothing needed to be shoveled. Since there was only a thin layer of ice on the river today, getting water for the animals was easy.

After loading up the watering trenches, I went back to the barn and began cleaning it out. It took longer than I hoped and after a few hours, the barn was in better shape and I went back out to give the animals some more feed.

It was near midday when Nyra came out and gave me a sandwich, which we ate while sitting near the river. It was a beautiful day. The air was crisp and fresh, the snow on the other side of the river made everything bright, and there were only a few clouds in the sky. We enjoyed each other’s company while we ate, but we didn’t spend much time. We both still had many things to do today. As she went back into the house, I put on my snowshoes, and started to walk to the other farms.
As I walked through the trees, I made a realization. Something I clearly overlooked. Bark.

Nyra had asked me if I could teach her to read and write, but I hadn’t had paper or parchment, so I had been at a loss. I had started to use ash to draw on to the table, but that wasn’t permanent and wasted a lot of time. However, birch bark may be the answer I was looking for. Light enough to treat it like paper and it had good contrast between the bark and the ash.

Birch trees weren’t overly numerous around the farm, but more than enough to teach Nyra with. Another thing to add to the list, but soon, I would actually have a list.

My first stop of the day was Ethan’s farm, and his family greeted me and welcomed me into their home.

I began talking with Ethan to get a feel for what he was planning this summer. He responded, “Was hoping to expand the plot east a ways. O’ course we also are working on Zane’s farm. Making it to the west o’ here. Got much o’ the land cleared, so we’ll need your machines for that too.”

I accepted that, having expected it for quite a while. “Got any marriage plans yet for Zane and Koryn?”

Ethan grunted, “Aye, found a good girl for Zane from a farm up northwards. Knows her way ‘round the farm she does. Perfect for a new farm. Comes with two sheep, and a pig. Real good price.”

I was impressed, that was a good dowry especially around here. “And Koryn?”

“Not yet for Koryn. Got my eye on a merchant’s daughter from out of the large village down south. Her father is offering a large bolt of good quality cloth and a bull. She doesn’t know much ‘bout farming, but she’ll learn.”

Wow, he’s getting some really good offers! I’m a bit jealous actually; not that I wanted to marry someone other than Nyra of course. I replied, “Those are some really good offers.”

“Aye, no marriages till after the first crop’s planted, but we’ll have Zane’s first since it’s been agreed. I’ve not accepted Koryn’s offer yet, but in a moon or so when her father comes by I’ll talk to him.”

I was shocked, “A moon? He’s going to brave the snows?”

Ethan looked at me weird, “Well, mayhaps a week or two. Haven’t your crops started to seed yet?”

“No, I didn’t notice. But I didn’t take a real close look. Damn, this is a short winter!” I was pretty happy, my first winter would be a short one.

Ethan chuckled, “Don’t look so happy there. Such a short winter doesn’t hold anything good, mark my words.”

Oh? “Bad summer you think?” I asked, a little confused by what he meant.

He shook his head, “Maybe, something bad’ll happen. Nothing’s free.”

Damn, that’s some doom and gloom right there. We continued to talk for a while and set a price of 3 stone for my equipment per harvest, before I moved on to the other farms.

The next three farms were all still interested in using my equipment and planned large expansions for their crops. After seeing the success at Ethan’s and my own farms they decided to accept, and we set a price of 4 stone in wheat for the use of my equipment for the next summer per harvest.
The last farm I had some trouble at. It seemed Torrhen didn’t really trust my crop rotation and wanted to stick with what he knew. He was mostly a bean and turnip farmer and alternated between the two and a fallow field. It wasn’t the worst system I had seen, but it could be better. He raised a lot of cattle, and before I showed up was probably the wealthiest person in the area.

I knew he likely harbored some resentment for me, though he never said anything.

He wasn’t interested in planting wheat, rye, barley or oats. Nor was he interested in expanding his farm, as in his mind it would just be more work for him and he doesn’t have the time.

After failing to convince Torrhen I started to walk back to my farm. It was nearing dark, so I made my way quickly. I was disappointed to have not convinced him, but ultimately, I wasn’t worried. Firstly, I wasn’t sure if I would have enough time for everyone to use the same machines before everything went bad. With farming there were so many risks, and I wasn’t sure enough of the technology I had at my disposal. With modern equipment and transportation, sharing a machine between four or five farms this size was nothing. Secondly, he would come around next summer once he saw everyone’s food supply increase and his own trading power decrease as a result.

When I arrived home, dinner was almost already ready, so I quickly checked on my barley and saw that it had indeed began to seed. I would have to start planting my other winter crops soon, so hopefully the weather remained warmer to make it easier. By the time I finished, dinner was ready, and we began to eat. One thing about this new life, the food was almost always the same. Depending on the season, or more accurately the harvest date, their might be different types of food; but usually in winter it was the same thing every day. It was good that farming worked up such an appetite.

After dinner, we decided to take the night off and play a game of checkers while drinking some pine needle tea. It was a nice relaxing way to end the day, and while I planned to make a chess set eventually and maybe some wooden cards, for now we both enjoyed playing checkers.

We only played one game before going to bed; I needed to begin planting crops, so tomorrow was going to be a long day.
Tenth day, Ninth Moon, 229 AC

The seeding was almost done for this harvest, as I had got the potatoes, turnips, and clover already planted. I was just finishing up the wheat now, and then I could pass on the seed drill to Ethan. I had passed the heavy plow and harrow on to him, and he had passed it along as well. As I looked over the field I figured I would be finished today and enjoyed a nice cool drink of water to escape from the heat of the day.

I had a nice floppy straw hat that protected my head from the sun, and I found over time it was the little things like that, which gave me comfort and reminded me of home. Over the years I found more and more of my memories of America starting to become hazy. Somethings however, stuck out and helped me remember. Like my straw hat.

Soon as I was done planting and made sure that this batch of crops was starting to grow I planned to make another trip to Deepwood Motte. I needed to sell another round of vodka and pick up somethings, like sheep shears, which apparently didn’t exist. I had to shear my two sheep this spring and even with Nyra helping using a blade sucked. It wasn’t too bad since the sheep honestly didn’t have that much wool on them anyways, but when we get more and start breeding them properly it will be a nightmare.

On the other hand, my brandy making finally succeeded, so I could sell that too. The brandy was expensive though, so I wasn’t sure how well it would sell. I had never made brandy before, but I had known the steps, so after a lot of tinkering I had made it, but I was a bit worried. The process left me with under a quarter of brandy compared to the wine I originally had. I knew that the wine was supposed to be used up during the process, but I wasn’t sure how much it was supposed to be. Not having Google sucked.

Nyra and I were also arguing, since she wanted to come with me to Deepwood Motte and finally leave this village for the first time in her life. I wanted her to come, I really did, but she was pregnant. Yes, she was pregnant, and I was going to be a father! She was three months along at this point, and was still able to work around the farm, but a trip of over 3 days? That didn’t seem like a good idea to me.

Don’t get my wrong, I wasn’t sexist or anything by trying to keep her home. If this was modern America with modern tech and medicine, I would trust the hospitals to see her through. But here, where the definition of infant mortality rates didn’t exist simply because it was so commonplace? I didn’t think I could take enough precautions.

So, we argued, and argued, and then when it was quiet we glared. It was our first marital fight. I knew I had the right to tell her to shut up and stay here, but it didn’t sit well with me. And so, we argued.

I shook myself from my reverie and went back to work spreading the wheat seed in the field. I had a much larger field this year and was very proud of that. It was fairly smooth, with a soft downwards slope to the west. As I walked with my horse as it pulled the seed drill, I looked at the soil and did random spot checks.

My soil management technique was rather informal, but it was leagues above everyone else since I actually managed my soil beyond removing stones. My soil was actually very good, not as good as back home where I had access to fertilizers and other soil management options, but likely as good as
I was going to get. My experiment with the alternative pasture was a great success, leaving it as pasturage while seeding it with nitrogen-producing plants succeeded.

I felt the sun beat down on my as I guided my horse as straight as I could, trying to leave uniform rows down the field. The spring thaw wasn’t too bad this year, and the river level rose, but didn’t quite flood anything. Some of my path that ran closest to the river washed out a bit, but nothing major.

The sawmill stood strong, but I feared for a more severe winter. I had decided earlier that I wanted to build a better one on the other side of the river away from it. I was still working on the plans, but I figured a simple aqueduct would suit my purposes perfectly. There was a hill a little way back from the river that I could build my mill around and use the aqueduct to carry the water to make a sort of waterfall to power the wheel.

Over the winter I had collected quite a bit of cement, enough to use as columns for my aqueduct and as mortar for my bricks that I plan to make.

The brick making was going well, I had a lot of clay ready in a pile, my forms ready, and area prepared. I just had to actually make them and fire them. I was looking forward to it and the challenge it would bring. I really wanted to make a nice brick bridge to go over my irrigation canal instead of the current wooden one.

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Later that night, once I had finished outside and we had eaten, Nyra and I sat in front of the fire. She eventually said, “I’m perfectly good to take the wagon to Deepwood Motte. You know this.”

I sighed, it appeared we would argue again. It was really starting to get to me, and I wasn’t sure how to make anything better. She wanted to go, I didn’t want her to. I wasn’t sure what kind of compromise could even be possible.

“I don’t want to risk anything happening to our child or you. The road is long and uncomfortable. We will have to sleep outside, so what if it rains or there is summer snow? How will you and the baby handle that?”

She looked stubborn, “Perfectly fine! We can bring a shelter to sleep in, and a cushion to sit. I want to see more of the world!”

I tried a different tactic. “What about the farm then? We can have Koryn come to help out a bit, but he can’t truly manage the farm on his own while still helping your parents. And what if the wolves come back? It was only two weeks ago that they were sneaking around the farm!”

She rolled her eyes, “Koryn can manage the farm for a little while! He just needs to watch over the animals a bit, and water the crops if they need it!” She then narrowed her eyes, “And the wolves? Are you really wanting your pregnant wife to deal with the wolves?”

Shit. Okay, that was a bad move on my part. “Not really.” I allowed, but continued, “I just don’t want you getting sick or hurt! I want to show you more of the world, I really do! I just worry.”

She replied, “Can we take a little bit longer perhaps? Another day of travel each way, and stay a day in Deepwood?”

Damn, that was actually a halfway decent compromise. It wasn’t much better, but at this point I was ready to give in. I reluctantly said, “That might work.” She visibly preened.
“Of course, it will! Koryn can come watch over the farm, and we will have a wonderful trip!”

I was happy that she was happy, but I wanted to clarify a few things. “There are some rules though. If you feel sick, at all, we stop and rest. If you stay sick, we turn around and come home. No ifs, and, or buts. Clear?”

She laughed and gave a little clap, “Of course love! Of course!” Once she calmed down again to manageable levels, “So when can we head out? And have you decided what we are selling and buying?”

I smiled, as her enthusiasm was infectious. “I am going to do as your father recommended and stay on the safe side. I will only bring two barrels of vodka and the one of brandy. I was also going to sell some grain too. As for buying, I want to get some sheep shears, more wine, I know you wanted some good linen, and I also wanted some rags for a project of mine. Anything else?”

She considered for a moment before speaking. “Another cat? The one you picked up on your last trip has been very good, and we can then breed them? I also want to talk to a wheelwright and grab a wheel for my wool spinning machine.”

“Another cat would be useful, and we can sell the litter to others. Good idea. The wheelwright should have some stock, so we should be able to buy it off him right away.”

She smiled and said, “Good! Enough talk now, as your pregnant wife I demand some sweet songs!”

I laughed and went to get my guitar.

“Birds flying high, you know how I feel. Sun in the sky, you know how I feel.”
Act 1: Chapter 8

Thirteenth day, Ninth Moon, 229 AC

The door slammed open as I entered the tavern. It looked much the same as last time, with its worn tables but clean floors. It was empty since it was midday, but a head poked out from the kitchens and hollered out, “With ‘ya in a moment!”

I went to sit down at a table off in the corner near the kitchens and waited. Nyra was outside watching over the wagons, she was a bit nauseous from the trip, but otherwise fine. We encountered no trouble on the trip, but we took our time and Nyra enjoyed the new sights. Her face was quite the sight to behold as we entered the Wolfswood proper, with its large trees densely packed, and its thick canopy.

It wasn’t long before a maid came out and asked what I wanted to drink. I told her that I was here to talk with the owner, and she went back into the kitchens to get him for me. Once he came out and saw me his face lit up in recognition, “Michael! Good to see you again!”

I nodded in return and said, “You too Arlan. How’s business?”

He smiled, “Good, good. So, you got more vodka for me?”

I laughed, he wasn’t so good at hiding his eagerness. “Sure do, I’ve got two more barrels for you. And a new drink!”

He looked interested, but said, “Only two barrels? The two from before sold mighty well! Was hopin’ to get more ‘o that!”

“I hoped to as well, but with the short winter I’ve been cautious. Too many signs, if you know what I mean.”

He nodded viciously, “Aye, I hear ya’. Lot of wolves lately, something’s getting them all riled up.”

I replied, “Yes, so I’ve got more I might be able to make but I’ll have to see how many more harvests I can get. If I can get another two I can come back with maybe three more barrels.”

He looked thoughtful, “Aye, that sounds better. So maybe six or seven moons you come back? That’ll work.”

“Good. How’d the people like it?”

Arlan laughed, “Mighty fine! Guards liked it, like you said. Good for a cold night, or if’n someone’s in a rush.”

I smiled at that, “So price then for the next two barrels. I’m thinking four stags a barrel?”

He coughed at that, “You tryna’ rob me blind? That’s bloody double the price!”

“Oh, come now, you told me how well it sold. You made a lot more than you bought it for, a lot more!”

Arlan smiled, “Jus’ trying to be polite-like! But I’ll make you a deal, how’s three stags?”

Oh haggling, how I missed you. “Let’s say 3 stags each, and four barrels of wine?”
Arlan reached out his hand, “Aye, I can live with that.” We clasped hands. “Now, what’s this other drink you got for me?”

I indicated for him to wait a moment and I went outside to bring back the barrel of brandy.

When I returned I asked him to get two small cups. “Best if they’re small, something similar to a wine cup.”

When her returned I poured us each a drink and told him to drink slow and really taste it. I watched as he took a sip and his face scrunched up in thought. He took another sip before smiling and he said, “Hmm, grows on you it does. Guess people’ll choose this or beer?”

I nodded, “Yes, it’s more of a drink to enjoy. Could go with a fancy meal too. I’ll warn you though, its expensive. Took a long time to make, with a lot of costly goods. The barrel’s only quarter full, so let’s say 10 stags for this first batch?”

He looked at me in shock, “10 stags?! Only Master Glover could afford that! Maybe some of the other lords!”

“Come now, it’s not so bad as that! It’s a treat to be sure, not something everyone will drink every night. But say a man’s getting married, he gets a glass to celebrate. The Castellan up at the castle might like it once a week. Things like this are special.”

Arlan didn’t look overly convinced.

I said, “Look, I was right about the vodka, right? The brandy will sell just fine. Let’s say 10 stags, but if you don’t sell it all by the time I come back with more vodka, I’ll give you a barrel of vodka free.”

He looked a little bit more warmed to the idea, but not yet sold. “That’ll still put me out a lot of stags.”

“Yes that much, and you will sell enough to cover the costs easy! Come on, trust me.”

He nodded, “Aye, I can do that.”

We shook on the deal and began offloading the barrels and loading up my wine. We said our goodbyes, and Nyra and myself began to walk down the street. As we walked down the street we took turns watching over the wagon while the other went to make purchases. We made some additional purchases with the money from the brandy, like dyes and high-quality linens. I also convinced the blacksmith to make me the shears I wanted by sweetening the deal and getting a few pick-axes. I wanted to start work on the sawmill, and I needed more concrete. I was planning to hire some local boys to help me mine some more materials to make the concrete necessary.

We also picked up another cat from the same man I purchased from before, though it was from a different litter. Nyra found a person selling dogs as well, and we ended up getting two herding dog that looked like corgi’s. She thought it would help as we started to have more and more animals. I was excited for a dog that might be a good pet, as our current dogs looked like a husky but were very aggressive.

We made all our purchases, but still had daylight to burn so we dropped off our wagon at the inn’s stable and walked around the travelling market for a while looking at some of the different wares. Nothing really caught our attention, until we came upon a food vendor. The man was selling various types of food, some basic like wheat, others like beets, but what caught my eye was a certain leafy green vegetable. Bok choy.
I tried to contain my excitement and asked the man, “What’s that there? I don’t recognize it.”

He replied, “Oh, that there is mountain cabbage. Comes from parts in the Vale.”


He scratched his head, “I think round the interior. Not very popular though, not so good at storing through the winter.”

Huh, it freezes somewhat alright if kept sealed from air. Maybe I could rig something up with the uhrplant? Bok choi was pretty healthy and grew really well with short harvest times. I had never grown any before, but I was pretty sure that the climate around here was suitable. It was supposed to be a cool-weather crop after all.

I asked him, “How much for it? Mind, I want the seeds as well.”

He hemmed and hawed, “Did come a long way, so a lot of work to get it here, and quickly too! It was hard to keep alive on the road. 20 coppers for the plant and seeds?”

He had the thing planted in a wooden pot, so I’ll admit that it was pretty impressive he managed it. “15 coppers and you got a deal.” We shook hands on it.

As Nyra and I walked away, she asked why I was so interested in the plant. While we walked back to the inn, I told her about the quick harvests and how it was good for you. Westerosi concepts of health were is the ‘miasma’ stages, and while Maester’s seemed fairly knowledgeable all things considered, the general people had no real concepts of healthy foods. Probably to busy with survival. I ended up talking about how people who ate more variety of different things were healthier and stronger. Hopefully eating some of this would help with her pregnancy a bit. She was a little wary of spending so much on one plant, especially after the trouble I had with our fruit trees. I had originally planted three quinces and three apple trees but one of the quince and all three apple trees died. We agreed to try our best and see what would happen; we weren’t short on money, so it was a risk but not a large one.

We enjoyed the rest of our time in Deepwood, and soon departed back home the next morning.
Act 1: Chapter 9

Seventh day, Third Moon, 230 AC


*Scream.*

Trees and fields. Fields and trees.

*Scream.*

Pretty trees and my fields.

My trees and pretty fields.

*Scream.*

Fences. Ah! My beautiful brick bridge. So wonderful.

*Scream.*

I even added a beautiful brick wall to the bridge. Liven things up a bit, has a nice curve. Architecture.

*Scream.*

I heard another voice from inside, "PUSH! You are almost there!"

My wife was giving birth. My wife. Was. Giving. Birth. I tried to be the good husband. Stay by her side. You know, husband things. I was unceremoniously kicked out, by both the midwife and my wife.

The midwife thought it improper, but I expected my wife to be relieved or thankful or something. But no. She gave me a weird look and said, "That's sweet, but in a weird way. Get out."

I know it wasn't common for a man to be in the birthing room, but I thought it was more of a thing on the side of men not wanting to be there. I was going to be the modern man. Oh well. At least I got them both to use lots of soap and rubbing alcohol. So that was something.

Trees and fields. Fields and trees.

I needed to keep myself busy.

The work around the farm was good. I had my beautiful brick bridge built across my irrigation ditch. I, uh, had the sawmill building itself ready, but the aqueduct wasn't finished yet.

Other topics, other topics.

Baby soon, baby soon. No. Other topics.

The bok choy was growing excellently. Took a harvest to work out the kinks, like how much water, sun, etc. The fun stuff.
It looked like winter was coming again. The summer had already past, and it was now autumn. Though, autumn seemed to be passing quickly. So, it looks like Ethan was right about bad omens. Even though a short summer wasn’t too bad, we would be perfectly fine. I still got a lot of harvesting done, and we are overstocked from last summer too. Go technology! So maybe a two or three-year winter, then it's back to business. The farming business. Does that count as a dad joke? Am I making a dad joke? No. Definitely not. No babies here. No wife giving birth. Nope.

Technology! Yes. I should make a computer. Easy, simple. Yeah. I took a high school computer course. There was some metal, and then you put electricity through it, and some gates. Then I just have to write a program or something. Lots of spaces and weird symbols that no one ever uses. Easy. And then a metal case and bam. Internet.

Okay, maybe not. Maybe a taser? Yeah, some magnets and copper and there's electricity. Then bam, jab that into someone. Put it on a spear, and I've got myself a taser spear. King of Westeros! King of the worlddd! Bring some freedom to this world. 'Murica.

God damnit. Gods damnit. This isn't working.

Wait, is there silence? My thoughts are way too loud.

I strained to hear inside the house but didn't hear anything. My heart started to race. Did something go wrong?

A baby's cry tore through the house.

Yes!!

I rushed to the door but hovered outside. I didn't want to go in and get yelled at but damn it! I wanted in! I waited another few painstaking minutes before the midwife came to the door and allowed me inside.

I saw my wife laying on the floor holding a little bundle of cloth. She looked exhausted, sweaty, and in pain. But through all that, she looked radiant.

I approached slowly, like you would to a wounded animal to not give fright. She looked up and saw me and gave a big smile, "My love, come meet your daughter!"

I sat beside my wife and peered into the bundle and saw a tiny little face peaking out. Chubby cheeks and healthy skin. Adorable.

I don't know how long we sat there, before the midwife shooed me out again, but I was a father! To a little girl! I waited a few more hours outside, but it remained a blur. I remember Koryn stopping by, some manly hugging, and Jess and Ethan stopping by as well.

Next thing I knew, it was late at night and my wife and daughter were asleep. I was sitting by the fire, watching them sleep by the firelight. I was drained, but life was good.
Twentieth day, Seventh Moon, 233 AC

The wind was blowing over the fields, picking up snow along the way as it skated over the field. The sun shone brightly, but it didn’t make up for the bitter cold or the way that the cold sucked out every bit of moisture from the air. It had snowed a lot this winter, more than many prior winters. So much so, that I had given up trying to keep my fields clear. I had one little section cleared, just so I could see if any of my barley started to mature indicating spring, but other than that it lay untouched.

I had finished doing various repairs around the farm last year, and this past year was mostly felling trees for wood and land clearing. I had some other small projects I was working on, some of which were successes, some failures and some just needed more work. My bok choy freezing went poorly. I had hoped if I used uhrplant, bok choy, and a sealed wax bag it might work, but it failed pretty miserably. I had no more to work with, but I was going to try and make sauerkraut next harvest. I half-remembered the process, so hopefully it would just take some time and fiddling.

On the other hand, I was trying my hand at a cowboy hat. It was going better than I thought it would, but my latest result was very low quality and wasn’t as solid as I would like. I watched a How It’s Made video when I was younger – or rather when I was back on Earth, so more like 30 years ago. Wow, that’s depressing.

My other side project, cross country skis, was coming along slowly. I could picture what I wanted generally, but I was having trouble getting it to work. I had never cross country skied before, but I knew the concept. It was an interesting challenge and helped fill the days.

I got up from my break and started to walk back over to the trees I was cutting down. The good thing about cutting down trees was that it didn’t require much thought.

My daughter, Violet, was now over three years old! She was running around now, rather than crawling, which meant we had to watch her even closer!

After she was born, Nyra and I had another brief argument over the name. I wanted to name her Violet immediately, but Nyra was insistent we wait. A custom around here was children born in the autumn or winter weren’t named for the first two years of their life. I thought it a rather depressing tradition and was determined to see my daughter flourish in the world. We did end up waiting, but I got to name her.

I stopped for a minute and examined the tree, it looked about ready to fall and was making groaning sounds. I made sure I was out of the way before giving it another chop and letting it fall. It landed with a muted thud, puffing up the snow around it.

As I began clearing the limbs off the trunk, I wondered when spring would arrive. It was already past the longest guesses we had, but there was still no sign. Our food stores were in good shape, same with the other farmers in our area, but people were starting to get a bit antsy.

I have always found people rather curious. People liked easy change, especially when things benefited them immediately. With a big emphasis on easy and immediate. But when things changed too much, people decried change as bad. It was the same on Earth as Westeros. For example, my machines showed easy benefits and so they were liked. But winter a little longer than it was supposed to be? I’ll admit, I wasn’t happy about it being longer, but to start to get all nervous and antsy? Please.
Though it was weird, my three-year-old daughter had yet to see summer once. Never swam in the river or felt warm dirt beneath her feet. Never felt the warm sun on her face or a cool breeze in the shade of a tree on a warm day. I wanted to play with her outside; to pick berries and to be able to step outside without bundling up in so many layers.

Nyra and I had been trying to get her pregnant for the rest of winter, wanting to wait until summer so our child could avoid sickness. Violet had been lucky so far, with only one mild bout of illness, and even that passed after a week. Hygiene and good food was to count for more than luck in my opinion, but she was alive and well.

Zane and his wife were expecting a child soon, while Koryn and his wife were also trying to hold off until summer.

I snorted. All this talk of holding off was amusing. There were no real contraceptives, so it was mostly a mixture of abstinence and pulling out. Which went about as well as you could expect really. I knew from my time in King’s Landing that there was moon tea, but it was expensive and not available locally.

Once I had cleared the limbs off the tree, I went and grabbed my horse, and got him to begin pulling it to the sawmill. Once spring arrived, I was planning on sawing a lot of planks. I had talked to the Koryn’s wife’s father, the merchant, and he was interested in buying the planks off me to resell. The large fishing village on the Stony Shore was always in need of good wood.

With the river frozen over, I was able to go right across instead of having to walk the long way. After depositing the wood, I started to make my way back as the daylight was fading away.

When I neared the barn, a howl echoed in the distance. Damn. The answering calls went up from the pack, but those sounded quite a bit closer. I quickly locked the horse in the barn and sprinted back to my house. I grabbed my bow, spear and a torch and made sure that Nyra and Violet were safe in the house. I went to the back of the barn and climbed up the ladder I had and walked onto the roof to get a good view of the farm.

The sun was sinking rapidly, and my vision of the farm was worsening. I stood on the roof for a while but heard no more howls. I started to lose the tension in my body but kept wary.

Another howl went up, this time much closer.

I started muttering under my breath, “Damn, damn, damn.”

I had some close calls with wolves before, but I had always lucked out. Eventually I saw movement in the trees behind the house, near the silo.

I regret watching The Grey. It was even worse since apparently Westerosi wolves are bigger and meaner. Not even counting direwolves.

I started to see more movement as the pack arrived at the edge of the woods. They stayed within the darkness of the forest, content to wait out the sunlight it seemed.

I shouted to Nyra, hoping she would hear me, “Nyra! There is a pack out here, don’t come out!”

I heard her muffled reply, “Be safe!”

I had about twenty arrows on me, a spear, a knife and a torch. I was hoping to just scare them off while out of range.
They certainly weren’t shy, I could hear some of them playing, and my attempts at shouting to drive them off failed.

Finally, a few started trotting forward. Some headed to the smokehouse, and others to the animal part of the barn. I let loose an arrow at a wolf that came close enough to the barn but missed. It gave a yelp and scrambled away.

I drew another a let loose at a different wolf. This one hit in its hind leg, causing it to withdraw, but otherwise unharmed.

I fired a few more but missed each time. They weren’t fleeing unfortunately; they were however unable to get into the barn or smokehouse, though the animals in the barn were going crazy. It was a good thing I locked the dogs in the barn, otherwise the wolves may have killed them.

The wolves definitely looked worse for wear, they were skinny and matted fur.

One finally braved coming near again and I shot another arrow. This one finally took it in the throat as it tried to turn aside.

It collapsed on the ground, before struggling to stand and collapsing again. That got a reaction out of the pack and they fled back to the forest line but did not fully retreat.

They must be truly desperate to stick around humans, especially after losing a member of the pack.

I decided to take a blind shot into the forest and run them off. I shot the arrow as far as I could and heard it crash through the undergrowth. Fortunately, it seemed to have run off the wolves.

I waited a few more hours before I descended from the roof. I cautiously approached the downed wolf and saw that it was truly dead. The body was already freezing, so I decided to drag it to the smokehouse and leave it for tomorrow.

By the time I entered the house I was exhausted, but I made sure to hug my wife and daughter. After a few minutes of that I went straight to bed, as the adrenaline crash had hit, and I could barely keep my eyes open. Sleep came easily that night.
Interlude: One

First day, Second Moon, 234 AC

"Then you have to tell the Queen about the party!"

My daughter was happily playing away with her dolls while sitting on the floor in front of me. It was after dinner, and we were just enjoying the warmth of the stove.

Violet was playing with a wooden doll my husband had made for her, while Michael was sitting nervously beside my carving away at a new handle for a hammer.

I let out a small sigh in relief, Violet was a very smart girl which thankfully meant that she was completely out of diapers. My mother said that she was quicker than my brothers and I, so I think it comes from Michael’s side of the family.

Michael. Ever since that night he had been awkward and nervous, but not without good reason.

I am getting frustrated even thinking about it now. How dare he wait so long?! Serves ‘im right though, I am going t’ drag this out for all its worth. Which is quite a bit.

I looked up at the roof in frustration and stretched my neck. My accent was slipping, even in my thoughts! Over the years I had worked at bettering my language. Ever since Michael had come into our lives, with his drive to always do things better, to be better, I wanted to make him proud. To show him, as he was so fond of saying, his partner in life.

I shook my head and went back to looking at my beautiful daughter. I suppressed the wince that accompanied the sadness of not having my other child sitting next to her. I turned my thoughts to happier matters. My mother had told me it’s hard to put into words what it feels like to watch your own daughter be happy, and she was right. It was indescribable. My mood was already picking back up.

She would need some new clothes soon enough. I had let out the ones she had now as much as I could, but they were wearing thin and too small.

The way she grew meant she needed more material, and previously she just added on to her outfits. But with all the crawling she had done, the knees were very worn. At least she was walking now. That was a mixed positive I guess.

I continued knitting absent mindedly, for Michael needed new gloves again. The ones he had were quite destroyed from all the trees he was cutting. For some reason, Michael’s biggest concern was boredom and his desire to continue building up the farm. I kept trying to tell him to be warier of the long winter; for it had yet to end and it was already four years in with no sign of spring. To be fair, we were well stocked as were many of our neighbors, but we were just one accident from starving through who knew how many more years of winter?

Michael seemed to adopt of carefree sort of attitude to it that made me confused. In the time before winter he was all worried and stressed over preparing, but once it’s here he is all calm and accepting? Was it a cultural thing? I knew that there wasn’t much more to be done regarding surviving the winter, but it still rankled at me. Winter is dangerous and should be treated as such. I still remember those winters of my childhood; the hunger and cold, the feeling of nothing to do and nowhere to go.

I was happy that Violet didn’t know that, and I suppose that was Michael’s reasoning, but it still sat
wrong with me.

I sighed. Michael looked up and watched me hopefully.

"You waited years. You'll need to wait a bit longer."

He looked sad again. "I know, it's just it sometimes doesn't seem quite real anymore. Like a dream."

"Years."

This time he sighed. Normally he had such an expressive face, a perfect storytelling or singing face I thought. Showed emotions and his moods so well for those that knew him. Now? It just showed how miserable he was.

"I can put a bit of you to ease. It's not that you're here or how you got here. If you are here, it's the will of the gods. Nothing but. It's that you waited. Years." I said a bit tersely. I mean, it took him years.

He perked up a bit, "How was I supposed to put that in words? Even when I did, it was confusing, and you didn't really understand at first."

"By trusting me. It goes both ways as you are always fond of saying. I am always trusting you. With new foods, new ways of doing things. I trust you."

He looked torn, his eyes highlighting his indecision. He clearly didn't know how to make this better. Such a sweet man, but sometimes so stupid.

It was curious though, he seemed so concerned about my reaction to his actual coming to Westeros. If he is here and not there, it's the will of the gods. But he seemed to think it was against the gods? What a curious world he must have lived on to have such thinking.

I gave him some mercy, "Why don't you tell me some true stories then? Let me imagine this world of yours. Your parents, your farm. Include me, my husband."

His face lit up like the spring sun shining bright over his wintry mood. "Well, where should I start? My parents were married..."
I woke suddenly. I felt my wife beside me and could hear my daughter just a few feet away. What woke me?

Barking sounded from outside. My dogs had found something then. Damnit. More wolves. This long winter was really driving them towards farms and villages in the area.

I shook Nyra awake as I quickly climbed out of bed put on my clothes while Nyra grabbed my weapons. The dogs were still barking, so I strung my bow and bid Nyra to stay with Violet.

I slipped out of my house quietly and paused to listen to the situation. I poked my head around the corner, but I didn't see any movement in front of the barn doors. It didn't look like anything was trying to get to the animals in the barn.

It was a cloudless night, with a full moon, so it was quite bright out with the light being reflected off the snow. The air was biting cold and creating a crust on the top of the snow, meaning it would be hard to sneak around without causing noise.

All the sudden a loud noise reverberated through the night! My alarm for the upper barn doors!

That meant men!

I sprinted silently over to the barn and quieted down the dogs and let them out. I had trained my dogs to be guard dogs as best I could. So, I bid them to stay until I whistled for them.

I went the long way around the barn and put as much space as I could between the upper barn door and myself. As I came in view I could hear the men talking amongst themselves. I couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but they clearly didn't know how to react to my alarm.

When I first built my barn, I wanted to make it secure, but I didn't know how to make a lock, nor were there any locksmiths nearby. So, I did what I could to delay and alert any thieves. I built a large beam to lay across the door, like you would see in the movies for a castle door, and made huge weights chained to it to make it difficult to move. Then, while the thieves would be distracted with that, I tied a simple string to back of the beam so that if the beam moved, it would pull the string.

That string was tied to a stick, which when pulled, dropped a stone on a makeshift bagpipe. Thus, alerting me to any thieves.

Which worked perfectly. I smiled to myself.

There was four men around the door, none had any type of armor. One had a wood axe and a torch, another had a pitchfork, another a fishing spear, and the final one had a wood axe, a dagger and another torch.

I prepared my arrows, no sense in rushing them outnumbered. The one with the haybale spear stood a bit apart from them and a little closer to me, so he would be first. Then the one with the fishing spear, since I needed to get those that could outrange my sword.

I mentally prepared myself while the thieves tried to disengage the chain attached to the beam. I had only ever killed, when those bandits attacked my all those years ago. I felt a sudden cold sweat at the
thought of killing again. Last time, I had attacked without letting myself really think. I needed to do the same before my thoughts spiraled out of control. My family depended on it. These men, these men would let my family starve. I would not let them.

I looked around at the scene once more to ensure that I had not missed anything. I could see their tracks in the crisp snow and saw no other tracks. They went straight to the barn doors - they must think I store all my food in there. I could see by the moonlight the rest of the clearing, and saw no others lurking in the trees, though the moonlight did not penetrate very deeply in the forest.

Finally, I reached for my first arrow and calmed myself. I felt the cold air biting against my hands but did not let it distract me. I drew back my first arrow, aimed quickly and let loose.

The twang of the bow snapped through the cold night. All the men snapped their heads in my direction, but by then the arrow struck the first man in the chest and he went down in a cry of agony.

The others froze unsure what to do. I did not hesitate and reached for another arrow. I let out a loud whistle for my dogs to attack.

At the sound of the dogs I could hear one of the men exclaim, "Shit! He killed Karl! Gots t' get out o' here!"

The second went to respond but my second arrow cut him off as it narrowly missed him.

The man looked shocked then shout out, "Get him!" He started to run forward but his companions had other ideas.

The first one shouted back, "Fuck that! 'm leaving!" He started to run away with the torch.

The second one cursed and started to run away as well.

The third one however, remained rooted to the spot. He looked terrified, but as his friend ran past him he tried to look confident.

He started to back up and shouted out to me, "You'll regret this you bastard! You theivin' bastard! We'll be back, and you'll pay! You and your family!"

He turned to run away, but my blood was boiling. This little bastard was threatening my family?!? He comes in the night to steal from me?! AND dares to threaten my family?!?

I drew back my arrow, straining against the weight of it and let loose. The arrow released high into the sky, and the third one turned his head while running to look at the sound.

He never saw the arrow. The arrow dropped from the sky and hit him in the back near the left shoulder blade. He went down without a sound.

Like the first time I killed, my senses rushed back into me and overwhelmed me. This time, I held on and suppressed it as best I could.

I pulled another arrow and examined the scene. I could hear the moaning of the first man I hit on the ground, as he lay curled in a ball. I could hear my dogs barking in the distance, clearly chasing the two men who ran away.

I approached the first man carefully, trying to keep an eye on the other man I shot at the same time. The first man was moaning and making a keening noise, and when I came closer I could see the blood dripping out of his mouth and nose. It looked like I punctured something, probably a lung or
something. He was going to die but would likely live for a few hours yet. I decided to put him out of his misery and pulled my dagger across his throat.

I stood back up and then approached the other man I shot. He lay still on the ground, with his face in the snow. Now that I was closer I could see that I likely shot through his heart. A lucky shot. I turned his head and put my hand beneath his nose but felt no breath. I went to feel for a pulse but found nothing either.

I went to stand back up but stumbled a bit as my foot sank a bit through the crust of the snow. It saved my life.

The next thing I knew, I was on my side on the ground with a huge pain on the side of my stomach with a huge weight on top of me.

I could see that it was the second man that was atop me. The one who tried to rush me. He clearly looped back and tried to kill me from behind.

I rolled over while underneath him and quickly grabbed his wrist so that he could not hit me with the dagger again.

I tried to pull his arm away from me, but he grabbed the dagger with both hands and tried to push. I held him off, for I was stronger than him but he had the leverage. I began bucking my body trying to throw him off me.

He quickly let go of the dagger with one hand a sucker punched me in the face. He used my momentary distraction to maneuver the knife closer but was only slightly successful.

He went to punch me again, but I pulled on the dagger down and away from me, so that he stabbed the ground beside me. This brought his body down to mine and I tried to headbutt him, but I barely glanced his chin.

He readjusted himself and brought himself to kneel above me. He started to punch me in the face, while I grabbed my own knife with my free hand.

As he brought his own knife in front of my face again and tried to push down, I used my own knife to stab his wrist.

He reared back and roared in agony.

I used his momentum to finally throw him off me, and I scrambled away from him.

My right side was burning with pain, and when I pulled my hand away from it, it was covered in blood. It didn’t look very deep, but a gut wound was no joke.

Meanwhile, the second man pulled the dagger from his wrist while weeping. I picked up his dagger from the ground and unsteadily got to my feet.

I started to walk over to him slowly, but by the time I got there he had his senses back and was on his feet as well.

He made a few jabbing motions to try and make me keep my distance.

It didn’t look like either of us knew what we were doing. I made a discrete glance around me, but noticed my bow was too far away and my arrows scattered on the ground.
I still had my sword at my waist, but as I moved a hand toward it the man took a step towards me trying to prevent me from pulling it. It would take too long to get it clear of its sheath before he could rush me.

I remembered the old saying that the only winner in a knife fight is the one that dies on the way to the hospital. And I didn’t have a hospital handy.

Diplomacy it was then. I ground out in a hard voice, “Leave. You aren’t taking anything tonight. Your friends are dead. Run while you can.”

The man just narrowed his eyes and started to circle me. I started to move with him but quickly realized I would tire out much quicker than him with my side wound. It didn’t look like I hit an artery with my attack on his wrist, though he did keep it close to his body, unmoving.

We continued to circle each other in silence, underneath the winter moonlight.

Once I was opposite of the man I had killed I noticed he still had his axe beneath his body. The handle was sticking out, but I might be able to pull it free easily enough.

I started to walk back from the man as we circled, trying to put some space between us and the body. We were both angry and had our blood up, but it seemed neither of us wanted to be the first to attack.

When we were both far enough from the body, and I had my back to it, I sprinted to it while the other man let out a curse.

I quickly pulled the axe from underneath the body and spun.

I found myself bowled over from the man’s body and the axe ripped from my grip.

I could smell him clearly. He stank of dirt and shit, but I could also smell blood and lots of it.

I struggled to prevent him from stabbing me again, but quickly realized that he wasn’t moving.

I pulled myself out and looked at him. It seemed as I turned the axe buried itself into the man’s neck as he tried to tackle me.

I let out a sigh of relief.

I tugged the axe from the man’s neck and stood up straight. My side was still bleeding and hurt something fierce.

My dogs came trotting back into the clearing, their muzzles were reflected clearly in the moonlight, revealing them to be covered in blood.

Hmm, looks like they got their man then. I really hope they didn’t eat him or anything. I was kind of winging it when it came to training guard dogs, but I figure letting any domesticated animal a taste for human flesh was a bad idea.

I followed the dogs back to the man they downed, and it looked like he got somewhat far. By the time we reached him, my side was burning, and I was getting a bit lightheaded.

The body was backed up against a tree and was torn up, the one leg looked mangled. It looked like the dogs bit down on a leg to bring him down, and then started to tear at his arms and finally his throat.
Damn.

Now that I confirmed he was dead, I started to head back to the farm.

Once I neared the house I called out to Nyra to let her know it was safe.

She burst out of the house and hugged me. I explained what happened while she bandaged my wounds. I had scratches and bruises all over my body, but the stomach wound wasn’t too bad. She cleaned them out and bandaged them for me, they probably could have used stiches, but we didn’t have any.

“I am going to try and sleep for a few hours before sunrise. Can you make sure I wake at dawn? I need to collect the bodies and bring them to the village. I don’t recognize any of them, but I need to track down their families. Make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

Nyra looked worried, “I will, but you grab my brothers okay? I don’t want their families to try and retaliate against you alone.”

I nodded my assent and climbed gingerly into bed. Waking up was going to be rough.

xxxx

The next morning, I managed to drag myself out of bed with the help of my wife and put the bodies of the thieves on a sled. I harnessed up my dogs to it and went off to collect my goodbrothers. After explaining what happened, they grabbed an axe and a knife each and came with me to confront the thieves’ families.

One of the fishers in the village down the road recognized the one thief as someone who lived in the village to the south.

We headed off right away and made good time over the snow.

It was a bright sunny day, without a single cloud in the sky. The crisp winter air mixed with the salt from the ocean, creating that particular feeling of home for me.

When we arrived in the southern village, we could tell from a distance something was happening. We could see a lot of people moving about in the center.

We approached cautiously, and by the time we were close someone finally saw us approaching and called out to greet us.

When they saw what was on the sled they became uneasy and quiet.

One man pushed his way through the small crowd of people and stumbled forward with a cry, “My boy!”

I cleared my throat and spoke with a loud clear voice so that all could hear me, “These four men tried to steal from me last night. I defended my property, and they paid the price. I have no quarrel with anyone here and consider this to be done.”

The man that had approached earlier shouted out, “Fuck that! You thievin’ bastard! You stole our food! We got none now!”

I was bewildered, what is he talking about? “I think you have the wrong man. I’ve never stolen anything.”
The man started to stumble around a bit and waving his arms, “No! I know! I know ev’thin’! He’s the one! He’s why winter is so long!”

What? People in the crowd began muttering. “Look, I have no idea what you are talking about. I haven’t done anything to you, nor do I have any power of winter.”

“He stole our boys! Made them not farm ‘n fish! Then the first winter he’s here it’s a long one?! I say no! It’s his fault!”

“What are you talking about?! This is my second winter here! And I haven’t stolen any boys! I have a wife!”

The man became more irrational, “No! I know! I know!”

I looked around the crowd for support, but they seemed to be staying clear of us. I addressed them, “Can anyone make sense of this fool?”

An older man came forward, “Aye, this is Bart.” The man spit on the ground and continued, “Few years past, you came and gave some of the boys some jobs for coin. He took the coin from his boy and bought wine.” The man shrugged, “Found a likin’ for it.”

A town drunk. Wonderful. “And how does this mean I stole them or his food?”

The man shrugged, “Sold off his food stores for wine. Lost his wife a few years past. Wouldn’t ‘av been so bad if this winter ended when it should ‘av. His boy believed ‘im and gathered some o’ his friends.”

“How is that my fault?!”

The man - Bart, now that I looked closer, had bloodshot eyes and was swaying a bit; he looked malnourished and his clothes threadbare. He definitely looked like a drunk with no more wine or food. And a dose of crazy. Perfect.

Bart shouted, “I hear you! I do! I know! It’s you! You!”

Fine. Be like that. “This matter is solved. I won’t seek out anyone’s families, nor demand coin. But this is over. Tell the families not here that.”

Bart shrieked, “No! My boy! I know!”

I signaled for Koryn and Zane to unload the bodies while I kept my eye on Bart.

Once the man saw his son on the ground, he collapsed and started weeping and mumbling, “I know. I know. I know.”

I looked to the old man again and said, “Make sure he doesn’t come near me or mine again. When I came here I hired lots of people, paid good coin too. Made sure that they worked when they were free to do so. No one’s farms were hurt. You all just had more coin. This winter should have been easier for you, but I can’t control it’s length. I was kind, but I will not be stolen from.”

I turned and grabbed the sled and left with Koryn and Zane.

The sun shone high in the sky, with not a cloud to mar it.

Another wonderful day in Westeros.
Second day, Third Moon, 235 AC

“Nice shot!”

Nyra rolled her eyes at me, as I might have been a bit overly enthusiastic. I was trying to keep her encouraged while she practiced her archery, which if I was being fair, I was really pushing her to do. After the attempted robbery, I might have been a bit jittery, and if I was – well, it was perfectly normal right? So, I was practicing my skills and was encouraging my wife to do the same. Nyra was a decent shot when it came to stationary targets now, while my sword training fell sort of flat on its face. I didn’t have anyone to teach me, so for a while I was kind of just swinging it around getting a feel for it. Then I got Koryn to come by and jab me with a stick as practice, but it was pretty awful, and I didn’t learn much.

On the other hand, it was time to move Nyra up to the next level of difficulty.

“Nyra, its time to start you on moving targets. You need to be able to hit a moving target, ‘cause no one will just stay still for you.”

She rolled her eyes again. Sassy woman. She replied, “Why don’t you swing that log for me, my husband. Then go back to being ridiculous about your armor.”

I grit my teeth. “It’s a difficult decision! What kind do I get?! What kinds are there?!”

She laughed, “You will just have to wait and see; you really need to take your mind off it. Go and organize the spring planting schedule with the other farms maybe?”

I sighed, “Maybe. I’m still not decided. I’ve been thinking on making a large expansion of the fields, and hiring on a few workers for planting and harvest, but doing so will bring the attention of Lord Stark I fear.”

Nyra put down her bow and turned to face me. She said, “I still don’t understand your reluctance to show off your skill. Why not become the greatest farmer in the North? Be rewarded, and have that better life for your children like you always say? If Lord Stark can see that you can make even these lands grow much more food, than think of what you can do with the lush lands near Winterfell?”

I snorted involuntarily at that. “Lush lands? Dear, there is no lands here in the North that I would call lush.”

She waved my objections off, “Certainly better than here!”

“Aye, but I can’t help but feel that attention isn’t a good thing. I mean, what if we rise in stature and end up suffering. I and any sons we have will be made to fight, we will have to deal with people that can just up and have us killed! Back in King’s Landing, my father dealt a lot with minor nobility or landed knights and these people just had so much power over you it unsettles me. Turn down an offer from a noble? Maybe he gets angry and executes you on his land. Maybe he bribes a Gold Cloak to stick a knife in you. It just seems that the more you rise, the more eager people are to beat you down and take what you have. I don’t want that fight - that constant struggle. I’d rather be here, were it’s a bit simpler and greed doesn’t drive every decision.”

She looked dubious, “I can see what you mean, but I don’t agree. If we prove ourselves to Lord Stark, he will protect us. Just like the Starks have cared for the North for thousands of years.”
smiled, then added slyly, “Besides, even if they wanted to their honor and greed for the money you will provide would see them protect us and ensure we work for them.”

I replied, “Hmm, they have ruled for thousands of years, but the current Lord Stark has only been in charge for less than ten years. So even though his family has ruled, he hasn’t.”

She shrugged, “He’s a Stark of Winterfell.”

I sighed. I suppose to her, and pretty much everyone else here, that is the end of the conversation. Truthfully, I find myself not quite hating – but certainly disdaining the whole feudal thing. At least there wasn’t talk of the Starks having the Mandate of Heaven or any other type of equivalent.

“I’ll come up with something eventually I suppose.” I said to her and wagged my finger, “Now, get back to shooting there young miss!”

She laughed and began to shoot again.

Violet spoke up from where she was sitting, “Papa, I’m bored! Can we go see the new baby at Unca’ Koryns?”

Nyra replied for me, “Of course you both can! Violet, you can practice your skiing as well!”

Violet pouted, “Do I have to? It’s hard.”

I walked over to Violet and picked her up and tickled her, “Are you sure you don’t want to ski? You can fly over the snow! As fast and light as a wolf! Beautiful as a deer!”

Violet was shrieking with laughter, “Okay, Okay! We can ski!”

I smiled to myself, it’s nice when people appreciate your hard work. I said to her, “Why don’t you go put away your toys then and I’ll grab our skis.” As she ran off I turned to Nyra and wagged my finger at her, “Don’t think this gets you out of practice, you will just have to work on your distance shots then.”

She snorted, “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. Go keep your daughter occupied – she’s had way too much time on her hands lately.”

I nodded and walked off to get the skis. By the time I pulled them out Violet was waiting for me outside.

“Okay honey. Now, I know you didn’t like it before but let’s try again eh? Remember what I said, think like a deer. You want to be nice and graceful as you go. Think of it like dancing.”

She looked at me uncertainly, “Dancing?”

I nodded and strapped her to the skis. “Yes, when you bring your foot back think of it like making a pose when you dance.”

I got up off my knees and strapped myself in and began to show her what I mean. “See? It’s like a long dance. Come and try.”

She was laughing at my antics, but she was trying again and with greater results. Once she started to get a rhythm going, we decided to head out to Koryn’s house. Koryn was there and ushered us into the house.

“Violet ‘n Michael! How are you?”
I was about to reply when Violet cut me off, “Good! We danced all the way here! Can I see the new baby?”

Koryn laughed, “Of course you can! Did you sing all the way here too?”

“No silly! Not that kind of dancing!” Violet laughed and went over to the bed that had Koryn’s son on it and then promptly ignored us with all the grace of a child.

Koryn looked confused but gestured for me to have a seat. I said to him, “I was trying to get her to use my skis again and told her it was like dancing.”

“Ah, how was it then?”

“No, not that kind of dancing!” Violet laughed and went over to the bed that had Koryn’s son on it and then promptly ignored us with all the grace of a child.

Koryn looked confused but gestured for me to have a seat. I said to him, “I was trying to get her to use my skis again and told her it was like dancing.”

“Ah, how was it then?”

“Not bad, certainly quicker than snow shoes. Or at least it will be when we get better at using them. How’s things here?”

Koryn shrugged, “Good I suppose. Mostly just clearing more and more trees so we can plant come spring. Not much t’ do until its warmer anyways. Five years of winter tends t’ give you plenty of time t’ get everything done.”

I laughed, “Aye, I can agree with that. I think it was last week, I had to repair a bit of fence after my pig decided he didn’t like it. Before that, there’s not been much work around the farm. How’s Alessa doing after the birth?”

“Better now. As more time passes now she is getting better, but it was a tough birth.”

I nodded grimly at that, she was in labor for close to twenty hours. Koryn clapped his hands together, “Enough of that now. How goes my dear sister’s shooting?”

“Not bad, I am going to get her started on moving targets soon enough.”

“And how goes your new obsession with weapons ‘n armor?”

I tried to hide my disappointment, “Not bad I suppose.”

“Any more ideas like your sword spear?”

I blushed at that. I’m pretty sure I remember the Japanese having sword spear type things, and it seemed like a good idea. I like the idea of fighting someone out of reach more than fighting hand to hand. Unfortunately, it failed. I ended up with a spear with just a longer point on it; it was weighted much too heavily and balanced poorly. I didn’t really have the equipment to fiddle around with it, since I just ended up tying my sword to a spear to try it out. I think they used a scimitar type blade, but that might have just been artwork and not very accurate.

I broke from my reverie and replied to him, “No, I’ve given up on trying to make a new weapon. For now, at least. And I still don’t know about the armor. Next time I go to Deepwood Motte, I’ll probably take a look around.”

“Ah, probably the best plan. Take care though, come spring we might see a few raids by those damn Ironborn bastards.”

I was confused, weren’t they part of the Seven Kingdoms and not supposed to raid us? My confusion must have shown on my face, and Koryn elaborated, “Well they’re not Ironborn supposedly. They are just some random raiders, in Ironborn boats, with Ironborn weapons, Ironborn accents, and Ironborn clothing. Totally not Ironborn.”
Ah, I understand now. “Why doesn’t Lord Stark take more care? And why haven’t I heard of this?”

Koryn shrugged. “You have. We normally just call ‘em raids. You know, like a few springs back
there was a raid on the large village on the Stoney Shore. There not often, only after really bad
winters. I don’t think we’ve been hit here in a long time. Maybe my father’s father’s father?”

“How, so we might hear of them attacking then?”

Koryn replied, “Maybe. But not till long after. It’s not like anyone around here as much to take.
Well, at least we didn’t use t’.”

“Ah, while I’m thinking of it, I was wondering what your plans for harvest will be? I was thinking of
sharing our resources a bit.”

Koryn tilted his head in confusion, “What do you mean?”

“I was thinking, I’ve probably got more land ready to be planted now than I can handle alone. I
figure we hire some of the fishermen and hunters to help come planting and harvesting and they
work on all our farms. Helps us plant more and maybe sell some food.”

Koryn thought about it for a few minutes before replying, “I don’t have anything against it. But I
don’t have the coin to hire anyone either. And I don’t think they would work for free until we can
sell the first harvest.”

I nodded at that, “Right, but maybe for the first harvest we do things like we’ve done before and then
we sell that and get some coin? Then use that coin to hire for the next harvest? Failing that, I can
probably sell enough vodka for the first harvest, to loan everyone the coin. Then they can pay me
back later.”

Koryn replied, “Aye, that might work. I’ll talk t’ my Pa tomorrow and see what he and Zane thinks.
But I’m not so sure about selling that first harvest. The winter isn’t even over yet, and its been five
years. The thought of selling the food doesn’t sit right with me.”

“Well talk it over with your father and see what he thinks. We aren’t in any rush, but it’s something
to think about.”

With that, I decided we needed to head back since it was an overcast day, so it was like to get dark
soon. Though, it was still another ten minutes before I managed to tear Violet away from the baby.

On the way back, Violet asked, “Can we have some egg toast tomorrow for breakfast?”

I smiled. Introducing her to French toast and maple syrup was one of my prouder moments as a
father.

It was another fine day in Westeros. All we needed now was the Spring.
Act 1: Chapter 13

Fourteenth day, Fourth Moon, 236 AC

“Shovel faster damn you!”

“Got a breach over here!”

“This boulder is coming loose! The dirt’s being washed out too quickly!”

“Everyone get that rock! Grab a rope damn you! Don’t let that rock loose! HOLD!”

“We need to keep the water from seeping through! It’s loosening the whole wall!”

“We’ve got flooding further east! It’s coming around!”

“Alright, keep this wall secure! I’ll grab two men and start building the wall northwards!”

Two days. Two days of flooding. Spring had finally arrived, after six long years of winter, and it was making its displeasure at being delayed known. All the snow melt had inflamed the rivers, causing a massive rise in water levels. However, two days ago something must have happened because they water level rose even farther causing massive flooding.

My farm was lucky, in that our river had a deep lip that prevented major flooding from occurring on our farm. We still built up a wall just in case, but it seemed we would be fine.

The village however was in shambles. It was located near the conflux where four rivers join and flow out to the ocean, and this left it in a dangerous predicament. The village had a basic floodwall to it’s south along the riverbank, but it was not meant for the sheer volume of water the village was now facing.

It became overwhelmed quickly, and we all showed up to help build it up and reinforce it. We had just made it over the bridge near the village before it was washed out, so I had not seen my family in two days.

Everyone in the village was helping as some were moving food and valuables away from the river and to a hopefully safer spot. Others, like myself, were trying our best to stop the flooding from wiping out the village in the meantime. Very quickly, the water raised above the floodwall and we tried to build up, but it was a losing fight. All we were doing was allowing the villagers time to save as much as they could, but it seemed every time we got something done, ten more problems appeared.

Now the flooding was racing northwards and looked to be surrounding the village. I grabbed two men and began to build a ditch as best we could to buy time.

It was a few hours later, as the water began to overtake our meager work that a child ran up to us and told us that everyone was abandoning the village, and they were retreating the North-East, away from the water.

We hurried from the quickly overflowing ditch and followed the child to where the group of villagers were staying. They managed to find a small hill about twenty minutes North-East of the village that was big enough to fit everyone. There appeared to be no water in sight, so everyone was just sitting on the ground looking a little lost. Some families were weeping as they had lost people over the past
few days and others just huddled together.

Time to step up then. I cleared my throat and said, “Alright everyone, listen up! We need to get set up until the water recedes! All food and animals go to the middle of the hill! Everyone set up an area to sleep in a circle around the food stores. Then I’ll need some men to go and cut down some trees for some fires! Then some other men can start digging a ditch around the hill! We don’t know how long we will be here for, so we need to get comfortable. Let’s get some nice big fires going and get ourselves warm!”

As we all went about our tasks, I spared a thought for my family and hoped they were alright. Zane and Ethan had come with me to help the villagers, while Koryn had stayed with our families. They had managed to save a canoe, so we were planning to try and find our way back tomorrow once the villagers were secured and ready to wait out the flood.

The work was hard, but as we continued to labor throughout the day we managed to build a ditch around the camp and had some shelter up for the young and the old. Some fires were going to help keep people warm and cook food, and we kept an eye on the oncoming water. Before night fell though, it started to rain, just a drizzle at first but with increasing intensity.

It was a cold, wet, miserable night. The dark was all-encompassing, with a weight so great we could feel it pressing down against us. The fires eventually went out underneath all the rain, leaving us all huddled together on the lone, wind and rain-swept hill.

Eventually morning broke, and with it a cloudy sky, but mercifully without a hint of any rain. It appeared the water wasn’t rising much more and was still a good distance from the hill. Zane, Ethan and I decided it was time to go back to our farms to check on them. The villagers should be fine for now, and we needed to see our families.

We grabbed a canoe and started to hike eastwards, skirting around the water and the rivers. It took most of the day to hike through the forest around the rivers and come back south. Eventually we reached the un-named lake that was east of our farms, and we could see that it was swollen and had done a number on the surrounding area.

We cautiously got into the boat and began to make our way down the river to our homes. We reached my farm first, and I was calling out before we had even made land.

“Nyra? Are you there?” I shouted at the top of my lungs.

I could hear a door slam open and then her response, “Michael! Are you alright?”

As we pulled up along the riverbank I could see Nyra and Violet running towards me. I hopped out of the canoe and quickly made land and tied off the canoe. I knelt and let Violet jump into my arms. As I picked her up she whispered through her tears, “You were gone so long!”

I whispered back to her, “I know sweetie, but I’m here now. It’ll be alright.” She continued to cry. “Hush now honey, I’ve got you.”

I turned to Nyra and kissed her. She looked exhausted and just as worried as Violet.

She whispered into my ear, “It’s good to see you back.” She turned top her father and brother and hugged them as well. “Both of you too. What happened?”

Her father grunted, “Bloody flood. It took out the bridge and went over the floodwall. Had t’ give up the village in the end, but we got everything out first. Any word from your mother or Koryn?”
She shook her head, “Not since yesterday. We were lucky here, no damage to any buildings. But some of the western pasture and field was washed out. The path washed out too, but both of your places are fine.”

Zane and Ethan sighed in relief. Thunder sounded in the distance, and dark clouds started to crowd the horizon.

“Damn. We need t’ get back before dark and that bloody storm. You three take care now, y’ hear?”

With that, Zane and Ethan took off through the fields and made their way to their homes.

I stood there with Nyra at my side and Violet in my arms enjoying the closeness of them.

I broke the silence with a soft voice, “How bad are the fields?”

Nyra replied, “The pasture is beat, but not that important, though a good bit of fence is washed away. The field that was washed out lost a lot of good soil. Too muddy to tell properly now, but it might be a weak harvest.”

I nodded, “Could have been worse I suppose. The water doesn’t seem to be rising still, but its not showing any sign of relief. I’ll reinforce the riverbank more tomorrow.”

Thunder sounded again in the distance, but closer this time.

Violet sniffled in my arms, “Can I sleep in your bed?”

I readjusted her in my arms and replied, “Of course sweetie. I’ll even tell some of your favorite stories, and we’ll play a nice game, just the three of us. How does that sound?”

I could feel Violet’s smile against my chest.

“Do you know what they say about the rain Violet?”

She shook her head.

“It’s gonna take a lot to drag me away from you…”
Act 1: Chapter 14

Seventh day, Eighth Moon, 236 AC

I walked through the fields as the sun shone bright in the sky, relishing in the warmth and I let myself enjoy it. Summer was finally back, and with it came the warm sun and fresh food. I was currently walking through the wheat field in the eastern-most part of the field inspecting the wheat stalks.

Unfortunately, it was this area that was hit by the flooding in the spring and it showed. The wheat was not growing very well, and the yields were down. I had managed to re-landscape it for farming purposes and added more land to my fields while I was at it, but it was not as good quality. It would take a few harvests to get it back, but I would get there.

I snipped off a stalk and threshed out some grains into my hand and tasted it. Almost ripe, but not quite there yet. Another week or two probably.

As I continued into the turnip field, I noticed some rabbits appeared to be eating the turnip greens. Damn, I’ll have to try and lay some more traps for them and see if I can’t find their burrow. The turnips were growing nicely, and the soil in this section of the field was of good quality. The massive amounts of rain from spring did damage it, but it’s bounced back quite nicely. The clover was growing acceptably as well.

I started to walk back to the kiln, where I was currently heating up another batch of cement. When Lord Stark’s men had come through at the beginning of summer they had gathered everyone in the new village and told us that there would be no tax on the first harvest so that we may recover from the winter and spring. He also gave out ten gold so that we could build ourselves a new bridge over the river as well as a new tax collection barn. Of course, it needed to be done before they came back but I was happy to see that the concept of disaster relief was not completely absent from Westeros.

After talking amongst ourselves, we decided to use my concrete to create the feet of the bridge and use brick for the archway. Then we were going to use more concrete for a better floodwall for the village. After the flood, the villagers were split on where to put the new village; some wanted to move it close to the hill they rested on, which was away from the rivers and coastline and would not be prone to flood. Others declared that crazy, since they were mostly fishermen and moving away from the coast was stupidity. A few wanted to move to the eastside of the river, which did not receive as much floodwater, but was denied by the others since it would mean another bridge would have to be built for them to get anywhere.

In the end, it was decided to rebuild in the same location that their ancestors had always lived. They raised the ground beneath the village, and created a better drainage system surrounding it, and of course the new floodwall. Most considered the last flood to be an extreme that would not happened again, and so they made a few changes but continued on as usual.

I think they were used to me at this point, so my words of caution were mostly ignored. I still managed to help with the drainage ditches, and a few other measures like planting trees in between the village and the river.

A few merchants made their way through, bringing some food to trade and other goods. I ran a good business at the same time, selling wood planks to Koryn’s goodfather, since I had a few villagers helping me out. I did a lot of bartering too, I gave the villagers wood to rebuild and they gave me labor to make the planks.
My trip to Deepwood Motte was also successful, as I sold another batch of vodka and brandy and I bought my self some new items. I ended up purchasing some gambeson for armor, which I was recommended but I must admit I’m not thrilled about. It was a long sort of style that reminded me a bit of a trench coat, and I thought I looked a bit silly in it. Nyra disagreed and thought I looked properly heroic. Oh well, I think I’m supposed to listen to my wife about fashion, anyways right?

I also ended up purchasing myself a new longbow, as well as some new narrow-headed arrows.

With more coin in my pocket I came back home and started to hire some villagers to help mine the materials for the cement and help my bake the bricks.

At this point, I was happy about how I helped my community and was feeling pretty good.

Unfortunately, others were not so lucky. The village to the north of us was wiped out in the flooding, with 30 people dead and their village swept away by the waters. The remaining 15 people moved into our village, but they were a desperate lot.

They didn’t manage to save much, mostly what they could carry, and had no animals to support them. I hired as many as I could, but I didn’t have all the coin they needed. Lord Starks men provided them with some food, but since they did not have a bridge near their village they did not receive any money.

The next planting should include a much larger field, even if the soil is poor, and with their help I should be able to farm enough to help them. Nyra and I had decided that we wouldn’t seek out recognition from Lord Stark, but we couldn’t turn our back on our neighbors. So, if anyone asked, we would simply downplay our efforts. Our life, barring any natural disasters, was good and I wasn’t in any hurry to change that. Diffusion, deflection and distraction. Damn, I sound like a politician.

I had just finished shoveling more coal into the furnace when I say Koryn walking over to me. I wiped some sweat and walked over to greet him.

“Lo Michael!”

“Koryn. Good to see you, how’s the family?”

Koryn smiled and replied, “Alessa and my son are doing good. Ready for me t’ take over?”

I nodded. Koryn was going to take over the next shift at the kiln, while I spent some time with my family. “Aye, it should only need another two hours. After that, you can let it start to cool down.”

I left Koryn with the kiln and made my way over to the house. I quickly checked in on Nyra and Violet and saw that dinner was almost ready. I went for a quick wash in the river before dinner, and by the time I was out they were ready.

We made our way together to the cliff that I proposed to Nyra on. We tried to make it here as a family occasionally so that we could eat and watch the sunset. It looked to be a good sunset tonight, with a fairly clear sky, and a faint ocean breeze that left the smell of salt in the air.

We set out a blanket and spread out our meal and ate while we watched the sun set, enjoying the food and each other’s company.

Finally, as the sun began to fall beneath the horizon painting the sky orange, Nyra and I got Violet’s attention and Nyra said to her, “Violet, we have something to tell you sweetie. You’re going to have a little brother or sister, since I’m pregnant.”
Violet beamed at us, “A new baby? One that will live with us?!”

I laughed, “Yes Violet, a new baby for you to help watch over. That means you’re going to be a big sister! You can help teach and play with your new baby brother or sister.”

Violet hugged us both and said, “Can it be a girl? I want a sister to play with.”

Nyra chuckled, “We’ll have to wait and see. Now let’s pack everything up and head back before it gets dark.”

Violet pouted and turned to me, “Can we stay a bit longer? Maybe sing a song daddy?”

Ah, the pout. My eternal weakness. I turned to Nyra with my sad eyes look.

Nyra rolled her eyes at me and muttered, “It’s like I already have two children.” Louder she said, “Fine. One song only, I don’t want to go stumbling through the forest in the dark.”

I said to Violet, “What kind of song do you want honey?”

Violet worried her lip in thought, “Hmm, a love song?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Alright then. How’s this?”

“With every passing moment… Thoughts of you run through my head…”
I saw Nyra out of the corner of my eye laughing, while Violet and I danced with the crowd.

“Twirl me! Twirl me again!” Violet said happily.

Of course, I obliged her, and I went back to looking at the crowd. It was the harvest festival, and everyone in the community had come out to celebrate.

It was a perfect day for a party, the sun was shining, it was hot but not stifling, there was a cool breeze coming off the ocean, and there was happiness in the air. Everyone was happy that there was finally food available and that nothing happened to the harvest. The harvest itself went well; I hired a few people to help bring mine in, and no one had any issues this harvest. There was a resurgence in rabbits and the like, but we all made do, though our cats did have a big litter because of so much food.

The harvest festival was a special day for everyone. It was a day where everyone brought their taxes to the tax barn and once everything was put away, we made a huge lunch for everyone and began to socialize. Then someone began to sing, and people began to dance. Some danced with their spouses, or in my case with their children, and some children just danced by themselves dancing to tunes only they could hear.

Eventually the music wound down, and people began to drift back to the food and drink. I brought one of my last casks of wine for everyone, since I knew that there would be no mead this harvest because of the flood. I was walking over to Nyra when Rick, one of the villagers, waved me over to him and a few other men.

“Michael! We was just talking about you!” he shouted.

I chuckled, “Oh? All good things I hope?”

Rick bobbed his head, “Aye, no worries there! Just saying t’ the boys about the bridge. That she-ment of yours is mighty fine. The feet o’ the bridge are all dried now ‘n solid.”

“Good, good. By the way, its cement not she-ment. But I’ll come out tomorrow to make sure, then we can get the bricks going and finally be rid of that wooden bridge.”

Rick waved off my correction, “Bah, new words always mess me. They are out t’ get me I tell ’ya! How’s about I and the boys come up in the morning with a cart and we can start bringing them bricks down?”

“Aye, we can do that. Load up my wagon too.”

Rick nodded, “That’d be right nice of you. Looking forward t’ working with the brick. Done some stonework me’self, but this looks to be right easy to work with.”

“Yeah, it’s much easier to work with, but weaker than stone. I figure it’s worth it since that bridge doesn’t hold much anyway.”

He laughed, “I’m sure Lord Stark’s men will be right surprised! We shouldn’t be done for a long time if’n we used stone. Say, that is a nice hat you and Koryn got there! You pick them up from
Deepwood?”

I assumed he was pointing to my new cowboy hats. “Nah, Koryn and I made them ourselves. Took long enough to get it right, but they’re beautiful. Good quality too, and helpful in the sun.”

One of the younger boys spoke up, “They look real fancy! Like a Lord’s hat or somethin’.”

“Aye, real nice like a Lord’s hat,” Rick said. “You gonna sell any?”

I nodded, “I planned to later, but I’m not really sure when. You all interested?”

They all gave their assent and I replied, “Well, I’ll talk with Koryn and we’ll figure something out.” I saw my wife waving me over, “Well, are you all going to play in the game later?” Everyone around the table nodded. “Alright then, I’ll see you on the field. I’m going to go talk with my wife for a bit, you all have fun now.”

As I walked through the crowd, everyone was eating, drinking, and generally just having a good time. There were still the scars left by the flood if you looked close enough, but we were a pragmatic people. We put it behind us and moved forward.

I approached Nyra as she was seated on a bench with her mother, Jess, and they seemed to be in the middle of a discussion.

“No Mother, if Zane wants to, he can. It’s his choice, not ours. We can only try to make him see reason.” Nyra saw me approach and said to me, “Michael! What did Rick want with you?”

“Ah, just to talk about the bridge mostly. What’s going on here?”

Jess gave a huff, “My fool boy! Wants to start breeding dogs. Ones for sleds, ones for guarding, ones for everything it seems!”

I glanced between Nyra and Jess, trying to determine what exactly I should say. Nyra spoke before I could, “Peace Mother. Zane’s family is small and coming along nicely, with enough spare food for this task. He won’t starve if it goes poorly.”

I responded, “Err, I’m sure it will be fine Jess. Maybe just caution him to take it slowly? Quality over quantity.” I wasn’t really sure what Zane was trying to achieve, but I figured it was good advice regardless.

Jess seemed to chew that over for a minute before nodding, “Yes, yes. Quality over quantity. That’ll work.” She waved at us distractedly before going off to track down Zane.

I raised an eyebrow at Nyra, “What was that all about?”

She rolled her eyes, “Mother was just worried. Zane mentioned earlier that he was thinking about trying to breed dogs. It was an offhand comment too, so she is fretting over nothing.”

I shrugged, “If he can pull it off, there’ll probably be good coin in it. What was it you waved me over for?”

She snuggled up to me on the bench as I sat down. “Oh nothing, I just wanted you to rescue me from the conversation.”

I laughed, “Ah, always happy to be your knight in shining armor.”

We sat on the sun-warmed bench and watched the crowd mingle around. People seemed to be
enjoying the food, and my attempts at hot dogs seemed pretty popular. Ketchup was beyond my capabilities, but my mustard was acceptable, though it wasn’t quite like the classic mustard I was used to. I was sure I was missing a few ingredients, but for the life of me I couldn’t remember them.

The setting reminded me of home. Hot dogs, football, bright sunny days, and good company.

It looked like people were starting to come together to start playing football. I gave Nyra a squeeze with my arm before I stood and said, “Looks like they are about to start playing. Are you and Violet going to cheer me on?”

Nyra laughed, “Of course. Violet wouldn’t dream of cheering anyone else.”

“And not yourself?”

She smiled, “Violet wouldn’t let me. Just make sure you and my brothers are on the same team.”

I put my hand to my heart and acted wounded, “What did I ever do to deserve such treatment?”

She snickered, “You almost made me the woman who married the madman with a sword-spear.”

I could feel my face heating up, “Come on now! That was so long ago!”

She laughed again and waved me off, “I’ll get some more use out of it yet. Go on now and go play. Send Violet over to me when you walk by.”

I sighed and gave her a mock salute, “Yes ma’am!”

Ribbing aside, it was a good day.
Eighteenth day, Ninth Moon, 236 AC

“Nah, that’ll be fine. We just want enough for a few meals. My wife and I make a great clam chowder, but we haven’t had any in years.”

Bill, the fisherman, just nodded. He wasn’t a man of many words, but he knew his business.

After I loaded my wagon I started to make my way home. It was a fine summer’s day, but Nyra and Violet had stayed home to tend to the farm. Violet had been troublesome the day before, and though she was originally going to come with me today, she had to stay at the farm and do extra chores.

I breathed in deeply as the wagon started forward, determined to try and just enjoy the day and let my troubles and worries melt away if just for a moment.

As I was passing through the village I heard many horses and wagons approaching. Who could this be?

I pulled my wagon off to the side of the road and paused to watch the coming group.

The Stark banner flapped in the wind as the men approached. The sound of wagon wheels clacking, horses, and men talking filled the village. I nodded to the advance guards of the procession as they passed, and a few nodded back amiably. The group was making there way to the tax barn. Shit.

I should probably stick around to answer any questions, I really don’t want them poking around in my business. Damn feudals. Nyra has been trying to convince me that it would be alright, that the recognition was a good thing. But there was no certainty. No fall backs or safeties. No guarantees. If they saw my machine, they could kill me and take it and claim it as their own. There would be no investigation, no political repercussions, no public outcry, nothing. And if I died, what of my family? If they didn’t starve and the rest of our family could care for them, they still would lead a miserable life. No help from the state, hell, there wasn’t even a state.

Now, I wasn’t one of those socialist liberals, or someone who wanted the government to baby everyone. But a good, effective government, that helps people help themselves when they are at their lowest. Clear, accountable decisions and no nonsense. Simple. But it was not to be, in America or here apparently.

As the group dismounted and began to open up the barn, I approached one of the guards to make conversation.

“Afternoon. Good travels?”

The guard grunted, “Aye, fair enough. Sad t’ see all the empty villages though.”

“Were there many of them?”

He shrugged, “It’s me first time on this route. But the others said tha’ there was.” He shrugged again, “Lots died, but more just up and left for other villages. Didn’t want t’ rebuild I guess.”

Hmm, doesn’t sound like they are keeping track of everyone very well. How can they be taxing everyone accurately then?
… stupid question.

Of course, it’s not accurate. Maybe I can explain the increase like that? Be vague or something? I left the exact amount of tax I should have, after all, I am no cheat. But let them think more people contributed to the tax? It’ll look better, and they’ll leave quicker.

Having decided that, I responded to the guard, “Aye, we got a few of those too. People didn’t have enough to rebuild, and decided it was better to come here.”

The guard looked curious, “Oh? Many of them?”

I shook my head solemnly, “Not as many as I would have liked. Lots were killed in the flooding; the rest made their way here. Though a larger group did come here as they managed to save themselves, but not any of their stuff.”

The guard winced, “Rough. I’m from Winter town, ‘n we always see a few like that come winter. They got nothing but prayers for a short winter.”

A few of the other men who were loading the wagon stopped to talk to the man in charge, and the man in charge let out an impressed whistle. They all went inside, and my stomach sank.

I turned back to the guard I was talking to and asked, “Any big news?”

The guard thought for a moment while scratching his beard. “Hmm, well you know about the aid from the King for the long winter?” I nodded, and he continued, “Well there was the Peake Uprising tha’ killed King Maekar.”

I looked shocked, “The King is dead?”

He laughed at my reaction, “Aye, but this happened three years ago. King Aegon is king now. The fourth or fifth I think. Don’t right know, never good at tha’ kind of thing.” He scratched his chin in thought again. “Hmm, closer to home? Them wildling bastards have been quiet since fuckin’ Sleepy Jack decided t’ take a nap. Heard some tales of bandits on the Kingsroad since spring came, but no patrols have found anything.” He shrugged again, “‘Bout it really. Just happy summer is here again. Such a nasty winter.”

I replied, “Aye, I can agree with that.”

As we had been talking, the man in charge exited from the barn and I saw him squint from the light. He looked around for a moment before he spotted me. He began to walk over to me and the guard. The guard noticed him and straightened up and came to attention and said, “Master Roose.”

The man, Master Roose, nodded to the guard and said, “Guardsmen Varrick. Go see if the others need any help. I will talk to this villager.”

I swallowed nervously. I felt like I was in a spy movie, trying to pull the wool over the bad guy’s and save the world.

Master Roose then addressed me, “Villager. I am Master Roose of House Mollen. I am the one in charge of the tax collection for Lord Stark. What is your name?”

Straight to the point, with more than a hint of condescension. Wonderful. I answered him, “Michael Ragnar, Master Roose.”

“Well then Michael Ragnar,” he stressed the last name in amusement. “Was there a good harvest?”
I gave a slight nod, “Nothing great Master Roose. The flooding hurt the soil, but it was better than we feared.”

He gave me a curious look, “Oh? Then explain how there is so much in the barn?” He narrowed his eyes and continued in a darkened tone, “Cheated on your past taxes, have you?”

I gaped at the man, “No! No! Nothing like that!”

“Well then man! Spit it out!”

I tried to calm myself before replying, “We had people move here from other villages after the flooding. We’ve never cheated out taxes before, it’s just larger because there are more people here!”

And that was technically correct. Which is the best kind of correct. We have more taxes to give and there are more people. Not technically wrong.

Master Roose let out a contemptuous snort, “I’ll be the judge of that villager. This village’s tax is much higher than other villagers. Suspiciously high. How many came here?”

“Err, there was the village immediately north of here, another one beyond that, some from south too, and some trappers from the east. I’m not sure of exact numbers Master Roose.”

He didn’t look very convinced, “I did not see any furs in there. Are the trappers not paying their tax?”

“They are Master Roose. They’ve been helping with the harvests, which is why we have so much tax paid as food.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment, “Oh?”

I elaborated seeing a good chance to explain it, “Yes Master Roose. Many have helped that way, we have much more land under plow here. Even the fishermen help with planting and harvest.”

“And why have they done this? Why have they changed from the ways of their forefathers?”

I replied, “Well, the trappers mentioned something about letting the animals breed more after the long winter. So, they’ll likely be back to paying in furs next harvest. But with everyone helping, we all had more food.” I shrugged, trying to play it cool. “Not sure why it worked better this way.”

Master Roose nodded. It looked like he was trying to look wise and in control. “You make sense villager. You also speak well for a villager. How come you by this knowledge?”

“I am originally from the south Master Roose. I came to live here 8 years ago.”

He laughed, “Ah, you are him then.” Shit, he knows about me? People know about me? He continued, “Yes, the southerner who claims northern blood. From merchant to farmer. So, is it everything you thought it would be, Michael Ragnar?”

I nodded nervously at his question, “Yes Master Roose. I have enjoyed my time here in the North. The people as well.”

Master Roose inclined his head imperiously, “Yes, of course you have. To be expected really.” That declaration seemed to end the conversation for him and he walked back to his men as they finished loading up their wagons.

What a prick.
His comments about knowing about me has me worried, but it seemed like it might just be idle talk. Hopefully.

I watched as the group began to get moving again and quickly left the village.

But I was worried what would happen at the next harvest.
Twelfth day, Eleventh Moon, 236 AC

Violet and I sat underneath the apple tree as we had a little snack while taking a break from weeding our fields. Max, our corgi, lay beside Violet in the shade of the tree enjoying the cool respite from the heat of the day. Nyra was in the barn making felt for more cowboy hats that we planned to sell to the villagers.

While munching on an apple Violet said, “Papa, I like the summer better. It’s nicer. Why do we have to have winter?”

I laughed, “Violet don’t talk with food in your mouth. And the world needs winter to balance. It doesn’t mean we have to like it, but it’s needed.”

She frowned, “But it’s cold.”

“Yes, but remember how much fun we had doing things like skating and skiing?”

Violet smiled, “Yes! That was fun!” She frowned again though, “But it’s so nice when its warm. And we have fresh apples now! Why can’t we play more games in the summer papa?”

“Because in the summer we have a lot of work to do to make sure we have enough food. Didn’t you have fun at the harvest festival?”

She nodded, “Yes papa, but that was so long ago!”

I smiled, “Come now Violet, it’s not so bad. How about we play a game tonight?”

She perked up a bit at that, “An outside game?”

I nodded, “Sure, what kind of game do you want to play?”

She worried her lip in thought, “I don’t know papa. Can I think more?”

I gave her a reassuring smile, “Sure honey, you can think until later tonight if you’d like.”

After a while of just enjoying the shade, I eventually stood up and took our empty cups back to the house. When I exited the house, I saw Nyra cleaning up near the river.

She saw me walking over to her and smiled at me. She said, “Michael! Good break?”

I nodded, “Yes, Violet was just telling me about how much better summer is than winter.”

She snorted, “Yes, most children her age say the same thing about their first summer.”

I shook my head at that, “It’s still weird to me to have such long seasons. Really weird.”

She rolled her eyes at me, “Better get used to it mister.” She gave me a kiss on the cheek and said, “Because you’re not going anywhere.”

I held her close for a minute before giving her a kiss and pulling apart. As she walked back to the barn I took a moment to admire her, before walking back to Violet.
As I was crossing the field, I spotted Zane coming into view on the far side of the property.

I shouted out to Violet, “Violet, your Uncle Zane is here. I am going to go talk to him for a bit, so why don’t you go and play fetch with Max?”

At the word fetch, Max raised up his head and started to wag his tail. I watched them run off to the empty field behind the barn and started to walk to meet Zane.

We clasped hands as we met and greeted each other. “Lo there Michael. How’s the family?”

I replied, “Good, good. Yours?”

He answered, “The little ones, Jeran and Tarla, are good. Tarla is a bit fussy still, but tha’ is normal for a young one. Cait, is good too. Recovered from Tarla’s birth easy enough.” I smiled, glad that she had an easy birth. For her first one, she was in labor for many hours and took a long time before she was up and moving again. He continued, “Say, I had a few questions for ‘ya if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, come on over to the house and I’ll get you a drink.” I led him back to the porch and indicated for him to sit, while I went inside to grab a drink for us. I came back out and poured us each a shot of vodka. We both threw it back, and I poured another. I spoke up, “So what’s up?”

He replied, “It’s about the dog breeding.” I nodded, knowing from a previous discussion with his mother about his interest in it. He continued, “I know you’ve seen a lot o’ the Seven Kingdoms and such. Was wondering what kinds o’ dogs there already are.”

Interesting, I am glad he is putting real thought into it. I answered, “Well there are lots of different kinds, with some kinds having specific purposes. Hunting and guard dogs are common, especially among masters and lords; shepherd dogs among animal herders. There are also mixed dogs that don’t really have owners but aren’t quite wild in big places like King’s Landing. Then you’ve got a few special breeds that only exist in some places, like in Dorne they have hunting dogs but ones that are really small to chase into things like foxholes.”

He looked interested at that last one, “So different types o’ hunting dogs then?”

I nodded, “Aye, you might have the traditional Lordly hunting dog’s flush boars or birds. Others to chase foxes or retrieve dead animals from marshes and the like.”

“I was thinking something like a guard dog for merchants, ‘cause I never heard about anything like tha’. I’ve talked t’ Koryn’s goodfather, Rodrick, and he said that some o’ his fellows might have a large dog to scare off animals, but nothing ‘special.”

I hummed thoughtfully. That was a good idea actually, I’m pretty sure people did that with dogs back on Earth too, Dobermans I think, or maybe German Shepherds. “That sounds like a good idea. Any ideas on how to start that?”

Zane shrugged and said, “My dogs just had a litter, so I was planning to start with them. I was hoping the next litter could be studded from one of your large dogs?”

I nodded, “That’s fine. Make sure you feed the animals well and keep them healthy though. And then make sure you only breed the animals that have what you want. Like the bigger ones, obedient and aggressive. Stuff like that.”

“Aye, like you were saying about the other farm animals. I guessed it would be like tha’.”

I replied, “You might want to come with me the next time I head to Deepwood Motte. Maybe get a
dog or two from the guardsmen?"

Zane smiled and said, “Tha’ would be good. I got the coin for it now, though it’ll be a shame to spend the coin. It’s a good feeling to have that coin to spend.”

I laughed, “Yes, yes, it is. Another idea for the future is trying to capture a wolf or two to breed into the lines. The dogs will probably be much harder to control, but it might be worth it. Maybe we can find a direwolf, eh? A guard dog the size of a horse would be a mighty thing.”

Zane snorted, “A direwolf? That’s funny. They’re all gone south o’ the wall now, but tha’ would be a thing to see. The wolf idea is good though. Maybe have a second line, and slowly breed that in? I’ll think about it. Let me know when you are going to Deepwood next?”

I nodded, “Sure thing. And people say that the direwolves are all gone, but how would they know eh? I don’t know where the regular wolves den deep in the woods, let alone the direwolves.”

Zane rolled his eyes, “People would ‘a seen tracks or something. Anyways, I got to get back to the farm. Thanks for the talk, real helpful. And the drink!”

I stood up and clasped hands as he left. I watched him leave the property, then walked around to the back of the barn looking for Violet. I saw her throwing a stick yelling, “Fetch!” with Max with Nyra standing behind her with an amused smile on her face. I walked up behind them and put my arm around Nyra and gave her a little squeeze.

She said to me without taking her eyes off Violet, “What did my brother want?”

“Just wanted to talk about his dog breeding, and to see if he can use one of our dogs as a stud.”

She nodded, “Ah. He serious about it then?”

I replied, “Yeah, he’s making plans and doing some research. I think he’s got a pretty good plan actually.”

She smiled and said, “Good.” She was silent for a moment before continuing, “So, only a few more moons until we have another child. Ready for no sleep?”

I laughed and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Always. And Violet is old enough to help with some things.”

She didn’t reply but just leaned into me.

We were silent for a moment, with only Violet and Max breaking the silence of the day.

I started to sing, “Lalalala, let’s live in the moment…”
Act 1: Chapter 18

Seventh day, First Moon, 237 AC

“To the right! Little bit more. Little… Little… There! Hold it there! Almost got it… Good! You can let go!”

Koryn was standing atop the new house we were building in the village, as part of the village expansion that started last month, and was directing the beam into place. The village had seen some new additions over the past month, as some people filtered in from the north in search of a better life. Some came from the same villages; a few others made the trips just themselves or their families. It seemed that the tax collectors talked of our village a bit, enough that it encouraged some to make the trip.

Most were people who had lived through the flooding with little to their name and did not recover what they hoped to after the first year. I had talked with a few of them, and they all said that the tax collectors had made mention of how much more tax there was in this village compared to theirs. They hoped that meant that there was more to be had here and decided to take the risk. Their villages had been mostly wiped out, with only a few families remaining.

Some few individuals made the trip hoping to start a life. These were the youngest sons, who might have been taught by their parents at whatever they did, but there was no room or opportunity for them to live. Instead of trying to eke out a living in their family’s home with their parents and siblings and their sibling’s families, they made their way here in hopes of a better life. All told another 50 people had arrived, putting the village total to just under 100 people.

So, Koryn and I had been helping put up new buildings in the village, mostly homes, along with a few others and the soon to be owners of each building. We made the agreement to trade our labor now, for their labor come harvest. Materials would also be exchanged for labor, though a few would lend their services. A blacksmith had come to the village, but by his own admission, he was not overly skilled. He would be a big help for farm tools and the like, but he had never made any types of weapons or armor. Still, he would be a big help for even things like nails.

It seemed our little village was growing, for which I was happy. It was especially helpful in throwing off the tax collectors. Which, was the main reason I was helping. My hope was that when the collectors next came, they would see the village growing even more and continue to not investigate why we made so much food.

I helped Koryn climb down and we started to collect our tools as the sun was beginning to set. We both still had our own work to do on our farms but did our best to help the village as much as possible.

We began to walk back to our farms, and as we passed through the village I noted the buildings we had already put up. So far, we had 4 houses up and we were working on the fifth, and we had completed the forge for the blacksmith so that he could start making tools.

I said to Koryn as we were walking, “It’s interesting to see the village grow eh?”

He laughed and replied, “Aye. It’ll be nice to not buy from traveling merchants so much. Cheaper too.”

I nodded, “Yeah, though I’m not sure what Bronn, the blacksmith, is going to do about coal and
iron. I told him that there are some in the hills to the east, but he might try and buy some instead.”

Koryn looked puzzled, “Who would bring it though?”

“Well, Rodrick might I suppose. He sells in Deepwood and Barrowton, so he can get it from there. Or maybe by boat? I’m not really sure who would do that though.”

He shrugged, “Sounds better than trying to mine it himself.”

“I suppose. He would need a few people and probably need to take a week or so to go do it, since its like a day and a half away from here. I’m not really sure how that would work.”

Koryn shrugged again, “Not really our problem is it? ‘Sides, I’m dead tired and I still have work to do at the farm.”

I looked at him from the corner of my eye as we walked and noted that he was looking pretty tired and withdrawn today. I asked, “Is something keeping you up?”

He nodded, “Aye. Tarla’s been sick since yesterday morning. Mostly just some coughing, but she didn’t sleep much last night. I’m a bit worried.”

I grimaced. Tarla was still at the age where children died so easily in this world, and a cough could easily turn deadly. I asked him, “Has Alessa been keeping everything in the house clean?”

He nodded wearily, “Aye, keeps everything nice and clean. Makes and uses that soap o’ yours. Today she was going to wash all the bedding, see if that helps any.”

I nodded, and we continued to walk. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that the bedsheet cleaning probably wouldn’t help at this point, since it was more of a preventative measure. It wouldn’t hurt certainly, but it wouldn’t cure her. I could only hope that it would help a little and she would get better.

Damn it, I should have paid more attention in class. Of course, I remembered basic things, like the outline of Germ Theory. But damned if I knew any specifics or anything about it that could help, if there even was anything that would help. My rubbing alcohol would help sanitize things but wouldn’t fight a sickness like Tarla had. Penicillin would help I think? It was supposed to be made from mold or moss? Damn, there are too many things like that. Things that I know the general outline of, and maybe the starting and ending point. But the actual steps? The consequences? The details?

It felt like I was failing. I didn’t know why I was in this world; there was no grand message or God telling me what to do. Was I supposed to have brought medicine to this world? Or technology? Religion? I felt like I should know better, I should be better. I tried to brush it away, but that feeling lingered. The time for lessons was passed and going forward I would have to rely on my wits.

I just hoped I was up to the task.
Sixteenth day, Third Moon, 237 AC

It was a cold day today, with intermittent snows coming down throughout the day. It was not below freezing, but it was still a cold day and the lack of sun only emphasized the issue. It was still summer, but the infamous northern summer snows drove everyone inside for the day if they were able.

To Violet’s dismay, this meant lessons as we hadn’t done as much as I would have liked so far this summer. It made me wonder what an education system would look like. How would school be affected by year long seasons? Would it go on all winter, with a break in the summer? It seemed to me that a year or two break from school would be a really bad idea. Obviously, it would have to revolve around harvest time but with the variable seasons it would definitely be hard to plan.

Regardless, Nyra and I had been doing smaller lessons with Violet at night to keep her going and her mind used to lessons. We taught her all about reading and writing, math and basic science (as I could remember it). I did my best to teach her to think for herself, especially once I realized that a lot of things I know might not apply here. I mean, looking around I can tell that the law of gravity is clearly a thing. But, is gravity still that 9.8m/s or whatever it was supposed to be? I had no idea how anyone could check that, so I tried to work around it.

Today, Violet and I were going over some math. We were nearing the end of the lesson, so I decided to add a more complex question for her to see if she could apply the concepts she had learned so far.

“Okay Violet, let’s try a harder question. What is 228 plus 313?”

She looked uncertain with the three-digit numbers.

I spoke to her calmly, “Think it out like a normal question. Forget the big numbers. What’s the first step?”

Violet nodded to herself and grabbed her clay tablet and writing tool. She answered me, “First I write them down on top of each other.” She wrote out the numbers and then continued, “Then I add the last numbers.” She started thinking about the adding before saying, “8 plus 3 is 11. So, I write 1?”

I replied, “Close honey. You've got to write out the eleven.”

She wrote down the eleven. “Now I add the next numbers?” At my nod she continued, “2 plus 1 is 3. So now I have 3-1-1?”

I shook my head, “Close. You’ve got to write out the eleven.”

She wrote down the eleven. “Now I add the next numbers?” At my nod she continued, “2 plus 1 is 3. So now I have 3-1-1?”

I shook my head, “Close honey. You want to put that below the eleven, because you need to add that later.”

She frowned in thought and said, “Okayyy.” It didn’t seem like she really understand the process. Maybe I chose too hard a question? She continued, “Next part? I, uh, add 2 plus 3. That’s 5. And I, uh, put that below the 3?”

“Yep! Keep it in the same column though.” I pointed out what I meant by column by drawing lines down each unit. I continued, “Now, you can add up each column for your answer. And your answer is 541. Do you see what I did?”

She still looked a bit lost, so I explained, “You want to add up each column, but when the number gets bigger than a 9, you have to put the number in the next column.” I pointed out what we did for
She nodded a bit more confidently. “Now, this is a really hard question, so you did a great job!”

I gave her a big smile, which she returned. “These types of questions you will see more of later, and I will explain a little bit more about them and the columns,” I said.

I began to clean up from our lesson and said to her, “Now, why don’t you go get dressed and see if your mother needs any help in the barn? Your lessons are all done for the day.”

She beamed at me and gave me a hug while saying, “Thank you papa!” She raced off to go get dressed while I continued to pack away my teaching supplies.

Violet yelled out a quick “Bye papa!” as she raced out the door.

Cold air swept into the house as the door opened and closed. I decided to have another tea before going outside and dealing with the cold. I moved closer to the stove before pouring myself another drink. I let the heat of the cup warm my hands, as the heat from the stove warmed the rest of me. It’s a pity that chocolate wasn’t available, as today was a perfect hot chocolate day. Growing up back on Earth, hot chocolate was perfect for lazy days or as a kid after a long day of sledding.

As I enjoyed the warmth, I cast my eyes around the house. My workmanship had held up over the years, and everything remained solid. The years had added wear, but it made everything more comfortable. Made it more of a home than a house. It had served us well and would still serve us well for many years. Though, with our next few children would likely need me to expand the house.

Maybe next summer I could start an expansion? Our next child should be born in another month or so, but we wouldn’t need any expansion for that. But the child after would require another room.

A knock on the door interrupted my thoughts. “Michael are you in there? It’s Rodrick. Your wife said I would find you here.”

I went over to the door and opened it. I greeted him, “Rodrick! It’s good to see you! Come on in.”

I led him over to the table and passed him some bread and salt, which he dutifully ate. After he was finished he looked at me and said, “Good to see you! Cold day today, eh?”

“It is, but that just means it’s a good day for a hot drink! Would you like a tea?”

At his nod, I poured him a drink and watched as he cradled it in his hands.

After a moment he spoke, “Feels good to get warm again. The past few days have been miserable for travelling. So, have you talked to that blacksmith, Bronn, lately?” At my nod he continued, “I was talking to some o’ my fellows down in Barrowton, and they said they can start doing a few trips up here. I don’t deal much in iron and coal, so I don’t know how much he needs but I figure that’s enough to get him started.”

I replied, “Hopefully that will be enough. He might be able to pay for labor to go and mine once he gets some coin. Was boat not an option?”

Rodrick shrugged, “It’s not really my area, but there’s not much trade on the ocean round here. Some small stuff from Bear Island to Deepwood Motte, and Flint’s Finger to Barrowton. But the threat of the Ironborn means not much else, since you never know what those fuckers are going to do. Wasn’t too long ago that the they raided us all the time, or even owned parts o’ the coast. The North remembers.”
“I know we still get the occasional ‘raid’, but I figure Lord Stark would try to have trade on the west coast too. Food from the Reach would be a lot easier to get if there was a port at Barrowton.”

Rodrick replied, “Aye, mayhaps. I don’t pretend to know the mind o’ Lord Stark. But there’s stories in Barrowton of ships that have tried to make a run down that way. Figure the good money is worth the risk. Sometimes they make it with no problems, but most are never heard from again. The stories say the Ironborn’ll pick up those lone ships, for they are easy prey.”

“Those fuckers,” I said.

He nodded wisely, “Aye, too true. Well, I came here to pick up some more planks for The Fishing Village. But I was wondering, you always got some interesting stuff. You got anything I can sell?”

I scratched my cheek while I thought. I did have some extra vodka to sell, since the harvest was so good. I replied, “Aye, I can sell you some vodka if you like. Sell it down at a tavern in The Fishing Village. Or maybe Barrowton if you want to hold on to it long enough.”

He lit up, “You finally going to sell me some of it?! I’ll gladly take it off o’ your hands!” He stood up and said, “Come on, let’s go get it!”

I laughed at his eagerness. As we walked outside to go grab the vodka he said, “You know, this village will need a name soon. It’s probably the second or third largest in the area. A real name would be a good thing.”

I had thought about it before, I mean what kind of village doesn’t have a name? But apparently in Westeros, these small little clusters of homes don’t merit names. I replied, “Really? You think it’s big enough now?”

He nodded, still eagerly walking towards the barn, and said, “Aye, if The Fishing Village can have such an awful name, I figure that this place ought to as well.”

I snorted at that. The Fishing Village was an awful name. Near as I could tell, House Fisher used to rule there long ago and probably named it Fisher’s Village or something. After time had done its work, Fishing Village was all that remained and people called it The Fishing Village to make sure you knew what they were talking about. Still an awful name, regardless of its history.

As we began to load up the wagon, Rodrick spoke up again, “Before I forget, that new bridge o’ yours? That’s a thing of beauty it is. Granted, I had to scrape of a few layers of mud and shit to actually see it, but when I did, oh boy. That’s a beautiful color, and it fits together so nicely!”

My chest swelled with a bit of pride at that. I replied, “Ah, thanks Rodrick. That means a lot. I was just happy to help.”

He gave me a sly look and said, “You wouldn’t happen to want to sell any o’ those bricks, would you?”

I laughed, “Not right now no. Takes a lot of work to make them, more than I can spare. And you would need more than a wagon or two to bring enough anywhere to make anything.”

He sighed in disappointment but did not press the issue. After we finished loading up his wagon, he made his good-byes explaining that he needed to check in on his daughter and grand-daughter before he left, or she would kill him the next time he saw her. His grand-daughter, Tarla, had recovered from her illness after a month, but was still very weak and they were worried another illness may kill her easily.
After he left, I watched Violet and Nyra work and talk for a while before I went to go about my work for the day.

A cold day, but a good day.
Twenty-sixth day, Fourth Moon, 237 AC

A cool ocean breeze blew over Violet and I as we sat on the porch. She sat on my lap, with her eyes reddened and head buried into my shoulder. She had been drifting in and out of sleep for the past hour, after having tired herself out with a mixture of crying and worrying.

Nyra had gone into labor 14 hours ago, and the midwife still wasn’t sure when she would be done. Violet sat with me outside the entire time, but her mother’s pain sat heavily on Violet’s shoulders and after so many hours it wore her down.

We sat outside as the darkness fell, with Koryn stopping by earlier to bring us some food, and waited. I did not know how long labor’s back on Earth typically lasted, but according to the midwife, Nyra was already getting near the upper reaches of the normal time. The midwife wouldn’t say, but I think the longer the labor the more dangerous it was supposed to be.

I tried to keep myself occupied, but when Violet finally fell asleep in my lap I gave up trying to do anything so that she could get some rest.

The moon emerged from behind the cloud cover, illuminating the fields in a pale light. The fields of wheat lit in a golden glow as they reflected the moonlight. The straight rows gave an appearance of order, which had always had a calming effect on me. The moonlight illuminated the rest of the farm as well, and I could see the worn dirt paths, my fences, and the pasture. I let myself sink into my memories, of building that fence from cutting the trees all the way to placing that last plank; of trudging up and down that path so many times in both the warm and cold weather.

I felt myself drifting on the edge of sleep, watching the memories like I used to watch a TV. Comfortable on my chair, with my daughter snuggled up beside me. I could almost feel the memory – the fantasy – of living with my family on Earth. Relaxing in our living room, watching a movie, with everyone in the pajamas on our nice comfy couch.

Another shout, tinged with pain and frustration, from Nyra came from inside the house. Violet stirred lightly from her sleep before embracing it again.

Another shout echoed again, but this time it was accompanied by the midwife exclaiming, “Almost there! Keep pushing!”

I perked up at that. That was excellent news! Violet shifted again but stayed asleep. Another scream, with the midwife shouting encouragement. This became more and more common over the next few minutes.

Violet eventually woke up and rubbed her eyes. She looked at me and asked, “How’s mama?”

I replied, “She is almost there sweetheart.” Violet nodded, and we continued to wait.

After another half hour, we heard a final scream followed by a baby’s cry. Violet beamed at me and started to bounce in excitement, unable to contain herself. I managed to hold her back from rushing into the house immediately, and she began to babble excitedly. I found I couldn’t really concentrate on what she was saying, my own excitement was high as well, made worse by the fact she kept leaping from topic to topic in her excitement.

We ended up waiting another half hour before the midwife allowed us inside.
The house was hot, and a bit smoky as the cool nighttime air from outside swirled around the smoke from the stove. As Violet and I entered we saw Nyra laying there with a bundle in our arms. Violet rushed over as I walked a bit more cautiously, and by the time I got over there Violet was already pestering her mother with a lot of questions.

I admonished Violet, “Violet, calm down. Let your mother answer your questions.”

Violet nodded but did not lose her eager look. Nyra on the other hand looked absolutely exhausted. She was soaked with sweat and blood, with large exhaustion rings around her eyes. But she still had a slight smile as she answered Violet. “Violet, meet your new baby sister, Evelyn.”

Violet let out a happily squeal, which woke Evelyn who started to cry. Nyra started to rock Evelyn back and forth while motioning us to keep quiet. I took a seat at the edge of the bed and held Nyra’s hand. Once Evelyn settled down for a bit, Nyra passed her to me.

I held her so that Violet could see and whispered to the both of them, “Welcome to the family little one. Say hi to your sister Violet.”

Violet leaned in and gave her sister a kiss on the forehead. She whispered, “Hi Evelyn. We are gonna be the best sisters. And play lots. And have lots of fun!” She turned to me and said, “Can I call her Eve? A little name for a little sister.” She nodded to herself, “Then when we are all grown up I can call her Evelyn!”

I let out a quiet, soft laugh and nodded. “That will be fine sweetheart.” I looked over to Nyra and noticed she was out like a light. I motioned for Violet to follow me to her bed as the three of us lay down together. I told her, “Let’s sleep here tonight, and let your mom have some sleep. Go wash up your face first, then you can come lay down.”

When she returned I let her watch over Evelyn while I walked the midwife out and thanked her for all her help. Once she was gone, I went about tidying up a bit before readying myself for bed as well. When I was finally ready for bed, I let myself take in the sight of my daughters curled up on the bed.

My smile didn’t fade for the entire night.
Interlude: Two

**First day, Fifth Moon, 237 AC**

“And that is the final report from the western shore Master Jeor.”

I nodded, “The western shore, below Sea Dragon Point, is showing still larger than usual taxes. Why?”

Roose shifted nervously. Honestly, I know he is new to this, but he still acts like a child. What a disappointment. His father is such a good man too, but I suppose that is why he is the third son. Maybe some additional duties to toughen him up? Something to think on to be sure.

Roose spoke up, “Well Master Jeor, after the flooding a few villages came together, and with so many people they can pay more taxes.”

I raise an eyebrow at that faulty logic. I looked at the papers again and said, “Well, the overall tax is down from previous years which is to be expected.” I put the papers down again and looked him in the eye and said, “But, how does people coming together mean more tax?”

“It’s just more people Master Jeor. I’ve seen the village myself, they’ve got new buildings and such.”

He still was not addressing my point, but I let it go. I doubted he would understand, so I tried a new direction. “Did you get a count of the people in this village?”

He nodded enthusiastically, “Yes Master Jeor! I made sure that there was a lot of people there. Some are trappers and the like, so I could not get an accurate count, but I made sure that they weren’t trying to cheat on their taxes!”

“Cheat on their taxes? What do you mean?” I asked.

Roose straightened up a bit and replied, “I thought it suspicious Master Jeor, that there were more taxes after the flooding. I thought they might be cheating on previous tax collections. So, I performed interviews with many different villagers to get to the bottom of it. There were just more people in the village, and they were helping each other more than they did before the flood. Nothing to show they were cheating.”

I tried to reign in a sigh. The fool boy was finding reasons to explain something, but they weren’t really connected. Like as not, Master Rickard, the previous tax collector for the region, had been pilfering the taxes. Damn shame he died over the winter, so I would never get to the bottom of that. The taxes collected seemed a bit higher than other regions, but nothing to suggest the peasants were cheating on their taxes.

“And who did you talk to?” I asked him.

He shifted in his seat a bit, “Oh, some farmers and fishermen. Oh, and someone called Michael Ragnar.” He said the last word in amusement.

“That southern merchant that became the farmer?” Roose nodded. “Ah, yes I remember him.” I said whimsically. It seems like forever since he came here. “How long as that been I wonder? Ten years? Oh well, he still living out there then?”

Roose replied, “Yes, but he’s a bit uppity for a peasant. A peasant having a last name like that?”
Roose chuckled, “Yes, uppity is the right word. Well spoken, but uppity.”

I scratched my chin at that, “Seemed pleasant enough for a peasant when I saw him. Likely gotten grumpy as he’s gotten older. Keep note of that Roose, age will do that to you. Mark my words.”

He seemed to nod uncertainly. I contained my laugh, the young never want to think about growing old. “Very well Roose, thank you for your report. That will be all for now.”

Roose made a short bow of the head and exited the room. I leaned back in my chair and let out an audible sigh. A disappointment for sure, but hopefully he would grow into a man soon. The higher tax in that village is certainly odd, and Roose does not seem capable enough to determine the cause.

It is certainly possible that Master Rickard had been cheating Lord Stark, but there is nothing to prove it. And I will not besmirch the honor of a dead man who served Lord Stark for years. I went over to the shelves along the wall and pulled out a detailed map of the region and laid it out on my desk.

I looked over the area with the large increase, and I noted it was near the coast with lots of rivers. Hmm, sounds like fertile land. I tried to imagine it in my head: the flooding wiping out entire villages, people moving to the remaining villages and one of those villages had extremely fertile land. More people farming the land means more crops produced and a higher tax. A twist of fate. Yes, a small pre-flood number of peasants would mean it would be hard for Master Rickard to determine the fertility of land, especially with most of those likely being fishermen.

Good. Master Rickard’s honor is intact, all that is left is Roose’s wits. More people, means a higher portion of tax for no reason? That boy. Still, that land might be useful in the future. Fertile land is hard to come by, especially along the western shore. Another thing to consider.

With a sigh, I pulled out the report from the Cerwyn lands and compared it to the western shore report. Cerwyn lands had always been some of the most fertile and had not been too badly hurt by flooding from the Red Spring.

Yes, looking at the two reports the western lands are still not near as fertile as the Cerwyn lands. More people likely survived the flooding and moved to this new village. Maybe a count of the peasants is needed? The tax from the western shore is minimal at best, and it would be too expensive to conduct a thorough count.

Having Roose talk to people and –

A loud crash sounded from outside. An argument erupted, with the sound of many men shouting.

I muttered to myself, “What fool thing happened now?” With another sigh, I heaved myself out of my chair and went to go deal with more fools.
Act 1: Chapter 21

Twenty-first day, Fifth Moon, 239 AC

“Papa! I don’t want to!” Violet whined, as I made her put on multiple layers of hats. “It’s too heavy! I hate when you make me put it all on!”

Nyra tsked at Violet’s complaining while she was preparing food for dinner. I admonished Violet, “Stop complaining Violet. If you want to skate, you need proper protection. Safety is very important sweetheart.”

Violet pouted. I had to bite my tongue to distract me so that I would not cave to her demands. Oh, my child, how I would love to get you an actual helmet. One that was comfortable and safe. Unfortunately, all I had was thick hats and furs to protect her from falls.

When she saw that I wouldn’t cave, she turned her attention to her mother. “Mama, can’t I just wear one hat? My hat is really big already.”

Nyra let out a low laugh, “Now why would you ask me, when your father already said no?”

Violet let out a little whine, “Mamaaa!”

Nyra raised an eyebrow and wagged a spoon at her. She said, “If you don’t want to wear the clothes you can stay here with me and bake some bread. I’m trying a new recipe and I could use your arms for all the stirring and kneading.”

Violet paled a little and quickly responded, “No! That’s okay. I’ll wear the hats!”

I smiled to myself as I helped her put on the rest of the clothing. We said out goodbyes to Nyra and Eve, and we went outside to the river to put on out skates. The river had been frozen for most of the winter, which let us skate most of the way to the village quickly. Now that Violet was older, and was skilled at skating, she was able to come with me on my trips to the village or other farms. It helped to break up the monotony of winter and provided Violet with some fun and exercise. As we laced up our skates I breathed in the ice-cold air and I idly wished I could get a Fisherman’s Friend. I had always loved having one during the cold weather, especially while outside.

It was a fairly typical winter day; well below freezing, the sun was visible but there were clouds in the sky, the ground completely covered in snow, and tree limbs were straining against the weight of the snow.

As we skated down the river and made our way past the farms, we played I Spy as we went along; something I had always done as a child.

We didn’t see anyone on our trip down, and the river proved solid enough for us to make it to the village the entire way. As we took our skates off, and Violet gleefully took off her hats, we saw a few people sitting around outside and some children running around playing. Violet turned to me with a hopeful look, and I gave her permission to go play with a shout of “Play safe!” as she ran to go play with the other children.

I made my way through the village, greeting those I met, and made my way to the fur trappers area. A man roughly my age, Bob, was sitting outside near a large fire plucking and shearing a piece of fur.
He noticed me approach and greeted me, “Michael. How are you?”

I gave him a smile and replied, “Good. You?”

He gave a grimace and said, “Been better. My leg is all banged up ‘n my ankle is swollen something fierce.”

“Koryn told me you were back in town early and hurt. What happened?”

Bob answered, “We was travelling near a lake ‘n the snow was covering this river ‘n the ice wasn’t thick enough t’ support me. Fell right through ‘n got my leg stuck in the bottom. The current didn’t carry me away, but a rock rolled over onto me foot. Wasn’t deep enough t’ drown, but I was stuck until me brothers could help. I was cold as piss when I finally got out, worried I might die anyways, but me brothers had a good fire ‘n some dry clothes waiting for me. We don’t think me ankle is broken, but it hasn’t gotten much better yet.”

I indicated to his splint and said, “Well, its good your trying to relax it and got it a splint to help. Hopefully, it will be better soon. When is the rest of your family due back?”

He scratched his beard and replied, “When I left them they had another moon’s worth of supplies. Without me there, they will have enough for a few weeks yet. We usually go out for a few moons at a time and return with what we have. It’s what everyone does out here mostly.”

“Oh? What do other people do then?” I asked him.

He gave a slight shrug, “They’ll go for the whole winter. Crazy bastards I say. Take their whole families and move deep into the wild and hunt all winter. Eat all the meat they catch and bring other stored goods with ‘em. I think they’ve got houses they go t’, but others just move around constantly. Real good money, but it’s hard on everyone that goes. Some’ll move back to proper villages in the summer and do labor work for coin, some real crazies stay out there all the time and just travel back and forth to buy and sell goods. Real crazy those ones.”

“Aye, that’s pretty crazy. Alone with no one near you for many leagues. Bit scary to think about really. I came from King’s Landing, and there is half a million living there and even when I was travelling here there were usually people somewhere. Even here along the coast, there’s not many people but they are there.” I said in wonder. I could just picture it in my head, just endless forests and animals. Reminded me of those pictures back on Earth of remote places. Utterly eerie.

He gave a gruff nod of the head and asked, “So what brings you by?”

I replied, “Looking to get some beaver and rabbit fur if you have any. I need to make another hat for my eldest.” I pointed to my Russian ear flap hat. “She’s at the age where she grows out of everything before you know it.”

He laughed and replied, “Aye, I do. That’s an interesting hat, if I do say so myself.”

“Thanks. Made ‘em myself. It’s a style of hat I picked up on my travels, it’s very good for the winters.”

He nodded, “Aye, I can see it. Does it have a special name?”

Damn, what should I call it? I think it was called a uhana? Or maybe oshanka? I could call it a Russian hat, since people would have no idea what that word is anyways. The uhrplant sounds somewhat similar. Maybe the uhrhat? That would be fine, the dryhat is accurate I supposed. Especially with beaver fur. I replied to him, “It’s called a Russianhat, but I usually just call it an
He sounded out the words, “Russianhat. Hmm, never heard Russian before. Uhrhat though, that I like. Can I see it?”

I passed it over to him and said, “It’s very comfortable. With beaver pelts, it’s pretty water resistant and good all winter long.”

He nodded as he inspected it. He looked up at me and said, “This is good work. I see what you mean about keeping you warm, and the ear flaps are a good idea. I think I’ll make one myself.”

He passed my hat back to me and asked, “So just beaver and rabbit then? Any fox? I’ve also got some mink if you are interested?”

I perked up at that, mink was a very popular fur back on Earth and made good coats. I asked him, “Let me have a look at the mink, I’ve been wanting some for a while. Though I might have to come back with my wife to get an idea of how much we’ll need, but I don’t really see a need for any fox fur.”

He led me into his barn and showed me his furs. I went and picked out some of the better beaver and rabbit furs to take. He pointed out his mink furs and I looked them over with a critical eye. They were all in very good condition, with a variety of colors. I remember that minks had very good regenerative properties when it came to growing fur and it definitely showed.

I said, “These are some good-looking furs. I’ll definitely be back with my wife. While I am thinking of it, do you have any mink oil?”

He looked confused and said, “What’s mink oil?”

I scratched my chin in thought. Damn, I thought he might already know about it. I couldn’t remember when it became popular, but I always used it back on Earth. I answered, “I believe it’s the fat of the mink heated up. It melts really easy and is really good to apply to leather as it makes things work really good against water.”

He started to look curious and asked, “So just heat up the fat you say?”

“I believe so. I only ever bought the oil itself, but that’s all there was to it I think.”

Bob paused in thought before replying, “Might be doable. There is a band of fat around the stomach that would be easy t’ melt. I’ve already dealt with the mink meat for this batch, but if me brothers bring more back I’ll try it out ‘n let you know.”

I smiled graciously and replied, “Thanks, that sounds like a plan.”

We bartered for a bit, and I ended up giving him some coin and promising to bring some of my sausages and other food when I came back for the rest of the payment.

I loaded up my sack with the furs and tied it to my back like a large backpack and said my goodbyes to Bob. I went looking for my daughter, but before I went very far I met another one of the new villagers, a fisherman named Torrhen, and he pulled me aside for a quick chat.

“’Lo Michael! Got a minute?”

I replied, “Sure Torrhen, what’s up?”
He looked amused and said, “What’s up? What an interesting saying… I think I’ll use that in the future! Anyways, I was wondering about that soap o’ yours. Was hoping you could show me how to make it? I’ve got a newborn, an’ I heard that the soap an’ bein’ clean helps the little ones.”

I gave him a smile and said, “Congratulations! And yes, soap and being clean will help the child. Clean sheets and furs, and bathing helps too, but make sure that the child is nice and dry and warm after your done!” At his nod of understanding I continued, “I should be back in the village in a few days, I need to see Bob again, so I’ll come find you when I’m back.”

“Thanks Michael! Do you mind if I grab a few others t’ watch? A few have learned from others, but me an’ some others haven’t.”

I shrugged and replied, “Sure, no problem. It’s not too hard to teach just you or some others.”

He gave me a smile and thanked me before moving on. When I finally found Violet, she was playing tag with the other children in the field on the outskirts of the village. She was running around with the other children but came over when I called. She said goodbye to the others as they continued their game, and we walked back to where we left our skates.

As we skated back to the farm we stuck to the banks of the river, letting the tree limbs that were covered buried in snow make a white tunnel for us to travel through. The cold winter wind drove us onwards as it made the warmth of our home seem all the more enticing.

When we neared home the wind began to pick up, so I started to sing, “As the winter winds litter London with lonely hearts...”
Seventeenth day, Third Moon, 240 AC

I took off my hat and wiped the sweat off my face with a cloth. I had just finished another row of wheat seed planting, and I was about halfway done. As usual the seed drill made the wheat planting easy and efficient, even if I miss my old tractor.

But it was a truly gorgeous day, so I let that thought out of my mind easily enough. The sun was bright, it was warm without being uncomfortable, and there was even a slight breeze to help cool me down. As I got the drill into position, I urged the horses forward and began to work again. When I first built the seed drill, it took a while to decide on the design of it, but I ended up going fairly minimalist. Instead of being a wagon that I could sit on and hold a lot of seed, I decided for something smaller without a seat. Since it was my first time building something like it, I figured easier the better, especially when it came time to fix something that had broken and over the years that decision had been vindicated.

Now though, as I looked at my constantly expanding field it looked like I might have to make a bigger one soon to help cut down on time again. I had made an additional bigger plough already, and that was a big help when I hired a few villagers to help with getting the fields ready. They had already made their way to Zane’s farm, and would be helping there before moving on to the next farm. By the time they were done at Zane’s, I would hopefully be done with the seed drill and it would be passed on. We had a fairly good schedule, and the past few seasons we had been on track each time. If there was any overlap, the others would start planting potatoes or whatever else they were growing that did not utilize the seed drill. Our system had worked for us the past few years, even if Torrhen still didn’t adopt our methods, and there was even a new farm from one of those who lost everything in the floods.

As I went down the row, I saw that Nyra, Violet, Eve, and my newborn son had set up a seed stand. My son had been born only last moon, and since he was born in the spring Nyra let us name him right away, and we ended up naming him Ryden. Nyra and Violet were setting up a stand to begin to clean the potatoes in preparation for planting, while Eve played with her dolls and Ryden was mercifully sleeping. The potatoes needed to be washed before planting, since they were stored with the uhrplant, and it seemed to mess up the sprouting capabilities of the potatoes. But a quick wash before being cut and planted allowed them to sprout once again.

To me, there was no end to the surprises that the uhrplant provided. Most of my experiments with it failed, but it was still an interesting plant, one that I hoped didn’t have any major non-obvious downsides. Live and learn I suppose.

Mercifully, I had yet to hear of any raiding so far since the past winter was over. But I supposed it was early yet, with spring just ending, though I haven’t seen Rodrick come through the village since winter ended and he usually brought news with him. Although, with the blacksmith in the village I suppose the new merchants might also bring news. Now that I thought about it, I hadn’t met the new merchants yet and I wasn’t even sure how many actually came here. Hmm, I’ll have to ask Nyra later if there’s anything we need from them if they even have enough room in their wagons for anything other than coal or iron.

Once I had finished the row, I noticed that the seed tank on the drill was near empty, so I walked over to the barn to grab a sack of seed. As I neared the barn Eve called out for me, “Papa! Play dolls!”
I laughed quietly, trying not to wake Ryden and walked over to her. I whispered, “I can’t right now sweetie, I’ve got work. We can play with your dolls later tonight.”

She gave the same pout Violet always gave me. Clearly, she was learning. I walked over to Nyra and Violet and saw them scrubbing the potatoes clean.

I asked, “How goes it?”

Violet looked up at me and said, “Good papa. But Eve took forever this morning.”

Nyra responded, “She took as long as she normally does. You were just impatient this morning.”

“I just want to go swimming today! If we finish early we can! You said!” Violet exclaimed.

I rolled my eyes and replied, “Yes, we did say that yesterday. That just means you have to work hard today, and that includes helping your mother with Ryden and Eve.”

Violet shrugged as she continued to scrub the potatoes. She said, “Rye was okay this morning. And I did help.”

Nyra smiled and said, “Yes you did.” She turned to me and said, “And how goes the seeding today?”

“Good, the soil is well drained and my tests from before are accurate, so I haven’t had to use any more fertilizer.”

She nodded and said, “Excellent. Is the rest of the field the same?”

“The area for the turnips is good now. The application of lime last week brought down the acidity to a good level for them. But I am thinking of changing up the field of clover again. Since the flooding, we haven’t gotten quite the harvest from that field as I had hoped for. I think an application of feather meal and manure would be good.”

She tilted her head in thought, “What type of manure were you thinking?”

I replied, “A mixture of chicken, cow and sheep I think. Something fast acting to complement the slow nature of the feather meal and would benefit from the strengthened soil structure from the feather meal. I will think on the mixture while I finish the wheat seeding.”

Nyra shrugged and said, “If you think it best. The concept of ‘soil structure’ still seems odd to me.” She gave me a wink and continued, “But I suppose at this point I’ve got to trust you.”

I rolled my eyes at that and said, “Your confidence warms my heart, my sweet wife. Anyways, I should finish the wheat seeding today and I will get started on mixing the manure today.”

She nodded and went back to work, while I walked back to the barn to grab that sack of seed and returned to the seed drill. It took most of the day, but I managed to finish seeding a few hours before sunset. Nyra and Violet had finished washing the potatoes and readied them for planting before swimming for an hour in the river. Afterwards, Nyra, Eve and Ryden went inside to start dinner while Violet sat with Max under a tree and played with the guitar. I had been teaching her for about a year, mainly getting her used to it and how to take care of it. I hadn’t really taught her sheet music since I thought it a bit unfair to pile so many lessons on her in the little time she had available.

I waved to her after I returned the horses to their stalls and exited the barn. She sat there gently strumming the guitar, not necessarily playing a song but just making a gentle noise. It was a very
adorable sight, and one that really showed how great the summers were. Something that was greatly appreciated in these messed up seasons.

The manure pit was divided by the type of waste and held a mixture of other composts. There were many specifics from Earth I had forgotten over the years, especially some basic things, like what exactly the different manures did differently. I remember that sheep and chicken manure were very good and had high level of nitrogen and phosphate, but cattle was also good, but in a different way. Farming without technology was a lot different than I was used to, and I could only problem solve so much. So, I found myself in this type of situation often; trying to experiment to get the best results. This time I would use a 40/40/20 split of chicken, sheep, and cattle manure respectively.

Shoveling and mixing the manure was hot and stinky work, but the area of the field I was worried about wasn’t that large. It was mostly the area in which the field rose up a bit and the soil didn’t retain the nutrients as well as the surrounding area. By the time I was finished, the sun was almost set, and it was getting hard to see in the darkness.

I put away my shovel, grabbed a bar of soap from the house quickly and jumped into the river for a quick wash before it was too dark. Our sauna got a lot of use, especially in the winter, but during these busy times when I worked from sun-up to sundown I couldn’t always find the time. As I scrubbed with the soap, I did my best to rinse away the smelly evidence of my day’s work. As the years went by, Nyra had tried and succeeded in adding a variety of scents to the soaps like lavender, wintergreen and sassafras. Winter rose was also an excellent addition, but very rare for us to use. The winter rose was a project of Nyra’s, one that was very difficult for her. Winter rose was a difficult plant to grow and cultivate and turning it into an oil for use in the soap also took a lot of time. We had a few precious bars of winter rose soap, and usually kept it for special occasions or as a wedding gift.

When I entered my house after the bath, the smell of warm delicious food greeted me, and the sounds of my family washed over me. Nyra and Violet were just setting the table for dinner when I came in, so I rounded up Eve and Ryden and brought them to the table and got them settled.

Tonight, we were having egg noodles with sausage in a vegetable sauce. Dinner was fairly quiet as we all ate – well as quiet as a dinner with a 3-year-old and a 1-month-old can really be. We were all hungry from a long day and were quite content to eat, sit and relax at the table. Nyra and Violet began to clean up the dishes, while I went and put Ryden in his crib and gave him a few of his toys to play with. Eve went in front of the fire and played with her dolls, and I went to go update my journals with the manure mixture I was going to use tomorrow. Record keeping was difficult without computers or even proper paper, but I made do with birch bark.

After I finished with my journal, I went to play with Eve and her dolls as I promised earlier. It was mostly nonsensical games, tea parties, and random conversations, but it was enjoyable spending time with my daughter regardless. Eventually, Violet and Nyra finished their chores and joined us. Violet took my place and I went to sit with Nyra. We sat on the couch, cuddled together before the fire and watched our children play. It was a good feeling.
Act 1: Chapter 23

Thirtieth day, Seventh Moon, 240 AC

I was up before the sun, as I was most days, and like most days I stumbled my way over to the kitchen to boil some water. I missed my coffee, but the tea worked well enough and it usually got me out of my zombie state. The children were all still asleep in their beds, and Nyra still lay in bed as well. I usually let her sleep in a bit longer as I set up the kitchen for breakfast and got my wits back.

The house looked normal enough, but I didn’t quite trust myself to do or judge anything before I had my tea. As the water boiled, I splashed some cool water on my face to wake myself up a bit and took a seat at the table. I doze off slightly until the sounds of boiled water drove me to stand and prepare my tea. I stoked the stove to get the fire going and took a seat and sipped at my tea.

I could feel my senses flowing back into me by the time Nyra woke and joined me at the table. We sat quietly listening to the fire crack and pop while we drained the rest of the tea.

As Nyra was boiling more water and preparing breakfast she asked, “When will the others be here to help with the harvest?”

I replied, “They should be here in another hour or so. I told them to be here just after sunrise, so that we can start harvesting the wheat as soon as possible. All the other crops are up, and with the nice weather I want to get this all done before anything happens.”

She nodded as she went about preparing breakfast. I went to wake the children and started to herd them towards the kitchen. Once they were settled, I helped Nyra bring the food over to the table. A nice breakfast of eggs, bacon, beans, and toast was a good way to start a long day of harvesting. We ate quickly, trying to finish before the sun rose so that we could maximize the sunlight.

After breakfast, Nyra got the children dressed and ready for the day while I headed outside. However, when I opened the door I was faced with something truly horrible. Rain. Torrential rain.

Fuck.

It was a downpour, and from the state of the ground it looked like it rained all night. Now that I realized it was raining, I recognized the sound of the rain hitting the roof in the background.

Fuck.

With not much choice, I stripped off some of my clothes and stepped outside. The rain was cold, and I quickly became soaked through. Being cold in the rain was a mind over matter type thing because you expect to be cold and miserable in the rain, so you are. I usually kept that in mind while I worked in the rain, but I found it never helped me with that initial shock.

As I walked out into the fields I quickly became bogged down in the mud. The downpour had turned everything into a tick, deep mud that absorbed my feet. I definitely wasn’t going to get a horse and reaping machine out here. The downpour had not yet flattened the crop, but I would bet that I was losing a lot of seed and that the seed that would remain be of low quality.

My mood turned foul as I walked back to the barn. Hopefully, it would let up soon and let the mud dry out so that I could start to harvest the wheat before I lost it all. With the heavy rain, the villagers that were supposed to come and help, would not show. I refused to think about what would happen if it continued to rain tomorrow.
The rest of the day was spent doing various chores around the farm, and I did my best to make sure most of those I did out of the rain. I sharpened some of my tools, did a good cleaning of my machines and did my best to prepare for the rain to stop and the harvest to resume.

The wheat that I grew here was unlike the wheat back on Earth, which had been modified by a fellow Iowan, who even won a Nobel Peace Prize for his work. The semi-dwarf wheat back on Earth was much more resistant to disease and grew much shorter. The reduction in height allowed for more grain per head and it was more resistant to the wind and rain.

One thing I will grant about this tall, unmodified wheat: the poems that are written about wheat make a lot more sense. On the days before harvest, the wheat truly does wave in the wind and it is certainly poetic. The poem by Katherine Lee Bates had always spoken to me, even back on Earth, but seeing a good full harvest on a gorgeous day here made it truly come alive.

\[
O\text{ }\text{beautiful}\text{ }\text{for}\text{ }\text{halcyon}\text{ }\text{skies,}
\]
\[
\text{For}\text{ }\text{amber}\text{ }\text{waves}\text{ }\text{of}\text{ }\text{grain,}
\]
\[
\text{For}\text{ }\text{purple}\text{ }\text{mountain}\text{ }\text{majesties}
\]
\[
\text{Above}\text{ }\text{the}\text{ }\text{enameled}\text{ }\text{plain!}
\]
\[
\text{America! America!}
\]
\[
\text{God}\text{ }\text{shed}\text{ }\text{His}\text{ }\text{grace}\text{ }\text{on}\text{ }\text{thee,}
\]
\[
\text{Till}\text{ }\text{souls}\text{ }\text{wax}\text{ }\text{fair}\text{ }\text{as}\text{ }\text{earth}\text{ }\text{and}\text{ }\text{air}
\]
\[
\text{And}\text{ }\text{music-hearted}\text{ }\text{sea!}
\]

Trying to crossbreed wheat strains was something I had forgotten to think about before I came here, so my own attempts are modifying the wheat was miniscule at best. I was picking out characteristics in the wheat that I wanted, things like height and grain yields, but since they were the same strain there was only a little change at best. The parts of the North that I had seen all had the same strain, and while the Vale appeared to be slightly different, to my shame, I didn’t take a close look when I was passing through.

The rain didn’t stop for another day, and it was another week before the ground was solid enough to begin the harvest.

On the day when the villagers finally came to help me harvest, the ground was still muddy, but it was manageable. We went as quickly as possible, trying to save as much grain as we could. The rain had ruined over quarter of the harvest. The wind and rain had weighed down the wheat so much that it bent into the ground, thereby ruining the crop. The rain had also shaken loose some grain from each stalk, and the grain that remained was in poor condition. This was not a good harvest at all.

I learned from the villagers that the other farmers were working by hand until they could get the machine in order to save as much as they could. The villagers and I worked quickly and spent long days clearing the field, working in tandem to cut, thresh and dry the wheat. It took us three long days to finish cutting everything, from sunrise to long after sundown. The villagers ended up sleeping in the barn due to the long days, and once we finished my farm we all moved to the next to repeat the process.

The other farms did not fare any better than mine; all had massive losses in their wheat harvest, but they, like me, rotate their crops and had harvested all their other foodstuffs. We would all feel the loss of our wheat, but with our diverse farms and the fact that we would get at least one more harvest in before winter should help to mitigate the damage.

Torrhen, the only farmer in the area that rejected my ideas, however had a huge loss. He mainly grew just corn and beans, and due to the shorter growth cycles of corn and beans he was in the middle of growing season. The rains had wiped out a third of his crop, and with no diversity and a
smaller farm, he was in trouble. Before my move here he had been the ‘wealthiest’, as far as anyone in this region could be truly wealthy, mainly due to his cattle which no one else in the area had owned. He would likely be alright, but his family would definitely have to tighten their belts.

After the two hellish weeks of harvesting, I returned home and went back to finishing my farm’s harvest. I still had to manage the moisture of the grain and hay to make sure that it does not spoil in storage. Nyra and Violet joined me in sifting through the grain, to help dry it and to weed out any grains that had sprouted and were useless for storage.

Once the grain had been stored, the fields had to once again be fertilized and prepared for the next planting cycle.

My mood had been fairly dark since that first rainy morning and my temper short. So, when Nyra approached me after the grain had been stored, my response didn’t surprise anyone.

“Honey, you need to relax. You’ve been in a horrid mood for weeks. Please, just try and relax.”

“I have not!” I snapped back. “This is a bloody mess! A bloody mess! So much is gone or ruined!”

Nyra replied in a soothing voice, “I know, but being like this does nothing to help. Please. Come relax and spend some time with your children.”

“Being like what?! This is a huge problem!”

Nyra continued to talk in a soothing voice, “Stop trying to start a fight. I’m not against you. I want to help you; I want you to spend time with us instead of standing here brooding.”

I grit my teeth and tried to calm down. Not entirely successful I said, “Yes, yes. But the wheat is ruined! Over a quarter of the field was lost to the rain, a further quarter of the remaining grains fell to the ground from the rain! A fifth of the remaining was completely sprouted, and the remaining is of so low quality I can’t use it for future seed. That means we have less than half our original crop!”

She wrapped me in a hug and replied, “I know. I know, but your family is still here. And our other crops are just fine. We will be okay, and that is because of your new way of farming. You did that. You helped everyone in this area. They will be okay, because of you.”

I snorted, “Not Torrhen or his family.”

She rolled her eyes and replied, “Yes, but you always thought he was a bit of an ass anyways.”

I shrugged, unable to deny that. She continued, “Besides, they are well off enough to live through it. And he might come to accept you now too. It will be a good lesson for him.”

I let out a little chuckle at that, my mood starting to lighten. “I suppose,” I said.

Nyra tugged me a bit towards the house and said, “Come. Let’s lock up the barn, eat some warm dinner, curl up in front of the fire and just be happy.”

A wry smile crossed my face at that. “Just be happy? That simple?”

This time she was the one to shrug. “You never know. Maybe we can just be happy with our family. Then maybe after the kids go to bed, we can just be a different kind of happy?” She said suggestively.

I perked up at that. Now that was a kind of happy I could be on board with. “Mmm, that sounds
good.”

She just smiled.

**A/N:** I uploaded a new story if anyone is interested. It's just some additional information relating to this story, that I won't be including here. It's sort of an information dump about things like farming and the economy. If that interests you, feel free to look it up on my profile. Otherwise, it's not necessary to continue to enjoy the story.
Act 1: Chapter 24

Fourth day, Tenth Moon, 240 AC

“So, how’s business?”

“Bah! Things have been good here, same as always. How’s the family?” Arlan asked.

I replied, “Good. My wife birthed a son about 8 moons ago.”

He gave me a smile. “Good! Your first one, right?” At my nod he continued, “Can never have to many sons. Though, I suppose them Whitehills won’t agree.”

“Oh? What happened?”

Arlan chuckled. “Well, apparently they only executed a merchant. But, word is that there was a messenger from the House o’ Manderly rejecting a betrothal. Lord Whitehill didn’t like tha’ much. Not enough prospects they say.”

“Lord Whitehill tried to marry off his son to a daughter of Lord Manderly?”

He gave a wry smile. “Not his first son either. His fifth! Not sure what the man was thinkin’”

I coughed in surprise. “Fifth?! No wonder it was rejected. What is the fifth son gonna’ do? What was the point?”

Arlan shrugged. “Dunno. Not part o’ the rumor. They are the only Houses in the North tha’ worship the new gods though.”

“Huh. Any other news?”

He scratched his beard in thought. “Not really sure. You heard about the Fourth Blackfyre Rebellion?”

I nodded. “Aye. Heard it from some merchants a few moons back. Nasty business those rebellions.”

Arlan nodded solemnly at that. “Aye, it is. That Ser Duncan the Tall though, is suppos’ t’ be one of the best fighters though. Suppos’ t’ be even taller than the Umbers!”

I laughed. “And probably more knightly too!”

Arlan laughed at that. We both sat and drank our mead for a while before he spoke up again, “Suppose we aught to get t’ business, eh?”

“I suppose we should. So, I’ve got four barrels of vodka this time and one of the brandy.”

He nodded. “So, the same as last time? Same price then; Coin and wine?” At my nod, we shook hands in agreement. He pulled out his pouch and handed me my coins and yelled for a boy to go unload my barrels and load his. Arlan asked me, “Heading right home again?”

“I think so; I need to do business with another merchant. I’m not sure if he is here yet.”

Arlan perked up. “Well, if he’s not, you come straight back here! I’ll get you a room no problem, an’ a nice place in the stable t’ put your wagon!”
I smiled and thanked him for the offer. As I left the tavern, I let the boy continue to load my wagon while I went in search of the merchant. This was the same merchant I did business with many years ago, the one who transported my cast iron stove for me. Unfortunately, after an hour of searching I found that he had not arrived yet.

So, I made my way back to the tavern and got a room to stay the night. I spent the rest of the day wandering the town and buying a few trinkets for my family. Violet had really wanted to come with me to Deepwood, but her mother really needed her help to watch over the other children and the farm itself. Violet had been inconsolable for many days about that decision since she had been wanting to see more of everything for quite a few years. I had promised her that I would bring her on some of the shorter journeys, but the promise did little to mollify her.

For Violet and Nyra, I ended up purchasing some high-quality linen with some painted designs on them. Violet had been complaining about the heat this summer, which had given me inspiration for the idea. I remember the Japanese had those folding hand fan things, and I figured that would be a perfect gift for them. It didn’t seem to difficult to make, even if I had to puzzle through it. For Eve, I decided she needed a companion for her – like Violet had Max – so I ended up purchasing a new puppy for her. It was a breed I hadn’t seen before, but it looked like a big fluffball. According to the seller, they were a breed from White Harbour, and were originally meant to be guard dogs but ended up being pets for merchants. They were not overly aggressive, but they were protective. I thought it would be a perfect companion for Eve, and I even got another for Zane and his work. The seller called them Chow Chow dogs but didn’t know the history of them or the name. For Ryden, I got a cute little toy axe. It was big enough, so he couldn’t choke on it, and had no edge to it.

Dinner that night in the tavern was lively, and the food was good, if plain. The mead went down well, with me and everyone else in the tavern. It was also nice to see people purchasing and enjoying my vodka, though I didn’t see anyone buy any brandy. As the night wore on, the mead continued to flow and everyone in the tavern enjoyed themselves. Some sang bawdy tunes with their friends, others played games and gambled. I ended up gambling with a few groups of people as I drank. There was a fire going in the corner of the room, helping to illuminate the room, along with lanterns and candles. The tavern was packed, and it looked like Arlan was doing really good business.

I had not drunk this much in a long time, and I enjoyed the release. At some point in the night, my memories grew a bit hazy. And at some point, I decided singing was a grand idea. I managed to stumble my way to my wagon and grabbed my guitar and then stumbled my way back inside again.

Seeing an actual instrument, even if they didn’t recognize it, the crowd began to cheer me on. I dragged a chair over near the fire and cleared a little area around me so that I could have room to play and not worry about anyone crashing into me.

A/N: My recommendation is to listen to the music videos and just try to imagine Michael playing it in a medieval tavern. It’s lots of fun!

I began to sing, “And I would walk 500 miles... and I would walk 500 more...”

The song definitely energized the crowd, and they were cheering. The sound of the crowd’s enthusiasm was intoxicating, and so I decided another song was needed.

I shouted out, “This next one is for all the fellows that gave me their money playin’ cards!”

Laughs and jeers rang out from the crowd.

“You got to know when to hold ’em... know when to fold ’em”
The crowd sang along with me on the chorus, easily catching the tune and loving the song.

The next song, I decided to go big. Really make this song work for me and those in the tavern.

*Our hero, our hero*
*Claims a warrior’s heart*
*I tell you, I tell you*
*The Direwolf comes*

*With a Sword wielding power*
*Of the ancient North arts*
*Believe, believe,*
*The Direwolf comes*

*It's an end to the evil*
*From all or our foes*
*Beware, beware*
*The Direwolf comes*

*For the darkness has passed*
*And the legend yet grows*
*You’ll know, you’ll know*
*The Direwolf comes*

It was definitely a crowd pleaser, after all, everyone loves to hear about how great their ancestors are, and a good song about fighting.

I took a moment to drain the rest of my mead. My voice was starting to get a bit raw, and I was pretty tired, which made the alcohol start to make things difficult. One more song to finish off the night. In my drunken state of mind I began to sing again, though I wasn’t sure why I chose the song.

A/N: The lyrics for this song have been slightly reworked to fit better, but I didn’t want to type it all out. If you want, you can just imagine the changes, mainly regarding the section regarding deception and betrayal. And try to imagine the song put to a more upbeat pace.

“I'm running with the wolves tonight”

The crowd sang along with the chorus and cheered loudly once I had finished. I stood and tried to take a bow but lost my balance. There were some good-natured laughs, and at that point I decided to call it a night and dragged myself off to bed.

xxxxx

The next morning, with a pounding head I made my way downstairs and shoveled in some breakfast. I wasn’t entirely paying attention to what I was eating or my surroundings, so when Arlan sat at the table across from me, I was startled from my meal.

Thankfully, he seemed aware of my hangover and spoke quietly, “You were an excellent singer last night. You need to do it more often! An’ such songs! Never heard ’em before!”

I grunted my thanks and went back to my meal. Arlan didn’t seem to take the hint though and continued to speak, “You know I forgot t’ mention this yesterday, but I got this paste you might like. I know you like your food.” He handed me over a small bowl of paste. I eyed it warily, for it was far to early in the morning and I was too hung over to make good decisions. He continued while I eyed
the paste, “Comes from the Iron Islands. Got it from a travelling merchant meself; it’s pretty good and lasts a long time too.”

When I finally worked up the courage to try the paste, I spread it on some sausage and bread to make a pseudo-sandwich and gave it a bite. It was very salty and tasted distinctly of fish. The flavor was strong and overpowered the sausage, but I had probably applied too much of it. I gave it a few more bites before I made any decisions.

“Well, it’s pretty good. Salty though.”

Arlan beamed and said, “Aye! But a man could live off it, or so I hear. And lasts a long time. I was thinking o’ getting more. What do you think?”

I took another bite to give myself a moment to think. “I think it would be a pretty good thing to have in winter. Wouldn’t want to live off it though. From the Iron Islands you said?”

“Aye. From a travelling merchant. Actually, there he is now! Billy!” Arlan shouted.

I winced at the volume.

A big man ambled over and with a loud, boisterous voice said, “Arlan! How are you this fine morn’?”

Arlan indicated the man should sit. He replied, “Good, though my friend here, Michael, is a bit hungover!”

The big man, Billy, nodded and said still in his loud voice, “You were that singer last night. Good stuff!”

I smiled weakly at him as my head pounded. Would it kill him to lower his voice?

Arlan spoke up into the silence, “Aye, he was. Actually, we were jus’ talkin’ about that fish stuff you sold me the other day.”

Billy grinned and said, “The garum? You like it?”

Arlan replied, “Aye, it is fairly good. How long does it last exactly?”

Billy said, again in his annoyingly loud voice, “Not sure. Years. It’s so good though, that people eat it before it goes bad!”

Arlan scratched his chin and said thoughtfully, “And it only comes from the Iron Islands?”

Billy nodded and replied, “Aye. Comes from the Iron Islands, but people in the Westerlands and the Vale like it. I guess the mountain dwellers all like it. Good coin to be made off a run to the Vale though.”

I spoke up, “Oh, and why is that?”

Billy gave a booming laugh and said, “The Riverlands has banned it of course! They don’t let anything from the Iron Islands into their lands! They’ll destroy your whole cargo! If your cursed, they might even hang you! Not that I blame ‘em, not with Harren after all. But, that means good money for those willing.”

Huh, I hadn’t known about the Riverlands banning Iron Islands’ goods. Arlan asked Billy, “So what’s it made of then?”
Billy laughed loudly and said, “I can’t say that! Then you won’t buy it from me!”

Arlan shrugged and said, “Well, if I decide to buy it. And that’s still an if. You can’t sell me enough to last until you can bring more, you don’t come up this way often. So, you tell me how I can make it, the cheap stuff that is, and I’ll buy the good stuff from you when you come by.”

Billy scrunched his eyes up in thought before replying, “How much are you going to buy then?”

“Well, you come by what? Every 5 to 10 years? Let’s see how much the people round here like this garum. Then, let’s say you come by every 5, with a wagon full of the good stuff. That should last me, if not then I’ll get you to come by more. Steady money.”

Billy still didn’t look certain and replied, in his loud voice again, “I don’t know. What about price?”

Arlan replied, “I won’t agree to a price this early. We can come to an agreement when you bring the garum.” When Billy still didn’t look convinced, Arlan continued. “I’ll buy from you at least once every 5 years, for 20 years. We come to a good price each time, fairly, and we might do more business.”

Billy smiled and said, “20 years you say? That’ll be just fine!” They shook their hands in agreement.

I still had no idea why they were including me in this conversation. But I listened regardless as Billy described how the garum was made. It would take some work, but I figure some of the fishermen in the village could manage. Though the salt might be a problem.

Arlan and Billy continued to talk and finalize the details of their agreement, but I zoned out and concentrated on my nice warm tea. Mercifully, Billy and his awful, loud voice departed and Arlan turned his attention back to me. “So, do you think you can make some of this?”

I blinked in surprise. “You do know I am a farmer, not a fisher, right?”

He nodded and waved off my objection, “Aye, but you live on the coast with the fishes. So, can you?”

I replied, “Not myself. I can ask around, but we can’t do it in any significant quantities.” I paused while I rubbed my temples, trying to find some relief from my headache. “You’ll need to find a place with a salt mine. My bet? See if Bear Island can supply you. Maybe a coastal village to the north of Sea Dragon Point.”

He looked disappointed and said, “Damn. I hoped you could. You’ve been good for business.”

I gave him a genuine smile and said, “Well, thank you for the compliment and for thinking of me.”

He acknowledged my thanks with a nod and said, “Damn, I have to go see some other merchants then. Here,” He reached out and gave me a jug of the paste. “Take that as thanks, I know it can’t have been easy listening to Billy with a hangover.”

I gave him a wry smile and a nod of thanks. Once he left, I went back to attacking my breakfast.

As I finished, but before I could leave, another person sat down from across me. I looked up and saw a young man with dark hair sitting there staring at me. He wore nice clothes, and he even wore a necklace. He stared at me while I stared at him. I didn’t feel any urge to talk to him, not with my head hurting, so I just sat there and waited.

After a minute he shifted uncomfortably. Finally, he spoke in a soft voice. “Hello. My name is
Royce. You are Michael, correct?"

I raised an eyebrow, unsure why he was talking to me. “Yes,” I replied.

He did not seem put off by my one-word answer. He continued, “I heard you sing last night. You were very impressive. I myself am a bard.”

Was he trying to recruit me? I told him, “I like being a farmer. Not interested. Sorry.”

The man just smiled and said in his soft voice, “I assumed. I actually had a question about your songs. What do they mean?”

“What do you mean: what do they mean?” I asked.

“Well,” he said. “They seem to use repeat lines, and a lot of *imagery*. They were not like other songs, and it was hard to tell what they meant. So, what do they mean? What are they about? Did you create them? If so, how did you do so?”

I blinked at his onslaught of questions. My head hurt too much to come up with convincing lies and discuss musical theory. I told him bluntly, “They can mean whatever you want. It’s up to the listener to take what they want from the song. Listen, I’ve got a wicked hangover and I have things to do.” I stood up to leave but felt I ought to say something inspiring. “Sorry I can’t help more, just listen to your heart.”

Perfect. Poetic and vague.

I drained the last of my tea and left the tavern. Stepping out into the daylight blinded me for a moment, and I felt my head throb in pain again. The wooly feeling, I usually felt first thing in the morning while hungover, had disappeared, mercifully. But the throbbing still hurt.

Luckily, a boy I sent looking for the merchant, Kiran, found him quickly. I tipped him a penny and went back to the stables and collected my stuff. I made my way over to where the boy said Kiran was and spotted him easily.

“Kiran! It’s good to see you again.” I said in greeting.

“'Lo Ragnar! Been a long time!” Kiran said.

I smiled and asked, “How’s business?”

He replied, “Good, trade has been good. Got your stuff here.” He moved around to the back of his wagon and grabbed four sacks out of it.

He passed the heavy sacks to me, and I loaded them onto my own wagon. He then went and grabbed to crates and a box and passed those to me as well. I had asked him to transport some sugar for me from White Harbour, since I had been without it for years now. I had also asked him for glass jars and cork for me. I had to draw out what I was looking for, regarding the jars and cork, and I decided to make everything thicker and hopefully stronger to compensate for any quality issues.

The glass looked very cloudy, with some color distortions, but it was solid and looked alright otherwise. The cork was also pretty uniform and looked like it would seal the jars well enough.

I paid him the remaining half of the cost of the sugar, since I paid the first half when I contracted him to get me the sugar, and the full cost of the jars and cork were paid upfront. I quickly bid him farewell. With my head pounding, I was eager to get on the road and get home.
As I bumped down the road with my headache, I really missed modern cars. The thought of a nice luxury car like a Rolls Royce, not that I had ever even been near one, with a quiet interior, comfy seats and suspension and sweet, sweet air conditioning.

Hmm, I wonder if I could do something for my wagon? A leaf spring suspension shouldn’t be too hard. I laughed out loud, startling a few birds in the trees around the road, I couldn’t believe I never thought of that before.

Another project to add to the list then. It would have to take a backseat though; my jams were waiting! With my orchard growing, I was finding that some went to waste and I wanted something to help preserve my apples, quinces, and berries. Mmm, my mouth started to water at the thought of having jam again. Canning it would be a slight issue, and I hoped that my precautions would soon see me eating jam!

I let myself ride in silence and tried to put my headache behind me.

A/N: Shoutout to RichardWhereat on AltHistory for the lyrics for the Dragonborn song.
Sixth day, Eleventh Moon, 240 AC

As I finished grinding the mixture, I inspected the finely grained powder in the mortar and noted the rich color. It had taken a lot of work to get the process right, since I only half-remembered it, but it appeared I had finally made a good, blue pigment for painting.

An old girlfriend of mine had been really into natural things, vegan diets and the like. One of the many things that she liked to do was make her own paint for her artwork. Some of it rubbed off on me because I did end up looking how to make my own outdoor paint, though I never did make any myself. It took a long time to get my materials, and more time still to get the process right, but it looked like I finally had it.

The process had been called smalt and getting the right portions and heating had been tricky, since I didn’t actually remember any details. It was now the moment of truth. I mix a small portion of the pigment with my linseed oil and started to create a patch of paint. Once it was properly mixed and resembled paint, I applied it to a spare piece of lumber and set it aside to dry. I would have to wait until it dried for the final result, but the color looked good, the consistency of the paint looked professional, and it didn’t appear to be flaking at all.

Happily, I began to clean up my workstation and put away the blue pigment in a clay jar next to my other pigments. I made the primary colors my goal, and if I succeeded with my blue pigment I would be able to make a wide range of paints.

Blue had been the hardest color to create, because is ordinarily it was an expensive color made from exotic plants and animals, or from precious gems. Green on the other hand was fairly easy; there was something called verdigris is a common by-product of winemaking, and the use of malachite, which is a semi-precious gem is also used. I had obtained both easily enough and making two different greens had been simple.

Red was also easy, just using red clay created that pigment easy enough; Brown was made from dirt, and black from charred bone. Hopefully, with this selection I could make any color I need. I know that a lot of these colors could be made fairly easily with different chemicals, and I even remember which chemicals, but the trouble was that I don’t know how to get these chemicals. Sure, if I could walk down to the store and ask for some zinc oxide, then it would be super easy. Unfortunately, I have to work with what I’ve got. At least with the linseed oil that I had made over the years I was set for the future. Linseed oil itself was fairly easy to make, if time consuming, and I had been making it for years.

One of the next projects I had in mind, was purely vanity and nostalgia. I really wanted to paint some of my machines in the John Deere colors, to help me remember Earth. Even with some of the negative things they had started to do in recent years, the color scheme really brought back memories. I had already coated most of the parts of my machines in linseed oil, but some of the replacements I made lacked that oil, as well as the new larger machines I was building. So, I figured I would kill two birds with one stone. I was bound to get questions from the other farmers, but I figured it was worth the hassle. Nyra was just amused. Although, when I told her that when we next expanded the house I would do a complete refurbishment, she was much more impressed. I really wanted to paint the house and add some more color into our lives.

It wasn’t the most important of tasks, but not everything can be about work.
My other projects were a mixture of success, failure, and somewhere in between.

I had started on shaping some oak, so that I could make some leaf springs as I had decided on my trip back from Deepwood not to bother with metal at first. I figured shaped oak planks might serve fine on a wagon like mine, and with smaller weights. No need to jump to expensive iron or steel right at the start when I might not need it anyways.

As I finished tidying up the paint, I looked over my work area at my other projects.

My paper making project was still ongoing, even after all these years, and I still didn’t know how close I was to getting a good product. I had kept the paper-making project to myself mostly, since I knew it would work but I did not want everyone to laugh like they did with my sword-spear. I knew paper was a thing, but all I really remembered regarding how to make it was that: wood was pulped, then squeezed and then heated. It had taken many years, mainly because it wasn’t even a minor priority, and the ‘paper’ I ended up with was still crumbly.

I sighed as I looked over my paper-making notes, idly wishing these notes were on actual paper instead of bark and noted the results of my last attempt. Maybe the next time I will lower the heat, and run it through the heating process twice? More of a slow cook?

I made a note of that for my future tests and moved on. I would get it eventually.

My next project was something I was calling ‘maple sugar’. I wasn’t sure if it was an actual thing back on Earth, but I figured it must have been at some point. I discovered it accidentally a few winters back, when I was making syrup from the sap, and I accidentally overcooked a batch. It turned into a mostly burnt mess, but a small portion of it looked like a sugar. I had experimented a bit with some of my existing syrup and refined the process until I had a somewhat reliable method for creating the maple sugar.

Unfortunately, we had run out of syrup a while back, so I was unable to continue trying to make any. I had the idea of the process down, but I needed to refine it and get some more practice before I could make it without burning it. The syrup needed to be carefully heated, and then once it started to bubble it needed to be cooled down, all the while stirring and making sure nothing burned.

I had talked with Koryn and Zane, and we would increase our production this upcoming spring. With our families growing, and able to take more responsibility, we decided to make a bigger operation and collect more maple syrup. This summer we had built up a little cabin for us to use near a large maple orchard to the south-east of us and started making more tools so that we could harvest it all.

I was looking forward to getting my hands on the maple sugar, as I knew it would be great for cooking, and I was interested to see what it’s other properties were. I figured it would work for creating jams, which would save me a lot of money on buying white sugar. I was also interested in seeing if I could use it instead of white sugar in my rubbing alcohol. I didn’t know if they were chemically similar, and I didn’t really know how to check other than by trying to see if it would still create the alcohol.

Speaking of alcohol, my other project was to make some whiskey. Back on Earth, I was never a huge whiskey drinker, and I never thought to make it here. But after talking with Koryn a few moons back, I decided to expand my drink cabinet a bit. It would be a fun little project, and I already had most of the equipment I needed so it should be fairly straightforward.

My final major project was the semi-dwarf wheat. That was the wheat that pretty much everyone grew back on Earth, which was created in the 1940s. It was a crop that had a much shorter stalk, so it
was lower to the ground, which meant that it was more resistant to wind and could support more grain per head. The grain I currently had was much taller, and much riskier. The past harvest showed that rain and wind could severely damage the crop, and that I really needed a solution.

Unfortunately, my current efforts were miniscule as I was selecting seed from the best plants I could. Picking for traits like height, quality, yield per head, and other things like that. There was only so much variation per strain, so eventually I would have a different strain of wheat, I wouldn’t be alive to see the change. It typically took 12 years to create a new strain, and I had not yet been at it that long, so I still wasn’t finished this first round of changes. I needed a new strain to cross-breed.

The North, as much as I had seen at least, all had the same strain which did not help me. The Crownlands if my memory was correct had something like this. I never paid attention to it as a child, and my memory while I was a child was shoddy at best. So, while it might help, I still would not see a semi-dwarf strain as a result of my work. I didn’t know what the other regions had, but I can’t imagine it would be that different from the Crownlands.

The migration of wheat strains followed human populations and differed over time. The First Men who came to Westeros first, likely had the precursor of the strain of wheat that I had now. They would have spread it all over Westeros and farmed it. When the Andals came, they would have brought their own, and probably replaced the First Men’s wheat with their own. The question really, is how different the strains were before they moved from Essos to Westeros, and the time difference between movements.

History in Westeros was spotty as far as I was aware and were pretty vague on when the First Men came and how long after the Andals invaded. Also, no one knew where the First Men came from. Andals came from Andalos, so I could probably ignore wheat from there. On Earth, a Japanese breed was needed, but if there was a place like that here, the distance would be too far. Long sea voyages didn’t become common until after the medieval ages, and while I wasn’t at all knowledgeable on boats, I didn’t think Westerosi ships would be able to manage.

My merchant contacts were limited and trying to convey what I was looking for would be difficult, especially for a non-farmer to understand. Especially, if the merchants kept passing along the information to another merchant. The next time Rodrick came by, I would talk to him and try anyways, but I was not hopeful.

A cry from Ryden shouted from outside accompanied by arguing from Violet and Eve. With a sigh, I pushed all my notes back onto the shelf and went outside to see what set off the newest round of fighting.

At least it was a beautiful day outside.
Interlude: Three

Twenty-ninth day, Twelfth Moon, 240 AC

“And so, laid to rest, The Dance of Dragons…”

As the song died down, the listeners in the hall began to clap. I nodded to my group, and we all took a step forward and took a bow. It was a fair enough reception to the song, not the best we had ever received on the road, but certainly not the worst. The hall still looked ready for more, but we waited until the signal from Lord Stout before we started up again.

At his nod, Jeyne, my wife, turned to me and whispered, “Royce, do you want to do those new songs of yours?”

I took a moment to look around before I responded to her. I eyed the room, taking note of the rowdiness of the hall, how drunk everyone was, the temperament of Lord Stout; all the things an experienced bard knows to look for in a crowd. How good a singer you are or how good a song is, does not matter if the audience is not ready to receive it.

But the crowd looked to be in the mood for something new, something to stir their hearts. I nodded to Jeyne, and said, “Yes, let’s start with Direwolf and see what happens.”

I started to play softly to set the mood. After much practice, we had decided that Jeyne would be better off singing this song. It suited a female voice, soft and light as the wind.

“Our hero, our hero
Claims a warrior's heart
I tell you, I tell you
The Direwolf comes”

As we played the song, I watched the reactions of our audience to weigh their thoughts on the new song. Once the repeated lines came back, some of the crowd began to repeat it. As the song continued, the crowd got more into it. Lord Stout looked intrigued by the song, he wasn’t following along, but I didn’t really expect it from the man.

He was a bit of a stick in the mud, so when he put out word for bards for a feast, I was a bit surprised. It was common knowledge amongst my brethren that Lord Stout was not musically inclined, or even big on entertaining. His vassals were poor and few in number, but the pay for this feast was actually quite modest. Jeyne and I were lucky that we had been in Torrhen’s Square when word came out about this job, and we quickly made our way here.

As the song wound down, the men along the tables clapped and cheered their appreciation. It was a much better reception than the Dance of Dragons song, though not on the level of The Bear and the Maiden Fair.

I gave an enquiring glance to Lord Stout, indicating if he wanted our last song to be a more traditional song or a newer one like the one he just heard. He indicated for a new song, he seemed to enjoy the change.

Interesting. Perhaps I read Lord Stout wrong? Maybe, it was just traditional entertainment that the man disliked?

With a nod to Jeyne we started to play another song. “I'm running with the wolves tonight”
The applause was a bit more cautious, but Lord Stout seemed to enjoy it more than any other song that they had played.

It was a song that was a bit more complex than traditional songs, and it seemed a bit lost on some of the men in the hall, though I could still spot that they liked to sound of it. Something to think on I suppose.

Jeyne and I stepped forward and gave a bow during their applause. We passed a group of mummers as we made our way out of the hall and gave them all a nod in recognition of our similar jobs. The head servant of the castle gave us our pay as we left, and we headed back to our tent in the nearby field.

Jeyne and I sat hunched over our little folding table in our tent the next morning, after the performance, and we were discussing this new style of song.

“I still think it won’t be popular,” she said.

I rebutted, “I think there are two distinct styles we can explore, dear. The first, would be something like The Direwolf Comes. Something that stirs at the heart; it’s easy to understand and it’s easy for the crowd to repeat and participate. It’s more in line with traditional, but with the repeating phrases they crowd can sing along. The other, songs like Running with the Wolves, use more complex terms and hidden meanings. It has more of a ‘it means what you want it to’ feeling, something vague yet specific. It speaks to the heart, but someone might not quite understand why at the first listen. Lord Stout seemed intrigued by the second song, much more so than the first, and both were more favorably received than the traditional songs.”

Jeyne appeared in thought. “I guess. But his reaction may have just been from a new song, not from his opinion on the style of it.”

I rubbed my chin in thought. “Perhaps, he doesn’t seem like the musically-inclined type. I just wish that the man at Deepwood Motte would have taken more time to talk to me about his songs.”

She nodded. “Aye, it would’ve been nice. Put any more thought into making a new song?”

“A bit. I was thinking maybe start off easy, with something that speaks to my heart. A love song perhaps?”

“Love is easy?” She asked in a teasing voice.

I gave her a cocky smile. “Of course, love. I got you after all.” She rolled her eyes but held her tongue. “I was thinking of tying it to our love of traveling along the open road, with naught but clouds to accompany us.”

She nodded as she pictured it in her head. “Aye, that could work. I think we would need a catchy repeating phrase to capture the crowd though—“

A knock on the tent peg from outside interrupted her.

I exited the tent to see who was there and saw a demure well-dressed servant.

“What can I do for you?” I asked.

“Are you the bard that goes by the name of Royce?” At my nod, he continued. “Good. Lord Stout wishes to talk to you about performing again at tonight’s smaller feast.”
That was a surprise: most of Lord Stout’s vassals had left this morning. “Aye, that sounds good. Let me grab my partner.”

I poked my head back into the tent and got Jeyne’s attention. I gave her a silent look to ask if she was interested, she just nodded. We both knew that any coin we could get before we left here would be needed.

As we both followed the servant back to the castle, I gave Jeyne a winning smile. This new musical style was quite the unexpected gift.
Seventeenth day, First Moon, 241 AC

I laid down the sheep down at my feet and wrangled him in between my legs so that his head rested between my knees and his belly was exposed upwards. The sheep kept struggling weakly against me as I started to shear his wool off. By this point in my life, I had shearing down to a science and did not need many clips to get all the wool off.

Nyra was beside me shearing another sheep but was having an easier time of it than me. We normally gave her the smaller and more docile animals, so that we could work together and be quick. Violet was watching her siblings just outside the barn, but still in view of us. Violet was showing Eve and Ryden how to weave a bracelet out of grass with mixed success but was managing to keep them occupied nonetheless.

The sheep shearing itself went quickly now that we were old hats at it. Especially with proper sheep shears, instead of the blades that were typically used by people in Westeros. The shears made the process much quicker, and with only fifteen sheep on the farm, we were able to finish shearing within the day.

The rest of the day I would help Nyra to sort, wash and beat the wool. Sorting the wool into it’s inner and outer layers was the first step, as it determined what kind of yarn it would be made into. Then we will wash the wool to remove some of the oils and other things trapped in it, like dirt. Then we beat it with branches to separate the fibers, remove any remaining matter, and help it dry.

Then I would move on to other things, while Nyra would continue to work with the wool. She would dye it to what colors we need, card it in preparation for spinning, then finally spin it into yarn. Violet was at the age to help her now, and Eve would likely watch them do it. My children were growing up.

The spinning wheel that Nyra made, with input from myself, turned out really well and made things much easier around the farm. Combined with the carding tool that I made, instead of the traditional comb, really made this task easier. Before my arrival, it would have taken Nyra’s family close to a month to get this all done. The village, now called Redbridge, quickly picked up the idea of the spinning wheel and after showing them how to build one, it was quickly made in every home along with the carding tool.

After a few moons of discussion, the villagers finally had decided on the calling the village Redbridge. It was not my choice, but I got voted down on my suggestions unfortunately. The rest of my family seemed to like the name though.

Speaking of family, I turned to ask Nyra, “So what names were you thinking for our next child?”

She rubbed her belly thoughtfully, her pregnancy just starting to show. “Well, it is your turn to choose this time. Though, if it is a girl, I would like a flower name perhaps. It’s something that I’ve been thinking about for a while.”

“Something like Rose or Lily maybe? Anything for a boy?”

She looked thoughtful as we finished stacking the wool and began to sweep the barn. “I like Lily, that sounds very nice. Rose is also good. Maybe if we have two more daughters, we can use both? As for a boy, I had nothing in particular.”
“I like Arthur for a boy’s name.”

“Hmm, Arthur is a nice name. Not common around here certainly, but nice all the same. Are you sure you don’t want to name a son after you or your father?”

I shook my head. “Not really, I have never liked the thought of naming my own son after me. My father’s name, Tylar, would be alright I suppose. But I like Arthur more.”

I didn’t mention it, but if I was in a medieval world I definitely wanted a son named Arthur. It was a name that just screamed Medieval to me.

She nodded her acquiescence and said, “So either Arthur or Lily then? Let’s think on it for a while and see how it sits. We still have a few moons before we have to decide regardless.”

We were silent as we moved the wool outside near the river so that we could wash it.

Eventually, Nyra asked, “Have you finished your plans for the additions to our house?”

I shrugged. “Still finalizing it a bit. I’ve got the room additions planned out: the master bedroom for us, and a small bedroom for each child plus one for your pregnancy and one more for our last child. The rooms will be small, enough for a bed and some storage for their things. The living room will be enlarged, as will the kitchen. I’m just getting down the final numbers for sizing and estimates for all the supplies I will need.”

“And have you gotten the paint colors ready?”

“Just about. I’ve got the dark, earthy green for the outside of the house ready, as well as the dark brown for the door. The red for the trim on the outside is ready as well. The bright yellow and white for the kitchen and living room is ready, as is the children’s bedroom colors of bright blue, green, and pink. The only outstanding color is our room.”

She nodded. “Yes, about that. I’ve decided, a nice dark blue will be best.”

“Okay, you’ve decided against the purple?” At her nod, I continued. “Okay, I will get to mixing that color then. I was planning to start making the planks next moon after we’ve got all the fields harvested. I’ll need to go down to Redbridge to talk to Bronn, to get some more nails, but I think that’s all I’ll need to buy.”

The planks would be used on the interior to create a more finished interior, at least in my mind. It was definitely a more ‘modern’ and refined look, than the log cabin was currently. Nyra and I both loved our house, but we had different views on it. Nyra loved the quality and the style of the home. It was new and unique to her. I, on the other hand, loved it but viewed it as a more rugged and basic home. It was something in my mind that equated to a cottage, rather than a really nice home. We wouldn’t put the planks on the outside, so that it could retain the log cabin appearance, but we would on the inside to give it a bit of a different feel.

We were both excited to expand the house, as it was starting to get cramped with the five of us under the same roof. Nyra and I had talked, and after this child we would probably only have one more. We had a larger family now, and God willing, we would not have any of our children die to disease. Families tended to have many children, since so many would die before becoming adults. Nyra herself, had two siblings who lived past infancy but died while still children.

It also did not help that we were both getting older, not old, but older. Nyra and I were both 31 now, and I couldn’t remember the specific age, assuming humans are the same on Westeros as Earth, but the older a woman is the harder and more dangerous it was to give birth. It really was depressing to
think about but planning for the future was an important thing.

Once we finished washing the wool, I began to spread it out so that it could be beaten, while Nyra went and got us all some snacks and water.

While she was doing that, I released the newly sheared sheep into the pasture and set our dogs to watch them. We had three sheepdogs, the corgis – which included Violet’s Max, to help watch the flock. They were just in the fenced in pasture right now, but you never know when a wild animal might come calling. We also had six husky’s, that doubled as both guard dogs and for pulling sleds in the winter; there was also Eve’s new puppy, that she named Missy. Ryden wasn’t old enough for a dog of his own yet, but we would likely give him a puppy from Missy.

As I looked over the pasture I took a moment to think about the other farm animals.Alongside our sheep, we typically kept about ten goats throughout the summer. They provided good cashmere fibers when we sheared them, which was about twice a year, and they provided milk and meat. The meat from both the sheep and goat was normally done later in the season, before winter, in order to cut down on the feed we would need over the winter to keep the animals healthy.

We had four cows typically throughout the summer, though we allowed litters to be born throughout the spring, summer and fall. The cows provided milk, as well as meat, though they did consume a lot of feed during the winter. I always kept 2 breeding pairs, since I wanted to be cautious in case of an emergency since they were so rare along the coast. Torrhen had cattle, but they were a smaller breed, and I wasn’t keen on relying on them.

Of horses, we had four. Like the cows, I kept two breeding pairs alive at all times. Like cows, they ate a lot, but they were critical to the farm. They pulled my machines and wagon, and when they were old, they were killed, and we used their bodies in a variety of ways. Meat was a major component, leather from their skin, and a ton of things from horsehair.

We also had ten pigs right now, after having just slaughtered a batch of fattened pigs which had been about a year old. The pigs were relatively easy to keep, as they ate both forage from the pasture as well as pretty much anything else, which was great for getting rid of food scraps and other things that would only end up going to waste.

Finally, we had a variety of birds. Ducks, chickens, and geese made up our flock. They provided eggs and feathers mostly, along with meat. Nyra and Violet dealt mainly with the birds, for which I was grateful for – I was not a big fan of birds.

The farm had grown over the years, and the more fields we had under plow, the more animals we could support. Already, our farm was significantly larger than the typical farm in the area and was still bigger than our neighboring farms.

A call from Nyra alerted me to the food she put out.

When I made it over to everyone, Violet turned to me and said, “Hi Dad! I’m bored, can we go swimming?”

My lips twitched. “Hi Bored, I’m Dad.”

Violet and Nyra both rolled their eyes simultaneously. Eve let out a giggle, while Ryden just looked on curiously.

At least I had one fan.

“Daaaaaddddd….”
I laughed and grabbed a slice of bread and loaded some cheese on it. “Once we’ve finished with the wool today you can. But you’ll have to wait for either your mother or myself to watch.”

She nodded happily and went back to stuffing cheese in her mouth.

After we were finished eating I packed up all our dishes and brought them to the house and cleaned them while Nyra stayed with the children.

When I had made my way back to my family, we got the children to go back to playing while Nyra and I walked hand in hand back to our task.

It was days like today, where everything just falls into place, that make life truly worth living.
Fifth day, Second Moon, 241 AC

A vast blanket of white hung heavy over the farmyard before me. The rain had stopped some hours ago, leaving a wet world, cloaked in white. The fog lay heavy and still in the air; oppressive and thick. The air had that clean, after-rain smell, but it was mixed with the damp and humid fog. I held out my hand and let the fog flow around it – there was no resistance but looked like there should be.

It wasn’t an unusual scene, as we were close to the ocean, but I still liked to marvel at it. It always reminded me of movies that were set in rural England or Scotland. There was always thick fog rolling over the hills, with no people in sight. Lonely and heavy, but timeless in its beauty.

The harvest was nearing, and the crops looked good. The season had been perfect so far – a far cry from the previous harvest. Another week or so, and the main harvest would begin.

The fields we had under plow were large now, not as large as back on Earth, but certainly larger than the typical farm in the area. It was hard to tell without accurate measurements, but I figured my fields were about 12 acres, while the average farm – the ones that I didn’t deal with – were about 5 acres or less. My neighbors’ farms were larger than average as well, probably in the range of 7 – 10 acres, on account of my help and farm machines.

Normally, under the four-field crop rotation system you had four different fields of different crops growing simultaneously and you would rotate the crops each year to ensure good yields and soil quality.

However, in Westeros since we have abnormally long seasons things need to change a bit to compensate. Obviously, the major thing is that we can plant multiple times in a summer. This requires a bit more planning since there is so much variability in the length of each season.

That, and the lack of modern grocery stores, I decided to split my fields a little differently. I couldn’t quite handle just eating 3 types of food all the time. Now, most people in the area had gardens to produce things like carrots and onions, to help feed their families but these plots were significantly smaller than their main crops.

My field is split into two four-field systems. On one, I have the traditional choices of wheat, turnips, barley and clover. This field is larger than the other, since this is the main fare of my family and farm animals. The other, for sake of variety, is potatoes, peas, bok choy, and corn. Keeping each field rotating ensures that we have good soil, which leads to good yields. It also reduces pests and diseases, of which, we’ve mercifully had few in my years farming here.

Walking through the mist, I head over towards our gardens where we grow a large variety of food, but in smaller quantities. I stopped at the berry section first and look over the bushes. The two blackberry bushes had been harvested already; the red currant bush was still growing, the blueberries, strawberries and raspberries had all been harvested. We also harvested a small amount of ginseng mainly for tea.

Continuing my walk, I walked beneath the orchard I had grown over the years. Even wreathed in fog, I could see the trees clearly enough, as I had walked beneath these trees for years. We had a few apple and quince trees now, along with black walnut trees. The apple and quince had been growing for years, but the walnut trees were fairly new. Back on earth, black walnut trees were a very fast-growing tree that provided excellent wood as well as the walnuts themselves. They appeared to be
same in Westeros, as they had grown very quickly and already started to provide walnuts. I had planted a lot of these, as I knew I would get a lot out of them. I had planted hazelnut trees alongside them, though fewer in number, but they grew much slower than the walnuts and had yet to produce any sizeable harvests.

I planted a few plum trees a few years back, but they were still too small to produce any fruit, and they were struggling to grow. I might end up having to move them to a different location if they continue to struggle, but I hoped I would not lose any trees. I had also found some pear trees, but they tasted awful and I wasn’t sure what breed they were. The tree flowered beautifully, but it wasn’t worth planting. I hoped to find a good tasting pear tree eventually, but it looked like all the ones in the area were the same poor-tasting breed.

Closer to the house, we also had a little cellar outside to grow a few varieties of local mushrooms. I usually left most of that work to Nyra, as she had grown up in the area and knew not only how to farm them, but also what types were edible. She had been shocked when she first moved in and realized I didn’t have any mushrooms growing. On Earth, I had never grown any myself and typically bought them from the store. And when I came to this farm in Westeros, I didn’t even know which ones were edible, and didn’t feel like poisoning myself to find out.

As I continued my walk, the sun started to shine through the overcast sky and break up the fog slowly. I eventually made my way to our gardens, where we kept a large variety of food. Things like carrots, onions, squash, lentils, celery, kale, and beets. We also had a section for spices; things like coriander, chives, thyme, rosemary, oregano, mustard, mint, sassafras, tarragon and wintergreen. I had picked them up throughout my travels and hunting trips and done my best to cultivate them to spice up our diets a bit.

Trying to get a healthy, balanced diet was a difficult thing, even back on Earth. But we did our best to grow what we needed to thrive, even if things like the celery didn’t last us the winter. The spices were pretty important too, since I couldn’t handle going the rest of my life without seasoning. Nyra certainly enjoyed the spices and did her best to come up with new recipes and new flavor pairings. Just last week for dinner, we had some delicious gnocchi, which she discovered all by herself, with a wonderful mushroom sauce. She had mixed butter, mushrooms, garlic, beef broth, cream, and a few other personal touches and we had a mouthwatering meal. Mmm, my mouth is watering even now, just thinking about it.

It was a huge change from my life in King’s Landing, and even from when I first moved to the farm. We were established now. Our work was never done, and we still had more we wanted to do, but we had achieved a lot and we could now reap the benefits of our labor.

By the time I finished my walkthrough, the fog was noticeably less dense, and I could start to see across the field. This was going to be the second harvest of the summer, and I was unsure how many more I would get before winter hit. Back on Earth, it was simple and predictable. Here, it was completely uncertain and could be risky. If the summer was long enough, the fall would likely be long grow a full harvest before winter hit – though it would be with reduced yields. But a shorter summer, may leave a fall that is too short to support a full harvest.

Even without a full harvest our family should be fine; we had plenty of food in storage and did our best to prepare for any disaster. Our fields were larger than we needed, so we were able to grow our stores of food. Though, with my fields continually growing and harvests getting bigger I will need to either build a new storage silo or expand my current one. And, if my fields get bigger I might need to hire someone to help me on a more permanent basis. Ryden was just under a year old and wouldn’t be able to help me do the more serious work for many years yet. Violet was old enough to help her mother, and to help watch over her younger siblings, so she was unable to help me. Eve was too
young and would still end up helping her mother anyways.

Nyra and I will have to sit down at some point and plan this out a bit better. With two more children I would be more comfortable if we increased the size of our farm a bit more.

I walked back to the house, where Nyra had already set out some warm tea on the porch for me. I could hear her inside corralling the children, but before I could go inside to help, Eve came outside. She was pouting as she sat down on her chair grumpily. She had the same coloring as her mother, with blonde hair and ice blue eyes, and looked close to what Nyra did at her age – according to Nyra’s parents. She had my nose, but everything else was all Nyra. As a not-quite-4-year-old, her pouts always made me want to comfort her, even when she was pouting because she was being punished.

“What’s the matter Eve?” I asked.

She didn’t look up from her lap as she replied, “Want to play with Dacey and E’fan.”

Ah. Ethan was Zane’s three-year-old son and Dacey was Koryn’s three-and-a-half-year-old daughter.

“But we need to finish today’s chores early, so we can do our lessons later.”

She just muttered, “I know. Want to play.”

I scooted over to her and gave her a hug. “Sweetie, we can’t always play. Sometimes we have to work hard, so that we can play later.”

She still looked unconvincing. “But later is lessons, not play.”

Damn, she’s not wrong. “Later doesn’t always mean tonight. Don’t worry sweetie, you can see them before harvest, and you will see them at the harvest festival as well.”

She brightened a bit at that and started to sip at her tea.

I relaxed into my chair and looked over the landscape. It was mid-morning now, and the heat of the day was finally burning off the fog. From where I sat, the closest field in front of me was taken up by corn, which blocked my view of the fields behind it. It was a comforting sight, to see the results of my labor.

After she finished her tea, I sent her back inside to help her mother. She went off reluctantly, but happier than when she came outside.

As I sat there on the porch looking at the corn a song popped into my head, one I had not thought about in years.

Slowly I began to sing, trying to remember all the words, “As we sat on the front porch, of that ole gray house where I was born and raised…”
Eighth day, Third Moon, 241 AC

Sunlight streamed through the leaves above as we bounced along the road in our cart. The heat of the day was warded off in the shade of the trees, which was about the nicest thing you could say about the road. Up and down, back and forth the road went; it was ever a mixture of washed out, exposed roots, deep mud, and plants growing in the middle of it.

Violet and I were returning from a trip to Deepwood Motte, which had been Violet’s first time visiting. She had been asking to go on a trip with me for a while now, and this was the first time we were able. It was early enough in Nyra’s pregnancy that I felt comfortable still leaving her for a short while, even though I did have to ask Koryn to help out a bit while I was gone.

The trip itself had gone smoothly, we sold all the vodka we brought and bought a few things that we needed along with things Koryn, Ethan and Zane requested. The trip there was slowed briefly a few times when we had to clear the road of some fallen trees or new growth that threatened the road. We were probably the first people to travel along the road in some months – at least along certain portions of it. At night, I dreamed of smooth highways that were direct and trouble free. It was a bit depressing though to realize that I would never again travel at 65mph or fly at even faster speeds.

I turned to Violet as she sat beside me and watched her for a moment. She was 11 years old now and was a pretty serious child. Very meticulous. It came with the territory of being eldest I suppose – I wouldn’t know as I had been an only child in both lives – and for helping care for her siblings. She was still prone to bits of childish behavior but could be counted on to help around the farm. Two weeks ago, she had gotten into an argument with Eve and when she was banished from the house so that Nyra and I could talk to Eve she ended up laying outside the door and listening in. When Eve ended up telling a lie, Violet shouted from outside, “That’s not true!” Looking back, it was a cute and adorable kid thing to do, but at the time set off another fight between the two and a headache for Nyra and I.

I asked her, “Excited to be heading back?”

She gave a quick nod. “Yeah, it was a fun trip.”

“What was your favorite part?”

“Umm, I liked all the trees. And the big town! The big town was so busy! I can’t wait to tell Eve and Mom all about it!”

I smiled, happy to dispel the uneasy quiet that had fallen on her since this morning. “Are you excited to see everyone again? This is the longest you’ve been apart from them.”

She gave another quick nod. “Yeah, I hope Mom and Eve like their gifts.”

Ah, I think I found the problem. “And not Ryden?”

She gave a little shrug. “Umm, yeah. Him too, I guess.”

“Did you get into a fight with Ryden, Violet?”

“No!” She denied quickly. She continued a bit slower, “Not a fight. I don’t know.”
“Then what’s the problem?”

She didn’t respond, and just looked sad. I asked again, “Did he say something hurtful to you?”

She shook her head. “No. But all he does is play with his toy knights! He doesn’t play with Eve and me anymore!” She gave a quiet sniff and blinked her eyes rapidly. “I don’t know. What if he doesn’t like us anymore?”

I scooted over in the seat a bit and put my arm around her. “There, there. It’s nothing like that. He still loves you, he’s your brother.” I gave her a moment to compose herself before I continued. “And those toys he’s playing with? They’re just new to him, which is why he has been playing with them so much lately. Remember when you first got your really fancy dolls?” She gave a nod. “It’s just like that. You played with them a lot when you first got them, but after a little while you went back to playing with Eve. It’s not because you didn’t love her anymore, you just had something else to do for a little while.”

“Will he play with us when we get back?”

I gave her a reassuring smile. “I bet he will. He’s probably missed you a lot, and he will love your gift for him!”

Violet gave a small smile at that. We continued down the road for a few more hours as her mood continued to improve.

At one point I asked her, “So have you thought anymore about what we talked about before? About what you want to do when you are older?”

Her face scrunched up in thought. “I don’t know yet. I know I asked before about what the other girls in the village said about marrying boys when they are older, but I don’t know what I want.”

I gave her a reassuring nod. “That’s perfectly alright. Just remember what I said before, you can be a fisher or a farmer, a merchant or an adventurer. Just so long as you are happy.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “I know, you said it before.”

I gave her a big grin. “Just checking!”

We were silent for a few minutes before she spoke again. “Is making stuff a job?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Like, you made the threshing machine and mom made the spinning wheel. No one made stuff like that before, right?” At my nod, she continued. “So, like that. Making stuff that’s not made yet. That sounds fun. I like knitting with mom, and making new designs and stuff, but I think I might like making really new types of things.”

I scratched my beard in thought. So, an inventor, huh? “That would be an interesting job. It’s called being an inventor. It would be a lot of work, but very rewarding. Maybe talk to your mother about how she made her spinning wheel? And something to keep in mind, especially as we travel, is to look around and notice what other people are doing. Some people might already be doing something different than what you know, and it might be better, or it might give you a really good idea.”

She nodded her understanding and continued to think about what I had said.

As we continued down the road, night began to approach, so I began to look about for somewhere to
set up for the night. Recognizing the area, I remembered an abandoned farm off the road another mile ahead.

When we neared, I pulled us off the road and followed the barely-there path to the old farm.

Violet turned to me and asked, “Where are we camping tonight, papa?”

“Ah, tonight we are going to camp at an old abandoned farm.”

“Why’s it abandoned, papa?”

“Well, near as I can tell, hundreds of years ago there was a big farm here, but they were scared off by the Ironborn. Because at that time, the Ironborn raided here a lot, and even held parts of the shore as their own.”

Her mouth gaped. “It’s that old? How can you tell?”

“Well, you can tell a bit by how old the trees are, where the fields ought to be. You will see, but the old house is a ruin now and you can see how overgrown it is. I also asked some people in nearby villages.”

“But why would the Ironborn come here?”

“It’s a bit complicated. The Ironborn like to fight rather than farm. So, they have to take food from others. Wood is especially important to them, so they used to come here to get wood from the coasts. A lot of people left during that time, and so we have a lot of abandoned farms – though many, like this one, have been reclaimed by the wilderness.”

“How come our ancestors didn’t leave then?”

“Well, my side of the family isn’t from around here, but your mother’s family was. You would have to ask her.”

The farm itself was mostly overgrown, but there was an old field that was mostly just a meadow, as the trees had not claimed it. The old house had long ago collapsed, with only a few stone walls remaining, and the barn long since rotted away.

We set up camp in the meadow and went about preparing for the night. I tended to the animals and wagon, while Violet started the fire. By the time we had settled down for the night, the darkness was falling.

Violet asked, “Can I explore the ruins tomorrow morning before we leave?”

“Sure, but only for an hour. I want to us to be sleeping in our own beds tomorrow night. That sounds good, right?”

“Right!”

“Oh, and papa? I’m going to ask mama about her spinning wheel when we get back.”

“That’s a good, mature decision Violet. I’m proud of you.” I gave her a wry smile and said jokingly, “But don’t you want to ask your old man about his work?”

Violet laughed. “Maybe later papa. Mama is just awesome. Err, you are awesome too! Mama is just, uh, mama.” She just gave a sheepish shrug.
I laughed. “I know, it’s okay. Your mama is pretty great, huh?”

Violet just nodded her head feverishly.

“Want to sing some songs before bed?” I asked.

“Yes!” She exclaimed. “Can we sing the song about rivers and roads? I was thinking about it all day!”

I gave a wry smile. “You can start singing during the day too, you know.”

She shrugged. “I know. But I like it better when you start singing first.”

I laughed. “Alright then. I’ll start off.”

“Rivers and roads... Rivers ‘til I reach you...”

Xxxx

The next morning, we rose early, and I started to set up breakfast. I let Violet go explore the ruins while I got us ready to leave and set Max off to go with her.

By the time the food was ready, I had hitched up the wagon and cleared the campsite. Violet was not back yet, so I put some food on a plate for her and put out the campfire. It hadn’t been an hour yet, so I wasn’t worried, but I did start to pack up the rest of our food as we would eat on the road.

The ruins itself, was not very large, and I could see the front of what used to be the house from our campsite. It went back a bit into the forest, and eventually broke up into the ruins of a few old buildings and stone fencing. It looked like this used to be a large family farm, with multiple houses. Not a village, but more of a clan holding type thing. It was very interesting from a historical perspective, though I had lied to Violet when I said they left rather than live with the Ironborn. There was enough evidence around the place, if you knew how to look, to see the evidence of a long-ago battle. They were likely all killed during the battle, though some may have actually fled. A bit too morbid to tell my little girl.

A little while later I was startled from my daydreaming by barks from Max, as he raced over to me. The way he ran was off. Not like he was hurt, but like he was a puppy again. Unsure of his footing, of what he could do, and generally confused as a puppy usually is.

I closed the distance between us as I looked around for Violet, but I did not see her.

Panicking, I asked, “Max? Where’s Violet boy?”

Max whined up at me and kept making weird barking noises, as if I could somehow understand. Weird. Max had never done this before.

“Max, where is Violet? Did she send you to just come back or to come get me?”

Max continued to make weird whining noises. After a moment, Max began to pull on my pants towards the ruins.

Well, that answers that.
Max started to run in that direction and I struggled to keep up. What had happened to Violet? Worry and panic had started to set it, driving me faster.

We passed the ruins of the main house as we skirted the side of it and entered the pseudo-village. The village had always made me uneasy with the way that nature had reclaimed it, but in such a way that you could still expect to run into someone just around the corner. Like some sort of post-apocalyptic village.

We quickly exited the village and started to head back into the back fields. They were a mixture of open meadow and forest, but Max just followed one of the stone fences.

We had been running for a few minutes now, and Violet was still not in sight.

Finally, a taller ruin was revealed at the end of the fence. It looked to have been some sort of barn or guard tower? Violet was still not visible, but Max started to slow down as he went around the back of the structure.

My breath was ragged from the sprint here, and my heartbeat loud in my ears.

As I turned the corner I saw Violet laying on the ground with some rocks covering her leg. I rushed over to her shouting her name. At first glance, it looked like she was unconscious.

Max just stood in the background, still looking confused, as if he didn’t know what was happening.

I turned Violet’s head to my while whispering her name. I pulled back her eye lids, to and was shocked by the complete whiteness of them.

That wasn’t normal. Maybe a very serious concussion? Fuck.

“Violet… you need to wake up… please… you need to wake up” I whispered to her.

Max moved closer to us, uncertainly. Tears began to fall from my eyes.

I wiped them away violently. Now was not the time.

I moved down to her leg and cleared off the rocks. She was lucky, the larger rock on top had landed on some others first, so while her leg was trapped, it wasn’t crushed.

Once she was clear, I examined the rest of her body. She was not bleeding, and she didn’t land on anything sharp, so her spine ought to be fine. But the eyes worried me.

“Violet, please, I need you to wake up. Come back to me, you hear? I don’t know what’s wrong, but I need you to come back. Just listen to my voice, I – “

I was cut off when Violet’s eyes suddenly returned to normal and she let out a loud gasp!

She shouted out, “Papa!” And moved forward to wrap me in a hug.

“Violet! Are you alright? Where are you hurt?” I questioned rapidly.

“I don’t know! I was walked in the fence, then I went in the tower and climbed the stairs. But then the stairs and wall fell! And then my leg hurt and was stuck! I don’t know!”

“Does it hurt still?”

“Yeah!” She sniffled. “It really hurts, papa! It keeps feeling like a really loud heart, and it prickles
like it does when it falls asleep, but it hurts more than normal!”

I shifted her in my arms a bit. “Does anything else hurt?”

She shook her head a bit. “I’m sore all over, but nothing like my leg.”

I picked her up in my arms and stood up. I didn’t see any blood on the ground, though her leg had some scratches. Max still stood by, but he had lost his goofy look, though he looked even more confused and stressed out.

“Come on boy, let’s head back to the wagon.”

When we got the wagon, I placed Violet on top of some blankets and looked closer at her leg. There were some scratches, and it looked like there would be a very large bruise, but no stitches required or any broken bones.

I asked, “So, what happened after you fell?”

She wiped some tears from her face before she answered. “Well, my leg was stuck but it didn’t hurt. But when I tried to push the rock off, my leg really started to hurt. Then, I don’t know. I shouted for you, but I think I went too far, ’cause you didn’t hear me. Then, I really wanted Max to go get you. But he wouldn’t.” Her explanation slowly drifted off, as she struggled to find the words to say.

“Then what happened?” I prompted.

“Well,” she said hesitantly, “I kept hoping Max would go, and I really wanted him to go. I wanted to make him go… Then it was like, I was Max. Like it was like a story, where you get the story from the eyes of a different person?”

“Perspective?” I clarified.

“Yeah, that. But, I could say, ‘Walk there’ and Max would do it. Or I would. I don’t know.”

Some sort of wacky psychic connection? But why did it ring a bell?

“Do you know what happened, papa?” She asked hopefully.

Damn, why do I feel like I should know this? Something to do with animals?

Violet let out a gasp. “I think I know! It’s like those stories mama tells! With the skinchangers!” She shivered a bit. “I’m like a skinchanger!”

Shit, I suppose that’s what I was reminded of. What the fuck is with this world?! I mean I never figured out what was with the long seasons, but I figured the world was tilted weird, or there were extra planets in the solar system. Not any magic stuff. I mean, yeah, the world is different, but it seems like a natural change due to the seasons. Not magic, or whatever.

“Well, that’s something.” I finished lamely. “Err, how do you feel?”

“My leg still really hurts and I’m tired, but my back is less sore from falling. What do you think it means, papa?”

“Well, it’s not a bad thing” I reassured her. “It’s something to be careful of though. So, you can tell your mother, but no one else alright?”

She nodded her head. “Okay, but what should I do?”
I’d really love to just straight out forbid her from doing anything else, but there’s a few problems with that. One: what if she did it accidently at a really bad time? Two: Violet wouldn’t be able to keep it a secret from the rest of the family for long, they were too close. Three: what if it was a bad thing to suppress? Like in the old fantasy stories from Earth?

I had no real, good options. Skinchanging was not really known in the area, other than tales, and I knew down south it was looked down upon. Here in the North, it wasn’t looked down upon per say, but it wasn’t really thought of favorably. At least hypothetically, since I don’t know anyone who was a skinchanger or who knew a skinchanger. I needed to say something that cautioned restraint, and secrecy, but not too restrictive. And we still needed to talk to Nyra, so something to tide her over for now?

“Well,” I started. “Let’s not rush things. We’ll have a nice long talk with your mother when we get back, but let’s not do anything hasty. Remember, everything in moderation dear. Just remember who you are, and don’t let this become the only thing you are. Okay?”

She nodded in understanding. “I wonder if anyone else can do it too? Like my cousins?”

“Your mother may know. Now, let’s eat up and then we’ll get you nice and comfy on the wagon, so that we can head home.”

Her eyes were still red from crying, but she gave a little smile at the thought of going home.

“That sounds good, papa.” Sensing my uncertainty with the whole situation she added, “Don’t worry papa. It’s just like you said earlier about inventing. We’ll figure it out.”
Fifth day, Fourth Moon, 244 AC

My family and I stood in the crowd near the back, since we were not particularly close to the deceased. Maecy had been the oldest person alive in the area and had lived to an incredible 77 years old. She had died four days ago, quietly and in her sleep, which was probably for the best. Ever since I had known her, she had been a cranky old lady, not that I blamed her. I think she had arthritis, because her joints had been in constant pain for years and had lived with the various pains and injuries collected over the years.

Maecy had lived a long life and had lived to see her great-great-grandchildren born. Of course, with such a long life, there was loss. Her husband died 20 years ago, and she had lost many family members to sickness and starvation. I had never really had any type of conversation with the woman, but I liked to think I made her life even just a little better – even if I hadn’t done much to improve the lives of the fisherfolk directly, unlike the farmers in the area.

We all stood gathered in the weirwood to the east of the village to attend the funeral rites. Funeral rites were an intriguing ceremony for those that followed the old gods. I imagine it would have been somewhat similar to ancient pagan ceremonies back on Earth.

First, the deceased was laid on a pyre in a coffin for three days, while wearing an eslene, or a death shirt. The eslene was a clean white shirt that wrapped around the entire body. On the third day, like today, everyone came to pay their respects and light the pyre. The dead were surrounded by burning candles and rushes throughout the three days. Before the pyre was lit, a bowl of honey was placed atop the pyre.

Then the pyre was lit by Maecy’s family - a symbolic gesture to show them sending off their loved one’s soul to the afterlife. We didn’t arrive until a few hours after the pyre was lit, since we were not close to the family, and only the immediate family stayed the whole time. We then waited our turn to offer condolences to the family.

The children were well behaved today, even Ryden and Arthur, as we had told them to be on their best behavior during this solemn gathering. Arthur was our youngest son, born back in 241AC, and loved to follow his older brother Ryden. Anari, our youngest daughter, was born just 3 months ago and Nyra was struggling to keep her quiet throughout the ceremony.

After we had given our condolences, we moved back to the village where there was a small feast prepared by the family, though all the families brought some food to share. Nyra didn’t join us, as she had gone back to the house with Anari to put her down for her nap.

We all waited at the feast for the family to finally join us, as they were completing the last part of the funeral.

When a person dies, their family alerts their friends and, in this case, their community. The community then builds a pyre and coffin for the dead, while the family works on the other part of the funeral. After the dead are cremated, the family collects the ashes and brings it to a secret location to be buried. They then would place rocks above the site to mark it, though the style of grave marker varied wildly. Some built more complex markers, others placed just a sole rock to mark the site.

I had asked Nyra years ago about it, but no one seemed to know why the graves had to be secret, but I had a suspicion it was a remnant from the Ironborn occupation of the area from long ago.
It was about an hour later when the family joined us, and we all mingled about. The family themselves, were cloistered together – at least the older ones, while the younger went off to play – and the rest of the guests talked to each other and occasionally the family of the deceased.

The food was brought by everyone, like a potluck, so there was plenty of it and a lot of drink. Out of respect, the guests did not drink overly much, but after another hour people were in much higher spirits. The feast itself was more of a celebration of life, rather than focusing on death, but it still tended to not necessarily be an overly joyous event for adults.

I sat on the ground, with a few friends from the village, drinking and snacking a bit. My kids were playing with the other kids their age and having fun playing a variety of games, like tag, football, and ruggedball.

Rugged ball was an interesting story. When I had first introduced football, American football, people enjoyed it. Until someone broke a finger, at which point kids stopped being able to play it since parents didn’t want to risk their children’s health. So, I got people to play soccer instead, which was much less physical and was a huge hit. But people didn’t like calling the sport that required you to use your hands football, and the one your feet soccer. After a while, soccer ended up being called football, while football was called ruggedball. Since the ball was more rugged. The adoption of ‘flags’ instead of tackling also made ruggedball more popular, though with the use of rags as flags, it was also called raggedball.

Jon and Carn, my friends, were both currently arguing over a new fishing boat.

“Nah! I tell ‘ya, ain’t no point! It’s too much work, and not like we can sell much extra fish. Who’s going to buy it, huh?” Argued Carn.

Jon snorted. “It makes sense! We build ourselves a big fishing boat, grab my boys and yours, then start hauling in lots of fish, just like they do down at the Fishing Village! You ‘eard from Rodrick didn’t ‘ya? They haul lots o’ fish there!”

I chuckled quietly to myself as I took another sip of mead. I did my best to stay out of the discussion, after all, it was the same one that they had been having for years. Jon and Carn were some of my closer friends, excluding family, even if most of their time revolved around fishing, rather than farming.

Carn took a large swig of mead and said, “Michael! Tell this fool he’s being a fool!”

I raised my hands in protest. “Leave me out of this, you know I’m awful with boats.”

“Come on, your good with coin though! Tell him there’s no more coin to be had!” Carn wheedled.

“Meh, there’s always more coin to be had. But I guess, in this case, there’s not much. People create wealth, and there’s not enough people in the area to have any wealth. You would have to travel, probably northwards to Deepwood area. Even then, there’s already fishermen in the area.”

“See!” Carn turned back to Jon and wagged his finger. “Ain’t no reason! Now, why don’t you go and grab us some more food to, uh, show you’re a good loser.”

Jon grumbled as he stood up and walked over to the tables.

Carn gave me a conspiratorial grin and a wink. I just gave a laugh while he pulled out a little pouch from his pocket.

He offered me the pouch and said, “Want a piece of gum? I’ve got a new flavor today. Mixed in
some oregano and mint into the spruce pitch.”

I popped one in my mouth and gave it a few experimental chews. Boy! That was a strong flavor! I started coughing and had to spit out the gum.

“That’s a strong flavor!”

“But good right?”

“Eh, don’t know if I would go that far,” I said with a laugh.

“Aw, come on. It’s good!” He gave a few exaggerated chews to emphasize his point.

I washed the taste out of my mouth with the last of my mead, as Jon returned with more food. He had grabbed a few buns for us and stuffed them with some goat that someone had cooked up for us.

I ate eagerly, even though it wasn’t as good as my family’s regular cooking.

After Jon finished his sandwich, he said, “Fine then. You know, I think this summer I’ll take a trip up to Deepwood myself. Sell some fish and buy some goods for my family. Heard about it enough from you Michael, figure I should see the place too.”

I nodded. “Aye, that sounds good. You can get pretty close to the town itself if you follow the rivers inland from the coast nearby. You’d have to ask the locals though, I don’t think I’ve got any good maps of the area that show the rivers.”

Carn rolled his eyes. “Stop encouraging the man! Ain’t no point to it, you said it before!”

“I said, there wasn’t much money in the area to justify building a big ass boat. Using the boats, you already have, you could actually make it through the rivers and sell directly in the town. Sell some dried cod, and you can probably make enough money to justify the trip.”

Jon grinned and said, “See! I’m bold, not stupid! Oh, by the way Michael, is Violet still coming to my Jess’ nameday next week?”

I nodded. “Aye, she’s been talking about nothing else for the last moon.”

Just then, an older man stumbled past them shouting about the next village over being shoe stealers.

“What’s Jory on about now?” asked Carn.

Jon shrugged. “Crazy old coot. Looks drunk.”

Carn tutted. “Shouldn’t say things about the elders. They got lots o’ wisdom. ‘Sides, when we get to be the elders, you want the young ones to treat us right and good, don’tchya?”

I laughed. “Just ‘cause they’re old doesn’t mean their smart. Dumb young people can become dumb old people.”

Jon rolled his eyes. “Michael’s right. Jory is crazy and a drunk. I mean, what’s he on about now with the shoes? Is he talking about that trader that came through the other week and bought a pair of boots from Bronn’s family? How’s that stealing?”

“Damned if I know. I tend to ignore and avoid Jory,” I said.

As I relaxed in the open field, drinking with my friends, life was good.
Fourth day, Fifth Moon, 247 AC

I was jolted from my thoughts as the wagon wheel bounced heavily off a hole in the road.

Damn it, bloody dirt roads.

I sighed. At least my wooden leaf springs were working, even if they weren’t as good the steel ones of Earth.

Oh well, I was almost home anyways. It had been just a quick trip into Redbridge to trade for some seafood and nails, and now I just had to stop in at Koryn’s house, to talk to Rodrick while he was here.

As I pulled off the road, Koryn’s house came into view. Koryn’s house was built in a similar style to mine but built right next to his father’s house. I could see his children in the distance playing, with their grandparents watching over them.

Ethan saw me and gestured towards the house, indicating where Koryn and Rodrick were. I waved my thanks and knocked on the door.

After a moment, Koryn opened it and smiled when he saw me. “Michael! Come on in! We were just talking about you!”

“All good things I hope?” I asked.

“Oh course! Of course! My goodfather here was just saying he had something for you!”

Koryn gestured for me to have a seat and grabbed me a cup of mead.

I nodded my head in thanks. “So, what have you got for me then Rodrick?”

“Well,” he said, happily. “I’ve got one o’ your longest standing orders!”

He gave a big grin. “Aye! Two different ones!” He put two large sacks on the table and opened them up a bit to let some seeds out onto the table. “This first one ‘ere, is called a soft red. I checked, and it’s different than the ones you got. Mind you, I got it off a guy who got it off a guy, so the story might be wrong. But, it’s from Essos and it’s popular for the rich folk. But that might be bunk so that they could charge more. I didn’t get much off the man about how tall it grew or any such, but he said its mostly grown on the west coast near Pentos.”

I popped a seed in my mouth as I examined another. They looked fairly similar in coloring to the ones I already had, but I could see the differences. It looked similar to a soft red wheat from Earth, as opposed to the hard red that I currently had. If I remembered correctly, soft red was used for pastries and things like cookies, which would fit the rich person story I suppose.

It probably wouldn’t help me in trying to create a dwarf wheat, but another strain of wheat would be nice. Pentos is near Andalos, so it probably had a common ancestor with the stuff I had now. The First Men probably brought over the ancestor before it diverged, or they just found this strain to be better for their needs.
“Excellent work, Rodrick! What’s the other one?” I asked.

“Ah, that one. They call it Farmer’s Gold, and it’s from ancient Valyria supposedly. It has a Valyrian name, but damned if I know it. It’s grown mostly around south-western Essos and used in their food there. It gets the name from the outer shell.”

He held one up and sprinkled some water on it. The outer layer, the bran, started to reflect the light in the room giving it an almost golden color.

“Interesting…” I muttered.

I picked one up myself and popped another into my mouth to taste. The grain itself looked like a regular amber grain when dry, and it tasted familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it.

“What type of food do they use it for?” I asked.

He scratched his beard in thought. “I think they called it pasta? Little dough things that they boil or some such.”

Pasta! It’s probably durum then, though I didn’t know why it reflected light.

Rodrick continued to speak, “Again, I didn’t get much about how it grew or anything. I did get charged a lot t’ get it though. Had to use up the rest o’ the money you gave me. Dunno why it shines like that though. The man who sold it to me said there was an old wives tale about it, that they Valyrians used to make gold with it. But its just a bunch of shit. When that story got started after the Doom, they had a bunch o’ Maesters, the Essosi ones I think, check it but they said it was lies. Even the Alchemists tried and failed. Apparently, a bunch of merchants wanted to charge extra to foreigners. Still costs a lot though.”

“Huh, well all that glitters is not gold.”

Rodrick blinked. “Aye. I suppose not. That’s a good line!” He gave me a conspiratorial wink. “I think I’ll use that one. Try and sound real wise!”

Koryn and I laughed.

“Well, I’m really happy that you managed to get two different types for me! Still, if you ever manage to find more let me know. Before you leave, swing by my house and I’ll give you some more coin.”

Rodrick nodded and gave a satisfied smile.

Koryn finally spoke up, “How long has it been now? 10 years?”

I shrugged, “There abouts. Maybe a bit longer.”

“Time flies, eh?”

Rodrick laughed. “You’re telling me? I’m the one with grandkids.” He shook his head. “Tell me how you feel in another ten or twenty years, if I’m still kickin’ around that is.”

“Speaking of taking a long time,” I said. “Jon wants you to come by his house before you leave. He’s finally got that garum sauce to his liking.”

“Oh? Was he wanting me to bring it up to Deepwood?” Rodrick inquired.

“Aye. He wants you to see what kind of price you can get for it. See if it’s worth his while to make.
It’s a pain to get all that salt needed for the recipe, and to make the garum itself.”

Rodrick scratched his beard in thought. “I’ll see what I can do. No promises, but I’ll talk to him before I leave and get an idea o’ how much it cost him to make and go from there.”

I stood up and downed the rest of my mead. “Excellent! Well, I best be off. I’ve got fresh fish in the wagon for dinner.”

I clasped hands with both men as they said their goodbyes and hopped back on my wagon and headed home.

A/N: Just a quick chapter. I know some people have been complaining about lack of conflict, but I assure you, its coming.
Seventeenth day, Tenth Moon, 247 AC

“There! Hold ‘er there!”

I took the nail out of my mouth with my free hand and put it in position with the other hand I was using to hold the plank in place. I quickly picked up my hammer with my free hand and sent it home.

Perfect!

I walked around the boat and examined the lines. Good curve, planks are snug against each other, and nice and smooth. I patted the siding in happiness.

I looked over to my boys, who were laid out on the ground after a hard day’s work.

“Alright boys, head on home t’ your ma. Clean up before you go inside, or your ma’ll get ‘ya good.”

His boys all nodded before trudging off. Good lads and will make good shipwrights just like their pa when they’re older. Too scared of their ma though, not that I blame ‘em.

I closed the workshop and started to make my way to the tavern. The Fishing Village only had one tavern, and it was nothing special, but it was ours.

I spotted a few young men flirting with some young women on my way and thought of my boys. They had yet to find out the joys of women, even though I and my friends had at their age. Their ma likely scared ‘em straight.

I chuckled at the thought. Fierce woman, my wife. Fierce and passionate. A beautiful mix.

I entered the tavern and let the noise wash over me. It was dimly lit, with the fireplace on the far wall providing most of the light. The air was heavy with smoke and the smell of beer. I spotted my friends and made my way over.

“Arren! Over here!” My friend, Bron, yelled to me.

“Oi, there he is! ‘Bout time!” The other man beside Bron, my friend Jaxar, said.

“Quit your bellyachin’ ‘ya slobs,” I shouted back.

I pulled up to the table that they had for themselves and sat on the old and beat up bench. The table was worn, scratched and stained, but it was mercifully clean today.

The serving wench wandered over and brought me a mug of mead, and deftly moved out of the way of Jaxar’s wandering hands.

“Jaxar ‘ye big lump. Your wife is gonna kill you one day, with those hands o’ yours,” I said.

He shrugged. “Ain’t nothing to it. She knows I ain’t like that. I just like t’ compare, is all. Ya know, that way I can tell the truth when I say my wife has the best in town!”

Bron and I laughed. “It’s all for her then?” Bron choked out in between laughs.

“Course it is!” Jaxar said with an exaggerated wink. “‘Yer all married now, ‘ye should know this!”
Bah, ‘ye all were helpless with the girls when we was boys, no different now. No wonder why I became a man first!”

Bron looked indignant. “Oi!” He said. “It was like two days, not even! And you had t’ pay!”

Jaxar shrugged unconcernedly. “First is first.”

Jaxar, Bron and I had all grown up together since our childhood homes were next to each other. They were both fishermen, like most of the village, while I was a shipwright, like my family had been for generations.

“Did either o’ ya hear that Rodrick was back in town?” I asked.

They both shook their heads. “Nah,” replied Bron. “Was busy working my catch all day.” Jaxar indicated the same.

I shrugged. “Was wondering if he had any more stories about Redbridge.”

“Bah!” Exclaimed Bron. “Ye know those are all just shit. He’s a storyteller, ‘cause he’ll always get a cup mead or two out o’ it.”

“No!” I denied. “Ain’t like that. Rodrick is good folk.”

Just then, the door to the tavern opened again and Rodrick entered. I waved at him, and he began to make his way over to us.

“’ello boys. How’s the drinks?”

Bron had an annoyed look on his face, as he always did when Rodrick called them boys. “Good,” I replied. “How was the road?”

“Blah, long and weary. I’m starting t’ get too old t’ be going back ‘n forth so much. Good t’ see my daughter though.” I nodded in sympathy. I did not envy him, having a child getting married in a far-off town, even if it was as interesting as Redbridge.

“Any troubles?” Jaxar asked.

Rodrick made a so-so gesture. “Not much. On the way back though, I ‘ad some trouble buying grain from my usual farmers. Old Tom and Jerry were going at it again. Tom didn’t want t’ sell anything t’ me this time, and Jerry called him a fool, so they started arguing again. Tom wanted t’ do a half-plant instead o’ selling, ‘cause he thinks winter is coming soon.”

“What’s a half-plant?” I asked.

“Eh? A half-plant is when a farmer plants another load o’ grain instead of selling it. Usually plant on their fallow field halfway through the season and try t’ get another harvest before winter. Trouble is timing it, ‘cause the fallow field won’t give as much grain as usual, and if winter don’t hit then you wasted the grain.”

“Bah!” exclaimed Bron. “Enough talk o’ farmers. Tell us one o’ your made-up stories o’ Redbridge. Arren over ’ere was mooning o’er ’em earlier!”

“Was not!” I retorted. “I was just wondering, was all.”

Jaxar just laughed into his cup.
Rodrick cleared his throat. “Well, things are going good up there. My daughter is happy. But! They did make a new kind of fish paste!”

“Fish paste?” Jaxar asked.

“Aye. It’s real interestin’. Sells for a lot more than regular fish. Couldn’t get ‘em to tell me how t’ make it though.”

Jaxar looked interested. “How much more we talkin’?”

Rodrick took a sip of mead and shrugged. “Not sure for the future. But I got about twice the coin than if it had been just fish.”

Jaxar and Bron’s jaws dropped.

Bron said indignantly, “Oi! ‘Yer having us on!” He turned to me and said, “See! Told ‘ye he’s always full o’ shit! No one pays twice for fish! No one!”

Rodrick frowned. “Watch ‘yer mouth there, boy. I ain’t no liar. The paste was worth good coin.”

I leaned in a bit and said, “Think you could get that recipe off ‘em?”

“Mayhaps in a few years. I’ll try next summer. They might not want t’ give it up.” He leaned into the table a bit, nodded wisely and continued loudly, “Remember boys, not all that glitters is gold! The boys up at Redbridge know that!”

With that, Rodrick drank the last of his beer and slammed the empty cup on the table. “Well boys, I’m off t’ see the wife. Take care now, you hear?”

After he left the tavern, Bron said angrily, “Full o’ shit I tell ‘ye!” He looked right at me and said, “Don’t go filling ‘yer head with that nonsense, ‘ye hear? Twice the coin my ass.” He shook his head. “Only thing he said that wasn’t full o’ shit was the last bit. I’m off t’ see my wife too. See you on the morrow, men.”

Jaxar laughed quietly as Bron left. Rodrick had always gotten Bron in a pissy mood.

“Well,” Jaxar said. “That’s a good enough time as any t’ go home too. Haven’t, uh, been with the wife since this morning, if ‘ye know what I mean.”

I just shook my head in mockery. “Always tryn’ find another way t’ say it. If you ain’t careful though, ‘ye gonna have another mouth t’ feed.”

“Nah, me eldest is gonna marry next moon and move out. One less mouth t’ feed, so I can get another one.”

I laughed. “Me ‘n Salna are done with more kids. Too much work. We’ve been blessed t’ have so many still with us.”

Jaxar nodded and said his goodbyes. After he left, I swirled the last of my mead in my cup. All that talk got me thinking. It had been a few days, since he and Salna had gone at it. Maybe he ought to pull her aside tonight? Once and a while, ought t’ not get ‘em a child.

With a new-found desire, I drained the last of my mead and headed home.
**Interlude: Five**

**A/N:** So, some people have said that they wanted who the POV is to be clearer, preferably by naming the chapter as such. However, any regular chapter will have Michael as the POV. Any interlude has a POV from anybody BUT Michael. I won’t list out the name of the person, but I do try to make it clear in the writing, through thought process, accent, interactions with others, location, etc. It’s somewhat of a writing challenge for me to communicate without labels, so I won’t be titling the chapters with the name of the characters’ POV. Just check to see if the title of the chapter has ‘Interlude’ in it. Cheers

**Ninth day, Tenth Moon, 247 AC**

A shiver passed through me as I stood atop the walls staring out into the darkness. The summer snow reduced my vision to almost nothing in the dark, and the torches along the wall did little to help.

I did a little shuffle to shift my weight around and leaned on my spear a little more.

The cold wind blowing in from the north cut right through my clothing and armor making me regret trading places with Benjen. The wind swept in an hour ago, coming in fast and carrying snow throughout Deepwood.

Be a guard they said. Fight, and be like a warrior of old. Train, work hard, and you can become a legend.

Fuckers.

I guess they wouldn’t get anyone if they said: Stand here and stare into the darkness for the rest of your life.

A particularly cold wind sent me closer to the protection of the tower, where there was less wind. Bloody piss. Where is Trent with those warm cloaks? He left half an hour ago. I swear, if he’s taking a break in front of a fire while I freeze, I’ll beat him bloody.

Finally, the door to the tower cracked open revealing a strip of light onto the floor. Trent scurried out, wrapped in his own cloak, and made his way to me.

“Finally, what took so long?” I growled.

I put the cloak on myself and reveled in the heat it provided. “It wasn’t my fault, Bill!” He shouted over the wind. “Castellan is gonna be pissed in the morning! Rats got into the storage area ‘n destroyed some o’ the cloaks.”

I glared at him. “Tell me I’m not covered in rat piss.”

“You are not covered in rat piss,” he replied unconvincingly. “On the bright side, I’ve got something for you!”

He handed me a cup. I took a whiff and smelled the familiar scent of vodka. I took a big swig of it, and felt the warmth radiate throughout my body.

“Ahh, that’s the stuff.” I said in pleasure.
“Too right. Grabbed some from Benjen’s stash. If he ain’t gonna be here t’ suffer with us on this miserable night, he ought t’ pay up.”

I laughed and took another swig before passing it back to Trent. He finished it off and quickly put it back in the tower.

“What did you end up using ‘yer extra coin for?” Trent asked.

“Got some good meat from the tavern ‘n treated myself t’ some o’ that brandy stuff. Heard some o’ captains sayin’ how good it was. Bloody expensive, but so good!”

“That shit costs a lot o’ coin, but I ‘eard good things. I ended up getting some new bedding for the home. Wife’s been going on ‘n on about it,” replied Trent.

“Bah, you give ‘yer wife too much. She ought t’ know her place.”

“Happy wife, happy life.”

I shrugged. “Rather a good drink. Drinks help me forget this shit job.”

“Come on man, it ain’t so bad. We’re the first line o’ defence!”

I glared at him. “That’s shit they just say t’ make you feel good.”

“O’ course it isn’t!”

“We’re here to make Master Glover look good. It’d be dumb to have a castle with no guards. But ain’t no one attacking here.”

“Oh yeah? What about them wildings? They came down here 20 years ago!”

“Great, so every twenty years we oughtta be worried?”

Trent rolled his eyes. “Nah, ‘yer being dumb. There’s the Ironborn and bandits too.”

It was my turn to roll my eyes. “Ironborn? They don’t come around here.”

“Exactly! ‘Cause of us! If we weren’t guarding, they would attack.”

“Their scared o’ two men in the dark?”

“And all the ones in the castle! And in the town! Wait. Is this why you eat that garum shit?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean,” he clarified. “You don’t care about the Ironborn? If you buy that garum, that’s coin that goes to them bastards. It’ll buy ‘em swords and armor, and then they’ll come here! It’s a damn fool thing to do!”

I rolled my eyes. “Piss off with that. Ironborn haven’t been here in generations!”

“There are stories about them attacking small villages on the coast!”

I shrugged. “Not here though, and I ain’t ever seen one of those villages or an Ironborn. I ain’t worried.”

“A damn fool, you –“
“Quit chatting like milk maids!” A loud voice bellowed, interrupting our conversation.

Trent and I snapped to attention. A large bearded man emerged from the stairs and into the light of the torch. “Castellan Hardwyn!” We both said.

“You are supposed to be on separate walls, ‘ye curs! On with you! Before I dock your pay!”

“Yes, Castellan Hardwyn!” Trent said.

Trent quickly scurried off to the next wall, while the Castellan gave me the stink eye.

“What are you staring at, guardsmen? You should be looking outwards!”

“Sorry, Castellan Hardwyn!” I replied. I quickly turned around and stared into the darkness of the night.

It was a few minutes before I started to relax again.

Hello darkness, you old fucker.

A/N: So, in the last two chapters, the POV have been kind of sexist in how they treat women. I’ve tried to keep true to medieval perspectives with these characters, since they are not SI’s. So, in case it isn’t clear: Those aren’t my views.
Twenty-second day, Eleventh Moon, 247 AC

“More wine, Ethan?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No more for now. Too early in the day, and as I get older I find I can’t deal with it as I used to.”

Zane piped up from the other side of the table. “Pass it on over here, Michael. It’s too beautiful a day t’ not have a full cup in front of me!”

We were sitting around a large table in the open field by my house. We were having our annual summer family gathering where the entire family, all 26 of us, would gather at our house and spend the day together. The kids would be off playing with each other, whether it be sports, swimming, or some other game. The adults would spend time with each other, and we would cook up a big feast to celebrate.

The date of the gathering was usually the same time each year (barring poor weather), but it had no real significance. A few years ago, all our wives had gotten together and spent the day enjoying themselves, when they realized it would be a good idea to have a day where the whole family could get together.

The older children were currently swimming in the river, while the younger ones were either playing tag or make-believe.

Violet was the eldest child at 17 years old, although many would label her a young woman, she was still my little girl. It was indisputable however, that I had to keep running off boys who were interested in her. I let out an unconscious growl at running off that idiotic Rob the other week. As if he could measure up to my little girl.

Beside me, Ethan gave me a knowing look, seeing where my gaze was pointed. He said, “It’s tough when your little girls grows, eh?”

I grunted. “Bloody, blasted boys. Uncontrollable animals at that age.”

Ethan, Koryn and Zane all laughed. “And you were much better? Please!” said Zane mockingly.

“Of course, I was!” I protested.

“You were better,” Ethan conceded. “Not by much though.”

“Just you wait, you two!” I wagged my finger at Koryn and Zane. “Soon your daughters will be grown, and you’ll have to fight off the boys!”

Zane had the most children of us all, at 7 living children, with four sons and three daughters. Jeran his eldest son was 14 years old, followed by Tarla at 11, Ethan at 9, Lucas at 7, Aline at 4, Dorthy at 19 months, and Denzin at 3 months.

Koryn had six children, with three sons and three daughters. Bran, his eldest, was 12 years old, followed by Dacey at 10, Jesryn at 7, Tobas at 6, Riler at 3, and Kegan at 13 months.

With my five children: Violet at 17, Evelyn at 10, Ryden at 7, Arthur at 6, and Anari at 3; that gave
Ethan and Jess a total of 18 grandchildren, which was completely shocking given the community average was much lower. They themselves only had 3 living children, and only a few still-living distant relatives, so this was a huge change for them. Similar stories played out in the village, with more and more children living and growing, though not to the same extent as our family.

I had lost count of all the things that would make the difference that I had done over the years. Boiling water, soap, pasteurized milk, and even just more plentiful food had done its work.

All these changes had created even more changes. Things like the village being expanded and even named, or even new houses.

I cast my gaze over at my house, which was drastically different from what I had first built. The original, was a log cabin, that had been built into the hill on my property. Now? I had greatly expanded it to fit our family, as we had outgrown our previous home and were very cramped for space. It was now a two-story home built into the side of the hill, with a depressed cellar. It had a roofed porch in the front, which opened into the main area of the kitchen, dining and living room. We had six bedrooms, with three on the main floor, and 3 on the top floor, with another room for storage. The masonry heating and stove for cooking provided heat throughout the house. I had even went above and beyond a little and created a deck on top of the first floor, since the second floor was only half the size of the first floor. It created a spectacular view at dusk.

It had taken a lot of work to build the house, and very little of the original remained. The original plan was to just expand it, but as I had begun to dig I started to encounter problems. My foundation was already much weaker than I had anticipated, as the wood had begun to rot and warp. I ended up redoing the foundation and doing it properly this time. With stone and concrete I set a solid foundation for the house to rest upon and help to prevent rot and mold from forming. I was immensely pleased with the final result, even if I hadn't been happy when I first started encountering the problems.

While I was redoing the house, I realized it was the perfect time to finally get some indoor plumbing. I had to get a lot of help to get not only the materials I needed, but to get it built while I was building the house simultaneously. There was a lot of trial and error getting things done, and I was still a bit nervous about the upcoming winter.

The main piece was a water tower, that was powered by a small windmill on top. I debated endlessly with myself on the size of the beast but decided having something larger than I needed would be better than smaller. It pulled water from an enclosed well and put it into the tower. Copper pipes then fed the water underground to my house. This then fed a kitchen sink, toilet and bathtub. I did my best to make sure that the pipes were close to heat sources so that it would not freeze, but I was nervous as I had never done anything like this before. The toilet was a basic thing made of metal and wood, but it beat using an outhouse any day.

The wastewater however, was still an issue I was working on. A basic septic tank was simple enough, as I had experience with those from back on Earth. What was causing me trouble was dealing with the water after that step. I knew that one form of treatment was putting it through a wetlands environment, and the vegetation there would clean the water, but unfortunately, I had never dealt with one first hand. So, I had rigged up something I had hoped would work, and so far, it was. I mean, I had no intention of drinking the water it produced, but it looked clear and didn’t stink, so I didn’t feel bad about letting it run back into the river. I was concerned how it would handle the winter and hoped that the subsurface flow that seemed to be present would last throughout the winter and keep the system working.

It was a lot of work and worry, but it sure was glorious to be able to shit inside a house again.
Loud barking shook me from my reverie. I looked back over to where Violet was and saw her playing around with Mimi, while her cousins watched on. Mimi was Violet’s dog, after her previous dog, Max, had finally passed from old age. Mimi was a corgi-mix, from a line that started with Max, but was significantly larger than Max had been.

It seemed that Violet and Mimi were having a race, with Violet standing on her hands and Mimi using her front legs. It was another exercise that Violet had started doing to practice her skinchanging. Doing two different complex maneuvers simultaneously helped her skill, or so she said. I was uncomfortable with it still, but only in the fear that others may look down on her for the ability. The rest of the family had taken it in stride, and Violet had dedicated a lot of time to figuring out what she could do with it, and how to do it better. The rest of the family was initially shocked, but very accepting of it, though no one else showed any signs of it. Or perhaps, they were just not old enough to show signs.

“Children! Come and wash your hands for dinner!” Nyra called from the house.

A stampede of children made their way to the house, while Koryn and I went and brought the freshly cooked meat to the table. Our wives brought out the food that had been in the house and ushered the children to the table after washing their hands.

We had a separate table set up to hold all the food, sort of like a buffet style, and I started to cut the lamb and place it on everybody’s plate as they passed. It took a while to serve everyone, and the delicious smells of the food caused my stomach to grumble loudly while I waited.

The lamb was made in a beautiful, thick, wine sauce, and served as the main dish of the meal. Alongside it we had, creamy mashed potatoes, and cooked carrots and onions. The aroma of cheese and freshly baked bread permeated the air, as they were still hot from the oven. They were already sliced and had a layer of fresh-churned butter atop them. There were sauces were scattered throughout the table, fresh honey from the nearby hives, as well as some other homemade recipes.

There was a large variety of drinks, both alcoholic and not. Mead, cider, beer and wine were the drinks of choice among the adults, though some of the older children received a cup. The children drank fruit juices and milk with their meals, and I felt a brief pang of regret that they would never experience drinking pop at a family party.

For dessert, we had pastries with berries and maple sugar. There was pie and there were various sweets to choose from, though the adults all had to make sure that the children didn’t sneak any before they had finished eating their dinner.

I quickly loaded up my plate once everyone was finished and took my seat.

With such a large group, no one had bothered waiting for anyone else, but that was tradition by this point. The noise we made drowned out the sound of the farm animals, as people talked, laughed and even argued. I tore into a piece of freshly made garlic bread, the smell of which had been taunting me all afternoon. The garlic and the butter that had made my mouth water for so long tasted just as good as it smelled. Good bread made the world go ’round.

As I ate, I savored the moment. The taste on my tongue, the laughter in my ears, the sun on my head, the smell of the food, and the companionship of my family.

Life. Was. Wonderful.
A/N: I will release a family tree soon, not to worry. I know it was kind of an info dump of kids, but I did want to highlight some of the things that had been going on in the background, of which, there was many kids.
I cracked my neck as I fitted the new handle into the shovel blade. Over the winter, my septic tank system had worked quite well. The windmill had no issues, and neither did any of my piping. The only issue I had was the wetlands did not drain as nicely as I had hoped. To solve that, I was going to expand my drainage ditch and have some of it exit out into the wetland, creating a bit stronger of a current and hopefully keep it more active throughout the winter.

It wouldn’t help much on the coldest days, but for most of the winter it should hopefully be fine. But, it meant a lot of digging, and I wanted to make sure I had everything I needed before I started.

Koryn, Zane and Ethan were still unsure about whether to add plumbing to their houses as well. It would be a lot of work for them, and there wasn’t enough surety about the plumbing, since I had no idea how it would fair if we had another bitterly cold and long winter like we had back in 230AC. But, if they did, it would help to create more flow to the wetland. At least, I hoped it would.

Nyra and the kids were off with their cousins to go see the cliff for the day. I wanted them out from underfoot while I did my planning and preparation work. I still needed to set my boundaries for the dig once I had finished with the shovels. There was a lot of work ahead for us, trying to get the wetlands working, and a nice break from chores beforehand was a nice treat for the children. Though I imagine they wouldn’t be too thrilled to find out they were expected to have some lessons during the day. Nothing to hard; mostly just mathematical shortcuts for harder problems for the older ones, and some spelling for the younger.

Violet was off with her boyfriend, Tylan, at his farm and was being chaperoned by her cousins Jeran and Bran. Tylan was 19 years old, to Violet’s 20, and was a farmer from the north of Redbridge. They met when Tylan had come into town with his father to sell some of their produce to the thriving village. He was a good enough lad, and they had been ‘dating’ for just over a year now, and I expected him to ask me for permission any day now. Nyra and I had been thinking about it for a while and decided I would say yes. I had long since run off all the local boys, much to their disappointment, and even a few travelers. Nyra was incredibly worried that Violet remained unmarried, but I couldn’t help but be relieved that she wasn’t rushing things. There just wasn’t anyone in the immediate area that was a good fit for my daughter, let alone anyone good enough.

I scratched my beard in thought. Was that conceited?

…Nah, my daughter is just that wonderful.

I heard the dogs begin to bark from the other side of the barn.

I sighed. Hopefully, they weren’t fighting again.

I continued to work on my shovel and finished it in short order. I was quite hungry, but since it was still only mid-morning I decided against taking a break and gathered my supplies for staking out the new ditch.

The barking of the dogs increased in intensity however, and I could hear the other animals getting restless as well.

Damn, I hope it isn’t wolves or some other predator.
I put the shovel down and grabbed the nearby axe and went to exit the barn. A shout had me frozen.

“Where’s ‘e at?!” a rough voice shouted out.

“Oi! The barn door is open! Over ‘ere boys!” Another voice cried out.

A tall man entered the barn. He had black hair and black eyes, with a large, scraggly beard that dominated his face. He wore worn leather clothes with a chainmail vest and a rusty helmet. The smell of blood and salt surrounded him as he stared me down with his cold, hard eyes.

His face was blank, but his posture screamed predator. He adjusted his sword in his hand before he casually began to walk towards me.

The man’s confidence began to unnerve me, so before his fellows could join him, I rushed him, swinging with my axe.

The man parried my axe easily, and lazily reversed his sword, slashing at my stomach. I quickly leaped backwards to avoid the blow and swung again.

I aborted my swing when the man stabbed his sword forward. I leaned to the side and got inside his guard and punched him in the face. The punch briefly stunned the man, but two more men rushed into the barn and surround me.

I looked around for something to help me, but realized I was cornered.

Another two men enter the barn, and the five men begin to circle me.

“Give up ‘ye old fool!” A man growled.

I try and lash out at him, but he just leaps back with a laugh.

Another man laughs and makes a game of it; trying to startle me by dashing in while my back was turned.

They quickly tired of the game, and the man behind me finally tried to end it and came forward, but I whirled around and swing the axe at him. He raises his own sword to block it, but I adjust my aim and sank it into his unprotected torso.

I could see the shock and disbelief in the man’s face, but another man tackled me from behind and threw me onto the floor.

The man ground my face into the floor and growled, “Now ‘ye done it.” I could feel him shift slightly as he said, “How’s Artie?”

The man I had embedded my axe in, Artie, was making a racket as he cried, but I could not see him from my position.

“Bastard has gone and killed ‘im. His insides are all on the outside.” A third man said, in a bewildered tone.

Artie’s crying increased and the mention of him dying.

“Don’t you worry, Artie. What is dead may never die.” The fourth man said, calmly.

A gurgling sound replaced the crying, as I felt Artie’s body feebly thrashing on the ground.
Taking advantage of the man on my back’s distraction, I quickly rolled onto my back, and tried to dislodge him.

The man reacted quickly, and stayed on top of me, but I was able to free an arm.

The man put his hands around my neck and started to squeeze. “Fuck off, ‘ye bastard!” The man growled, angrily.

With my free hand I struggled to find leverage to push him off me but couldn’t find anything.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the fifth man see me struggle, and he began to walk over to assist his partner.

I quickly drew back my fist and punched the man atop me in the chin, snapping his head back.

The man collapsed like a sack of potatoes, and I struggled to push him off me.

By the time I had started to push him off me, the fifth man had approached me, and he had a furious scowl on his face as he glared at me.

The last thing I saw, was his fist flying towards my face.
Interlude: Six

**Thirtieth day, Ninth Moon, 250 AC (several hours before the last chapter)**

A loud bang disturbed the night.

Bronn sat upright in his bed, listening for the source of the noise.

A feminine shriek sounded from a nearby house.

Bronn leapt from his bed, urging his wife to get the children and prepare to run into the forest, before running outside with his spear.

A quick look around showed his neighbor, Jax, also holding a weapon looking around for any danger.

“Where’d the scream come from, Jax?” Bronn said quietly.

Jax indicated his head towards the center of the village. “Smoke,” he said, with a quiet focus.

Laughter echoed out over the village, and shouts and bangs increased in frequency.

“RAID! TO ARMS!” Jax shouted.

As he and Jax ran towards the middle of the village in the pre-dawn light, he saw his wife and children, along with Jax’s family run out of the village.

Turning around a corner, they saw a three men break down the door of a house and enter it with whooping laughs.

Bronn’s heart sank at the scene. Many of the doors along the street also had broken doors, and the screams. One of the homes had caught fire, which was quickly spreading, and bathed the street in a demonic glow.

Jax pointed to the house the group just entered and said, “Let’s get ‘em. Only three of ‘em, I reckon with surprise on our side we can get ‘em easy enough.”

Bronn nodded. Any plan at this point, was a good plan.

Bronn led the way with his spear, while Jax moved behind him with his axe at the ready.

Bronn cautiously entered the house but didn’t see anyone immediately. There was mud leading to the back rooms, but also a single set of footprints leading to the kitchen. Indicating to Jax that they would go to the kitchen first, the pair quietly moved through the house.

Peaking his head in the room, Bronn saw a man in patchwork armor going through the food stores, seemingly ignoring his surroundings. The man was wearing a chainmail vest, with a helmet and shoulder guards, but had sheathed his sword and placed his shield on the ground beside him.

Bronn took an involuntary swallow at his daring but took a calming breath to fortify him for what he knew he had to do.

Sneaking up behind the man Bronn braced himself and stabbed forward with all his might, into the back of the man, pinning him to the wall.
The spear did not break all the way through the chainmail, but Jax quickly rushed forwards and swung his axe at the man’s neck.

The body fell to the floor in a thump, that seemed to echo throughout the house.

Brons and Jax stood silent for a moment, wondering if they had been discovered.

When a shriek from Maddy, the woman of the house, sounded from the bedrooms they knew they remained unheard.

Jax quickly stripped the dead man of his armor and equipped himself.

This time Jax took the lead with the armor and shield, while Bronn followed behind watching his back.

Jax edged along the wall to the bedrooms, and carefully poked his head around the corner.

What he saw most have been horrifying, as he immediately stilled with rage.

Jax whispered to Bronn, “Two men. One on the bed, facing the other way. Other is going through their storage chests. I’ll take the storage one, you take the bed. Bed has no armor on. Remember, nice and quiet.”

Brons nodded his agreement and waited for Jax to make the first move.

Jax slipped into the room, but a squeaky floorboard gave him away. The man going through the storage chests glanced up, expecting to see his comrade but was shocked to find armed villagers.

Jax surged forward, while Bronn sprinted to the bed, where a naked man had a shocked look as Bronn barreled towards him.

He jabbed forward with his spear, impaling the man in the gut sending the man backwards onto the bed.

Brons quickly leaped onto the bed and ripped the spear out of the man, while the man screamed in pain, and thrust forward again into the man’s screaming mouth, silencing him.

A quick look showed that Jax had been able to kill his man as well.

Jax caught his eye and nodded. “Grab their armor,” he said. Jax cautiously approached Maddy and eyed her dead husband’s body. “Maddy? You need to grab your children and run into the forest, okay?”

She gave a teary-eyed nod, adjusted her ripped nightgown, and ran out of the room, seeking her children.

Once Bronn had armored himself, the two of them took off and moved to the next house.

It was empty by the time they arrived, so they left to investigate another house when they found another, larger, group of raiders.

The group easily surrounded them. “Put ‘em down, boys,” one of the men said, in a mocking voice.

Jax and Bronn glanced at each other, not seeing any other options.

They placed their weapons on the ground and put their hands up in the air.
The raider who spoke nodded in satisfaction. “Smart,” he said, “Take ‘em to Marion.”

They were led to the village center, where a large group of villagers had already been gathered. A few raiders had herded the group into a small circle, while others emptied out the nearby buildings, including the tax barn a street over.

Over the next few minutes, a few small groups of villagers were escorted to them, but there remained frightfully few villagers before him.

Bonn hoped that meant that most, like his family, had been able to escape into the forest.

Once it became apparent that no more villagers were coming, a man approached the group of villagers, accompanied by two other armed men.

The man eyed the group with disdain and said, “Listen up. I don’t give a shit about you, or your shit village. I am looking for one thing. But the longer I look, the longer my men will stay. The longer they stay, the more they will take.”

His gaze swept over the huddled group of villagers. “Where is the golden farmer?”

The villagers glanced at each other.

Bonn was just confused. What was this man talking about? It looked like no one else knew either, but everyone was too scared to speak up.

The apparent leader of the Ironborn, for now that the rising sun had started to lighten the sky, their features became plain to see, scowled at our silence.

He nodded towards one of the men behind him. “Follow the roads out of the village, Barrick. Find him. If you come across any villagers, kill them; we don’t have time to fool around with them. We have enough hostages here to get any information.”

The man, Barrick, nodded once and jogged away calling for some men to follow him.

The leader spat at us and walked back over to the rest of his men who were dumping their loot in the village center.

Bonn and the others sat, huddled together as they watched their livelihoods get ripped from them just as some of their loved ones had been earlier.

A few minutes later, Barrick returned and started talking to the leader again.

Bonn strained listened in, curious as to their apparent goal here.

“Two roads leading out o’ the village, Marion. One looks more heavily used, t’ the south, but no farms right next t’ the village.”

“Follow the heavily used one, Barrick. The Golden Farmer would have a lot of people going t’ him,” replied the leader, Marion.

“But the Golden Farmer is smart, you said. Won’t he be on the less used road? Trick anyone from finding ‘im?”

Marion glared at Barrick. “Don’t be a fool. No one thinks like that.”

Barrick raised his chin in defiance. “You said he is a tricky man. Hiding in stories and the like.”
Sounds like a tricky thing to do.”

Marion scowled and turned to one of the Ironborn that was standing behind him. “Grab one of those villagers.”

The man approached our group and grabbed Tyn from the group. Her husband leapt to his feet to defend her, but one of the guards hit him in the head with the hilt of his sword, knocking the man unconscious.

Tyn was dragged over to Marion by her hair and thrown onto her knees before him.

“Where,” Marion growled, “Is the Golden Farmer?”

Tyn trembled in fear. Marion backhanded her across the face. “Answer me!” He shouted.

“I- I don’t know what ‘yer talking about.” Tyn stuttered out.

“THE GOLDEN FARMER!” Marion roared. “I’ve put it together! I’m no fool and will not be treated as one! Where is the rich farmer?”

“Ye- ‘ye mean Michael?”

“Is he rich, you fool woman?”

“Y- Yes.”

“Where?”

“The so- south road. Then east, he’s the la- last farm on the road.”

Marion gave her a cruel smile. He looked up to Barrick and said, “You heard her. Off you go. Find the gold and bring the man back here.”

Barrick nodded and jogged back to his men, and they left the village.

Bonn prayed that all the farmers would be able to escape.

Marion shouted out to the rest of the Ironborn around him, “Put the rest o’ villagers in the large barn over there and lock ‘em in!” He paused for a moment and looked right at Tyn. “You best hope we catch him, bitch. Or we’ll take it out on you first.”

As the door to the barn was shut in our faces, and the events of the day finally began to sink into the shocked villagers, Bronn prayed for these Ironborn to get what was coming to them.

A/N: Per a reader recommendation, I wrote this interlude in third-person. Let me know if you like it and think I should continue or go back to first-person.
Act 1: Chapter 33

Thirtieth day, Ninth Moon, 250 AC

Awareness came back to me in a rush, as the ice-cold water was dumped on me.

I tried to surge to my feet but found myself tied to the main pole of the barn. I cracked open an eye to find myself surrounded by four angry men and a bucket.

One of the men stepped forward and punched me in the gut, without warning.

I erupted into a fit of wheezing as I tried to regain my breath and move past the pain. The man punched me twice more before stepping back.

“You killed Artie,” said the man, who had entered the barn first, originally.

My stomach was on fire, but I coughed out, “You slit his throat.”

The man shrugged. “He was a dead man, still breathing. That’s on you. Where’s the gold?”

Gold? They were just after gold?

“I don’t have any gold. Got some silver though. Just take it and leave.”

The man started to laugh, and his fellows followed his lead.

“Funny. Tig, go search the house. Seban, take the rest o’ the barn; Carron, look outside for a buried pit.”

“And what’ll you be doing, Barrick?” Asked Tig.

“Watching the prisoner, you fool.” Replied Barrick.

After the rest of the men moved off, the leader, Barrick, said to me, “Well. We can do this the hard way, or the easy way.”

The way he said it, reminding me of a cheesy one-liner, had me start laughing, heedless of the danger I was in.

At my laughter, Barrick scowled. He punched me again in the gut, but I didn’t stop laughing.

I could feel the hysteria building in my gut and felt that if I stopped laughing I would start crying. Barrick punched me in the face and I could feel my nose break before the pain erupted.

“Fuck!” I swore.

“Tell me, where the gold is! I know it is here! No games!”

“I don’t know what you mean!” I pleaded. “I’ve never had a lot of gold. I’ve got some silvers, like I said. I ain’t a Lord.”

He looked me in the eye, and seeing my earnest, though pained expression, he swore and marched out of the barn.
I remained alone for a while, before I heard their voices start talking outside.

“Find anything, Seban?” Asked Barrick.

“Nah,” replied Seban, “I didn’t even find any o’ that gold tha’ grew on plants. Got some drink though. The alcohol is real strong. One looks like water, the other like wine.”

I could hear them pouring out my vodka and brandy into cups. Anger rolled through my stomach. How dare they? Coming into my home? Stealing my things and holding me prisoner?

“He doesn’t have any gold, or so he claims,” said Barrick.

The other men erupted into an argument. “The fuck he does!” Said Tig. I could hear him throw down my bag of coins onto the ground. “See,” he said, “There’s plenty of silver, he’s just hiding the gold!”

“Maybe it’s with his wife?” Carron said.

“That’s dumb, why would she carry it around?” Replied Barrick.

“What was the riddle again?” Tig interrupted.

“The riddle? You mean the one that Marion found out?”

“Yeah, that one. How’s it go?”

“Something like: All he has glitters like gold. Or something like that.”

I felt confused. All I have glitters like gold? What the fuck? What does that even mean?

“I think I understand!” Exclaimed Tig.

The men entered the barn again, and Tig led them over to my machinery.

“Right here! See this? It’s metal. And it ought t’ glitter like gold, but he’s a tricky one! Like you said, Barrick! So, he’s gone n’ painted it t’ hide it!” Tig said proudly.

Barrick rapped the metal portion of the threshing machine with his sword. A dull clang rang out.

Barrick facepalmed. “You idiot. That’s just iron!”

Tig’s face went red in embarrassment. “Wait! He’s… He’s so tricky, that he’s gone n’ hid it inside the iron! Yeah, that’s gotta be it!”

“And how’s he done that, you fool?” asked Barrick exasperatedly.

Tig stammered out, “I don’t right know! Ask him!”

The silence was deafening.

My mind was still mulling over that riddle. It sounded so nonsensical. But familiar at the same time.

Tig, fed up with the silence, rushed over to me and pointed his sword at my head. He said in a low voice, “Tell me how you hid the gold, or I’ll start cutting bits off.”

I blinked in shock at his threat.
Holy shit. He looks serious. Wait…

That means I’m being tortured. Taking me prisoner and hurting me till I talk…. That’s torture.

I’m being tortured. I’m actually being tortured. What the fuck. Holy shit, this is a real torture situation. This isn’t a story of someone in some far off, barbaric place.

…

Fuck. Oh, fuck.

My lack of response pissed off Tig, who moved his sword back and eyed my foot as he prepared to swing.

Before he could swing downwards, and arrow sprouted from his throat. He blinked in shock before falling to the ground with a thud.

I stared in disbelief at his body. I quickly turned to look at the other three men and saw another was down on the ground with an arrow sticking out from his chest.

The other two men immediately picked up their shields and hid behind them.

They were talking in whispers and I couldn’t overhear them.

It was still silent, which was odd. What happened to the animals?

Three dogs cantered into the room, looking like fierce predators. Mimi, looked unusually ferocious, especially alongside Buddy and Willie, our livestock guardian dogs. They all had a seriousness to them that indicated that Violet was here!

The Ironborn quickly but confidently moved over to me and shouted out, “Get your damn dogs out of here, or we kill the old man!”

The dogs paused for a moment, before Koryn shouted from outside, “Put your weapons down, and we won’t kill you!”

Seban and Barrick each quietly snorted at that.

“Pull your dogs out o’ the barn, ‘n maybe we’ll talk!” Barrick shouted.

The dogs reluctantly exited the barn and disappeared from view.

“Now, let’s talk about you leaving!” Koryn said.

Barrick indicated that Seban should go near the door to ambush the next person to enter.

I didn’t like that much, so as Seban passed by me, I lashed out with my leg, tripping Seban, while shouting, “Get in here!!”

Seban tucked into an awkward roll and came to his feet but was met with three dogs who jumped onto him and tore into his neck and arms.

Seeing his partner go down, Barrick tried to escape by smashing the nearby window and attempting to jump through it.

Unfortunately for him, Koryn and Bran has entered the barn with their bows drawn and seeing him
flee they quickly brought him down.

Violet entered after and ran over to me, shouting. “Dad! Are you alright?”

I groaned in relief as she cut through my bonds and I felt the circulation return to my hands.

“Roughed over a bit, sweetie. I’ll be alright though.” I replied.

While Violet had been releasing me, Koryn and Bran had been making sure that the Ironborn were actually dead.

As Violet helped me to my feet, she helped me walk over to where Barrick was laying on the ground. As we approached, we could hear him making a low moaning sound. Bran rolled him over with his foot, so that his bow was at the ready in case Barrick tried anything.

The man’s mouth was bloody, and his eyes darted around the room in panic.

“How many more of you are there?” Asked Bran.

Barrick kept moaning and did not answer.

“Answer me, you pig! How many more?!” Bran shouted.

Barrick gave a low cough. “What is dead, may never die.” With a final breath, the life went out of Barrick.

“You’re dead now, you fuck,” cursed Bran. He turned to me and said, “We met others fleeing from the village. It’s under attack, but we don’t know how many there are.”

I sat down heavily on a chair near my workbench; I was exhausted and felt wrung out. “How did you find out?”

“Well, we were leaving this morning,” Violet said, “and as we got nearer to the village we could smell smoke, so we continued on cautiously. We ran across some of the villagers fleeing in the forest, and they told us what happened. We wanted to get a closer look, so we left the road, but we were soon passed by five men jogging down the road to our farms. So, we ran back as quick as we could. We managed to warn a few farms, but the raiders got ahead of us; it looked like they were coming straight here. Grandpa saw them coming and ran into the forest, but they didn’t chase him. Him and Jeran went to go find the rest of the family at the sunset cliff, while Bran and I continued on.”

Violet took a breath to drink some water, as she and Bran both looked tired and thirsty. She continued, “Uncle Zane ran off too before we got there, and we got to Uncle Koryn’s just in time to see him run. They looked briefly at the house but kept coming to our farm. When we finally got here, we saw they caught you. And, well, you know the rest.”

“And the rest of the family?” I asked.

Violet gave a reassuring smile. “Safe. One of the dogs, Trevor, is with them now. I sent him along once you were safe. They are coming back now.”

“Good. Anyone have any more water?” I asked.

Bran handed me his flask, and I took a long, refreshing swig of water.

I was tired, and I hurt all over, but the water energized me a little. I took a moment to just relax on the chair, while we waited for the rest of the family.
It was a few minutes before they all came rushing into the barn. The reunions were teary eyed, but it felt good to have Nyra in my arms again.

It took a while for everyone to settle down, and then Koryn asked, “Now what? These Ironborn came right here ‘n ignored everything else. They probably won’t just steal from the village and then leave.”

Ethan and I shared a haggard glance.

Zane stood up and said, “We can’t just do nothing! This is our land! I say we take the fight to them!”

“And how are we t’ do that, son?” Asked Ethan.

“We can gather the villagers who fled into the forest and fight!” Retorted Zane.

“That will take too long,” I interjected. “We need a good plan. Someone pass me that map I have on the wall over there.” Ryden passed me the map, and I continued. “Okay, how about Zane, Koryn, and I head on down the village, while everyone else heads back the cliffs.”

Ryden was about to interrupt, but I cut him off. “No Ryden, we need to look over the young ones. You need to watch over your younger siblings and cousins.” At his reluctant nod, I went on. “Okay, Zane, Koryn, and I will head on to the village, following the road but not actually on it. We will need to go slow and fight out how many are actually there. It will take too long to search the woods for people, but we might be able to get those still inside the village to help us fight. Now, why don’t some of the women go and collect supplies for us. Weapons and armor for the three of us, along with some medical supplies; and some medical supplies, food, and weapons for the rest of you.”

As the group dispersed to their tasks, I groaned as I stood up and tried to get my body limber. It was going to be a long day.
Act 1: Chapter 34

Thirtieth day, Ninth Moon, 250 AC

The rustling of leaves was the only sound our passage made.

The three of us, and Mimi, were stalking alongside the road on the way back to Redbridge while keeping an eye out for any more Ironborn. It seemed they hadn’t sent any reinforcements or set out any patrols, which while lucky for us, did little to help my own anxiety.

As we moved through the dappled sunlight, I tried to picture it as a simple hunt. I was just going looking for a deer, or maybe even a squirrel. A nice, small, friendly squirrel.

As we approached the first of two bridges we needed to cross, our pace slowed to a crawl. Eventually, we began to actually crawl forward so that we could examine the other side of the river.

We were southeast of the village, and still a way out, so there shouldn’t be any guards at the bridge, but we weren’t taking any chances.

Koryn looked back at me and whispered, “Looks clear. You want to run first?”

I nodded and replied, “Cover me?”

At his nod, Koryn and Zane both nocked an arrow and rose to a crouch.

With my heart thumping in my chest, I rose up onto my feet and starting to sprint across the bridge. My feet thudded loudly in the silence, but I could barely hear it over my chest.

As soon as I reached the other side I dove into the trees and waited a moment. I wasn’t shot, and I didn’t hear anyone shouting.

I nocked an arrow of my own and looked around. No one was there.

Feeling a bit foolish I stood up and waved over to where I knew Zane and Koryn to be. They joined me a moment later.

We continued along the road as it began to turn north, but we slowed our pace as we got nearer to the village. By the time the bridge was in sight, we were constantly crouched and moving from tree to tree.

What I wouldn’t give for a bird’s eye view of the situation. Unfortunately for us, Violet had been mostly unsuccessful in using her skinchanging abilities on animals other than dogs so far. She had some minor abilities with different animals, but nothing like her skill with dogs.

As we approached the second bridge, we found our first patrol. Two men stood guarding the road, but not really paying attention, as they were quietly talking to each other.

I looked to Koryn and Zane and whispered, “Zane you take the one on the right; Koryn the left. I’ll take care of any misses, but we’ll have to sprint over to them if they don’t die immediately.”

At their nods, we nocked our arrows and they drew their back and loosed. Their arrows flew true; Zane’s hit his target in the chest and the man went down with a cry, while Koryn’s arrow hit his target, but on an angle, and bounced off the man’s armor.
The man gaped at us and shouted, “ATTAC-“

His cry for help was cut off by my follow-up arrow, and he went down without further protest. By the time I got to my feet, Zane and Koryn were already across the bridge and silencing the last man.

We waited a moment, to see if the man’s cry for help was heard, but we heard and saw nothing.

Zane said, “You two ought to grab the bodies and drag ‘em off the road. I’ll keep watch.”

The man who went down to Zane’s arrow was wearing shitty armor, that included a chainmail vest, but was made of butted links instead of riveted. I ignored that while I searched the rest of his body since the armor we had stripped from the ones on the farm had been better. I found a few coins and trinkets, but nothing else of value; Koryn received about the same.

As we reached the outskirts of the village, we remained inside the tree line while we waited to see if there were any patrols. While we waited, we got Mimi to sneak into the village to see if she could find where the villagers were.

We ended up waiting for about half an hour before Mimi returned, and we did not spot any patrols during that time.

When Mimi returned I unrolled my map and asked, “Can you point out where the villagers are?” She placed her paw over the tax barn. “How many are there?” She shook her head, indicating she didn’t know. “Guards?” She tapped her paw twice in front of the barn. “Where are the rest of the Ironborn?” She tapped the village center and a spot along the shoreline. “Are the ones on the shore guarding the boat?” She tapped her paw ten times.

Koryn let out a low whistle. “Damn. That’s a lot.”

I nodded in agreement. “Yeah, so that’s five at my farm, two on the road, two guarding the villagers, ten at the boat, and more at the village center. So how many in total do you think? Maybe 50 men?”

“Probably. They normally leave a good chunk back at the boats, so that sounds about right,” Zane replied.

“If we attack the boat, the ones in the village will know. Same if we go the other way. How can we get them all?” Asked Koryn.

Mimi let out a little whine and placed her paw on the map a little bit further down the shore than where she indicated the boat was. She then rolled over and played dead.

“Are you saying there is a grave there? Of Ironborn?” I asked. She nodded, so I continued, “How many?” She tapped six times. “Okay, so they have probably 37 people? And there are another 13 dead. Were there a lot of villagers in the barn?” Mimi gave a little shrug. “Sort of?” She nodded.

“Damn, okay. We need more people to attack with us,” I said, grimly. “How’s this for a plan? Koryn and Zane, you both go and spend the next hour combing through the woods. See if you can spot anyone to help us and send anyone else you find the sunset cliff. Meet back here in an hour. I’m going to take a closer look at the village and see if I can get a better guess on numbers and layout. Depending on that and how many people you round up, we will either go to the barn to free and arm the villagers and then attack the Ironborn, or the three of us do that while the men you gather attack the ones at the boat.”

Zane shrugged. “Sounds like a plan.”
“So, if we don’t have enough people, we just ignore the boat guards for later?” Koryn asked, worriedly.

“About all, we can do. I mean, if we can manage to fight off the twenty or thirty people in the village, what’s another ten at the boats later?” I replied.

Zane snorted. “Aye, true enough.”

I smiled. “So, meet back here in an hour? If any of us gets captured, we still go ahead with the plan. Just pretend you are a guard for a merchant coming in from the north. They might end up sending men there and make it easier for us.”

At their worried faces, I quickly continued, “Don’t worry. We’ll be fine.”

Koryn rolled his eyes. I guessed it seemed hypocritical to say that, as my hands were clenched so hard around my bow that they were white.

Mimi and I watched as they went back into the forest and out of sight.

“Ready?” I asked.

Mimi nodded and led the way into the village.

I hugged the walls and moved slowly, listening out for any movements, but all I could hear was the odd outburst of sound coming from the village center.

A few buildings looked blackened by fire on the south side of the village, but nothing overly serious.

As I edged my head around the corner of the building, I looked into the village center and was disturbed by what I saw.

The Ironborn had a large bonfire in the center going, and they looked to be roasting pigs and chicken. Next to that was a large pile of stolen items: cups, jewelry, food, and whatever else they thought looked valuable. A few houses closer to the shore seemed burned down completely, with another still on fire. The Ironborn appeared to be preventing the village from burning down around them, but little else. There were also a few dead bodies on the ground, that looked like village women, that were strewn upon the ground, some in varying stages of undress.

My stomach was burning with fury, as I counted all of these fuckers I could see. There seemed to be 23 around the fire, and it seemed like no one was coming or going from the center. Judging by the size of the pile, they had already emptied the village.

It didn’t look like we had a lot of time. Once they finished eating and drinking, they would probably realize that they were missing men and that I hadn’t been dragged in yet with my supposed hoard of gold.

I snuck around the village the long way to reach the tax barn and saw the two guards leaning against the wall in front of the door. They didn’t seem to be too alert, but they did look to have decent armor.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t get a count of the villagers locked inside. The barn itself was made so that there were no holes or windows, so I couldn’t peek inside.

With the noise from the Ironborn in the village, and the barn being out of their line of sight, our plan seemed to be possible after all.
There was a little kernel of hope in my chest as I left the village in the same manner that I entered.
Act 1: Chapter 35

Thirtieth day, Ninth Moon, 250 AC

By the time I returned to the meeting spot, I saw that Zane and Koryn were already there – and they were not alone. With them, was eight other men who all greeted me as I joined them.

I asked Koryn how it went, and he replied, “Good. We rounded up these eight here and sent another two men to accompany everyone’s families to the cliff. We came across two guards to the north of the village, but we ambushed them. We also collected armor and weapons from the four dead patrolmen, and we did a quick raid on the blacksmith’s place. No armor from there, but we got a bunch of spears and arrows.”

“How many spears?” I asked.

“About twenty. Between all of us, we have six bows, nine wood axes, three swords, and a bunch of different kinds of armor.”

That was a good haul.

“I got the layout of the Ironborn in the village, without issue. They are mostly in the village center, eating and drinking. There is just two at the barn, but they are out of sight from the main group. I think our plan from before will work. These eight can head down to the boats to attack there-“

“What?!” interrupted one of the villagers, Theon. “You want us t’ split up?”

“Yes, we need to get both groups at the same time!” I replied.

“No, we don’t! We just need t’ scare ‘em off! And get our people out!

“If we don’t fight them off, they will take everything, and just keep coming back!” I retorted.

“Everyone knows tha’ the Ironborn always come back! Ain’t nothing we can do about that!”

“I don’t think these are normal raiders. They came looking for us at the farms! They normally just hit a village and leave. They don’t usually come in the night and attack, and then take prisoners!”

The other men grumbled their agreement to that last point. It was a weird thing for the Ironborn to do.

“Okay, so you eight men will head down to the shore. Find a good spot and wait until you hear us start to attack. If you can, kill any lone travelers that go from the village to the shore. You’ll have three bows with you, so use those as much as possible. The rest of you guard the archers and stay together. Use the spears to keep them off you, while the archers kill them, okay? Once you finish up, head on back to the village and see if you can help.”

The group all nodded in understanding, and with a final sour look from Theon, the group headed down to the shore.

After they had moved off, Zane asked, “So, we free the villagers in the barn first?”

“Yes,” I replied. “We are going to have to get in close to the guards at the barn though. They have what looked like pretty good armor. I don’t think we should risk our arrows not killing them quickly.
If we can open up the barn, send the women and children away and arm the men before the Ironborn are aware, we will be in a good position I think.”

We stalked back into the village, with Mimi leading the way, and I pointed out the two guards to Koryn and Zane. Their positions were unchanged, so I suggested that Zane and I sneak up on them to cut their throats, while Koryn climbed to the top of the nearby house to get a better watch over our surroundings.

Zane and I looped around the street, so that we could come up behind them, and pulled out our daggers as we did so. Zane’s dagger was a typical dagger, in which it was a miniature sword. Mine, on the other hand, was a bit special. I had mine made to be a replica of a Bowie knife, which, while not being as effective against a knight or someone fully armored, it was still good enough to do this job.

As we came to the corner of the last house on the street, I saw that the two guards were standing across the street from the barn, looking at it. Their backs were to the walls but weren’t leaned up against it.

Zane gestured for me to take the lead, and we began to move quietly in behind the two of them. Without anything littering the road, and no recent rainfalls, our movements were silent, but we still moved as little as possible to make sure our armor didn’t make any noise.

Then in a sudden explosion of movement, Zane and I moved our arms forward, tilting back the guards’ heads and opening their throats with our knives. With our hands clamped on their mouths, their deaths were silent and drew no attention.

Lowering their bodies to the ground, Zane ran back to Koryn to grab our weapon stash while I went to free those in the barn.

I knocked on the door quietly and said, “Hello in there? It’s Michael.”

“Michael?!” A hoarse voice called out. I heard movement inside and the voice spoke again, this time closer to the door. “Is it really you?”

“Aye,” I replied. “It is. I’m going to get you out. But you must be quiet, okay?”

Once I heard the voices inside quiet down, I moved off the beam that held the doors shut and opened the doors.

The sunlight displayed about eighty people inside the barn, in a rough state.

I stepped inside and addressed them. “Listen up. I’ve got Zane and Koryn with me and we’ve got a plan to get these Ironborn out of here. We’ve got weapons for everyone who wants to fight. But first, all the women and children are going to get out of the village and head to the sunset cliff, okay?”

The group began to separate as the men, and some of the older boys, came forward to help fight. Koryn and Zane distributed weapons and the armor from the two dead guards.

The women and children were led out of the village by two men armed with axes, while the men armed themselves.

Once they had finished, I looked over the group and saw thirty men in front of me, but not all of them were armed.

Looking at Zane, he mouthed that we were out of weapons.
Nodding to myself, I addressed the group again. “Listen up, men. We don’t have enough weapons for everyone, but we outnumber these scum anyways. So, we’re gonna be smart. Koryn, Zane and I are going to climb up one of the buildings around the village center. Then we’re going to shoot until we’re out of arrows, and then climb down and join you. You lot are going to stay together, with spears out front, and make your way to these scum slow and steady. Let the arrows do as much work as possible. Stay together, and let the unarmed arm themselves from the scum we kill. Trust in the men beside you, and let’s get these fuckers out of our village!”

There was a muted cheer that went through the group, as we were all trying to keep quiet.

We led the procession to the village center, and then we began to climb a house that overlooked the area. We poked our heads over the roof, and I saw that the layout was mostly unchanged from my sneaking earlier.

We looked to each other, and then readied ourselves. I signaled to the men below that we were ready.

As soon as we rose from our positions, our bows were already drawn back, and we loosed our arrows.

We started to rain down as many arrows as we could, while the Ironborn were panicking and scrambling about. We each shot about ten arrows, which is all we had and had varying amounts of success. Our initial shots were successful, and we downed two men permanently, but once they began to react, our shots became less effective.

By the time we ran out of arrows, four men total were downed, with five more with minor wounds. We hurried back down to the ground and joined with the other villagers who were making their way into the center.

As the group of us advanced through the center, two Ironborn rushed our group but were easily killed by the united front of spearmen. After that, the Ironborn grouped up themselves but did not rush forward.

Our two groups stood at a standstill, neither wanting to advance and be killed.

After a moment of this, I shouted, “Forward!”

Our group advanced forward, and a shout from the Ironborn saw them do the same.

We came together in a clash, and the screams started. Our spears gave us an advantage, but unfortunately, the armor and martial skill of our opponents saw us get pushed back. We tried to give as good as we could, but as our spearmen started to fall, our group started to get pushed back with increasing frequency.

As our morale started to plummet, I looked about for something that may save us. The fire around us gave me an idea.

I moved to the back of the group and quickly rifled through my backpack while shouting for the group to hold the line.

I easily found what I was looking for. A few glass containers filled with high proof alcohol, which was for cleaning wounds. I took off the lids and grabbed a nearby jar of tar that was in the big pile of stolen goods. I mixed the substances and stuffed a rag into the bottle.

I stood up and lit the first one and then threw it into the group of Ironborn.
The explosion of it took me by surprise. The explosion itself wasn’t like a bomb, but the rapid expansion of flame took me, and everyone else, by surprise.

Five Ironborn ended up covered in flames, and dropped to the ground, screaming. Their efforts to put it out was stymied by the stickiness of the tar.

“Kill them!” I shouted.

The villagers surged forward and killed the men on the ground, while I readied another jar.

My next jar lit more Ironborn on fire. This time their morale plummeted and their leader ordered a retreat into a nearby house.

We harried them as they rushed into the house, but they abandoned the last, slow few so that they could barricade the house.

I took stock of what had actually occurred during the fight. We had killed off 14 raiders by arrow, spear, and fire. But we had taken serious casualties: with ten dead, nine more grievously wounded, and a few others with minor cuts. Koryn was fine, but Zane had a large slash on his left arm.

I restrained a few of the men from deciding to rush the house, and instead set them keeping a watch on it.

Meanwhile, Koryn and I tended to the injured, all the while thinking of what was next.
Thirtieth day, Ninth Moon, 250 AC

After we had finished tending to the wounded, we had begun to take stock of what was around us. There had been no sight or sound from the Ironborn within the house, so I made sure that everyone stripped armor off the dead, and I went about recovering the arrows that I could, while Koryn helped keep watch on the doorway.

It was a few minutes later when the other group of men from the shore joined us, one fewer than when they had set out, but accompanied by two prisoners.

I greeted them when they had approached. “They all dead?” I asked.

“’Cept for these two,” Theon replied.

“Did everything go alright?”

“Was good, up until the last moment. Jon was killed at the end when one o’ those bastards went crazy and rushed us. Got himself impaled on a spear but kept going. Ain’t ever seen the like.”

“He ran himself up the spear to kill Jon?” I asked, incredulously.

“Aye, it was crazy. After he died, these other two surrendered though.”

I nodded and ran an eye over the two men. They had some bruises forming on their faces, the men probably roughed them up, but they were still armored and unbound.

I looked them in the eye and said, “Strip out of your armor and clothes.” Once they had done so, I had Theon and the others tie them up to a nearby cart.

Once that was finished, Theon asked, “How many died here?”

“Eleven dead and eight wounded. Not sure how many of those wounded will end up dead. Maybe one more - depends on whether or not their wounds go bad.”

Theon grunted. “That’s bad.” He tilted his head to the house and asked, “How many in there?”

“Not sure. Maybe ten?” I shrugged and called over to Koryn and asked him.

“Seven I think,” he replied.

Bronn denied that and said, “Nah, it was ten, but they left those two out here to die. So, eight left in the house.”

Vestrit wandered over and said in a low tone, “No. There are nine. I counted them.”

“You sure, Vestrit?” I asked.

He looked me in the eye and growled out, “I’m sure. I need to know how many I can still gut.”

The bloodthirsty look in his eyes told me that he wasn’t about them being in the village. As Vestrit stalked away and returned to his post, watching over the door I leaned over to Bronn and whispered, “What happened to him?”
Bronn whispered back, “His ‘Da was killed first thing. His mother ‘n sister, well, they took a lot longer.”

I grimaced at that. “Let’s make sure he doesn’t kill himself, eh?”

Bronn nodded and wandered over to the feast that those bastards had laid out and started eating. When he caught my look, all he said was, “What? It’s our stuff anyways.”

I shrugged and moved over to where Koryn was standing watch. “What should we do?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. Don’t see how we can end this without more of ours dying. Not that I want to see them go free, not after what they did to Zane and the village.”

Vestrit, overhearing this, exclaimed, “You think Zane has it bad? You don’t know what I-“

I cut him off. “Vestrit. This isn’t a competition. Do you really want to make it one?”

Vestrit looked stricken.

“Easy now, it’s alright. We aren’t going to just let these bastards go free,” said Koryn.

“We could burn ‘em? With your flame jar things.” Vestrit suggested, trying to move past his reprimand.

I let him off, and replied, “Lighting the house on fire would be dangerous. We might have the village go up around us.”

Vestrit shrugged. “Better the village than us.”

I frowned in thought. It would be better I suppose, but I think I should see if they will accept an unconditional surrender.

I gestured to everyone in the area to ready themselves. Once they had done so, I stepped forward and shouted, “You in there! Come out with your armor off and hands above your head! If you surrender, you’ll be allowed to take the black!”

Beside me, Vestrit grumbled something but I couldn’t make out what it was. He likely wasn’t too happy that he would be robbed of the chance to kill more Ironborn.

A moment later, there was a shout from inside the house. “Fuck that! How about you ‘n I fight, farmer! If I win, we take our stuff ‘n leave. You win, my men leave the stuff ‘n leave.”

A duel? This bastard wants to duel?

“The fuck is wrong with you? Surrender or die!”

“Fuckin’ farmer! The lot of you are cowards!”

“Coward? You’re the one hiding in a house!”

Once it was clear that no response was coming, I told the men around me, “Get ready. I’m going to burn them out.”

I only had two jars left, so I had to use them wisely. I lit the first jar and tossed it at the doorway. Unfortunately, my aim was off, and it caught on the wall beside the door. The wall caught fire quickly and began to spread.
By the time I lit the second one and prepared to throw, the door flung open and the Ironborn rushed out. Not missing a chance, I tossed it at the first man out the door, and he caught fire quickly and went down screaming.

The Ironborn rushed us, but their leader, apparently impatient, sprinted towards me, shouting, “WHAT IS DEAD MAY NEVER DIE!”

I hastily drew my sword and parried his first blow. His second and third were neatly parried, but his forth caught me on my arm. It glanced off the chainmail, but the force of the blow caused me to reflexively drop my sword.

With my other hand, I punched the leader’s exposed face. He went reeling backward, and I quickly picked up my sword again.

The sword felt incredibly heavy in my hand, and I could tell that I wasn’t going to win this fight. I tried to backpedal a little bit, to give myself some time, but the Ironborn didn’t allow that.

“Coward!” he shouted. “This is what happens to cowards!”

He ran over to another fight, where a villager, Rob, was fighting another Ironborn.

Coming up behind the fight, the Ironborn leader took a heavy swing overhead with his sword and cut Rob’s head in half.

I stared in horror as Rob’s body collapsed.

“That’s what happens to cowards and their friends!” The man shouted, gleefully.

We rushed towards each other, as I wasn’t going to allow him to do the same thing twice. The Ironborn swung again, but I managed to step out of the swing. I tried to follow up with my own swing, but it was too slow. The Ironborn grasped my arm as it swung past him and tugged me forward, off balance.

As I fell, I twisted around so that I still faced the man. The Ironborn swung at my chest, this time, but before he could swing, his neck erupted in blood.

A howling Vestrit had hopped onto the man’s back and was repeatedly stabbing the Ironborn in the neck.

“Die! Die! Die! Die! Diediediediedie!”

As the Ironborn collapsed underneath Vestrit’s weight, Vestrit continued to stab.

Once the Ironborn’s head was almost completely detached, Vestrit jumped up, covered in blood, with a wild look in his eye, and screamed, “WHO’S NEXT?”

The surviving Ironborn that had rushed out of the house, of which there were only five, all dropped to their knees and shouted, “We’ll take the black!”

As I stood up, I saw that Bronn was calming Vestrit down, while the other men were stripping the surviving Ironborn and tying them up.

The village around us was catching fire – the fire from the house the Ironborn had holed up in was spreading. One of the villagers - I couldn’t see who - was screaming in pain and looked to be missing an arm.
With the smoke heavy in the air, and the events of the day finally catching up to me, I fell to my knees exhausted. I looked up to the sky but couldn’t see anything due to the large black cloud of smoke that hung over the village.

Fuck Westeros.
Thirtieth day, Ninth Moon, 250 AC

It was nearing nightfall by the time I was able to sit down again. I had sent someone to bring all the people at the cliff back into town, and then a few others and I had tried to contain the fires. We ended up losing six homes from my Molotov’s, but the rest were untouched. The rest of the day had passed in a whirlwind of activity, and by the end, my limbs were trembling and my throat raw. My injuries had moved passed pain and were starting to get into debilitating, so I was forced to stop for the day.

By the time the sun started to set, the people that were at the cliff had arrived back into town and started to pitch in. It was hard work, but we managed to get the town from falling down around us.

As I sat down, Nyra put some food in front of me, and I started to wolf it down. I hadn’t eaten since breakfast, and I was starving!

It was leftovers from the feast the Ironborn had laid out, with some additions made by the women of the village when they had arrived. A mixture of lamb and chicken, with some potatoes, salad, and bread.

Nyra pulled up a chair beside me while I ate and sat down and leaned up against me.

“Zane is going to be alright,” she said. “Barring infection. He shouldn’t lose the arm, but he might not get the full use.” She sniffled a little, before continuing, “It could have been worse, I know, but I’m still worried about my brother.”

“There were some close calls but we’re past it now,” I said, reassuringly. “Has there been a count of the dead yet?”

“We’ve counted what we can. We think a few families might still be in the woods since we haven’t seen anything to think they are dead. There were 151 people in the village before the raid, plus about forty farmers in the immediate area. There was, we think, thirty people killed immediately – mostly men. Then another twenty women died. There were 77 people taken hostage, of which, sixteen died attacking the Ironborn alongside you. One died on the beach, and then we have ten seriously hurt – including Zane. Most of the farmers were untouched since they fled when Violet, Bran, and Jeran were able to warn them. So, that’s 67 dead with more wounded. Eleven houses burned down, with more damaged by the flames. A lot of the animals in the village were slaughtered as well, and some of the grain stores destroyed.”

My face grew grimmer as she listed it all out. “Over a third of the village dead? Truly?” I asked.

She nodded, grimly. “43 Ironborn were killed, and seven are prisoners.”

“Speaking of prisoners,” Bronn said, as he joined us. “What are we going to do with them?”

I shrugged, as Koryn and a few other villagers joined us. “I don’t know, they surrendered and will take the black, but I don’t want to walk them all the way to the wall.”

Koryn nodded. “Aye, but we can’t trust ‘em to walk by themselves.”

“Kill them,” said Vestrit, in an angry tone.

Bronn shook his head. “We can’t just kill ‘em. Only Lord Stark can do that. It’s his right.”
Everyone could hear Vestrit grinding his teeth. He suddenly gave a chilling smile and said, happily, "Don’t worry! I’ll bring ‘em to the wall. And I won’t need anyone else to escort them, so it won’t be a problem!"

Nyra and I gave each other a disturbed look.

“For now,” I said, “How about we set them to work around the village. Chain up their legs and put them to work. Can you rig something up, Bronn?”

“Aye, I can. Take me an hour or two. Best to lock them up tonight and have them start in the morning. I think we all need to sleep soon.”

“That’s fine,” I replied. “What should we do with the dead Ironborn?”

Koryn asked, “They normally go out to sea, or something, right?” At our nods, he continued, “Well, I don’t think they should get what they want. Let’s bury ‘em inland or something.”

Vestrit’s face lit up. “How about we burn the bodies first, then bury ‘em!”

“Sure, Vestrit. Why don’t you work on that?” I said.

Vestrit got up and left, whistling to himself, happily.

“I hope he gets better,” Nyra said, sadly.

“He needs to get the anger out of him,” Bronn said. “If it doesn’t in the next few days, then we might have a problem.”

I nodded my agreement. Some people need to work through their anger. I just hoped it wouldn’t destroy the boy.

Koryn wiped his face tiredly. “So, what are we going to do about the prisoners then? We can’t keep ‘em here for long. And we definitely can’t keep them here until the next tax patrol. That won’t be for a few moons.”

Bonn agreed and said, “Aye, but we can’t take ‘em to the wall either. What if we only brought ‘em to Deepwood? Let the Glovers worry about it from there? And let them tell Lord Stark.”

The men in the group looked intrigued. “Not a bad idea, Bronn, “I said.

“Let’s give it a few days,” I said. “Have the prisoners work in the meantime, and let’s have our funerals. Get our village in some sort of order, and then take them to Deepwood. If we keep them chained, we won’t need too many men. Maybe five?”

The group gave their assent. One of the fishermen, Jax, asked, “What are we going t’ do about tha’ boat? I went out ‘n looked at it earlier. It’s mighty fine.”

“Is it fine where it is now? Or does it need to be pulled in?” I asked.

Jax replied, “It’ll do for a few days, but we shouldn’t leave it out there long, especially if a storm comes by.”

I nodded. “Alright, I don’t know much about boats, but I reckon it’s the villages now. No idea what we can do with it, but after the funerals, can you and some of the other fishermen bring it in? We can deal with it later.”
Jax nodded.

“It’s really important we all work together these next few days. Look after each other too,” I said, tilting my head to where Vestrit had gone. “Some peoples’ houses are burnt down or damaged, so others might need to take ’em in.”

Nyra said, “Some of the women are already trying to organize were people will sleep. We’ll be okay for tonight, and things will become clearer as the last few families out in the woods drift back in.”

The people around us all nodded. Eventually, one by one the group drifted away in search of sleep.

I looked over to Nyra and noticed she was exhausted as well. “How are the children?”

“Shaken, but alright,” she replied. “Violet took the younger ones back to the house an hour ago.”

I smiled. “Violet did really well today. I am proud of her.”

Nyra gave a pleased smile as well. “She did.” She leaned in a little closer and whispered, “I know she was using her animals. Did anyone, other than family, see?”

I shook my head. “No, no one saw anything definitive. Mimi was by my side most of the time, but I lost sight of her near the end. I think the smoke drove her away. But Mimi being by my side can be explained away by training.”

“Violet told me that Mimi is fine, but you are right, the smoke drove her off. She’s back at the farm already.”

“Good, I never saw anything hurt her, but I worried nonetheless.”

“Did anyone figure out why the Ironborn came here?” she whispered.

“No, I don’t think so. I told people that the Ironborn were acting weird, but not why. I’ll try to make sure none of the villagers talk to the prisoners.”

“Alright. I will talk to everyone over the next few days and see if I can pick up any gossip.”

I kissed the top of her head, that was resting on my shoulder. “That sounds wonderful, dear.”

“One day at a time, honey. One day, at a time.”
Act 1: Chapter 38

Tenth day, Tenth Moon, 250 AC

I kicked the ground, angrily, before I plopped down.

I watched the soldiers start to set up camp, but I made no move to help.

Fuck them. If they’re forcing me to come, they can damn well do everything themselves.

Oh, sorry. Not forcing, of course, it’s just that Lord Glover is sure that Lord Stark would want to talk to me personally. Can’t take a letter or a message, no sir.

A nearby soldier asked for my help in setting up a tent, and I moved to help him before I realized I had. I paused for a moment, then went to help him and let out a sigh.

It wasn’t the soldiers’ fault. They were doing their jobs and were not trying to be malicious. It wasn’t right for me to take my anger out on them.

When the villagers, Koryn and I arrived at Deepwood Motte, we quickly explained why we had men in chains with us. Master Glover came down to talk to us and got the story from each of us. We asked him if he could arrange the transportation to the Wall or Lord Stark for us so that we could go back to our village and start recovering.

Master Glover agreed to let two of us go back, while he thought the rest should continue to Winterfell to report in person. Master Glover’s soldiers would accompany us, so we would not have to take care of the prisoners, but that was a small consolation.

Koryn, Vestrit and I continued to follow the soldiers to Winterfell, so far, without significant issue. On our way to Deepwood, there was one minor incident. Apparently, one of the prisoners got a bit mouthy to Vestrit, and another of the villagers accidentally let loose an arrow and shot the prisoner in the arm. I wasn’t there, but I can only imagine that Vestrit instigated it. Vestrit had yet to come to terms with what happened, and it was eating away at him. The other villager seemed remorseful that he accidentally shot his bow, but he didn’t lay any blame at Vestrit’s feet. I was careful to keep Vestrit away from the prisoners, or at least not left alone with them, but it was a difficult task since we were all on the road together.

The two men we were able to send back promised to deliver messages from Koryn and me, and we promised to see if we could get help from Lord Stark to rebuild. Koryn suggested that Lord Stark may be amenable to giving us some gold to purchase supplies and some goods like he did to get the bridge rebuilt. I was less optimistic – I thought it more likely that Lord Stark appoints more supervision in the area and a more onerous burden for the people living in the area as well. Likely a Masterly house to watch over the general area, as the Glovers do for the Wolfwood.

I was undecided on how to best proceed. How could the village and the surrounding area be made safe? Fortifying the village would be extremely costly, and if we fortified it, we would have to train or hire men to stand guard. If we do that, our food production would need to increase further. And if there were two Ironborn boats next time? Three? At which point are we protected?

Perhaps we could get the villagers to practice with archery or spears, but if they are taken by surprise, what good would that do?

And that does little to address the outlying farms. Building a wall around my house would do little,
especially against determined attackers. Even grouping all the farmers’ homes into a new fortified, mini-village, it would run into the same problems as fortifying Redbridge would.

While nowhere near the same scale, it seemed like the Ironborn problem was similar to the Saxons raiding England in the early medieval age. Though, they sounded much more similar before the arrival of Aegon.

I paused in helping the tent set up for a moment, causing the soldier to look at me in curiosity. I waved him off and went back to work.

That was interesting. It was like a medieval England equivalent. Was this one of those science fiction movies, where someone is sent to an alternate dimension? Where the Saxon equivalents did not take over, but were driven off?

Did I remember my history correctly? The British were also called Anglo-Saxons, were they not? Because the Angles and the Saxons won? And the later Vikings were driven off?

I racked my brain trying to think of other clues to this alternate dimension theory. Dragons were a definite no. But what could have been the old Valyrian Empire? Rome, perhaps? Valyrians did have pasta and slaves – like the Romans. But Valyrians weren’t known for their armies, but for their dragons. They could have been like Romans, but the introduction of dragons changed their focus?

Without any damn libraries, trying to figure this out might be impossible. Maybe Winterfell has some good storytellers?

There was a lot that seemed similar on the surface, but I lacked information. The Dornish seemed Spanish, but I was pretty sure that they fled from the Valyrians – whereas the Spanish were a product of the Romans? Or was that just the land and the Spanish peoples were from elsewhere?

Oh well. The alternate dimension theory was the closest thing I had to a somewhat educated guess, which was pretty sad, now that I thought about it since I had been here for forty years. I wasn’t sure how knowing that would help me any, but it would be nice to figure out what happened to me, and why. I didn’t want to go back to Earth and abandon my family, but being able to go back and acquire some luxuries?

That’s the stuff my dreams are made of.

I was starting to feel my age as well, though recent events probably made me feel worse than I should have.

After the camp had set up, and dinner started, I stared into the fire, wondering what Winterfell would bring me.
Twentieth day, Tenth Moon, 250 AC

I followed behind the Castellan as we made our way through Winterfell and started to climb the stone tower that contained Lord Stark’s solar. I was the last one to be interviewed and was a bit nervous.

We had arrived late in the day, yesterday, and were individually called today by Lord Stark for meetings. He probably wanted to corroborate everyone’s story to make sure they all lined up. I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing, yet.

Winterfell itself was just as beautiful as it had been when I had last seen it decades earlier. The castle dominated the landscape, and even Wintertown, which was the largest town I had been to in years, was still overshadowed by the castle.

It was interesting, seeing a castle in its prime. Well, maybe not prime, but in active use. Back on Earth, most castles were more mansion or palace than a castle, and the war types were pretty run down – at least the ones that I had seen. They had either been abandoned and fallen to ruin in disuse, or in use but with the outer stones all but falling from the walls. Winterfell was in reasonably good repair even if it hadn’t been attacked directly in a long time, though things like the Broken Tower were obviously not in good shape.

It was curious, to me, why the Broken Tower remained unrepaired. I mean, I get that the Starks didn’t expect to use the castle in a major war – they hadn’t since long before Aegon’s Conquest – but after events like Raymun Redbeard coming south of the wall just a year after I started my farm, I figured that ought to have kickstarted some repairs. I know that the North is relatively poor, but funds should have been available for something as fundamental as that. They were even wasting the materials from the ruin. There was plenty of good building rock strewn about the tower that lay unused even after all these years. I had asked the Castellan about it, and he had said that they had only cleaned it up and left it to be reused. When I asked why it was never reused, he had merely shrugged and said he didn’t know why that was the case.

Other than that, Winterfell was a vast castle. And not huge as in it has like ten bedrooms in the main keep. Huge as in, it has two monstrous walls surrounding it, the walls spanning several acres, there’s a moat in between the walls, and there is a damn forest inside the walls. The legends say that Bran the Builder built all of it, but I think it more likely the main buildings were built by him. It looked like it kept expanding outwards over the centuries – or millennia – especially considering the likely cost of building it. Regardless of its exact origins, it was a timeless design, and it was quintessentially Northern.

I swallowed reflexively as we approached the closed door to the solar. The Castellan knocked and entered at Lord Starks response. The room was a medium-sized room – as in medium in general, not medium in the scale of Winterfell. I could see it being cozy, in another situation, but the people in it made me very nervous. The walls and floor were wood paneled, with decorative paints like my own house and artwork along the walls, accompanied by wolf themed tapestries, and a magnificent looking greatsword was hanging over a large unlit fireplace in the back corner. Lord Stark easily dominated the room, sitting at a large, well-made wooden table in the center of the room. He was a large man, with a long stern face and deep grey eyes, in the likeness of most Starks supposedly. He was surprisingly clean shaven, with long hair, pulled back into a warrior’s ponytail. His hair was black with grey overtaking near the temples and the crown of his head. Even seated, I could see he
had a very militaristic bearing, and his eyes met mine as I walked in, and I felt judged. It felt as if every out of place hair, that smudge of dirt on my shoes, the slightly frayed hem of my pant leg, and every action I had done or will ever do was examined and summarily judged. After a moment, his eyes flicked away, and he bid for the Castellan to take the remaining seat to his right.

At Lord Stark’s left sat an old man. He wore a simple grey robe, with a heavy chain made up of multiple metals around his neck. A Maester then.

The unnamed Maester, looked like he had one foot in the grave, with large bags under his eyes, heavy wrinkles on his face, and a slumped posture. His hands were nimble as he scratched away with a quill on a piece of parchment, likely containing the notes of the trio’s previous meetings.

Once the Castellan was seated, I realized I should probably kneel or bow. Damn if I knew which.

I quickly kneeled, figuring the more subservient, the better. I mumbled out, “My lord,” in greeting. I kept my head down and waited for permission to raise it.

“You may stand,” a low voice said.

I quickly stood and looked to Lord Stark.

“I have heard from the others and talked with the prisoners,” he said, “now I would hear from you.”

In the aftermath of the raid, Nyra had picked up that the villagers knew that the Ironborn were coming after ‘The Golden Farmer’ and were essentially chasing rumors of buried treasure. With such a vague reason being given, Nyra and I decided that we needed to spin the situation as best we could to avoid any blame.

After I finished relating the sequence of events to Lord Stark, he asked, “And? What do you think the reason they went to your farm specifically is?”

I cleared my throat. “Well my lord, I think they were after a type of wheat I have. I picked it up from a merchant, who got it from Essos. The merchant must have talked about it in his travels because when it gets wet, it shines brightly – like gold. The tale must have grown taller in passing, and these Ironborn felt it credible enough to warrant a raid.”

Stark raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Do you have any with you?”

I nodded and passed him a little bag that I had brought with me. He sprinkled some water on it from a pitcher on the desk and watched it sparkle with interest. “And this isn’t actual gold?” He absentmindedly asked while he passed the bag to the Maester, who began to examine it as well.

“No, my lord. The merchant said that Maesters and Essosi had checked for it, long ago.”

Lord Stark looked to the Maester. “Erwyn, is that true?”

The Maester, Erwyn, looked up from his inspection of one of the grains. “It doesn’t appear to have any of the properties of gold. As for previous examinations, I would have to consult my records. I believe something like this may be contained in the Winterfell library.”

Stark frowned. “Very well, onto other matters. Unfortunately, the prisoners are not worth any ransom, so they will be sent to the Wall once a Black Brother comes by. At least with their capture, I can send actual complaints to the King and the Greyjoys.” At my hopeful look, he continued. “No, don’t expect anything. We’ve long known that it is the Ironborn that raid our shores, but we have never quite been able to confirm it. We have never been able to capture any live prisoners to use as
proof. Regardless, the Greyjoys will disavow any knowledge of raiding parties as usual, and King Aegon, a friend though he may be to the smallfolk and the North, won’t be able to do anything more than send a letter to the Greyjoys, admonishing them.”

“As you say, my lord.”

“Wait a moment!” the Castellan interrupted. “I remember you! You are the half-southerner who came up from King’s Landing, some thirty years ago, aren’t you?”

“Ah, yes, Sir. Yes, I was.”

The Castellan shook his head softly and laughed. “That was a long time ago! You were much younger and shorter, while I definitely had more hair! So, other than this unpleasant affair, how has the North been? Excellent, I assume?”

“Yes, Sir. It’s been, uh, great,” I said, nervously. “The coast has been nice. Quiet and peaceful, for the most part.”

“So, in your opinion,” said Lord Stark. “raids aren’t a frequent event?”

I shifted uncomfortably. Any raids, to me, are unacceptable. But, he is technically asking only about their frequency. I also wasn’t too sure about feudal honor and didn’t want to offend him by implying the raids were his fault or something. I replied, “Not terribly common, no. Over the 25 years I’ve been here, I’ve heard a few stories about villages hit. So, no, I wouldn’t say they are common, but they do occur.”

Lord Stark leaned forward and looked at me intently. “It’s a curious thing, then. How effective you and your village fought. It seemed you were very prepared for something so uncommon.”

Shit. “Um, well – we were very lucky, you see. We, um, were able to arm many of the villagers. If we hadn’t been able to, or the Ironborn killed them, instead of taking them prisoner while they looted the village, we would never have succeeded as we did.”

Lord Stark looked thoughtful. “True, I suppose. But there were plenty of weapons available. Why was that?”

“The village blacksmith had some spears in his forge, my lord. The rest were personal things, mostly wood axes. But as we killed the Ironborn, we armed those that were unarmed.”

Before Lord Stark could ask another question, the Castellan interrupted. “Sorry Edwyle, but I must ask the man while I have him here. How is the farmland on the coast? I’ve never been able to make the trip myself, but I’ve heard surprisingly good things.”

Thrown off by his question, it took me a moment to reply. “Good?” I said, uncertainly. “It varies wildly, but there are some good pockets of land.”

Lord Stark looked thoughtful. “True, I suppose. But there were plenty of weapons available. Why was that?”

“The village blacksmith had some spears in his forge, my lord. The rest were personal things, mostly wood axes. But as we killed the Ironborn, we armed those that were unarmed.”

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The Castellan nodded to himself and leaned forward, intently. “Yes, I had noticed a tax increase since you got there. I assume you work one of these ‘good pockets’ yourself?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Lord Stark interrupted our conversation, and asked, “And why would the blacksmith have all these spears?”

I mentally rewound the conversation and found where Lord Stark and I left off. “Well, he’s kept
some for a long time now. You never know when a hungry bear or a wild hog comes by.”

Lord Stark finally seemed to have been satisfied by that line of questioning and pivoted to another. “So, from your own tale, and from that of your friends, it seems you took charge, quite readily. That is rather unusual for someone like you.”

I stared blankly at him, not exactly hearing the question. After a moment of collective silence, I moved to fill it. “Well, my lord, someone had to.”

“Naturally. I’ve had a few reports of you, actually. It seems like you have a lot of respect from your fellows.”

Reports? He had reports on me?! “Reports?” I asked, weakly.

“Speaking of,” the Castellan interrupted, once again. “My records, from Master Roose Mollen, show that the total tax in your area has significantly increased, more than can be accounted for by your farm alone. How do you explain this?”

I blinked at the constant change of topics. “Err, like I was saying earlier, my farm is on some nice land.”

The Castellan waved away my explanation. “No, man. I meant on the whole, what has changed?”

My mind scrambled for an explanation. Damn it all! “Well, some of the others did copy some farming techniques that I learned from down south. That’s probably it.”

The Castellan looked intrigued. “New techniques, eh?”

“Not really new, but new to the area. Just things like when to plant and the order in which to plant. It’s a bit of a different order than what they used in the area before.”

Lord Stark changed the conversation, again. “So, would you say that you like your village then?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Why is that?”

“Do you mean, why do I like my village?” I asked. At his nod, I continued. “Well, um, the people there made me feel welcomed when I first arrived, especially seeing as I was young and alone. Err, my wife is from the area. Koryn, one of the men here with me, is actually my goodbrother. I originally felt kind of out of place, having not grown up in the North, and Koryn and his family helped me along and taught me quite a bit. In return, I ended up teaching them a lot of what I knew. People can make or break a place because I think people are one of the most important things in life.”

Lord Stark looked genuinely intrigued. “You are very eloquent for a commoner. Quite impressive. Do you happen to be properly lettered?”

“Thank you, my lord, and yes, I am literate along with my wife and children. We are called smallfolk, my lord. Not stupidfolk,” I said, with a small smile.

Lord Stark let out a loud laugh along with the Castellan. “No, I suppose not. But few are truly educated to such a degree.”

I gave a small shrug. “They just don’t usually have the opportunity. People can achieve a great many things if they have but the opportunity to rise.”
Lord Stark leaned back in his chair while looking thoughtful. “I’m not sure I agree with that, nor does history. Since time immemorial, there have been nobles, and there have been smallfolk. While the smallfolk provide the majority of labor necessary for these great moments, the nobility is tasked with shepherding their charges forward, lest they stray. Even the founder of my house, Bran the Builder, was a noble. He guided his people through the rise and fall of many a kingdom, building not just The Wall, one of the greatest buildings made by man, but also laying the foundation of my House’s legacy, and the very keep you are now in. He might not have swung the hammers himself, but if not for him and his vision, there wouldn’t have been anything to work towards in the first place.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “I suppose in essence, you are correct. But you seem to place too little importance on the role of nobility as the heads of the proverbial herd.”

Maester Erwyn spoke up in a thin, reedy voice. “History itself shows you are correct, my lord. We can see that people achieve much, but only when nobility has the strength, vision, and conviction to see it done.”

I surprised even myself when I started speaking as soon as the Maester had finished. “Leadership has always been vital to everything mankind has done, from when men first crawled out of the caves and gazed upon the Sun in Essos to building wonders like Winterfell and The Wall. Was it not The Last Hero, in the Age of Heroes, years before Bran the Builder, a man without even a known first name, let alone a House, that rallied mankind to his side and fought the Others, pushing back the Long Night and saving the world?”

Lord Stark seemed less surprised at my knowledge of Northern mythology/history than Maester Erwyn, as he simply nodded. “Of course, sometimes the smallfolk will rise to the occasion, and act nobly. Leading their brethren, and as you say, providing the opportunity for the people to ascend to greatness.”

I had quickly started to look at Lord Stark in a new light. I had only been trying to simply verbalize a basic argument for the education of the peasantry while trying to avoid saying anything about nobility or feudalism in general. But the way Lord Stark was able to organize and illustrate his argument had me almost dumbfounded. If it weren’t for the fact that I knew that the feudal system was unnecessary, I would have agreed entirely with him. This man was clearly more than just a mildly educated administrator or some sort of despot; he was a deep thinker, able to think in the abstract and grasp philosophical reflections. I don’t think I had ever, in my seventy years of living, met a more perfect personification of a stoic. He was what I had always imagined Marcus Aurelius to be.

He continued, heedless of my thoughts on him, “The Tallharts were the last major house to rise in the North. There have been a few other minor houses since then, but they are the last of my principle bannermen. They had been Ironborn thralls on the West Coast and fled inland after convincing others around them to rise in rebellion. They followed the rivers inland until they met my ancestors. The Starks at the time gave them land and let them raise a castle where Torrhen’s Square now resides, to be the vanguard of defense against the Ironborn incursions. Proud and Free are their words. Very apt I think. Of course, there is Barrowton and Flint’s Finger on the southwestern coast, but they have always struggled living so close to the Ironborn. Deepwood Motte and Bear Island as well, though to a lesser level.”

“Things have been better since the Targaryeans came,” said the Castellan. “Ironborn raids have dropped significantly.”

“True,” Lord Stark conceded. “With the end of the Ironborn occupation of the Riverlands and periodical large-scale conflict between the Kingdoms, there was less need for the nobility to guide the smallfolk. The smallfolk should have been able to prosper, but they haven’t.” He looked to me
and said, “Part of the reason why the West Coast is so empty is a holdover from those times when the Ironborn regularly attacked the coast. Barrowton has significantly improved since then, but the other locations? They have shown that there is little value on that coast.”

I moved to interrupt, but Lord Stark waved me off. “Yes, yes. I know you disagree, man. You believe the people hold inherent value in and of themselves. An interesting theory, one I will contemplate on later, but one which has little historical precedence. There are many reasons for my actions, and the actions of my ancestors, regarding the West Coast, but you certainly have given me some food for thought.” Lord Stark stared off into the distance for a moment, before saying, “There is much to think on. This business with the Ironborn, for you, is done for now. I will call for you again in a week to see how to best rebuild your village.”

He stood and gave the slightest nod of his head and said, formally, “I thank you for your spirited defense of the North and its people. You have become a true Northerner.”

Taking that as a dismissal, I bowed at the waist and exited the room. I took a huge sigh of relief.

I was still confused at exactly what had happened, but it seemed to have gone well? The different lines of questions had left me wondering what exactly happened and it was hard to tell what they were thinking.

Alas, another week and then I could rejoin my family.

A/N: Thanks to Luke Mahr for all his help with this chapter! Also, regarding the castle thing at the beginning of the chapter, I am aware that there are examples of castles in good repair; however, Michael doesn’t.
Twenty-seventh day, Tenth Moon, 250 AC

I had spent the last week wandering around Winterfell and Wintertown, doing some exploring and information gathering.

The information I was seeking was mainly regarding the Ironborn since I hoped that a little more information about them might help me in the future. I was technically a guest of Lord Starks, but I was also smallfolk, so I had not been granted to the Winterfell library, which was disappointing seeing as it might be the only real library in the North. So, I went on a pub crawl and talked to as many people as I could, and I was pleasantly surprised to find my share of free drinks once news of the Ironborn my group and I had killed got around. Old veterans, storytellers, you name it - I talked to them. I was mainly interested in their tactics and more details on their raids. I was able to glean some information that seemed common throughout all the tales, so it was likely true, but I had no real way of gauging their accuracy. Most raids seemed to one boat, typically on the smaller end with 20 to 30 raiders – Redbridge seemed to have been raided by a larger group than typically used in these raids. Targets were more remote villages along the coast, rarely going to a large village like The Fishing Village. It seemed like mostly targets of opportunity, typically the first village they found, at random times in the day. Sometimes early in the morning, sometimes late – it all depended on when they found something worth raiding.

Usually, the villagers would be able to flee with a warning. Since most of these villages were centered around fishing, there was usually boats out on the water, and if they were close enough to the shore, they were able to blow a horn to warn those on land and flee with them. The Ironborn would then sack the village, taking what was left behind. Sometimes, if winter had been particularly fierce and the Ironborn needed more, they might search inland for farms or people. Food appeared to drive these raids, as the main targets were mainly food and animals, as the people along this shore were already poor. Hunger was a powerful motivator.

The stories varied, but most raids were quick unless they got a really good catch, or they captured people to be slaves, and burning down the village was uncommon, but not unheard of. Everything else I learned was a bit useless. There was no consensus on their tactics, armor, fighting style, or anything along those lines. All the stories agreed they wore armor, but none could agree on how much. In the raid on Redbridge, the quality varied considerably, but for the most part, they seemed fully armored. Was this always the case?

Answers to these questions eluded me and would likely stay that way. I wasn’t overly concerned by that, but it was annoying nonetheless.

I had also spent some time exploring Wintertown since the concept of a winter only town was new to me. Of course, some people still occupied the village during the other seasons, but it was quite empty. Each house, while not exactly well-built or luxurious, was solid enough to endure a harsh winter and contained a reasonably large underground food storage, in addition to the stores located in Winterfell. Those who lived in Wintertown year-round lived in one big section closest to the road and the castle, while the rest of the village remained empty. There were a variety of services available, as well as two inns, but otherwise, everyone was a farmer with nearby fields.

I purchased a few goods while I was here, mostly things that were not available in Redbridge and even Deepwood, but I had not thought to bring any to sell myself. It was a missed opportunity, but not overly important. I didn’t end up buying much as I was unsure of what aid Lord Stark would be
providing us, and I didn’t want to end up carrying too much that might end up being needless. Koryn bought a few things as well but agreed with me and was waiting to make most of his purchases. Vestrit on the other hand, we had seen little of. Apparently, Lord Stark informed him that they would not be invading the Iron Islands, and he took it rather hard. Nonetheless, Vestrit had signed up to be a man-at-arms for Winterfell, and we saw little of him as he threw himself into training. It seemed he wanted to escape his memories of Redbridge, and I didn’t have the heart to impose on him. I hoped this would be enough for him, and that he could begin to heal, rather than letting his hate consume him until there was nothing left.

Koryn and I had received a messenger yesterday to let us know that Lord Stark would meet with us at noon today, so that’s where we were headed.

A servant showed us into the solar, which showed little change from my visit the week before. The only difference apart from what was on the desk was two extra chairs at the table across from Lord Stark.

Koryn and I kneeled and murmured a proper, “My lord.”

“Rise and be seated,” he replied, in his low voice.

As we sat, I noticed the large map unrolled on the desk as well as a few piles of paper in front of Maester Erwyn.

Once we were seated, Lord Stark spoke again. “I have given much thought over the past week regarding your situation as well as the philosophical conversation we shared. I have always been of the mind that good work deserves good repayment; just deeds deserve just rewards, and that great acts must be met with even greater honors. Your village is suffering and will struggle with the loss it has endured. This is unfortunately not unique, but I believe that my solution to this problem will prove to be an exceptional solution.”

He paused for a moment to look me in the eye. “What you said last week about people having inherent value gave me much to think on. It took much contemplation, as well as some interesting conversations, but I believe that I fundamentally agree with you. In doing so, I believe that this has interesting consequences, one of which is that smallfolk can create wealth if given the opportunity. The West Coast has long been near unprofitable for the North, and spending coin to try and create more coin has long been viewed as foolishness. I think that if a new solution is found, and introduced, it may allow the right opportunity for this theory to flourish.”

Maester Erwyn gave a polite cough, and Lord Stark gave him a chagrined smile. “To be fair, there have also been several political reasons that led to the current lack of nobility on the west coast. Tell me, what do you know of the Greystarks and Wolf’s Den?”

Koryn and I looked at each other questioningly before we both shook our heads as we knew nothing about either.

“Well, the Greystarks were a cadet branch of my house, formed by a talented younger son, that was granted their own name and lands. This occurred a little more than 2,000 years ago, so I did not truly expect you to know any of this. After these honors were bestowed upon them, they were loyal. The second generation was also loyal, as was the third. In fact, for near 500 years, they had proven themselves to be leal subjects, and we had no issue with them and there was even some inter-house marriages during that time. But eventually, issues began to arise, ultimately culminating with them rising alongside House Bolton in rebellion and attempting to become the King in the North. This raised an obvious quandary for my house as the Greystarks claimed that by blood they were Starks themselves and thus held royal blood alongside a stronger claim to the Throne of Winter. My House
learned an important lesson from this which we have never forgotten. Raising your family to a new noble house does not end well.”

“This has inadvertently led to not just my House, but every House in the North being wary of gifting keeps to any younger sons, lest their descendants find themselves being displaced by powerful cousins. This is why the noble houses of the North are frozen are rarely change; why Moat Cailin does not have a permanent house watching over it; and why the West Coast does not have any houses to guide it. I mentioned before that House Tallhart was raised from those who raised in rebellion against the Ironborn. Well, the fact that they possessed no threat to any existing house through bloodline claims, meant that they were a safe option to the nearby Houses. Over the centuries they have proven to be a loyal House, and a perfect example of what you call people rising to the opportunity.”

Lord Stark leaned back in his chair and took a sip of wine. “You are a vexingly interesting man, Michael Ragnar. You have said that your mother was the maid of a noblewoman whom was sent south to marry. You also are known in a few different towns, like Deepwood Motte. I’ve heard tales of a man, who makes a special drink, who goes by the name of Michael, whom I assume is you. Others in Deepwood Motte have also noticed a small increase in trade coming from that shoreline in recent years, which again, I assume is because of you. I have even heard that there is now some sort of fish paste from the Ironborn being sold at Deepwood Motte? A lot of coincidences, to not be somehow related to you.” He then gave a wry smile and said, “Even my tax collector, Roose, has a few interesting things to say about you.”

I blushed a bit as he listed out some of the things I had done over the years. I had never thought about it before, but I had had a fairly large impact along the coast over the years. Nothing world-changing, but there were changes, regardless of my attempts to live quietly.

He took another long sip of his wine, savoring the taste. As he eyed his cup in thought, he said, “Yes, a lot of coincidences, all of which seem to lead to you. You have introduced a completely new situation, one that has apparently allowed the area to flourish, even if on just a small scale. I find this all very fascinating and I find myself interested in how this works on a larger scale.”

“My final decision on this matter is to expand upon this success with the both of you.” He stood up from his seat and walked over to the fireplace, where he retrieved a greatsword from the wall above the mantle. He unsheathed the beautiful sword, which was as wide as Lord Stark’s hand and almost as tall as the man himself. I looked upon the dark, smoky steel and noted its uniqueness, and realized this must be the famous Ice. He walked back towards us and said, in a loud, clear voice, “I hereby elevate the Michael Ragnar and Koryn to their own respective Masterly houses. You are charged with the protection and guidance of your territory and smallfolk.”

Koryn and I sat stunned. Our jaws dropped in shock, and we both waited for something to happen. Anything that might prove that we had not misheard anything. To prove that this was actually happening. There was no way this was actually happening right now; it couldn’t be. This wasn’t something that actually happened, long ago tales of the Tallharts aside, it was something found in tales and legends.

My frantic inner monologue of panic was interrupted by Lord Stark’s serious, but calm command. “Kneel and say your oaths.”

Koryn was the first to react, but I quickly followed as we pushed back our chairs and knelt.

In a voice that commanded absolute attention, he said, “Repeat after me. I promise on the old gods that I will in the future be faithful to my lord, never cause him harm and will observe my homage to him completely against all persons in good faith and without deceit.”
We both solemnly repeated the words with as much conviction as we could. Once we were finished, Lord Stark placed his sword on each of our shoulders and said, “Then in accordance with the traditions of the First Men, and authority vested in me, Lord Edwyle Stark of House Stark, by King Aegon V Targaryean as both Lord Stark and as Warden of the North, I officially recognize and elevate you, Master Michael Ragnar, as Protector of the Central West Coast and all it’s assigned lands and duties, which are to be inherited by your descendants till the end of time. And I officially recognize and elevate you, Master Koryn, as a Masterly House sword directly to House Ragnar. This is officially witnessed by Maester Erwyn and Castellan of Winterfell, Jeor Wull, on the Twenty-Seventh Day of the Tenth Moon in the year 250. As your lord, I swear by the stream, forest, and stone to fairly and justly rule over you and to aid you in the defense of your new lands. You may now stand as Masters of the North.”

Koryn and I both shakily rose to our feet, in awe of our sudden change in fortunes. Koryn looked about ready to explode in absolute joy with what was happening and had tears running unabashedly down his cheeks. I, on the other hand, was still wholly stunned and overcome by emotion. I was happy that I was being recognized, scared that I was being recognized, and surprisingly excited by what was to come. My achievements, my hard work, and my determination had led me to this point. I stumbled but never fell. I slowed but never stopped. I had risen.

“As you may know,” Lord Stark said, as he gestured for us to sit again. “Your friend, Vestrit, has taken up a position here in Winterfell. He was asked if he wished to take up a man-at-arms role with you instead of here at Winterfell but declined. Regardless, I know that you will need someone to train your levies and future men-at-arms, as well as your other more martial duties, so I plan on raising a man who performed a great many deeds for me during Redbeard’s rampage to a Masterly house as well. Michael, you will be my primary bannerman in the region, with Koryn and my man, Donovar, being sworn directly to you.”

He bade us to sit again, and once we had, he pointed to the map. “Michael, the region under your overall control will encompass all this land. The northern-most point will be up to, but not include, Sea Dragon Point. It will continue down the coast, including the Stony Shore all the way down to the Twin Lakes river. It will follow the river inland until it reaches the twin lakes, and northwards until it reaches the Wolfswood.”

I gaped at the vast amount of land I was now responsible for. How could I manage such a thing? Even with Koryn and this man, Donovar, I will be swamped with work!

Lord Stark chuckled at my expression. “While I let that sink in, we can discuss something else. Koryn, your family needs a proper last name with your elevation in rank. Did you happen to have anything in mind?”

Koryn looked as shocked as I was but quickly gathered his wits. “Not really, my lord. It’s all a bit sudden. What kind of name should I have?”

Lord Stark scratched his chin in thought. “Names are a tricky thing. Some choose a name that pays homage to their home, but I personally find that names that have meaning are much more impactful and memorable. Even if it is just a private meaning.”

Koryn mirrored Lord Stark by rubbing his chin while he thought of a name that the rest of his family would use for the rest of their lives. He eventually came to a decision and said, “Voktergård.”

Lord Stark looked puzzled. “My grasp of the Old Tongue is not the best, but I believe that says guardian farm?”

Koryn frowned and replied, “It’s supposed to be guardian farmer.”
I was frankly impressed that Lord Stark knew the old tongue to begin with. It wasn’t spoken commonly by any means, mostly just a few words here and there among the smallfolk. A few might be fluent, but I certainly was not. Koryn had always had a keen interest in the language and learned what he could from the few people in the village that were fluent.

Lord Stark looked to Maester Erwyn, who replied in his seemingly perpetually thin, reedy voice, “That does indeed mean guardian farm. Vernebonde translates to guardian farmer.”

Koryn sighed. “Well, that don’t sound near as good. Voktergård is good enough, and it rolls off the tongue. And I guess, my family’s farm produces guardians?” He shrugged. “Good enough.”

Lord Stark looked amused. “I suppose I have heard worse. Karstark has always given me a bit of a chuckle. It means vessel of Stark.”

Koryn bowed his head and thanked him, while I sat still trying to wrap my head around what was happening.

“That’s a fine choice,” Lord Stark replied. “Now, we have a lot of details to discuss and events to plan. We will need to have a formal oath ceremony in the godswood soon, and then we need to decide things such as tax details, military obligations, and so forth. Then you need to be taught several things, such as tax collection, etiquette, and so forth. A lot of which, most of the established houses have learned from birth, so you will need to catch up. There is plenty to do, and that is before we even get started on rebuilding your vassals’ lives. There is also the matter of your castle, Michael.”

“My castle?” I asked, bemusedly. The very idea of me owning any kind of castle felt absurd.

“Yes, your castle. A simple Motte-and-Bailey might suffice for your bannermen, like Master Koryn, but as the core for the defense along the coast, you will need to house and support your men-at-arms as well as your sworn houses when needed. This will be part of the details we sort out later, but I was thinking something in the range of one thousand Gold Dragons to cover the costs for materials and labor.”

I sputtered, “A thousand?” I thought I might have a heart attack. I had never even owned a single gold dragon, and here I was being offered a thousand?!

Lord Stark nodded. “Yes. Maester Erwyn will go over more specifics with you regarding castle construction, but a thousand should see you through till completion. Men will have to be hired, fed, and transported. You should have most of the materials already in the area, so that is not much of a worry. I will put out word of your need for workers, which shouldn’t be hard to fill, especially once winter comes near. You also won’t get a Maester until at least your castle is built, but likely for much longer than that. The Citadel isn’t exactly punctual when it comes to these matters, especially in sending someone to the North.”

Maester Erwyn looked disapproving, but Lord Stark just laughed. “Come now, it might be uncomplimentary, but it is hardly untrue.” Maester Erwyn harrumphed and went back to his paperwork.

I looked on in horror at his pile of papers. Oh God, I was going to have paperwork now.

“Now,” Lord Stark said, as he clapped his hands happily. “for the fun part. Where do you want your castle, and what shall its name be?”

I took a moment to think that over. I didn’t want to destroy my house to build this castle, especially
not if it took years to build a castle like I suspected it would. A castle ought to be a safe place and located somewhere it can be used effectively for defense. I suppose having it in The Fishing Village, as the largest village in my region would make sense, but that felt like abandoning Redbridge. I really needed a safe place near Redbridge. Somewhere that was physically safe, as well as symbolically.

The cliff!

Building a castle on the cliff would give a view of the surrounding area; it would be defensible, and reasonably close to Redbridge itself. The cliff had long been important to me anyways. It was where I could relax; where I proposed to Nyra; where people sought shelter from the Ironborn. It was perfect!

I told Lord Stark this, and he looked intrigued. “Sounds like an excellent location. What about the name?”

The perfect name popped into my head, and I grinned as I said, “Sunset’s Rest.”

A/N: So, to forestall any questions regarding some of the things I have a feeling people will take issue with. One, I don’t really hold the Telltale games as canon, as I have never played them, and GRRM has said that they weren’t. I will probably shamelessly use some of the elements I may run across from them, but I won’t necessarily be beholden to them. In the game, the area that Michael is in shows as the territory of House Glenmore, but that isn’t the case here. Secondly, the amount of coin for the castle is loosely based on some research I did. Mostly the cost to employ people to build the castle, since the materials are nearby. If someone more knowledgeable than me wants to help point out a more reasonable number and give actual reasons why, that’s cool, but otherwise it will stay as is. Thirdly, this is the last chapter in Act 1, so I have made it to the end! There will be a brief interlude from Edwyle Stark’s POV, then Act 2 will begin! I’m very happy to have made it this far, and broken the 80K word limit, and I hope you all continue to follow the story into the next Act!

Again, I also want to thank Luke Mahr for his help with editing this chapter and fleshing out a few portions of it!
Interlude: Seven

Twenty-second day, Eleventh Moon, 250 AC (+25 days from last chapter)

“I still question the wisdom of this, my lord,” Maester Erwyn said, in his thin, reedy voice, as they watched the large party leave through the gates of Winterfell.

“Oh? Are you still not the slightest bit impressed with the man?” Edwyle asked.

“He was quite smart for someone not formally educated,” the Maester conceded. “My biggest issue is the financial cost of this endeavor.”

“It was a large cost,” he conceded, “But it is not ruinous. The relief from King Aegon back in 236AC was a large help, and we had some of that coin still left. The rest was just savings for emergency use. As long as we are not called to war in the next few years, we will be fine.”

The last war had been when Redbeard had come south of the Wall, and his father had ridden out to meet them in the field of battle. The Fourth Blackfyre Rebellion had never touched the North; so most of Edwyle’s reign since had been peaceful – barring that one dreadful winter.

“But with so little oversight? To one of the smallfolk?” Erwyn said, as his hands fretted about.

“He is different, yes, but I believe that is for the better. It is a risk, but clearly, he has made his immediate area more profitable. He has strengthened his surroundings, and I wish to see that made bigger. All men have power over their own mind – but few can control outside events. This is something I have realized over the past few weeks, and it has strengthened my conviction. Master Ragnar is one of these few, these proud men, who can make such changes.” He gave a small smile as he watched the procession below slowly make their way out of sight. “Regardless, the land is of little use and has long lain idle. I will be questioned by the other Lords to be sure, but they will not begrudge me this.”

Erwyn nodded in agreement. Erwyn had always leaned to the Andal-side of the feudal structure, rather than the way of the First Men. In truth, they were not so different, but the outright unquestioning atmosphere of the south was not present in the North. We Northerners did not shy away from confrontation, which had always made Erwyn uncomfortable; the Andals liked their confrontation indirect and wrapped in layers – like a man protecting himself from the cold winds of winter.

They stood for a while longer, as the procession was finally out of sight, and the life around the castle started to take its normal shape once again. He spoke up once again, “It is a gamble. A one thousand gold dragon gamble. Other than the coin, and maybe some respect, I lose nothing. But if I am right about this man, the North stands to gain everything. I will send Rodrick next summer to keep an eye on them, and Donovar is loyal. I will sit back and watch and try not to interfere.”

“Just try?”

He gave a wry smile. “I make no promises. Something tells me I may have to sooth some ruffled feathers from the Lords that Master Ragnar interacts with. At least at first.”

Erwyn nodded at that. “His etiquette does indeed need much work. He sprints from overly formal to informal in a heartbeat, all while still attempting to be polite. It is quite vexing.”

He gave a small smile at that. “If he hadn’t been polite, things may have ended differently. The man
tries and is willing to reflect upon his actions.”

Erwyn tutted. “His character is still lacking, though his actions give him credit.”

“I disagree. I believe he will accomplish many great things, and I intend to benefit from them. Great things are not achieved by muscle, speed, or physical dexterity, but by reflection, force of character and judgement. Michael has shown to be capable of reflection, he may not have the greatest of character, but it does not waver – and he will learn besides, and he has shown to have good judgement. That is all I will say on the matter.”

As they began to walk back into the castle, Erwyn spoke once again. “Lowering the risk of the venture, I feel, still would have been wise.”

Edwyle rolled his eyes, for Erwyn had been against this plan from the start. He had a great amount of respect for the man – having known him since he was a child, but the constant warnings and discussion on this topic had started to grate on him. At least his son, Rickard, was interested in what he was doing – though that was mostly due to the admiration most children held towards their parents. He replied, “Yes, so you have said – repeatedly. I could have given Donovar half the territory, or even expanded my current vassals land and reduced the land given to Master Ragnar. At the end of the day, the decision is either a good one or a poor one. In other words, I should have made the decision or not. Attempting to make half a decision is poor leadership, and such an action is unbecoming of the House of Stark. Either I make the decision because it is a good one, or I do not because it is foolish.”

As they entered into his solar, they found Jeor, the Castellan, waiting on them.

Jeor spoke first and briefly bowed his head to him. “Edwyle. They have left, and I have the final tally of the numbers of smallfolk who accompanied the newly ennobled men. 128 smallfolk from the immediate area have accompanied the party, with ten men-at-arms that you loaned House Ragnar, along with the Master Builder Jon. The 141 men and women have now left, and word is still spreading about the new Masterly house, so I expect a small portion of people to continue to migrate westwards.”

“How far out has word spread?” asked Edwyle.

“By now, every lord with a Maester should have received their raven, so rumor is likely to have spread in the immediate vicinity. In this area, word has spread fairly quickly, though it will take a year or two for word to get to everyone.”

He nodded, as it was about what he expected. When he had first thought of elevating Michael, he had done some research to determine if it was viable. He and Jeor had combed through their census data to determine how many people would actually move to this newly protected land and begin to populate it. They estimated around 300 to 800 people would move from his House’s land over the next two years, based on their age and the composition of their family. Third and fourth sons, those that were disinherited, and other categories of people that would find the prospect of moving to be less daunting than those who were secure in their lives. It was harder to determine movements from other lands since Winterfell did not have such detailed census data. Our best guess was possibly another 100 to 200 from Master Glover and his bannermen, as well as internal movement from the Stoney Shore that would move to Sunset’s Rest. There would also be some movement from other lands like the Ryswells or Dustins but in negligible numbers.

More may move in time, when -hopefully- Michael’s tenure as Master of the Stoney Shore proves to be prosperous and entices movement among the smallfolk. There would never be massive migration, where whole families and villages move from coast to coast, but the ‘unneeded’ children in families
may move once given the incentive, and they realize that their current location holds nothing for them.

He frowned for a minute, before speaking to Jeor. “Keep track of who is moving to Sunset’s Rest. Perhaps send one of your cousins to work there and keep an eye on things. Mostly just general numbers, but I want to keep an eye out for entire families moving. If too many people move from another Lord’s land, they will be displeased, and the larger the group, the more anger they will have. Ideally, I want only individuals or young couples moving there, but we have no way to force such a thing. But if I know of any issues forming, I can solve the issue before it becomes a problem.”

Jeor bobbed his head. “Aye, I have a few cousins that could use the work and are reliable for such a thing.”

“Good, I will leave the details to you. Now, let us raise our cups to this venture, and pray that the old gods bless us for our daring!”
Ninth day, Third Moon, 250 AC (+128 days from last chapter)

The breeze carried a slight chill that proudly proclaimed that it was no longer summer. Being so close to the water made its effects easier to bear – that and a nice hot cup of tea.

I had dragged my desk outside of my new office so that I could enjoy the sunlight while I was able. Since I was sitting all day, I had to wear my nice flannel jacket and a light scarf to keep warm, but it was not yet cold enough to bother with gloves or a hat.

I was currently going through a few books that Lord Stark had given me, things such as, census data, resource data, a book on the history of the houses of the North, and a book that contained a variety of information – like laws and customs. Though I can admit, I was leaving that aside for now, especially since Lord Stark said that he would aid me with the next few tax collections – at least until I got on my feet.

Jon, the Master Builder who was loaned to me by Lord Stark, had left a few weeks ago once it became clear that autumn was here. He didn’t want to be caught out by snowstorms, and there was nothing really for him to do at Sunset’s Rest during the winter.

He, along with 128 people and ten men-at-arms, came with Koryn and I from Winterfell to Sunset’s Rest. We picked up another thirty people as we moved across the countryside, and there were even people still drifting in! It had shocked me at first, but people were actually interested in this new opportunity! It had made me take an honest look at how I viewed others, and I had to admit that over the course of my forty years here, I had grown a bit of a superiority complex. I was more educated than 99% of the people here, I knew things they didn’t even dream about, and I knew the taste of freedom.

It was easy to look down on them; to see that these people didn’t really strive to do better and that they just seemed to aim to live. To be fair, trying to live here was difficult, especially for a peasant, but it didn’t make it easier to connect with people. Sure, once I got to know people, my view on them changed, but my default view of people was pretty low. I’m sure there was some proper term for it, but it was, what it was. It was funny to think about too because I was never the smartest person – not that I was dumb, obviously, but I was not a great scientist, mathematician, philosopher, or what have you, but being here in Westeros was quite the ego boost.

Once I had recognized that my original view was overly conceited, I realized I shouldn’t be that surprised that people were travelling here in search of a better life. Had people not done the same thing since the founding of America? People weren’t able to hop on a boat here, so they had to walk, but the effect was the same. If they could, they sought a better life. Granted, it was not much of a better life, yet, but there was hints of one, at least from the traveler’s perspective.

Most of the new travelers had hastily built homes, which they were now reinforcing in preparation for the upcoming winter. The work I had them doing was mostly preparatory work so that we could build up our supplies to start building the castle. While the Master Builder staked out the worksite, the workers began to chop trees, mine limestone, iron, coal, and all the other supplies we would need an abundance of. The Master Builder finished staking the castle before he left, so the workers were also now starting to excavate a food storage area that would be beneath the eventual castle as well as stockpiling the other materials.

It was exciting to see everything taking place, even if all the work was giving me a headache.
Managing everyone so that work flowed smoothly, while at the same time planning for the future and working on my farm. The farmwork was mostly offloaded to others, but there was no way I was getting rid of my farm anytime soon! I had put too much effort into it, and I loved it too much.

My castle was pretty much designed already, and Jon and I had come up with a design that could be expanded later if needed. There would be the main house for my family, done in a mansion-esque design, and would have barracks, an inn for visitors, a stable, blacksmith, and all of the defensive requirements recommended by Jon. He was a bit confused by my rough drawings for the main house, but he got the idea and made the defensive changes it needed to be an actual castle. I had thought about adding some really cool towers, like Winterfell has, but ultimately decided against it. I didn’t have the internal heating capabilities that Winterfell did, so building such extravagant features would be incredibly costly to keep. We plan to keep space clear though, in case that changes at some point down the road, but there was no need for it right now since my family didn’t need the space.

Speaking of my family, their reactions to our rise to a Masterly house was interesting. I missed the initial reaction, unfortunately, because Lord Stark had sent a rider letting our families know that we were delayed and the reason why. I was still greeted with hugs and kisses when I returned, though everyone was very shocked. Nyra and I had several, very long conversations, but the children took it well. Well, Anari doesn’t quite understand, but she is close enough for now – she thinks it means she is a real princess, and I don’t have the heart to correct her. The rest of the family took it in good cheer, though poor Ethan almost had a heart attack, and hasn’t quite recovered. As he is getting on in age, he is just over 70 years old, it’s not unexpected, but it is certainly unwelcome.

A shout breaks me from my reminiscing, as I see Koryn and Donovar making their way over to me.

“’Lo, Michael!” Koryn shouted, happily.

“Koryn. Donovar,” I replied, giving each a nod.

“Michael,” Donovar acknowledged, with a small bow. “How goes the planning?”

I shrugged. “Alright, I suppose. How is the training?”

Donovar nodded, with a serious look on his face. “Good. Your son is learning quickly, more so than the other boys his age. The older men are giving me some more trouble, as expected, since they have ingrained bad habits, and typically make for poorer students. So far, we have twenty boys of varying age, around your son’s age or older, with twelve older men. The older men will make fine garrison troops and guards, once we are done training them, but the boys should go on to become the equal of other Lords’ men-at-arms, with the proper motivation.”

I sighed. “That’s a start I suppose, but it doesn’t do much for the rest of the land.”

Koryn shrugged. “Not much we can do about that. One step at a time.”

“I know next summer you were planning to do a tour of the land. Maybe we can tie in some defensive applications? Stay long enough to train a garrison in the more major settlements?” asked Donovar.

I shook my head. “Major settlements? The major problem is that we have no major settlements. Everyone is dispersed, afraid that if they congregate, the Ironborn will target them. A few weeks of training at every small village will take years. We would need to convince them to move closer to each other, and that is not an easy process.”

Koryn frowned and said, “I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Really, what we need to do is
figure out what are actual goals are and work backwards. I know you already thought on it a bit Michael when you were originally planning the castle. Let’s expand on that.”

Donovar agreed, so I rolled out the map of the area. It was more detailed than I was used to and showed quite a few streams and lakes, as well as general geological features, that were not marked on the general maps.

“Well, to start, let’s break this down into regions,” I said. I quickly drew four regions and named them Northern Coast, Northern Interior, Southern Coast, and Southern Interior. “How’s that?” I asked.

Koryn and Donovar looked it over, before Koryn said, “The names are awful, but I get the idea. I think it should be five regions though. The northern half of the Southern Interior is quite different than the southern half.”

“True,” I conceded, “It’s more similar to the Northern Coast region, but then the region would be ungainly.”

Donovar said, “I agree with Koryn. Five regions would be best.” He scratched his cheek and added wryly, “And maybe some actual names as well.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. The Southern Coast is the Stoney Shore - no need to change that. Hmm, the Northern Interior can be called the Inverloch. The northern half of the Southern Interior can be called Woodshire? While the southern half can be called Rillplainshire? Then the Northern Coast be called Iowa.”

The two men eyed me in amusement, but I was pleased with the names.

Donovar said, bemusedly, “Those are some… interesting names.”

Koryn covered his cough with a laugh. “Yes, interesting. Do these, uh, interesting names have a meaning?”

I blushed a bit, as I had let my enthusiasm get ahead of me. I cleared my throat and replied, “No, not really. I just thought they sounded good.”

Koryn laughed, and Donovar just shook his head.

“Names aside,” I said, “How should we go about defending that?”

Donovar frowned in thought. “Well, Sunset’s Rest will serve as the hub of protection for Iowa, though we will need to increase our forces. Maybe a castle in each region?” He scratched his cheek. “That would mean another two Masterly houses to control that though. From there, we form up a cavalry to use in response to any Ironborn raids, until they realize that this land is protected and stop.”

Koryn shrugged. “Sounds about right. Who else would take control of those castles though?”

I didn’t like the sound of that plan. It didn’t sit right with me and sounded pretty lazy, to be honest. “I don’t think that is our best bet. Let’s think this through. We need castles to protect our people. We need to protect our people from various threats. The threats they face are Ironborn raids, wildlings, a Westerosi civil war, a Northern civil war, an Essosi invasion, or some random invasion from people beyond the Sunset Sea.”

Donovar looked flabbergasted. “Civil war?! People from beyond the Sunset Sea? What are you
“Well,” I replied, “we need to think about every threat, regardless of the likelihood. I am not truly worried about people from across the Sunset Sea, but it is a possibility. And planning for it is pretty much the same as planning for the Ironborn - it will be naval landings we need to contend with. So, I think we need three castles, one here at Sunset’s Rest, one at The Fishing Village – which by the way, definitely needs to have its name change - and one somewhere along the Twin Lakes River. This will protect the coastline, from external threats. I am not overly worried about a civil war, or an Essosi invasion threatening the West Coast, so we don’t need to bother with any inland castles, for now.”

Koryn looked thoughtful, while Donovar started to calm down. Poor man probably thought I meant to start a civil war.

Koryn asked, “Will that be enough? We know that the Ironborn will still infrequently raid even Glover and Mormont lands, and even if it is less than our area now, it still doesn’t really solve the problem.”

No, it doesn’t,” I conceded. “But it is a start. We will need a mobile force to combat that, one of which is horses. With enough horses and increased water traffic, hopefully, we can spot the Ironborn early and respond to raids along most of the coast.”

“What about some naval forces located at each castle?” asked Donovar.

“That would be expensive, more expensive than we can afford for now. I don’t think between us, that we even have the expertise necessary for such a thing. I imagine fighting on a boat is a lot different than on land.”

Donovar shrugged. “I’ve never been on a boat myself, so I wouldn’t know.”

Koryn said, “Perhaps we can ask White Harbor for help? They would likely know such things.”

I nodded. “I will make a note of it and include it in my letter to House Manderly. We have the one longship for now, maybe see if any of the fishermen want to try it out and see what it’s like?”

“I will talk with the fishermen and go along with them. See what it would be like to fight on a boat. Maybe I will take some of the recruits with me. Even if we don’t fight on water, moving soldiers by boat is much quicker,” replied Donovar.

We have ideas; now we need a plan. I spoke my thoughts aloud for both of them, “First, we need to build up Iowa. Get Sunset’s Rest built and populate the region. Encourage people to move here and improve the lives and health of those that already do. Next, will be one of two things. On the tour next summer, if possible, at some of the larger coastal villages, it may be possible to build smaller fortifications of some sort. Something to house food stores, and a place to fall back to in the event of a raid. Hopefully, that will encourage people to move to these more fortified locations and make things easier for us. Failing that, we then need to get started on The Fishing Village and building a castle there.”

“Speaking of which, I need to rename that. Any thoughts?” I asked.

“Maybe go back to the old name? Fisher’s Village,” replied Koryn.

“Doesn’t make much sense to call it based on the prior Lord’s family name,” retorted Donovar.

“Maybe something in the Old Tongue? Fishing is, what? Fiske? Village is ver, or was it vær? So,
perhaps Fiskevær?” I asked.

Koryn gave me a wry smile. “You really like using the Old Tongue, eh? I dunno, if we are going to change it, might as well change it. Not translate it.” Donovar nodded his agreement.

“Alright, how about Stonefisk? Unique, and a blend of Common and Old Tongues.”

The two men agreed, so I continued outlining my thoughts. “So, we build a castle at Stonefisk over the next few years. It will have to wait until Sunset’s Rest is done, but perhaps on the tour, Donovar, you can start to train up some men-at-arms and form the core that will be there for the castle.”

“That’s going to take a lot of time and money. More than we want and more than we have, respectively,” replied Donovar.

I nodded and let out a sigh. “Yes, yes it will. I will focus on the money aspect, Donovar if you can get these boys trained up.”

Donovar took that as a dismissal and left after giving a short bow.

Koryn waited placidly, while I gathered my thoughts. “In order to make money, we need goods, services, and people to tax. We need to attract more people to live here while making sure those that already do, live.” I stared at the map and said, “I need you to go along the coast, Koryn. At every house you see, try to convince them to form a village. Get them to congregate as best as you can; let them know that they now have the safety to live in a village. Teach them the things you know; the things I’ve taught. Lye soap, pasteurized milk, boiling water, and general cleanliness. Make up a program – something you can teach and reteach, over and over again. We need to start reducing deaths and improving health.”

Koryn nodded his understanding and replied, “I can do that. It’ll take me a few days to come up with a good, reusable teaching method, but I can do it. Where do you want me to get the people to gather though?”

I looked at him and said, “People can walk, what, 25 miles in a day on a good road? That’s about eight hours of walking. Now fishers can live in a village easily, and people who provide services, like blacksmiths, can as well. So, ideally, we would want larger, trade villages every ten miles. Farmers are going to live in the village close to their fields; they also want to be within walking distance of a trade village. So, if a person walks say ten miles each way that’s about a three-hour trip. That gives them time to stay in the village for a few hours, then walk back home. Focus on getting them to congregate in these larger trade villages, that are no closer than ten miles apart. It’s not a big concern, yet, as we don’t have the population for it, but if you notice two villages that are only a few miles apart, try to get them to merge or make note of it. I don’t think there are any off the top of my head, but I never really paid attention either. If they don’t merge, we can choose one of them later to serve as the trade village.”

“Aye, I can do that. What about the other things, goods, and services?”

“Well, brandy and vodka production will have to be expanded. Damn, that reminds me! As you go along, teach the farmers about crop rotation! Tell them I will buy potatoes. I’ll probably need to have two men-at-arms go with you for legitimacy. Would probably help if I had a banner made, and an actual sigil designed in the first place! Anyways, root beer will also be a good product to sell, I think. Using the sawmill for planks will also be a boon, especially as new homes are needed. I will need to think on other things as well because the markets for those products don’t exist, so it will need to be created, which means that money won’t start flowing in at the start. I honestly, don’t know if any fish on this coast would be in demand on the east coast. Something to look into I suppose. Garum might
be though! Leave it with me; I will deal with the goods and services, you just focus in on the people in the region, okay?"

“Aye sounds like a plan! Oh, by the way, my family agreed on our house words and sigil! The house words are: Protect and Serve.”

“Very fitting!” I said. “It suits you and your family very well.”

Koryn gave me a big grin. “Now you need to decide on yours, or all the good ideas will be taken. Donovar is still undecided on his sigil, but for his house, Armstrong, the words are Witness. My sigil is an orange shield, with a hammer and sickle! You are going to have to top that!”

“Bah,” I waved off his teasing. “I’m not worried, House Ragnar will have an amazing sigil, with powerful words.”

Koryn laughed and replied, “Going to give into your wife then? ‘Reap what you sow’”

I chuckled. “I’m not giving in just yet. It still seems unnecessarily provocative. We will always have poor relations with the Ironborn if we use that since it takes a shot at the Greyjoys. I prefer either ‘All That Glitters’ or “Who Dares, Wins.’”

Still laughing, Koryn said, “Bah, we were never going to get along with the fucking Ironborn. Might as well get what shots we can in. Might even make them think twice before attacking."

“Thinking twice with no brain isn’t any better than thinking once.” Koryn started laughing uncontrollably, so I said, “Get out of here you man-child! Some of us need to work!”

Koryn stood up and said, “I can’t wait to tell that one to Nyra, she will love it!”

I rolled my eyes. Great, another reason for her to make me pick her house words.

“Go on, then. Go make your teaching program and stop torturing me with these house words!”

With a final laugh, Koryn left the area.

I facepalmed when I realized that he left in the direction of my house.
I stretched my neck as I sat, hunched over the table, writing a variety of letters while my family sat around playing games before they went to bed.

It had been another long day of work, overseeing the construction and prep work, and I needed to finish these letters by tomorrow so that the messenger could take them for me. I needed to write some introductory letters to the Lords of the North, as well as some merchants and tradespeople.

The letters to the lords, for the most part, were simple enough things.

To the right honorable Lord Karstark,

I greet you, as the newly elevated Master of House Ragnar, of whom Lord Edwyle Stark so generously recognized some few moons ago, and I wished to convey upon you my best wishes. I, unfortunately, will not be attending this fall’s gathering at Winterfell, as I am needed here in my newly appointed lands to bring together its peoples and forge together a strong land, free from the predations of the Ironborn. The good House of Glover and Mormont to the north of my lands have kept my lands free from small raids of wildings, just as the entire North, led by William Stark, protected us from the despicable Raymun Redbeard, the so-called King-Beyond-the-Wall. It is my intention, in writing this letter, to seek both your advice and acquaintance. I would be grateful to you if you were willing to impart any knowledge or advice on how I can best protect my lands and serve Lord Stark.

In lieu of attending the fall gathering, I instead gift to you a most excellent drink of my own creation, in hopes that you will enjoy it. I have taken to calling it vodka, though many have called it by another name, Northern Water. I find it best enjoyed in small cups and drunk quickly, for it packs quite the punch.

I look forward to meeting you in person at the next fall gathering, or old gods willing, sooner.

May the old gods bless you, and your family.

-Michael Ragnar, Master of House Ragnar.

The letters were overly florid in my opinion, but Maester Erwyn had instructed me in my lessons that such things were required. Most of the letters were almost identical, especially to the Houses that I was not likely to interact with. Houses like Karstark, Umber, Bolton, and other small Houses that were quite the distance away and held no real resource I needed.

Other Houses, such as Manderly, Glover, Mormont, Tallhart, and Ryswell, had different, more personalized letters. To the Ryswells I talked of horses; Glover of trade; Mormont of ships and trade; Tallhart of future opportunities in mining and trade; and Manderly of trade and naval expertise. With all the letters, I sent a small barrel of vodka, to both give a gift, and to create a market. I hoped that if they tried it, and liked it, they and their vassals would buy more, and hopefully trickle down to their peasants. Unfortunately, I did not have enough brandy to gift to the lords, so I made do with the vodka.

For the merchants and tradespeople, I had a few different types of letters. One was to the blacksmith in White Harbor that had made my cast iron stove; another was a wheelwright I had done business
with before, one was for a bowyer, a fletcher, a shoemaker, and an experienced miner. Tradespeople were essential to a growing city, especially once people become more specialized in their jobs, and forego making everything themselves. We were making do for now, but our demands for goods was only going to increase, and we needed people dedicated to specific jobs, and I needed them to be damn good at it too.

Mining was simple enough now, but we had yet to truly dig deep, and we had no one experienced in such a thing. Same with a weapon and armor-smith, as we currently had enough training weapons, but we did not have enough armor or real weapons for all our recruits.

Arrows we had enough for now, but as my military expanded, so would my need for arrows. Having someone dedicated to that, as well as making bows, would be vital in the coming years. Especially since I was considering something along the lines of medieval England, with their longbows. Most people in the region owned their own bows for hunting, so I hoped that would make for an easier transition to longbows. I still needed to figure out an incentive scheme for that though.

Most of my letters to the tradespeople were to people I had met, inquiring if they would be willing to come and work for me, or if failing that, they would recommend someone to the role.

The letters to the merchants, on the other hand, were centered mainly around food. I was doing my best to keep food coming to the city, especially since the new arrivals had little in the way of saved food for the coming winter. Further, I had hoped to distribute my own store of food next summer to many different farms so that crop rotation could begin.

Of which, Koryn had completed his training program the other day, and when he came to me, I had a realization. Targeting the farmers in the area, was by far the more crucial task. I needed to expand the regions food production quickly, so Koryn was instead talking to the farmers in the region, few as they were, and only talking to the larger (for some definition of the word) villages about the rest of the program. His task was so large, he conscripted some of his and Zane’s eldest children to the task, and even then, this would likely continue in the winter.

The goal was to have as much farmland as possible, come next summer, under plow with the four-crop rotation method. Hopefully, that would secure our food supply and allow me to focus on money-making.

Still, the situation wasn’t all bad. A few more people had trickled in, though I didn’t expect any more as winter approached, and Lord Stark’s tax collectors had come by and dropped off the payment. It had been well received and quieted many people’s fears about going hungry.

It led to a bit of a funny situation. I paid my workers in coin, and then they turned around and paid my back to coin for the goods I owned, such as iron and food. It was amusing to see the money moving like that, but I knew it to be a good thing. Nyra had told me that I ought to keep the money and just hand out the goods directly as payment, but I knew that wasn’t the best option. I was no economist or banker, but I knew that money movement was important to an economy, and that switching people from a barter-oriented society to coin-oriented was best.

I was shaken from my thoughts as I felt Nyra wrap her arms around me from behind. She kissed me softly on my temple and said, “Those are some deep thoughts, for so late at night, my love.”

I sighed. “Yes, they are. I was just finishing up writing these letters, as they need to go out tomorrow.”

“We are you done them?”
“Yes, finally,” I replied. I took a look around the room, only to find it empty. “Where did the kids go?”

“Bed,” she responded. “Ryden has been asleep for a few hours already, his training has left him exhausted, and the others followed half an hour ago. You’ve been deep in thought for quite a while.”

I leaned back in the chair and slid it out from the table. Nyra took the opportunity to come around and sit on my lap. She burrowed into my chest to capture the heat of my body as I wrapped my arms around her. “He’s quite taken with the training, and doing well, according to Donovar.”

“Yes, he is,” Nyra said, proudly. The light from the lantern on the table was cast over her face as she looked up at me. “After the Ironborn attack, he has become determined to not let it happen again. At least not while he was unable to do anything about it.”

I let out a sigh. “I know, I just wished he didn’t have to. I don’t like the thought of him on a battlefield.”

“It won’t be as bad as you’re thinking. He will be fully armored, in the best available, so he won’t have to worry so much about getting hurt.”

“Armor isn’t perfect you know,” I retorted.

Nyra rolled her eyes.

“I’m serious; it isn’t. And I still have to decide on how to arm and armor all my men.”

“I know, but it helps me sleep.”

Ah. We sat in silence for a while, before she spoke again. “So, you are determined then, about the house words?”

I gave her a wry grin. “Yes. ‘Who Dares, Wins’ will be our words.”

She gave a low chuckle. “Pity.”

“I know, but I still hope to salvage something with the Ironborn. ‘Reap What You Sow’ can be our unofficial words. Like the Lannister’s ‘A Lannister Always Pays Their Debts.’”

“I suppose it will have to do.” She gave out a light groan as she stood up and stretched. She reached a hand out to me and said, “Come, my husband. Bed awaits.”
I shook off the snow that had accumulated on me from my trek from my house, as I entered the office with my lone household guard accompanying me.

The office was a large auditorium-style building that served as the headquarters for the building operations. My office, along with Koryn’s, Donovar’s, and some of the work supervisors lay separated at the back of the building, while the rest was an open space, with a platform and podium tucked into one of the corners.

The open area served as a meeting room for assignments as tasks were complete or for general announcements. The offices gave us some thinking space and storage area for records, which was helpful for making sure payments were on time, supplies were being delivered, and measuring progress on different tasks. It was a burgeoning bureaucracy, albeit a poor one. Parchment was used, but sparingly because of its costs, otherwise we used birch or slate and chalk.

Work had slowed over the winter, but far from entirely ceased, as mining was halted, and trees were cleared instead. I was mainly having the efforts focused on clearing area for a more direct road from the castle to Redbridge. It would cut the land between the two rivers in half, and cut down travel time, as well as stopping people from walking through my damn farm!

Trees were also being cleared for more farmland, and while we couldn’t pull stumps from the frozen ground, we could get it ready so that once the ground thaws, we can rip the stumps out quickly and start planting crops. The work was progressing quicker than I had thought, especially once people started to make cross-country skis like mine. It made travel a lot faster over longer distances, though snowshoes were superior for uneven ground and short distances.

Only Trent, the logging supervisor was in right now, so I made my way over to him. He was a good man, who was among the first group settlers from Winterfell, and had a good head on his shoulders and well-respected by his fellows. My guard waited in the main room, while I entered Trent’s office.

“Hello, Trent. How are you this morning?”

He stood and gave me a bow while answering, “Good, milord. And you?”

“Good. What is the status today?”

“Well, milord, the path for the road is about three quarters done, and the rest is staked out well enough I suppose, barring any storms.”

“Excellent. And the fallen trees?”

“Branches are all cleared off, but transport is slow going. There’s quite the backlog, no pun intended milord, since the snow is so deep after the last storm. Horses can’t get in there, so I was thinking we ought t’ just stack ‘em where they are now, ‘n leave it till better weather.”

“That’ll be fine, Trent. And the farmland clearing?”

“Not much change since last week; too much snow stopped a lot o’ progress.”

I shrugged. It wasn’t unexpected after all, but it was better to ask anyway since I hadn’t been in for
about a week. Now that it was winter, I had a little more time on my hands, so I was working on a few different projects.

With my new-found bureaucracy, paper was going to become vital, and I needed to figure it out. I was close, oh so close, I think I just needed to get the timing right, as the process seemed to work. I was also working trying to create a Fresno Scraper, or at least what I remembered of one. My new lands had shit roads, not unlike the rest of Westeros, and I needed to change that. Roads were the lifeblood of a country, and the dirt paths I currently had were unacceptable. It had been over four decades since I last thought about such a machine, but with the general idea in mind, I was stumbling my way to success.

The Fresno Scraper wouldn’t help me with gravel though. I needed a way to create gravel efficiently, since breaking it by hammer and pickaxe would be brutal and time-consuming work. I had no memories of how to break stone; I could only assume a machine crushed it somehow. I was toying with a few different designs powered by a waterwheel, but it was very much up in the air at the moment. The river stones found further south along the shoreline were too big to be used in a macadamized road or concrete, at least for the most part.

I had also hired some of the neighboring farmers to build some more seed drills, threshing and reaping machines so that we would have something to use come spring, with the obvious focus on seed drills. It was a good thing the seasons were so long in Westeros; we didn’t have to plant on a strict timetable since there would be multiple harvests in a summer anyways.

I focused back on Trent and asked, “Everything okay with payments to the workers?”

“Aye, milord. Everything is on time, just like you like.”

“Excellent,” I said with praise. “I just came in today to get out of the house and get some quiet, so I will be holed up in my office if you need me.”

With that, I left his office and entered my own. It was nothing fancy; it contained a solid table and chair, with a large slate board on one wall, shelving containing some records on another, and a painting from my children on the last. The room had candles liberally placed around it, with a lantern on the desk. It was a shame I had no electrical lighting but needs must.

I unrolled the map I had on my shelf, onto the table, and looked over it. This one was a more detailed version of my immediate surroundings, which was made by the Master Builder before he left. It showed detailed geography of the area, which would help me in planning my new city. Some things were easy, in that it was essential to have dirty industries and other polluters downstream of people’s homes.

Others were more difficult; how would I design the city? A traditional American suburb wouldn’t be overly well received, I think, and wouldn’t really serve any function. A higher density type arrangement would be better, but how high density? I could let it grow organically I suppose, but there were certain things that needed to be done. I wanted the main roads, at least leading up to the castles to be paved, whether by concrete or stone, with sewers to help with flooding and hopefully widespread plumbing at some point.

Obviously, skyscrapers were unavailable, from a materials and population standpoint, so something like a European city? Apartment style homes, with a few floors? Maybe a shop on the bottom floor? Would people even be interested in that? I really wanted to get everything right the first time, without waste, but it looked increasingly unlikely that would happen. Perhaps if I drew up a hybrid, and made the first floor more open space, so that people could decide?
General planning was somewhat decided, in that I wanted housing to follow the new road, which would act as one of the city’s main arteries, to Redbridge to start. Industry would be along the southern river, west of Sunset’s Rest so that it would be downstream, and let any dangerous runoff be isolated. Eventually, I hoped that housing would expand northwards to the farms, and then continue towards Sunset’s Rest, and continuing eastwards towards the lake.

Last winter, Koryn, Zane, and I planted some maple trees to the east towards the lake, and I was of a mind to expand that further. Maple syrup and sugar would be a valuable commodity, and the trees took a long time to mature enough to get sap from, so long-term planning was necessary. I was also making sure that trees were being left alongside rivers.

Another long-term goal I was contemplating, was attempting to re-route the southern river that bordered my castle so that it did not rejoin the other rivers near Redbridge and would instead flow directly out to the ocean. It would make Redbridge less flood-prone, and make sure any waste or pollution isn’t taken to the city. I had no idea where, to begin with, such a project, so I suspected it would be offloaded to the Master Builder once the castle was done if he was amenable.

Sewage and water were another set of issues. King’s Landing just pumped raw sewage into the sea which made the whole area stink and was a health hazard. But I didn’t know how to go about creating a system for an entire city. A city-sized septic tank was out of the question, but would a large wetlands type thing work, similar to what I had built for my farm? It was working well for my family, and the water that went back into the river at the end of the treatment process smelled and looked clean enough. I had no interest in drinking such water, but I felt less bad about the people downstream.

How big would a wetland required by a city be?

Master Builder Jon wouldn’t know, but he might be able to help me figure it out. Another thing that needed to be set aside for now.

Plans, plans, and more plans.

My goal was to create a large city, one that would rival White Harbor. I wanted to create a belt across the North that would foster trade, one that stretched from Sunset’s Rest-Torrhen’s Square-Winterfell- White Harbor. Sunset’s Rest wasn’t in the most optimal place for such a thing, but it wasn’t a poor location either. Other cities might eventually beat mine if other Lord’s tried, but if I could make mine large enough, and attract enough industry, I could force the trade routes to stay.

With that in mind, I began to draft my first Five Year Economic Plan. It was hard to plan for variable season lengths, especially since it impacted what we were able to do so heavily, but I could make estimates and try to keep the plan flexible. Based on the past summer, the winter should be another eight months, followed by a six-month spring, a two-year summer, six-month fall, and another two-year winter. So, a plan to the end of next winter would incorporate my entire five-year plan.

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**Year 1 (Winter/Spring):** Clear forested land to make room for improved roads and farmland. Store logs for future use. Build machines for future farming, with the aim to make the region once again food self-sufficient. Design future machines and plans. If temperature allows, begin removing stumps. Expansion of spinning wheels for wool.

**Year 2 (Spring/Summer):** Begin farming operations. Expand animal herds. Resume mining operations and castle construction. Koryn’s teaching program – ties into farming expansion. Obtain tradespeople for Redbridge. Apply new techniques for certain trades (waterwheels). Continue to
build machines for farming. Expand alcohol business and create demand. Expand maple tree farming. Determine if garum can be a reliable industry. Export fish? Use captured longship as transport for trade.


**Year 4 (Summer/Fall/Winter):** Begin to sell paint. Continue previous projects. New projects may arise from tour. Ensure materials are stocked so that some work through winter may continue.

**Year 5 (Winter):** Clear more trees as needed.

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I grimaced as I looked at the end of the list. It was a bit sparse but good enough for my first long-term plan. A lot rested on me being able to create and find markets for goods, and I was hampered by the North’s low market activity. I would have to route any goods up to Deepwood, what doesn’t sell there can be moved on to Winterfell, and then White Harbor, and then onwards.

That meant a lot of wagons for merchants since we had only the one ship capable of carrying sizeable amounts of cargo. I made a note to hand off the leaf spring design to my friends, Jon and Carn, who were good with wood and could use the money. Hopefully, the influx of money would improve the general atmosphere.

Some of the villagers weren’t overly happy with me, as they saw Koryn and I being elevated with jealousy. Luckily, none were truly angry that we were elevated, but the fact that they weren’t stung. Theon was the agitator of the group, as he was unhappy since he had led a group into battle but was not recognized for it. Most were just grumbling -nothing serious- but Theon had never liked me, and his opinion hadn’t changed after the raid. Just another to watch out for.

By the time I had finished writing up my plan and some other miscellaneous work, it was getting late in the day, so I decided to call it quits and head home. Trent had left an hour ago, so I signaled to my guard and began to bundle up.

It had begun to snow once again, so our passage home was cold and silent, as we travelled beneath the falling snow.
Eleventh day, Second Moon, 252 AC (+184 days)

“Ah, Michael. Just the person I wanted to talk to.”

I looked up from my desk and saw Donovar standing at my door. I waved my hand for him to sit and waited for him to get settled.

“Good morning, Donovar. What did you want to speak to me about?” I asked.

“Weapons and armor,” he replied, curtly.

I sighed as I leaned back in my chair. “I suppose I ought to come to a final decision before spring hits.”

“Yes, Michael.”

“Fine, let’s start from the top then. Right now, you are training two different groups. One consists of young men, that will primarily be garrisoned at the castle, and perhaps patrol Redbridge. The second, made up of young boys, will have a wider variety of training and form the core of what is to be my military strength.”

Donovar bobbed his head and replied, “Correct. I aim to have the second group, including your son, proficient at handling a few different types of weapons, while the first only a small selection.”

“Well, the first group, the garrison soldiers, can use a halberd as their main weapon, like you had suggested earlier?”

“Aye, that is a fine choice. Good for guard duty, as well as patrolling the village. I was also thinking a crossbow would be an excellent ranged weapon for them.”

“Wait, I thought you agreed with my plans for encouraging the use of longbows?” I asked, confusedly.

“I am, in regard to the broader populace. However, for garrisoned troops, the crossbow is a better weapon. The disadvantages of the crossbow are largely negated by using it atop the castle walls.”

“So, crossbows just for the garrisoned men? Wouldn’t it be better to just train everyone on a longbow? Easier for training purposes, and less variety in our weapon purchases.”

“No,” he said, slowly, while in thought. “No, while it is true that it might be simpler for the supplies, it really doesn’t hold that much benefit. It is simpler t’ train a crossbowman than a longbowman. While a master longbowman is a much deadlier thing to face on a battlefield than a master crossbowman, an adequate crossbowman can be trained in a shorter time and be very deadly for it.”

I shrugged as I didn’t care too much, what the garrison guard had. I knew that massed longbowmen could be great, and so long as Donovar wasn’t undermining that, I didn’t care.

“What about the younger boys, including my son?” I asked.

“They will be trained in the more traditional weaponry: sword, bow, dagger, mace or hammer, shield and eventually horsemanship. Once that training is completed, we will have to reassess to see what
else is needed. They might also learn the lance or polearms.”

“That sounds fine; I don’t know enough to add to that. Will they learn the longbow?”

“Aye, even if none use it, the strength required to learn it will be a boon for their training. Though, a shortbow would be a boon if they are primarily mounted.”

“Can they learn both the shortbow and the longbow?”

“I don’t see why not. Though I would advise against having them learn them at the same time. Let us start with the longbow, and once complete, then the shortbow.”

“Alright, so what of armor?”

“Well, gambeson is a must, as you already know. Typically, you would add more in layers, so next would be chainmail with a half sleeve. Depending on costs, for the garrison men, you can stop at that. If you want, you can spend more on a brigandine.”

“What’s a brigandine?”

“It’s a type of chest armor. It’s essentially a coat of plates; small metal plates are on the inside and riveted to a layer of cloth or leather. It’s not as effective as plate armor, which I would assume you will buy your son, but it is better for your men-at-arms, especially since they can put it on without help from others.”

Huh, so like a medieval flak jacket? Interesting. “What about other items, like helmets?”

“Helmets will need to be purchased, but I wouldn’t bother with anything else for the garrison men. If they want to purchase anything else, they can buy it themselves. That is pretty much the standard arrangement in the North. Besides, most men won’t bother with additional gear, especially if they are at the top of the castle walls. As for the young men, that is highly dependent on what you plan to do with them.”

I scratched my cheek as I thought. “Ideally, I would want them to be highly mobile, with the ability to deal with whatever threats to my land. The land right now is under-populated, and with few bandits, but I hope that in the coming years the population and wealth is booming. That means an increase in bandits and perhaps Ironborn raids. We need to be able to deal with that.”

“Increased Ironborn raids will be a problem; we don’t know how many men will attack at once. If we don’t send enough men, then the men won’t be able to do anything.”

“I’ve talked that over with Lord Stark, actually. The number of raids might increase, but the men per raid won’t. If the Ironborn start sending multiple ships to villages, the Greyjoys will no longer be able to disavow those actions. After that, the Greyjoys will either have to rebel or severely punish their vassals and stop all raids. Essentially, if they escalate the issue it becomes less of our problem.”

Donovar smirked a bit at that. “Fair enough.”

“In that case, for the young men, they should be capable of dealing with whatever threats they face. So, more armored than the garrisoned men, and more heavily armed as well.”

“Alright, so we will aim to have them equipped with gambeson, mail, and brigandine. A helmet is a must, one with frontal face protection preferably, some faulds would be good, and at least a vambrace. Depending on what they face, pauldrons or gauntlets may not be beneficial, so that can be held off for now; boots and plate for the legs can wait as well. Perhaps if we extend the faulds t’
cover the thigh? It’s better for the men if they can put on all their armor themselves, especially when they are in the field or on patrol.”

“Aye, sort of like a protective skirt?”

Donovar bobbed his head while he thought. “Yes, that would be good for extended horseback riding, especially with a split down the middle.”

“Sounds reasonable to me. How will that work for the winter?”

“Winter?” he asked, confusedly.

“Aye, the winter. The men will need to patrol during the winter as well. Doesn’t make sense to abandon the countryside for years, does it?”

Donovar was a bit pale as he replied, “Winter patrols will be very difficult, Michael. It’s really not done, especially in the interior. We are lucky that the winters are so mild here, it’s what allowed the people here to avoid living in villages. In Lord Stark’s land, as well as most of his vassals, the people will move near their lords keep into a village for the winter. It lets the Lord keep watch over the winter and protects the smallfolk.”

I chuckled as I said, “Well, we are too spread out for that to work. Can we not use the cross-country skis? That would allow for plenty of movement.”

“I suppose that might be an acceptable solution. I would have to do some testing to see the usefulness of it.” He grinned a bit and said, “Would have to train the boys more, as well.”

I grinned as a thought popped into my head. “And perhaps instead of horses, we can use dog sleds in the winter! They are fast and mobile, maybe more so that the skis!”

Donovar tilted his head in thought. “That might be true. I suppose I would have to see. Do some trials and the like; determine how much can be pulled, how many dogs are needed, and the distance they can travel. Yes, maybe they are more akin t’ horses and good for quick, shorter distances? I will test this.”

“See! Not as bad as all that, is it?”

“Perhaps not, but I still need to test it out. This doesn’t help us with making sure the boys can survive out there in the winter. How will they survive in a blizzard? If their food supplies spoil? Most of these boys likely can manage for short periods of time, but if they are far from help?”

I frowned and slumped a bit in my chair. “Damn. The trappers might help if we consult them? Especially if we pay them a consultation fee.”

“Consultation fee?” Donovar asked, with his eyebrow raised.

“Aye. If we are going to consult them, might as well pay them.”

Donovar laughed and replied, “Aye, fair’s fair. That’s a lot of extra training for the boys.”

“That reminds me of something else I wanted to bring up. I had a few ideas for training I wanted to bring up with you. There are a few exercises I do, that might be helpful to you, especially if we expand them a bit.”

“Oh, what is that?”
“It’s called weightlifting. Sort of like what you are already having the boys do, but adding weights into the mix, and targeting certain motions.”

I stood up and demonstrated what I was talking about.

Donovar looked mildly interested, but clearly had trouble picturing what I was saying.

“It’s fine, it’s just a suggestion,” I said, “Come by my house tomorrow, and I will show you.”

“Aye, that sounds good.”

“The other thing I thought might be beneficial is more team exercises. If they need to rely on their fellows, they need to not only trust them but know their limits. Incorporating teamwork ought to help, I think. Something like all of them picking up a log at the same time or helping each other climb obstacles.”

“Hmm, the boys already know the limits of the others through sparring, but the additional exercises might help. Maybe incorporate it into this weightlifting thing.”

I shrugged. “Just food for thought.”

“No, no! More training is always welcome! I always aim to be stronger than yesterday! If I must, I will be stronger than half a day ago, or even a moment ago! Those whom I train will benefit from this, and if they are smart, adopt such a thing for themselves!”

I struggled to maintain a blank face at his enthusiasm. I settled on saying, as wisely as I could, “That is a very wise outlook on life.”

Donovar grinned and said, “Thank you, my lord! I will sort this out, and if I cannot, I will run around the castle in the snow ten times! If I cannot manage that, I will do 200 pushups!”

I struggled to resist rolling my eyes, as Donovar was always passionate about training. He was an odd duck, but I could see why Lord Stark liked him.

Donovar was two years younger than me, and he still participated in the defense against Redbeard’s wilding invasion when he was 14 years old. According to Lord Stark, he had ended up fighting alongside Artos Stark, Lord Edwyle’s uncle, and saved his life in the battle. Thanks to Donovar’s actions, Artos was able to avenge his brother and kill Redbeard.

When he was asked what boon he wanted for his actions, after the battle, Donovar asked to be taken into the Stark’s men-at-arms and to be properly trained!

Donovar had a history of being crazy about training and was not shy about sharing his love of it, at least according to what my tired son told me every night before stumbling into his bed.

“Oh, before I forget,” Donovar said, “You will need t’ choose how their loyalty is displayed. You can have them wear a surcoat, paint the brigandine t’ your liking, or have some other special type of distinction, such as the King’s Landing Gold Cloaks.”

“Well, I decided on my House’s sigil. It is green and gold, parted per pale, with the green on the left. A sun is emblazoned in the center, with the rays of light being sickles on the right pale, and stalks of wheat on the left. The color of the sun is the inverted colors.”

“Ah, green and gold. Good colors.”
“Hmm, well I like the idea of emblazoning a small coat of arms on the brigandine to signify that they fight for me. That won’t really work if we can’t afford the brigandine immediately though. Perhaps we can paint the helmets green? That’s pretty distinctive.” It actually reminded me a lot of the green berets, as well.

“Green helmets would work; it is similar to the Gold Cloaks, so it would be accepted by many. A surcoat or cloak would also work.”

I grimaced at the thought. All I could think of was the scene in The Incredibles with the old lady talking about how bad capes are for superheroes. Granted, my men were in no position to be sucked into a jet engine, but I figured the principle was sound.

“No, I don’t want anything that can be caught or trapped and used against my men. What about tools?”

“Do you mean, like axes and such?” At my nod, he continued, “Normally, a kit for a man-at-arms that is travelling would include his bedroll, knife, perhaps an axe, and depending on what is occurring, food.”

I leaned back in my chair as I thought. The men would have long distances to travel and might not always have access to a village. Food and shelter would be critical. “Alright, well the men should all definitely carry an axe. Have one carry a sort of combination between an axe and a pickaxe; where it has an axe blade on one half, and a pickaxe on the other. That should help in a variety of situations, but we don’t need every man to carry it. Another man or two should carry a shovel; another should carry rope, and someone else carries some fishing gear. Every man should also carry some cooking ware: a pot, a spoon, etc. Once we get patrols going and get a feel for how many men in a group, we can change up those numbers as needed.”

“Aye, that sounds fair. That should let the boys handle anything that gets thrown at them.”

“Food is another issue. It might be important for them to rush somewhere, so they will need rations to be able to feed them. On a regular patrol, we can schedule them enough time to do some hunting or buy food in a village, but that won’t always work. I think dried food would be best for this. I’ve been working on something that could be really beneficial, especially once our food production increases. The first, is a ground up, dried beef or goat. I call it borts, and it is very lightweight, and once thrown into boiling water, creates a very nice soup. That with some dried, ground up corn, grits, can easily make a meal. Some dried cheese, and maybe fish will keep them healthy and keep the hunger away when quick responses to something are required. Some horse fodder would be good as well, so they don’t have to let the horses graze.”


“Well then, is there anything else we need to think about?”

Donovar shook his head, and replied, “No, I think that covers everything, Michael.” He stood up and gave me a small bow, and said, “I will be off then. I left the boys training under Lord Stark’s men, so I don’t want to leave them too long, or they might go soft!”

I smiled as he left my office. A good man, if a bit crazy.
Thirteenth day, Seventh Moon, 252 AC (+152 days)

Spring was in the air.

Birds were chirping, bees were buzzing, the grass was growing, and sometimes there was snow on the ground.

You couldn’t have it all.

Regardless, it was a beautiful day; a promising day. There was a quote from Robin Williams that I had always liked: ‘Spring is nature’s way of saying let’s party.’

We had taken that to heart, and tomorrow, my eldest daughter, was getting married! Tylan had finally gathered his courage, the poor boy, and asked me for Violet’s hand in marriage. I felt bad for the boy; if he had asked sooner, he wouldn’t have had to ask a Master, which had been nerve-racking for him. Violet pestered and cajoled him throughout the winter, and finally asked when the first signs of spring were in the air.

Unfortunately for him, now that we were a Masterly house, we couldn’t just have a simple wedding. No, it had to be a grand affair – well, as grand as we could make it. I sent out invitations to the neighboring major lords and masters, but I did have to send out qualifications. I let them know that due to the newness of my land, we had no castle or servants, or any luxuries that they may be used to. I let them know that I would not be offended if they were unable to show up, and I let them have an out. Marrying a commoner, and doing it in somewhat rough settings? I really wouldn’t blame them for not showing up.

In the end, I received a lot of declined invitations, with their sincere regrets of course, but I did still receive quite a few accepts. Granted, most of those were not of the main family, so I wasn’t sure if that was some sort of snub, or just practical? The Glovers sent a cousin and his wife; the Mormonts a younger brother of the household head, the Ryswells a cousin and his wife, the Manderly’s a younger brother, and Lord Stark sent his uncle, Rodrik. The rest declined, which I wasn’t surprised nor angry at, though I was disappointed that the Tallharts declined to send anyone since I hoped to have good relations with them.

Over the past few days some of the guests had trickled in, and as Master of these lands, I greeted them and got them settled in the temporary quarters. In the vein of waste not, want not, we had erected a large hall building, with an attached kitchen and living quarters along the new road, nearer to Redbridge. We would be having the wedding reception here, and afterwards would convert it into a communal building, possibly for schooling.

The women had enough time to plan and get enough supplies for the wedding feast, sew the dress for Violet, nice clothes for Tylan, and a myriad of other tasks that I, quite frankly, had no knowledge of. While the women prepared for the wedding, I took charge of where they would live. As a dowry, I was giving Tylan a brand-new home, some coin, and a job.

Over the winter, I realized as I continued to plan out long-term ideas and goals, I kept relying on Master Builder Jon to be able to help – which wasn’t realistic. He was Lord Stark’s man, and he wasn’t about to be enticed away; I needed my own Master Builder, and who better than my new son-in-law, or goodson as it were. Tylan was a smart man, if not overly learned, so I spent time in the latter half of the winter teaching him what I could. Mathematics, drawing, measurements, and
everything else I could think of. He was already very handy, as he was a farmer, so it was just stepping that up a bit and formalizing it. The real knowledge he needed was what only Jon could teach him, and luckily for me, was willing to do so. Tylan and Violet were not overly attached to the farming lifestyle, even if Violet loved the outdoors and her animals, so I figured this would be a good fit. Nepotism wasn’t really a thing here; hiring my new goodson was just seen as good sense.

While I was doing that, the women aimed to have this be the best wedding in the history of the area. Nyra and I were determined to give our not-so-little girl the best wedding we could, for her sake, but as Nyra was apparently more politically savvy than I, was also aiming to make a political statement with it.

As I approached the main hall, I saw Master Ethan Glover and Lord Mace Mormont talking quietly in the courtyard and walked over to them.

“Good morning, my lords. How are you today?” I asked.

“Well enough!” replied Ethan, in his booming voice. Mace nodded the same.

“Excellent. I hope the accommodations are not troubling you too much?”

Mace waved it off. “Bah! I’ve had much worse before. Redbeard was a pox, and not just because I had to sleep on my horse!”

Ethan snorted. “Please, don’t tell that story again.”

Mace glared at him. “It’s a good story!” He cleared his throat and asked me, “Ready for your daughter’s wedding? The first one is always the hardest, or so they say.”

I smiled and said, “Yes, a bit nervous though. Tylan is a good lad, and I know Violet will keep him straight!” The two men laughed, and I pulled up an empty chair and sat beside them.

“Truth be told,” I said, “the women are doing most of the work. I just made sure that the dowry was ready, and let the women take care of the rest.”

Mace smirked. “Aye, that’s about the best you can do.”

“What was the dowry, if you don’t mind me asking,” Ethan asked.

“A new house for their new family, coin, and I got an apprenticeship for Tylan with Master Builder Jon.”

“Planning to build a lot?” asked Ethan.

Mace snorted. “What kind of question is that? This is the Stoney Shore. There’s nothing here; of course, he needs to build a lot.”

I contained my laugh and replied, “Yes, there is that. But I do plan to build a lot, and I lack the people and knowledge to do it. I still plan to build two more castles for my vassals, but at the rate, we are going, it’s going to take a long time.”

Ethan looked confused. “Why so long? I’ve wandered by the site for your castle, and it is not extravagantly large.”

I shrugged. “Not enough people. According to Lord Stark’s information, I’ve got about 35,000 people living in my land, and they are incredibly spread out. It’s about 0.7 people per square mile.”
Mace grimaced. “That few? I knew the area never recovered, but that few? Bloody Ironborn.”

“‘Aye, that’s why I am looking to get as many people as I can.”

Mace nodded. “I know; Lord Edwyle sent that letter last summer. I’ve had a few people interested, but not enough to help you.”

“Any number helps, Lord Mace. Lord Stark said he would try to get the spare sons of his smallfolk, but I also need skilled tradesmen.”

“Oh, like what kinds?” he asked.

“Miners and shipwrights, mostly. I’ve had a few other tradesmen come in, most at my request.”

Mace shook his head and said, “I don’t have any spare shipwrights or miners. I’ve only have enough living on Bear Island to work – no extra.”

“Would you perhaps be open to an apprenticeship? I’ve got a few lads down in the village who would be willing.”

Mace scratched his cheek. “I am not quite sure. My older brother normally deals with all that, but I don’t think he would be opposed. When I head back, I will inquire about it, and let you know.”

Ethan spoke up and said, “I don’t have any spare miners myself, and no shipwrights at all. Would I be able to send someone as well?”

Mace shrugged languidly. “I’ll ask. Keep in mind; our shipwrights don’t build any of those big boats, like the ones in White Harbor or down south. Longships and knarrs, mostly.”

Ethan and I both nodded. “That’s perfectly fine,” I said. “I’ve sent out a letter to an old acquaintance who knows an older, injured miner, who might be willing to come and instruct my people here.”

“It will be nice to have some more activity along the coast. With enough strength, the bloody Ironborn might finally leave us alone,” said Ethan.

“Aye,” I replied, “It would be nice. This area here is fertile, and if I had enough people putting it under plow, there would be plenty of food to go around.”

I wasn’t too sure how this diplomacy thing worked, but I figured if I hinted towards my manpower needs enough, with some benefits for them, they might acquiesce.

“It would be nice to have more food security; it would let my people focus on the coin-earning projects, instead of trying to eke out food from our island,” agreed Mace.

“More food in and along the coast would benefit Deepwood Motte,” replied Ethan. “The question is, how much food could be gained from such an adventure?”

“Of course, since I would be benefitting from such an adventure, I would, of course, be willing to front say, ten tons of grain per 100 people, payable after the first full harvest they arrive?” I said, hoping to make a deal.

Ethan looked amused and said, “Aye, it would be very kind of you to pay initially for such an adventure. But the cost of such a thing, I fear, is much higher than ten. Something much closer to fifty seems to be a much more accurate number.” Ethan nodded along to his words.

“Of course, but such benefits also play out in the long-term. It would be fitting to have food costs
cheaper for say, ten years, for any food you wish to purchase. Along, with an initial fifteen tons of food, of course.”

Ethan nodded. “Aye, long-term benefits and costs should be spread out. But that hardly lessens the impact of the immediate costs. Forty tons.”

“Oh, but for such an adventure, first right to purchase, plus below market rates would be enough to cover such a thing. Twenty tons,” I replied.

Ethan said, “Twenty tons might be appropriate, but you do not have the people to transport such amounts of food. It must be taken into account that it would be our people who travel. Thirty tons.”

I contained my sigh. We normally get anywhere from seven to eight bushels an acre, and each bushel weighs about sixty pounds. A ton was 2,000 pounds, so I would need 60,000 pounds per 100 people, which was about 125 acres of food per 100 people. Each bushel of wheat was about 15 pennies, so the cost per 100 people was around 15,000 pennies or about 1.25 gold dragons.

“Thirty tons it is. But the majority of them must be farmers, or at least willing to farm.”

Mace and Ethan both smiled. “Aye, we can manage that,” said Mace, happily.

I stood up and said, “Well, I hope this is a great start to many new adventures! Thank you for your help, my lords. I must be off; plenty yet to do before the wedding.”

That didn’t go as poorly as I thought it would. There had been few people who travelled from other lords’ lands, and I had been at a loss at why. The people were free to move, yet they weren’t. Apparently, the lords were holding them back somehow. Maybe not bothering to tell anyone?

I shrugged to myself as I entered the main hall. It seemed bribery was the order of the day.

The hall was well lit and had two long rows of tables going the length of the room to seat all the guests. At the far end of the room, going width-wise was the head table for Tylan’s family and my own.

There was little in the way of ornamentation in the room, just wood floors, wood walls, wood tables, and wood chairs. We had a large tapestry hanging on the wall behind the head table with my coat of arms, but that was it. There was a little stage in one corner of the room for some people to play music and an empty table in the other corner that would eventually hold snacks.

I wandered out the back of the hall, looking for my target. With confirmation that the West Coast had no one capable of producing larger ships, I hoped my next target would provide me with a very profitable industry.

Finally, I saw him as he was coming back from the direction of Redbridge.

“Lord Manderly!” I shouted as I called out to him.

He gave me a little wave and made his way over to me. “Master Michael. How are you, on the day before your daughter’s wedding?”

I gave him a smile and said, “Good, good. A bit nervous and a bit excited and a bit sad.”

He chuckled and replied, “Yes, I know the feeling. Before I forget, I have a letter from my brother for you. I will pass it along after the wedding. You were looking for me, for something?”
“Ah, yes. I was hoping to talk to you about shipwrights for the bigger ships on the sea.”

“Shipwrights, eh? Looking to get a few to move here?”

“Either move here or possibly send a few boys from here to be apprenticed at White Harbor.”

“Apprenticeship would be easier to do, but it would still take a lot of work on my part to find someone suitable to teach.”

“Of course, and I wouldn’t expect you to do such a thing without recompense. It is my hope that our Houses can have a mutually profitable relationship! If you were able to find high-quality masters to apprentice a few of my people to, it would be entirely appropriate for a finder’s fee to find its way to you.”

William smiled and nodded his head. “That does sound reasonable. I believe I could find such a master shipwright.”

I smiled and replied, “Wonderful! I was also hoping you might be able to find me someone who is familiar with whaling.”

William let out a low whistle. “That is a tall order. The Ibbenese have that market pretty much locked down. They do not take kindly to competition.”

“Oh? I am not overly familiar with them.”

“The Ibbenese have claimed the best spots for themselves and will fight off anyone they see trying to whale. Furthermore, the largest market for whale products is Braavos, and the Ibbenese have paid most of the merchants to rat out anyone that produces whale oil.”

Damn. I had no idea that whale oil was an essential monopoly. “Wait, what if the product isn’t sold in Braavos?”

William gave me a sly smile. “There is nothing stopping local production and usage of whale oil but trying to sell in Braavos or elsewhere in Essos is a fool’s errand.”

I gave him a look out of the corner of my eyes and asked, “Would you happen to know anyone who dabbles in such local production?”

William chuckled. “Yes, I believe I could find such a person.”

“Excellent!” I exclaimed, happily. “When you return to White Harbor, please send me a letter once the details are sorted, and how difficult for you it was to find such people.”

“I will. Are you aiming for Redbridge to become a whaling town?”

I shook my head. “Not exclusively, no. I aim to be a bit more general, but the profits from whaling are quite welcome. And the Ibbenese do not frequent the Sunset sea, so I will lack competition for that as well.”

William laughed. “Aye, profit can be great, even for those merchants who just transport the goods.”

“Speaking of transporting goods, I was hoping to get some advice from you or your brother.”

“Oh, concerning what?”

“I had hoped to open some sort of dialogue with the Ironborn,” I replied. “I would like to see if I can
open up any sort of trade negotiations.”

William frowned in thought. “Well, it has never been done before, I can tell you that.”

“Exactly! I know that the Ironborn will never deal nicely with anyone, but I hope that by having beneficial trade it might take their focus off the North.”

“It is certainly a bold course of action. This is something you would definitely have to talk to my brother and Lord Edwyle about. What trade exactly were you hoping for?”

“I was thinking something along the line of transports, at least until I have enough people to transport goods.”

“The Ironborn probably won’t be well-received by anyone here, and they probably won’t be interested in such an endeavor. Paying the iron price, and all that.”

“Ah, well, perhaps I will discuss it with Lord Edwyle and Lord Wyman. I think its something that should at least be attempted since it has never been tried before.”

“It’s an interesting path, but one I think, futile.”

“Perhaps something else can be arranged? A trade fleet to make the trip from White Harbor around Westeros up to Redbridge?”

“A trade fleet? What would make it worthwhile?”

“It would have to be a combined effort from the western Houses, but I believe we could have enough produce to make that worthwhile. For instance, my lands are in dire need of wool, animals, and people. Any that could be brought here would be welcome. I also plan to sell some different types of drinks.”

“Drinks? Like that Northern Water, you sent my brother?”

“Exactly! We will be serving some at the wedding reception if you are interested.”

“Are you that badly off for wool and animals?”

“Expanding the number of animals for the influx of people is crucial, and wool is always a welcome item,” I replied, deflecting the question.

Truly, we did need to expand our animal herds because of the influx of immigrants, just as we did for wool. However, Violet had finally accomplished her childhood goal of inventing something! She managed to create a simple carding machine, that would greatly increase our ability to process wool. It vaguely reminded me of machines from back on Earth, but I frequently found that it was getting harder and harder to remember details from back then.

Regardless, it meant that our demands for wool were high since we could turn around raw wool into spun, easier than anyone else. I wasn’t about to let anyone know that however – that was just good business.

“Well, we will have to discuss this later with Mace and Ethan, probably Dunn Ryswell as well.”

“I look forward to it, Lord Manderly.”

“Ah, call me William. I have a feeling we will continue to get along splendidly.”
I gave him a smile in thanks as we stopped upon a small hill on the road. Sunset’s Rest came into view, and while the work had started up again, it was invisible from this angle.

It was a sunny day, if not overly warm, and I was glad that I had my hat to shield my eyes. I would never have the luxury of sunglasses again, but my cowboy hat was undoubtedly much better than a straw-hat or a wool pullover.

After a moment, William spoke again. “Say, where did you get such a hat? The materials look very fine.”

I pulled off my hat and handed it to him so that he could examine it. “I made it myself, actually. I found straw-hats to be a poor material to wear, and I wanted something a little distinctive.”

“How does it hold up?” he asked.

“Good, I’ve had that one for about ten years now. You can see it’s a bit worn, but it is excellent quality.”

“Do you have another I might buy?”

“It would be my pleasure to gift one to you.”

William laughed and replied, “I think we are going to get along great!”

The wedding itself passed by in a blur – both figurative and literal. I fought off tears through most of the ceremony as I watched my beautiful daughter marry her love. She looked radiant in her elaborate dress as she made her vows beneath the heart tree. Their vows were heartfelt, and the guests certainly felt it.

It was a short walk back to the hall, where we had hired some people to help serve the feast for the reception.

The hall itself was bright, with both the windows and doors open allowing light to come in as well as lanterns and candles, and there was food spread out all over the tables.

At the head table, Tylan and Violet sat in the centre, accompanied by Nyra, myself, and Tylan’s parents. At the other two tables, there was a mixture of people. At the one table, we had all the invited lords, as well as my children and Nyra’s extended family, as well as Donovar and his family. The other table included some of Tylan’s invited guests and some of the more prominent people that were living in Redbridge.

The first course was a mix of appetizers: asparagus cheese puffs, skewered shrimp rubbed in a mint pesto sauce, and smoked salmon rosettes. The second course was served soon after and consisted of a fresh salad with vegetables and fruit intermixed.

Between the courses, we had music playing from a few hired villagers and a lot of chatting and laughter. The third, which gathered quite a few comments, was clam chowder served alongside with a fresh, hot baguette.

The fourth was a choice between hot beef steak pie or a steak and kidney pudding, served alongside warm, mashed potatoes, gravy and mushroom ketchup. I ended up choosing the pudding, and enjoyed the savory taste of the meat inside the suet pastry.
Finally, after the toasts had been made, and the fourth course cleared the fifth, and final course, was brought out. It was a dessert dish, that consisted of a beautiful hazelnut and maple layered cake.

My eyes teared up as I watched my daughter and her husband laughing and enjoying themselves as they made the first celebratory cut on the cake. After the last dish was cleared away, the snack table in the back was filled with snacks for all the guests to serve themselves, and the wait staff was given the rest of the night off. The snacks included things like cheese curd fritters, fried chicken, potato chips, prosciutto, and donuts.

If the atmosphere was fun and light-hearted during the feast, it certainly picked up after the feast. The invited Lords mainly conversed with each other, while the rest of the guests enjoyed the party.

Outside, more villagers had their own party to celebrate the nuptials with the leftover food from the feast, as well as more food provided by the villagers in a potluck style meal.

I hired a few people to play music for the feast, and though they played little to my liking, it was enough to get people dancing and having a good time.

Eventually, as the night wore on, Tylan gathered the attention of everyone present. “I have a final surprise for you, Violet. Over the past winter, I’ve had your father teach me how to use a guitar so that I could play you your favourite song, on our wedding day.”

He walked over to the vacated stage and sat down on the chair. He cleared his throat as he strummed the guitar a few times. “*Somewhere over the rainbow, Bluebirds fly, and the dreams that you dream of, Dreams really do come true.*”

As he sang, his voice wandered, but his heart was true, and Violet’s eyes were tearing up as she listened to him sing. After he finished singing, Violet hugged him and gave him an affectionate kiss.

I had been very happy when Tylan approached me looking for lessons, and his choice of song was perfect. Nyra squeezed my hand, letting me know that I was not alone in that assessment.

“Smallfolk and bards. Wonderful,” a quiet voice said, as it drifted across the room. I saw out of the corner of my eye that Dunn Ryswell had made that comment to his wife. He was quiet enough that no one else appeared to have heard, but I could feel anger bubbling in my chest.

Nyra’s grip tightened on my hand. I looked towards her, and she shook her head. I shouldn’t ruin this night for my daughter.

Luckily, it seemed Violet and Tylan were ready to call it a night. I had passed word around earlier that there was to be no bedding ceremony, but that did not stop Violet’s cousins from ‘escorting’ the couple to their room and trying to scare the shit out of Tylan.

All the guests cheered and gave the couple their best wishes as they left the hall. After that, the assembled group started to quiet down again, as the lateness of the night made itself known. Outside, I could hear people still enjoying themselves, but people inside were starting to say their goodbyes and head out.

I gave Nyra a kiss as we sat and looked over the hall. What a wonderful night.

xxxxx

The next few days were good, though I did my best to avoid the Ryswells, and we had a productive meeting with all my neighbouring lords regarding the trade fleet. We had planned to have it come to
us in a year’s time, which would let us stock up on trade goods. Amber and furs were the main items to be traded, though some specific west coast fish were also included.

At my suggestion, ice was also included, since I knew that it would be a huge draw down in the south. I had to explain, as best I could, how to store the ice and it was planned to have a ship do a test run to see how viable it was. The ice in my immediate area was gone, and barring any freezing spells, would not come back, so I suggested that the Mormonts send a party to the Frozen Shore. That was well-received and hopefully the start of a promising trade, even if it was of limited use to me. Inverloch would still contain ice in its peaks, but it wasn’t viable for me, yet. I still hoped to capture part of the trade by having any ships dock at Redbridge along the journey.

To my relief, the Ryswells departed early this morning, and the Glover party and Mormont party joined them. The Ryswells departed with little fanfare, but I made sure that the Glover and Mormont parties had a good sendoff – and they even bought a few barrels of vodka and brandy, though they didn’t have much room.

Which brought me to today, as I was seeking out William Manderly and Rodrick Stark who still remained in Redbridge. William had brought a small merchant caravan along with him and had been doing a brisk business selling linen, tools, glass, wine, and other things we lacked.

I finally stumbled across them both in the town centre of Redbridge.


William smiled and replied, “Good afternoon, Michael. The Mormonts and Glovers all sent off then?”

“Yes, they have a long road ahead of them, so they did not stay overly long.”

“What have you got there, Michael?” asked Rodrick, indicating towards the sack I was carrying with me.

“Something that I hoped might interest the both of you,” I replied, as I put the sack down on the back of William’s wagon and started to empty it. “Soap,” I declared, as I stacked the different bars on the wagon.

William looked amused. “Soap?”

“Yes, different kinds and good quality,” I clarified. Over the years, Nyra and I had experimented to improve the regular lye soap we had. We tried different things to improve the quality of the soap, such as goats’ milk, sunflower oil, and beeswax, and also things to improve the scent, such as mint and winter roses. “I’ve got a few different kinds of varying qualities, as well as scents.” I broke one of the higher quality mint bars, made with goats’ milk and beeswax, in half and gave each to the men. They each gave it a sniff and raised their eyebrows in surprise.

“That is a good smell! And the texture if different than the regular soap!” Exclaimed Rodrick.

“Aye, it’s a hardier soap, but less coarse at the same time. Interesting,” mused William.

I pointed out a nearby bucket of water. “Give it a try and see how you like it.”

“There are a lot of bubbles, and it certainly feels a lot nicer to use,” said William.

After Rodrick gave it a try, he said, “It’s certainly interesting. But why put effort into it?”
“Soap is very important! Since we use it all the time, I decided it might as well be as nice as we can make it!”

“I’ll admit, soap helps when it comes time to bathe, but I would hardly say it was crucial,” replied William.

“It helps cut down on sickness and removes dirt and any other filth much better than water alone.”

“Cuts down on sickness?” asked Rodrick.

“Aye, you’ve never noticed?” Rodrick and William both shook their heads.

Damn, how was I to explain this? “Well,” I said, “Shit stinks, right?”

Both men blinked, then nodded.

“And you wouldn’t want to eat shit, right?”

They both blinked again but look amused.

“Have you ever noticed someone’s hands stink after they take a shit, but they look clean?” They both nodded. “Right, so I figure there’s got to still be shit there then. Maybe small enough that I can’t see it with my eyes, but there nonetheless. Soap, however, will get rid of it completely. Not just the smell of it, but the shit itself. I think that applies to a lot of things, which is why I tell all my people to use soap, and why everyone who made food at the feast washes their hands before making any food.”

Both men took some time processing that. William spoke first, “I can’t disprove that, and it certainly sounds compelling. But I’ve never heard a Maester say such a thing.”

I shrugged. “I can’t confirm what a Maester does or does not say. I just know what I can reckon with my head.”

Rodrick snorted. “Aye, that doesn’t sound crazy. The thing is: does it work? Over the past winter, was there less sickness?”

I nodded. “Yes, there was one death in the village this past winter, but he was a very old man, and didn’t look to have died of any sickness.”

William looked more intrigued after hearing that. “What makes this different than regular soap?”

“A few more additives to make the soap nicer, as well as a variety of scents. Interested?”

Rodrick shrugged. “The soap and sickness idea is interesting, but I’m not overly worried about such fineries.”

William rubbed his chin in thought. “There would be a market for this, I suppose, but it would require a lot of work on my part. Ten silver stags for the bag?”

I barely stopped my grimace. “Ah, but the work and uniqueness of this is surely worth more. I only have one bar of it, but this contains winter roses. That is surely worth ten silvers by itself. The other products are not as rare, but combined? Seventy silver stags.”

“Winter rose you say?” He took a sniff of the bar, and replied, “Yes, I can smell that. But the rest? That cannot be worth sixty silver stags. Forty silver stags.”

“What if I throw in ten of my hats as well for a total of seventy silvers?”
William thought for a moment, then stuck out his hand for me to shake. “You’ve got a deal!” he exclaimed, happily. “Shall I come by your farmhouse later to pick up the drinks and hats?”

“That will be fine. You will be leaving tomorrow morning then?”

“Yes, as you said earlier, it’s a long journey.”

“You as well, Rodrick?” I asked.

“Aye, though I was hoping to come back out later this summer,” he replied.

I blinked in surprise. “Well, I would love to have you, but I was also planning to tour my lands later in the summer.”

“Ah, could you send a letter to Winterfell when you settle on a date to go?”

“Of course,” I replied, “But we still won’t have the castle ready before the summer is done, I think, so the accommodations will be similar to this and I don’t know if anyone will be available to be a servant.”

He waved me off. “Bah, it would just be me, not my lady wife. I’ve lived a long time without servants when I was in Essos; I can live without them again.”

William and I chuckled.

“Well, I will see you later today then William, and you tomorrow morning before you leave Rodrick. I hope you both have a good, last day in Redbridge.”

With that, I started to head back home, whistling to myself.

The wedding was a success. My first foray into politics went well enough, and my trades surpassed my expectations!

Things were looking up.
Interlude: Eight

Fifteenth day, Seventh Moon, 252 AC (+2 days)

She stretched in the chair as she rocked back, feeling tired from the long day. Violet was now married, and when Nyra had last seen her this morning, she looked like a radiant woman. Far different from when she had been a child, but the core of her remained.

All of her children had been growing, and just has her mother had promised when Nyra was first pregnant, had done so in a blink of an eye.

With Violet now married and out of the house, Evelyn was the eldest child and while on a different path than Violet; she was shaping up to be a beautiful woman. At 15 years old she was still trying to find her place, but her recent talk with Michael about his past seemed to have started a fire in her.

Nyra knew she would have to keep an eye on her, but she had to admit it was nice to know that she and Michael were able to successfully raise their first child. Not that she really had doubt doubts, but it had always been a worry in the back of her mind. Michael might not have really understood the significance of that, but to not have a single child die, to have them healthy, and to have them happy. It was a wondrous thing!

Ryden and Arthur were taking to their training with Donovar with enthusiasm, and it looked like Arthur had really found his calling. He’s taken with Donovar’s attitude towards training, and he seems to love the actual method and art behind it, rather than the violence. Ryden, on the other hand, leaned more towards the practicality of being able to defend himself and others, rather than the art. Michael was worried Ryden might react badly, especially after the Ironborn attack, but seemed to bounce back.

Anari at eight was enjoying her childhood, as she should before the duties and trials of womanhood were placed upon her. Michael, on the other hand, was a bit worn down from all of his tasks and stress. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him rereading the letter from Lord Manderly, though he had read it several times previously, and the words had yet to change.

The letter was just the latest worry, for coin was going to be tight by the end of the summer – if steps were not taken to correct that. Work on the castle was going again, and though cement was being made, concrete was not being poured. There was still the occasional overnight freezes which could damage the concrete, so they still had to wait another month or two before that could be started up again.

Coin was flowing outwards at a quick rate, according to Michael’s notes, and we would run out of money before it was finished. The foundations were mostly dug out for the castle, but nothing was built up.

Michael and she had been working up a few ideas to combat this, and a few had already borne fruit. Michael had explained the concept of industry and how that could be a huge benefit to us. However, he also explained the idea of unique products and marketing, in that people can eventually copy basic processes, but unique products backed by marketing would continue to flow coin towards us.

She let out a little sigh, wishing that she could have read some books on these fascinating subjects.

Regardless, she and Michael would build a warehouse to make and produce different goods. A factory would be an interesting thing as well, but Michael says that they are too small for a dedicated
manufacturing building to be useful at this point.

Speaking of, while it was a descriptive name, one apparently, they even used in King’s Landing, why would people who could build such wonders as flying machines, name such important buildings such a bland name? Surely there could have been something more? A building that houses wares?

“Michael?” She asked, “Why are merchants not called waremen, if we call buildings that houses wares, warehouses?”

He gave one of his rare, wry smiles. “Merchants carry merchandise, but I think the word came from another old word and was just used instead. Also, back on Earth, the word ware also sounded like were, which was a word used in tales to indicate someone who was cursed into a man-beast thing. Like a werewolf.”

She blinked. What a weird people. Maybe it was a translation thing?

Michael went back to his reading and left Nyra to her thoughts again.

Regardless, they would aim to have several industries running to get coin to start flowing in, such as soap, alcohol, garum, and wool processing. Possibly other condiments and seasonings that would travel well at a later date, but right now the aim was to get these processes going as soon as possible.

There was a lot of possibilities, however, in that Michael’s knowledge of different kinds of food would certainly create unique products. Michael thinks they might be able to create a brand name based on our location. His examples were meaningless to her, such as Belgian chocolate, but the meaning was clear. We needed things to stay here, regardless of how people adapted.

Prosciutto, for example, was a simple enough item, and it really wasn’t a radically different item than salted pork, but it contained enough simple twists and differences that it created a different food. Mace Manderly was certainly interested in the variety of different foods, and Nyra had many discussions with him about it over his stay. Suet was very interesting to him, and something she had been willing to share since suet did not store well, unless heavily processed, and her and Michael gained nothing by keeping it to themselves.

Breaking free from her thoughts, she addressed Michael again. “Are you ready to have a chat about it now?” She asked, calmly.

“A chat? What’s there to bloody chat about?” He retorted, with a little heat.

“Of course, there is,” she admonished. “We need to have a response. It would be incredibly rude not to.”

“Ryden is too young to be married. End of story.”

“I don’t disagree, but a betrothal is not a marriage.”

“No, but they will want to have them married in a year or two, which is still too young.” He made a disgusted face. “And an arranged marriage? That is just wrong.”

She frowned a bit. “Maybe from our view, but that is a common thing amongst the nobility. The same for fostering children.”

Michael’s face paled. “We are not sending our children away.”
Nyra nodded firmly. “Agreed. Perhaps we can agree to a betrothal to Alice Manderly, tentative to both of them accepting once they are 18? We can have them get to know each other.”

Michael sighed. “I suppose. But we shouldn’t force the marriage onto Ryden.”

“We will talk to him tomorrow about the offer. Besides, the marriage, as far as I understand, is a good one. Alice is the eldest daughter of Alfred, who is the brother to Lord Theomore. Technically, I think she would be the aunt of the youngest heir, Wyman, who is third in line behind his father William, who is Lord Theomore’s eldest son. She is removed from the main branch of the family, but not by much, especially for such an established and wealthy family. Alice is a year younger than Ryden, but it could be a good match. You have said, repeatedly, how good relations with House Manderly is important.”

“I know,” he replied, waving his hands around a bit. “But, I didn’t expect it to be in this form.”

“It is, what it is. You shouldn’t be angry at Lord Theomore; he is just doing what they have always done.”

Michael slumped in his chair - the poor man. Always at odds with something, and it always weighed him down. “Fine. We’ll talk to Ryden tomorrow.”

“Together,” she replied.

“Together.”
Interlude: Nine

Twentieth day, Seventh Moon, 252 AC (+5 days)

Her eyes tracked the dandelion seed as it floated in the air above her. She watched as it danced in the air, going in one direction when it was caught in a stream of air, only to be reversed as it danced another way when another current caught it.

It was a lazy day today, and even the air seemed reluctant to do anything. Spring was a time of growth, but looking around her, none seemed present today. It was an unseasonably hot day; the birds were quiet, insects still, and even the livestock was quiet and peaceful.

Evelyn had spent the last few hours just lounging on the hill that her family’s home sat upon and was idly looking over the farm splayed out in front of her. The cows and sheep were on a pasture out of sight today, but the hens were moving around in their pen as they followed behind the herd’s grazing.

Her father’s farming methods were complicated, compared to the traditional methods, but they weren’t truly his. It was fascinating to think that somewhere out there, there was an entirely new world, filled with wonders. To be able to travel so far, and so quickly, and to see so much of the world must have been amazing. The music and art would have been something to behold as well.

Papa hadn’t been entirely helpful in describing what he called different types, but what he had spoken about was wonderful to think about. It had sent her off on a bit of an artist kick; painting a few different ideas of styles, some clay sculptures, and she tried her hand at creating a small stone sculpture. She was determined to try and, if not recreate, create her own styles that reflect the beauty in the world, from her point of view.

Listening to her father talk about the different instruments had been fascinating to listen to as well. Papa thought that Braavos might have a wider variety than anywhere in Westeros and hoped to bring some instruments over eventually. There were so many possibilities, and while she was not as musically inclined as Violet, she had many fond memories of sitting by the fire listening to her father sing.

It was a benefit, she supposed, that came with being a Lady from a Masterly house in that she would be able to collect such instruments. It came with some downsides, such as the marriage offer for Ryden, but so far had only made life better. She was a bit worried about a marriage offer of her own and hoped to follow in her sister’s footsteps. There were a few interesting boys, but no one that would be good enough to meet her papa’s standards.

She had also taken after her sister in her warging ability. Unlike Violet, she did not have the wide range of skill and strength that her sister had, despite Violet’s teaching, but was happy with her few, precious, connections. Her dog, Snow, as well as a songbird, Tweety, were her first connections, as Snow was given to her when she was young, and Tweety had been her first wild connection.

Violet had taught her a lot of different kinds of information, from how to fully control a single animal to controlling multiple animals. It was actually during the part of the training, where Violet taught her how to smell through Snow, that she enjoyed the most. It actually had led to a small discovery of hers: the star-nosed mole. It was a small creature that tunnels through the ground, and though it is blind, it can detect things through the earth. When she had begun experimenting with it, she discovered that she was able to rely on the creatures’ senses to detect animals in a short area around her, as well as the ability to see stone. To really see stone.
To be able to see the fault lines, where it would break easiest; to see what the colors would look like, the composition, and how to best work it. It led to a variety of small stone statues to practice and had been a lot of fun for her. She hoped to create large marble columns for the main keep of the castle, like what her father had described was a Corinthian style column, made of marble that was located inland near the Twin Lakes. It was supposed to have a gorgeous orange and white coloring that gave her so many ideas to try!

Papa was willing to let me craft the columns myself, provided she could do so on a smaller scale first. She constantly had to reign in her thoughts from running wild – imagining all the statues and beauty she could create all over Redbridge and the Stoney Shore. There was so much potential!

Violet had been interested in the concept of sensing the earth, as she had not done anything similar. Smell had been an easy sense to learn – especially with canines – and sight was simple enough – though not without fully controlling an animal – but a new sense? Violet was excited, though she had put that on hold since getting married, not that Evelyn held it against her. Her other siblings were unable to help, as none had yet shown any ability in warging.

Evelyn was looking forward to the summer since Papa was taking the family – except Violet and Tylan – on the tour around the Stoney Shore! It would be the first time she had ever been far from home, and she was excited to see more of the world! Violet had been telling her story of adventure that she had had with Papa for years, and she wanted her own! Papa had said that the more people see of the world, the more their understanding and perception of the world changes and expands.

She was definitely ready for more – she was an adult! She was over 15 years old now, and regardless of what her papa said, that was an adult! She might never have made an invention, but she was just awesome in a different way than her sister!

“And why are you frowning on this beautiful day, my darling?” said a feminine voice, interrupting her thoughts. 

Evelyn turned around and saw her mother standing there, with her hands on her hips, peering down at Evelyn. “’Lo momma. I’m not frowning.”

She sat down beside her and smoothed her skirts out. “Yes, you were. I could practically feel it from inside the house.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “Nu-uh.”

“Speak with proper words, my daughter,” Nyra admonished. “You are a Lady now, that comes with the territory.”

Evelyn eyed her mother and replied, “Is this one of those costs of being raised that Papa gripes about?”

A wry grin spread across her mother’s face. “Perhaps, but far from the only one.”

“Well, I was just thinking about how excited I am for the tour!”

Nyra raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “And that had you frowning?”

“I wasn’t frowning!” She retorted.

Her mother gave her the look – the one that all her children feared. Not because her mother was super scary, but because everyone knew she was reading your mind and was going to say something uncomfortably true.
“Your art is going to be great, because you will accept nothing less than your best, and your best is capable of great things. Don’t borrow worries and troubles from tomorrow and stop comparing your achievements to your sisters.”

Evelyn shifted uncomfortably on the blanket but didn’t otherwise reply.

“Ah, my sweet daughter. You can hear the truth; I know you can. You just have to accept that in your heart. Once you can accept that you are a wonderful person capable of achieving whatever you set your mind to and that your achievements do not have to compete with your sister’s achievements, you can be satisfied. Work on achieving happiness first, the rest will follow.”

With that, Nyra leaned over and kissed her on the forehead and left Evelyn alone on the hill, laying down in the heat of the day, with her mind awhirl.
Second day, Eighth Moon, 252 AC (+12 days)

“Come on, Anari. Let’s go for a little walk, and let your mother and siblings spend a little more time inside,” I said, as I led her out of the building.

It was another temporary structure, as so many seemed to be lately. It was one I had hoped not to build for a long time, but life has a way of defeating those plans. Three days past, Ethan had died in his sleep after fighting multiple illnesses over the past few years. Jess followed her husband the next night, and luckily, she died peacefully in her sleep as well. She had not been sick, so I believed that she died from heartbreak. They had been married for 48 years, and they had both lived to old age, with Ethan being 72 years old and Jess, 63.

Nyra was devastated at her parents’ death, especially since no one had expected her mother’s death. The whole family was in mourning, even I was not unaffected, and the entire village turned out for the funeral.

Our family had been blessed so far, in that death was still a new, unwelcome, experience for the children. They had yet to realize the fragility of life but had finally received that dreadful lesson. Of course, they had been to funerals for other people, non-family that is, but having family die tends to affect a person more than a distant acquaintance. The children were saddened, though the younger ones were already bouncing back a bit. Anari was still too young to truly understand what was happening and was making a bit of a racket, so I took her and left the building.

In contrast to the traditions of the region, we were going to place the remains of Ethan and Jess in a mausoleum, rather than hidden in a private location. I had always thought it was a morbid ceremony, so changing it would be beneficial and send a message to the people in my lands that they need not fear the Ironborn any longer. Most of the other parts of the tradition stayed the same, the burning, the feast, etc., it was just the final resting place that was different.

Evelyn had even drawn portraits for her grandparents for their graves so that we could look upon them as they were for all time. Evelyn had done so at my suggestion when she had been at a loss of what she could do to help with the funeral. Doing so now, while she could still remember her grandparents’ faces was important, rather than doing so years down the line when memories started to get blurred. This had also spurred Evelyn into doing family portraits for the rest of us at some point, though in a more cheerful setting.

As I walked with Anari, we cut through the forest and made our way to the river. Playing by the river had always calmed Anari down, as the gentle current and sounds of the water had always lulled Anari to sleep when she had been a baby. It was peaceful moments like that that helped you move through the hard moments in life.

Ethan and Jess had both lived good lives, and though the early years had been harsh the latter half had been wonderful to them, and I knew they had been very happy. The days of long, cold, and hungry winters had been behind them, and they had seen their grandchildren grow, as well as their first grandchild being married. It was a remarkable thing for people in the area, but I was just happy that they had been happy. Seeing their children raised to a Masterly house had just been icing on the cake.

Unfortunately, this rise in social standing had seen myself spending less time than I would have liked with either of them. I had spent less time with my good-parents as my duties increased and my free
time decreased. While I had spent some quality time with Ethan as his health started to fail, but it hadn’t been much. Nyra had spent more time, and while she enjoyed her time, it hadn’t made things any easier. Doubly so, when Jess had died, it hit Nyra even harder since she had been so focused on her father. The time she spent was treasured, but it would never be enough.

As Anari and I reached the shore of the river, I sat down on a large rock while she tried skipping stones across the surface of the water. It was a beautiful day that heavily contrasted against the atmosphere of the funeral, though that would change slightly in a few hours when the feast was set to begin.

Anari was right at the age where she could understand death in a general sort of way but couldn’t apply it to her grandparents. She would forget and ask about them, and her moods varied wildly. Sometimes she would cry when others were; sometimes she would get restless at the depressed atmosphere. I felt for her though, as her siblings and a lot of her cousins were older and had more memories of their grandparents, and she would have but a few. I had lost my grandfather when I was a little older than Anari, back on Earth, and I had few memories of him and time had worn a lot of those away.

Still, it was peaceful out by the river, and I let myself recharge a bit. I rarely got a chance to relax anymore, so anytime I could, was valuable. I leaned my head back on the rock and closed my eyes, listening to the sound of the water and of my daughter playing.

Life might stop for but a breath, but it always moves on.
Act 2: Chapter 7

Seventh day, Tenth Moon, 252 AC (+65 days)

I stood on the scaffolding, looking down on the workers below, as I surveyed the castle build site. The lower-most floor of the castle, such as the food cellar and other basement rooms, had all had their concrete floors poured and dried, and work on the walls and foundation had begun. The forms were being put up, and I watched as the people below me scurried about.

I could see Master Builder Jon under his tent, writing at his desk, as he delegated tasks to his subordinates. Thankfully, summer had arrived, and we were now able to pour the concrete without fear of it dropping below freezing and damaging the concrete. Some of the workers were hammering together the forms for the concrete, others were bringing in materials, and some were doing other various bits of prep work.

Ropes strained as goods were lowered into the pit via rope and pulley that was harnessed to draft oxen, as we still lacked horses for a lot of work. Donovar sent a few of Lord Stark’s men-at-arms that were on loan to me along with a few trusted villagers to buy horses from the Ryswell’s, and I hoped that they would return soon.

The entire scene before me was incredible to watch. I had seen construction work before, back on Earth, but there were few of the tell-tale signs of work being done. Sure, there was lots of noise, but not the same kind of noise. There were no motors, electric saws, or even radios. It was like what I would imagine an Amish worksite to be, though I had never seen one personally.

Regardless, it was an interesting sight, one which also highlighted some of our lack of knowledge and experience. For instance, I knew how to make and pour concrete on a small scale, but this was my first large project. The forms we were making for the walls were huge and heavily reinforced, hopefully overmuch, as I had no knowledge of what type of strength the forms needed. I’m sure there was a formula somewhere back on Earth, but that did little for me now. There was also the matter of ensuring a good finish. When you poured a floor, it was easy to finish the surface so that it would be smooth and aesthetically pleasing, but I was unsure of how to do that with the foundations since it was vertical and would be hidden behind the forms. It was for that reason I was contemplating using a stone façade on the castle walls, both to give it a more traditional look as well as to hide any imperfections.

Master Builder Jon was interested in the properties of the material since it was different than the traditional mortar of the North, but he was in unchartered territories, and neither of us knew how to test the limits of the concrete. I could remember terms like pre-stressed concrete, but I had no idea what that actually meant. Construction had never been my forte, so I was disappointed, but not overly so.

On the other hand, the farming program was going excellently, and Koryn was planning to give me an update in a few days. My latest thoughts about that had been on fertilizer, specifically an industrial production of the various kinds. I didn’t have any sources for mineral potash, so I needed to rely more on wood ash for potassium deficiencies, which worked nicely with a more industrial process. I also hoped to set up an industry that would buy the waste of the slaughtered animals in the growing Redbridge and turn it into both bone meal, which was an excellent source of phosphorous, as well as blood meal, which was good for nitrogen deficiencies.

Hydrated lime is also an excellent tool for pest control, as it can be sprayed over plants and is easily washed off. It would also provide another product for my, hopefully, growing mining industry.
Koryn was already teaching people how to use fertilizer, as well as make it on a small scale, but it was my job to try and create an industry.

Tylan was also a huge help, in that he was currently doing some extensive land surveys for me, along with learning from Master Builder Jon, so that I could start to divvy up land for new settlers. My basic plan, for now, was to have farms running along the same river I was located on, and spread out northwards, which would allow Redbridge to grow eastwards in the land between the two rivers. I had settled on either handing out 40 acres of prime land to each family, or 60 acres of poorer land. The 40-acre parcels would contain good soil, good terrain, and other characteristics that would contribute to an excellent crop yield. The 60-acre parcels, on the other hand, would have a poorer soil quality, possibly more rocky or hilly, that would be good for pasture for livestock with some good land for crops. Theoretically, I could increase the land size based on even poorer land, but that was not something I needed to consider just yet.

This land size was too much for any one family to manage without the proper tools, so I had drafted a plan for distributing my tools over this past winter. I planned to introduce co-ops for farmers to enable them to purchase equipment. I planned to introduce the concept for five families to come together to loan out equipment, payable in harvested goods at the beginning, and work to pay down that debt together. I didn’t really think I had any way to create a legal framework to encourage this like the US government might have done, but since I would be in charge of judging any issues, I believed I can work around that.

Simple contracts for the five families would allow them to create a co-op, which would recognize each family’s responsibilities as well as benefits. This would also highlight how any changes can be made to each co-op, for example, if one family decided to purchase more farmland and needed increased use of the equipment. This would give me a framework for making any decisions in cases brought before me and set the stage for expansion for possible supply co-ops years down the line.

I figured that the co-ops could probably stand to be larger, but since my equipment industry was still in the baby stages, I didn’t want to have supply issues and have multiple families have their harvests ruined waiting on parts. This would also allow co-ops to lease their equipment in turn to other cooperatives and earn income.

I was trying my best to create some sort of legal framework for me to judge any legal cases that got brought forward, since thankfully, there hadn’t been any, yet. King Jaehaerys I created the first unified code of law, and though I had read through it while I had been in Winterfell, I found it to be very lacking. It set some limits upon Lord Stark’s and my powers but was very vague and freeing in others. Maester Erwyn had told me that the King had made the code of law in order to unify the laws in the land, rather than champion any reform. For example, slavery had the same punishment across Westeros, and King Jaehaerys had used what most of the Kingdoms had used before to move forward. Some of the Kingdoms had either stricter or more lenient penalties already in place, but this was normalized and unified the punishment.

So, with the lack of a more comprehensive framework I was putting together piecemeal ideas to help my rule. One of these was branding. I was debating with myself and Nyra about whether it would be a good idea to create a centralized branding database of sorts. Branding cattle would help with reducing any rustling, and with any legal cases brought forward in identifying stolen cattle. The main problem was resources, in that I didn’t have any to spare just yet to create an additional bureaucratic function. Back on Earth, I had also always been opposed to big government, sticking their noses in everything. Now that I was the government, did I really want to have an additional function? Wasn’t I supposed to be the change I wanted to see in the world? Yet, I couldn’t help but recognize the benefits of the program. I would have preferred more participation from my people, but they didn’t really see the need for them to be involved.
Another issue was the cost of such a service. Should I charge for such a service? If I was doing work, or delegating that work to someone else, it should earn money. But the government really shouldn’t be profiting off of people.

It was impossible to ignore how much I had changed in this new world, and how little of Earth applied to Westeros. I knew, in my heart, that I would end up creating the database because it was such a huge benefit to the people and myself, but it still chaffed something in me. I had spoken to Ryden about it, as part of my lessons to him, and he was quite enthusiastic about it. It spoke well of him, but it also highlighted to me, that the world that shaped him is so much different than the world that shaped me. He would not have the same internal conflicts that I had, but I suppose that would have happened regardless, as everyone is different.

Still, it was hope for the future. And the future was always coming, whether it be in the form of the apprentices that I had sent out to the Manderlys and the Mormonts, or to the Mormont sailors who were here teaching Donovar about fighting on the water. Things moved on, and new issues arose. I was teaching my son to think for himself, and with that knowledge and ability, the future looked bright.
Fourteenth day, Tenth Moon, 252 AC (+7 days)

My tea was nice and hot, on this brisk, early morning. Hot drinks had always been a great pick-me-up in the mornings, and though, regrettfully, I didn’t have any coffee, this pine tea was still delicious and did the trick.

Today was an administrative focused day, where I would spend most of it dealing with payroll. We paid the long-term works on a weekly basis in order to simplify the work, since I didn’t have the guards to transport money each day to the varying locations. We had a few random day labourers, mostly villagers looking for extra coin, that would occasionally work, and they would receive daily pay, which made it easier on my logistics. Unfortunately, it meant more work for me, as I had to compile the time reports from each of my supervisors about who worked to ensure that everyone received the correct pay.

I also received word yesterday from Master Glover, saying that he had his first group of 100 new settlers on the way to me. It was exciting to have such a large group coming, and like everything these days, meant work. I had Tylan going back to check that the boundary markers for these farms were in place, and things would be ready for these people to begin farming as soon as possible.

Across the office building, the door opened letting in Koryn. Perfect timing.

I waved him down, and he made his way over to me.

“Good morning, Koryn. How are you?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Not too bad. Yourself?”

“Just making sure everyone’s pay is ready for later today.”

Koryn laughed. “Important that is.”

“Important,” I conceded, “But dull. Actually, I have something a bit more interesting for you.” At his raised eyebrow, I continued. “I received a letter from Master Glover yesterday, stating that the first group of 100 new farmers is on their way here. They will probably be here in a week or so. Are you able to help them get settled and see what their level of knowledge is? Master Glover promised either farmers or people who have never farmed but would be willing to do so.”

“Ah, I wondered when we would see that bear fruit. So, just a greeting and then some questions and the like for each family?”

“To start, yes. For those that have no knowledge, a more intensive training program is probably necessary. Something to help get them up and running.”

Koryn scratched his chin in thought. “Hmm, I could manage that. It would have to be staggered a bit, depending on how many need to be taught from scratch. Something t’ help them get started, then maybe another lesson a month later t’ let the lessons sink in? I’ll think on that a bit more.”

“I was also want to make sure that every new farmer has at least one experienced neighbor. Someone that they can rely on for quick advice.”

“Their houses or their farms?” asked Koryn. “I know you were thinking of having people switch to
more village-oriented farming, instead of the homestead.”

“Ah, for these people we will stick to the homesteading model since they will be settled right beside Redbridge and our farms. It doesn’t make sense to switch it now, but for those who settle further away we can use the village model.”

“Aye, that makes sense. ‘Was just confused.”

“No worries. How goes the teaching program?”

“Good, really good. I got a method down now, so it flows as nicely as I think possible. First, I get them to take me on a tour around their farm and see what they are actually doing. It’s been shocking to see how many different ways people do the same thing! From there, I usually give an overview of the main points: crop rotation, equipment, livestock management, and fertilizer. With the crop rotation, I lay out what it is, how to do it, and the benefits. With the equipment, I talk about what it does and how it will help them, though I have to tell them that there will be a wait on getting them the equipment for a while.”

“Ah,” I interrupted, “I have news on that. So far, we have fifteen threshing machines built, fifteen reaping, and forty plows. I’ve also decided to go with a smaller cooperative model to help distribute the equipment.”

“That’s good news! I don’t think I’ll have time to oversee that though,” he replied.

“Hmm, who could handle it then?”

“Zane’s son, Jeran? He’s 19 now, and I know he’s been looking for something to do. He was too old to be trained as a warrior alongside the younger boys, and he hasn’t liked the training he did get. He’s not a martial man. Maybe this might get him going?”

“Aye, that’ll work. So, back to the program. What happens after the equipment talk?”

“I go over how to manage best their livestock, which is dependent on what they have so far. Most have chickens, sheep, maybe some goats and pigs, and a few have cattle. Almost no one has any horses, and a few have other types of animals, such as rabbits. I then go over how to integrate the animals together to get them the best feed possible. So, things like having the cows and sheep graze together, in small sections intensively, rather than in wide open pastures. I’ve gotten a lot of resistance to that, mainly in how to fence all that in, but for the most part that’s been well received.”

“Oh, and what did you say about the fencing?”

“Mostly that we would be getting more sawmills set up to help with getting planks and posts for them. It’d make it a lot easier than trying to convince these people to make so much fencing by hand.”

I snorted, remembering how much work it took me to make my fencing. “Maybe we can come up with a more portable system? Like, just have the posts in the ground, but be able to move the fence boards around?”

Koryn scratched his chin. “By rope, maybe? But I don’t know if that would be strong enough to hold anything back?”

I shrugged. “Maybe some kind of notch system that would hold the boards? I mean, if something like a cow is determined to get out, it’s gonna get out somehow, somewhere.” I made a note on the blackboard in my office and said, “I’ll add it to the to-do list and see if I can’t come up with
something.”

“

“You could see if Jeran will do it.”

I nodded. “Good idea. Now, what do you talk about after the fencing?”

“I usually talk about the chickens, and how to expand their flocks. Using your mobile broiler idea, I show them the basic format for a mobile chicken pen that will then follow behind the cattle and sheep grazing. I tell them how they will eat the bugs and flies that appear in the animal dung, and how that means they have to feed the chickens less. A lot of the talks I have is telling people how to do something, and why it’s better to do it. Finally, I talk about fertilizer and health. I teach ‘em stuff like how to make bone meal and blood meal, and how to recognize a crop needs fertilizer. I also tell ‘em about things to improve the health of their livestock, with things like feeding ground up oyster shells to their chickens. After I’m done that, Alessa will talk to them about being clean and a few other things for the wives, like soap.”

“Good, good. It sounds like you have it down. There hasn’t been any trouble?”

“Nah, they recognize your banner from the tax collectors. Of course, there have been people resistant to changing their ways, but most get over it. I tell them that they don’t have to do the new farming methods, but they ought to listen to my wife, for the sake of their families.”

“Excellent! And progress-wise? How many people have you reached?”

“Well, it’s been a bit over a year now, and I’ve got most of the people to the north of Redbridge, and everyone that’s within three days south of it. I think I might have missed a few trapping families or more mobile fishing families, but not enough to continue going around the area. I plan to move along the coast to the south of us now.”

“Wonderful! Were there any prime villages you noticed that would be good for future expansion?”

“There was a few, and I know that you wanted a certain amount of spacing in between each village, but honestly? They are already really far apart. Not something t’ worry about.”

I sighed. “I figured, but I wanted to try and get everything perfect from the start.”

Koryn chuckled. “Not gonna happen. There were maybe six ‘prime’ villages, that had good water access, good farmland, and were in a good position for travel. They were all fairly near to the coast, but there was one that was pretty inland, but had a nice enough river that could transport goods.”

“Ah, well. Any other issues?”

He shrugged. “Not really. Most people weren’t believing of the benefits of the more complicated equipment, but easily saw the benefit in the plow. Again, most were concerned about winter feed for the expanded herds and weren’t convinced by the equipment. I would say that it will still be another summer or two before people actually start to keep larger herds, at least through the winter.”

“I figured. The sooner we get the equipment rolled out, the sooner they can be convinced. Were there any easy fixes that some people had?”

Koryn shrugged. “Sort of? A few people really couldn’t make hay. Some never did any pollarding. Others had weird ways of doing things that were just dumb. Nothing major.”

“Not too bad then. Now we must wait, I suppose. Time. It all comes down to time.”
“True. Before I forget, Zane said he was making some good work on a new breed of livestock guardian dog.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“Aye, he’s cross-bred and selectively-bred the dogs for a long time now—“

“16 years, or thereabouts,” I said, interrupting him.

Koryn let out a whistle. “Wow, it’s been a while. Anyways, it’s not exactly where he wants it, but I think it’s pretty damn good. I think he wants t’ work on getting the coat better, and I think he’s a bit concerned about the personalities of the dogs. I think he was hoping for something a bit friendlier towards their owners.”

“Still! That’s quite the accomplishment in just 16 years! I thought it would take a lot longer!”

“Aye, it’s been a big help lately to be able to get dogs from farther away to breed into the lines. I don’t really know how long it’ll take to get a friendlier dog, not really my area.”

I shrugged. “No clue. Still, it’s good progress.”

“Aye, that it is. Well, I better be off. Bunch of things I need to do ‘round the farm before we take off again for the training program.”

“Well, have a good trip, and thanks for all the help,” I said, as we stood and clasped hands.

I watched as he walked away and settled back into my seat. All told, there was a lot of good progress. It wasn’t that we didn’t have any livestock guardians, but they could always be better. Just in time too, hopefully, I could convince Zane to start to sell them to the new farmers. Maybe frame it as creating new breeding lines or something?

I crossed out ‘meeting with Koryn’ from the day’s to-do list and noted that it was still depressingly long. Still, it had been good to work on farming matters, rather than other administrative ones.

No matter what, farming had always been the job that I could put my whole heart into.

A/N: I know this chapter was a bit heavy on certain technical farming terms, though I did my best to simplify it. Also, the guardian dog will end up being a Tibetan Mastiff. Originally, I wanted to do a Komondor, since I like the breed, but realized it was pretty impractical from a believability standpoint. Since the Tibetan Mastiff was the forefather of many modern mastiff breeds, I figure Zane is just going to end up rediscovering the original breed, which in my headcanon has been mostly bred out.
Sixteenth day, Tenth Moon, 252 AC (+9 days)

Today was a bit of a lazy day; I was relaxing around home, not doing anything overly taxing or stressful. The children had done the farm chores for the day before they went about their other tasks, Nyra was talking with her goodsisters at one of their homes, and I had my feet up while I dozed in the sun.

The sun was warm on my face, and I drifted in and out of thought. My grandpa used to do something similar in the afternoons but would always deny he was sleeping. ‘I’m just resting my eyes,’ he would claim. It would always get a laugh out of my family, but I’ll be damned if it wasn’t great.

A cloud passed over the sun, causing a shadow to fall on my face. Frowning, my thoughts turned back to the arrival of the newest batch of people to arrive. Half of the group had been farmers; a quarter had been younger, impoverished people and the final quarter had been a mix of different peoples, who ranged from fishing to trapping. Most wanted to farm, though a few wanted to keep with their professions. It was clear to me that Master Glover had sent his people from marginal areas, that he viewed as liabilities, and did his best to get the most he could out of our deal. After talking to some of these farmers, they were all from one little village that had supported a mine that had run dry a few years ago. The land was poor, and as there was no real reason for a village to be there anymore, the Glovers were more than happy to send them our way. The younger people were a mixture; some were orphans, others were the youngest in large, poor families. The youngest was probably 14 or 15, though the boy claimed he was twenty and a man fully grown, while the average age was around 17. Then the others seemed to be randomly picked to fill out the group, but they all shared the same trait, in that the region they lived in didn’t really need them.

Some of the fishermen fished in overfished rivers that no longer supported them; the trappers were competing with too many trappers, etc. The solution would have been to raise new villages and expand the population, but after the six-year winter back in 230-236AC, there had been a massive population decline. It was bouncing back, but too slowly for some people to continue to live in the same area, hence being sent here.

I didn’t really hold it against Master Glover. He was, in a way, providing good opportunities for his poorest people, while sending me people I desperately need and receiving foodstuffs in exchange. Koryn and Tylan were already dividing up farmland and getting the teaching program up and running. I had already earmarked the appropriate amount of food to be sent to Master Glover after the next harvest, and I hoped that he would continue to send more my way.

It was even partially to my benefit, to have people who have never farmed before. They were blank slates, and open to our methods, which meant a smoother transition. They would, hopefully, not be resistant to different things, like planting trees for windbreaks or keeping trees near rivers. A minor goal of mine was to have farms all along the river, diverting some of the water, and hopefully increasing the soil health in order to reduce the risk of flooding. By having strong shores, and soils that will absorb plenty of water, it would minimize spring flooding.

Things like planting rows of trees along watersheds, and mixtures of pasture and trees, would increase water penetration in the soil and reduce the flooding down the stream. It would also increase farm yields as the crops would have increased access to water, as the soil would be capable of retaining the water.
But this required a lot of forward thinking and long-term planning. Maple, for instance, took about forty years to grow large enough to harvest sap from. I was unsure if Westeros maple trees were the same, and everyone only seemed to agree it took a generation or two, so I had to plan now and estimate how many trees I needed to be planted. I wanted a large patch of trees to concentrate harvesting, and I needed it near enough to have the required amount of labor to harvest the sap, but I also needed it to be far enough away to avoid interfering with any expansion of Redbridge.

On a smaller scale, Koryn has included the maples in the group of trees that would be planted on each farm. It would give a measure of increased food for each farm, as well as help break the wind year-round. The variety of trees would also provide the most effective windbreak possible: a mixture of deciduous trees, such as maple, and evergreens, such as pine. The varying heights and the way they behave in winter provides the ideal windbreak.

Having other trees that provide perennial crops, such as hazelnut, chestnut, and walnut would provide even more food. Typically, people use the nuts in small quantities for personal consumption, but overwhelmingly as livestock feed. I hoped to shift that perception by using the flour of those nuts to make bread since the trees were much more weather resilient and needed fewer inputs from the farmers.

The cloud passed overhead, and the sun once again beat down on my face. I let my thoughts slow once again, letting thoughts of water runoff systems and trees pass through my head.

Today was my day off, thoughts of the future can be left alone for the day.

A new thought popped into my head; it was a warm day and perfect for a nice swim. Leaving my thoughts behind me, I got up off of my comfy chair and made my way to the stream. A swim sounded lovely.

A/N: Just a short chapter showing the arrival of the newest group of farmers. The next chapter will be the preparations for the tour, and Chapters 11-20 will deal with the tour itself.
Act 2: Chapter 10

Twenty-ninth day, Twelfth Moon, 252 AC (+73 days)

“Pass the sauce down, please?”

I reached down the table to grab the jar and passed it over to Koryn. As he loaded up his plate, I looked around the table. It was the first time all three families had gotten together for a meal since Ethan and Jess had died.

It was also a goodbye party, as tomorrow we would be leaving to go on the tour of my lands. We wouldn’t all be going, and not everyone at the same time, so we wanted to have an enjoyable evening as a family.

Watching all the children, both the older and younger ones, play and argue, when they should have been eating was a comforting and familiar sight. The children were loud and boisterous, for which, I was thankful that we were eating outside rather than an enclosed room.

“A good meal to send you off, eh?” Koryn asked as he leaned over to me to be heard.

“Aye, it is good to have everyone together,” I replied, with a wistful smile.

“It is. I just wish I could go along for the whole trip. I think it’s the adventure of a lifetime.”

“Don’t worry; the second half will still be as good as the first, if not better since you can see the future site of Osend.” Unfortunately, we were unable to take everyone with us on the trip as people were needed here to help guide new arrivals and construction work. My immediate family, less Violet and Tylan, would go on the whole trip, with Donovar and his family for the first half. The first half would follow the coast from Redbridge to Stonefisk and would take about two months. Koryn and his family would take a boat and meet us there, and Donovar and his family would go back to Redbridge. We would then continue along the coast heading towards the Twin Lakes River and the future site of Osend. From there we would continue up the Twin Lakes River and go to the Twin Lakes themselves, and then home. We were planning the last half to take us three to four months.

“Aye, I suppose. You got everything packed?”

“Yeah, we do. We’ve got the caravan wagons already, and we have the boat scheduled for additional drop-offs along the route. The food is planned out, and all of the equipment we will need is packed as well.”

“Excellent! I heard there was trouble with the sawblades though. Did you get it all sorted out?”

I nodded. “Aye, I did. We’ve got enough sawblades now to start handing them out to the larger villages and kickstart some building and industry.”

“Good. That and garum making will really get things going.”

I nodded. “It will, though I’m still worried about having enough merchants to transport the goods.”

Koryn shrugged as he took another bite of food. “One step at a time.”

“True,” I conceded. “I’m just annoyed, though I realize the situation. It’s part of the reason Donovar, and I wrote out the plan for fortifying the villages along the coast to Stonefisk.”
“Oh? You finalized that then?”

I laughed sheepishly. “‘Finalized’ might be a bit strong. We agreed to phases, but the specifics will have to wait until we do a closer inspection. The first phase will be to identify larger, ideally located villages and kickstart industry with garum and sawmills. Then during our stay along the trip, we will scope out a location for a small wooden hill castle that can serve for my Rangers as they patrol.”

Koryn made a face. “Ragnar’s Rangers? I can’t believe you went with that! It’s an awful pun!”

I just grinned. “It’s catchy. Anyways, phase two would be to fortify those villages at some point in the future, likely with some local garrisoned men-at-arms. The third phase is to expand small, wooden keeps to smaller villages that would serve as way stations for the Rangers and places for the locals to fall back to, in the event of a raid.”

Koryn nodded along thoughtfully, though the image of a wise man was ruined by a glob of sauce on his cheek. “Not bad. Did Jon give you any ideas on locating good places t’ mine?”

I shook my head. “Nah, he really didn’t have any methods for discovering new mines. Wasn’t sure there was any way to do so. I figure I will just talk to the locals and see what they know about. I’m not overly hopeful though.”

“Sounds like the trip might be shorter than you thought then?” Koryn asked, slyly.

Koryn’s wife, Alessa, snorted. “Oh, please. Stop trying to get out of here sooner.” She tilted her head to the side and said in a fake surprised voice, “Come to think of it, that means we can see my mother again! You really enjoyed meeting her last time, didn’t you?”

Koryn looked pained. “Ah, right.”

The rest of the adults around the table laughed.

“It won’t be short as all that, I’m afraid,” replied Nyra, directing the conversation away from Koryn’s misfortune. “You should know, I’ve talked your ears off about a good, quick hygiene program to spread as we go. We are hoping that there will be a huge population boom following our tour, especially after next winter.

I nodded along with Nyra’s words. Population growth and the seeds of industry. It would be a small kick in the pants for economic growth, but it would hopefully start some economic activity and trade in the area.

Nyra leaned over to me and asked, “By the way, did you send off that letter to Rodrik Stark?”

“Yes, I did. I let him know our tour’s timetable and said we would gladly host him after its completion, and I would send a letter once I arrived back.”

“Good, good. Once we get back, we can send a letter to Lord Manderly as well. Try and arrange a meeting with Ryden and Alice.”

I did my best to contain my grimace as my eyes travelled over to Ryden, who was laughing and eating with his cousins. “Probably,” I conceded, “I do need to head over to White Harbor eventually; the cast-ironsmith is uninterested in relocating to Redbridge and is terrible at letter writing. We might as well bundle that all into one trip.”

Nyra smiled. “That’s the spirit.”
I rolled my eyes and caught Zane’s eye. “Did you think about giving a few of your newest breed of livestock guardian dogs to any of the new farmers?”

Zane nodded. “Aye, I will give out a few puppies from my next litter t’ a few of the farmers I’ve talked t’, that have an interest in dogs.”

“Excellent! And have you decided on a dog name yet?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. The common breed’s name is Mastiff, and some’ll use the location as part of the name. But Redbridge Mastiff sounds dumb.”

Everyone chuckled.

“Aye,” I replied, “A bit. I’m sure something will come to you.”

“I’m sure, whatever it is, will be great,” said Cait, Zane’s wife, reassuringly.

I turned back to the food in front of me and let the conversation drift away from me. The food was excellent, as always, as there was something special about the food you made and raised. I mean, I missed Chinese takeout, but good, homecooked meals were always a delight – especially when you didn’t have to do dishes.

Regardless, it would be nice to get away from here for a while. It wasn’t quite a vacation, as there would be lots of work, but it was travel and a new type of work. I could ignore the castle for a while, my plans for growing Redbridge, and my finances, and instead, focus on different things and spend time with my family while doing it. My supervisors overlooking the work in this area were ready to be left on their own for a while – even if Violet and Tylan would still be here, watching over everything – and the tricky part of the castle was done – the foundation.

Our cement stores had run low again since the production was much more time consuming than pouring it, so that is where the focus had shifted back to. Hopefully, by the time I returned to Redbridge, another large section of the castle would be completed.

The rest of the dinner passed in laughter and good food, and soon enough I found myself sitting in front of the fire with Nyra, with the kids having already gone to bed. We sat cuddled on the couch, and as I stared into the fire, just enjoying the moment, Nyra was idly knitting.

“What are you knitting?” I asked.

“Another clothing patch for the trip – just in case,” she replied.

“Ah. Nervous at all?”

She let out a little hum. “A bit. A bit excited too. I’m looking forward to all the new sights and experiences, but I think I will quickly loathe riding in the wagon.”

I let out a little chuckle, as I tried not to wake the children. “True. The leaf springs make it more tolerable, but it is still awful. We will just have to cycle between riding the horses and the wagon.”

“We’ll make it work,” she said, confidently.

I leaned down to kiss her. “Yes, yes we will.”
Eighteenth day, First Moon, 253 AC (+19 days)

As we had progressed further from Redbridge, and the Iowa area, the land became progressively rockier and hillier. We had passed by more villages than I thought we would, but for a few quick speeches, we quickly moved on. The villages we spoke at were tiny, consisting of only a few homes, and I gave brief speeches and introduced myself. Most of the time the people in the village were out farming or fishing, so I ended up only speaking to a few women and their children. It wasn’t overly glamorous or exciting, and our party quickly moved on.

At the larger villages, we got to know the population and area a bit better, and other things like mining sites, the terrain, and the peoples’ lives.

The amount of good farmland decreased drastically as we made our way across the area, with most of the remaining area good for little other than pasture. There were nice little valleys that had good soil and were, for the most part, already farmed, which was where we were today.

The little village we were in didn’t have a name, and had about 90 people, and was one of the larger villages in the area. There was a hill that immediately overlooked the village and a small stream that ran through the valley. It was a quaint little area, though the roughness of the people and the buildings meant that it couldn’t quite be called picturesque.

The village itself was about as big as it could be, at its current production. Since they were inland a little way from the ocean, they had, according to some of the elders, never been raided by the Ironborn. So, every square foot of land was valuable as people frequently moved in from the countryside when they could. There were a few scattered farmsteads surrounding the village in other tiny valleys – they were really just depressions in the earth that contained a bit more soil – and there were some trappers and fishermen nearby as well. It was a downright thriving community for the area.

The area was heavily wooded, like something you might picture from a national park somewhere like Oregon or maybe Northern Europe. It was a region that evoked a certain feeling in you, with towering trees, sunlight filtering down through the leaves, and throughout the landscape, there was the stark feeling of wilderness. Not like the forest that I had near my house back on Earth, where it was hemmed in on all sides by humans, but an actual wilderness. Where the wild ruled.

I had known, intellectually, that my plans for this region would be like working with a blank canvas. There was nothing here I had to plan around; no major settlements, no political groups or racial tensions – nothing. But seeing the land and its wildness was humbling. I was going to be imprinting my mark on the world - on this land – for the first time, and I hoped that it would be a good one.

The lack of people in this region had dampened my spirits, but I could see why so few people lived here. There was nothing overly worth doing here, that could not be done elsewhere. There were places to mine, sure and a few iron deposits that seemed promising. But it was nothing that couldn’t be done better elsewhere. It also lacked navigable waterways and premium farmland.

What it did have was good locations for way stations for my Rangers to stay at during their patrols. The current ‘road’ was in rough shape and meandered wildly. I was already drawing up plans for an eventual highway of sorts. A widened, straighter road, a few good bridges, and we had the beginnings of a coastal highway. One day, a stone highway may even be possible. Maybe.
I heard footsteps approaching me from behind, and I turned to see Ryden making his way over to me. I smiled at him and watched as he made his way over. He was almost 13 years old, just another month to go, and was growing like a weed. His training with Donovar meant he was less gangly than boys his age might be otherwise, and he looked very similar to I did at his age, though his eyes were a dark blue, whereas mine were brown and his mothers were an ice blue. He was wearing a grey linen shirt, brown shorts, and his favorite hat – an Indiana Jones style hat done in white. He preferred that style of hat rather than my more traditional cattleman-style cowboy hat.

“Done with your lessons for today?” I asked when he neared.

He nodded seriously and replied, “Yes, Father. I had the time, so I came to see what you were doing.”

I smiled in amusement at his words. “Why so formal, Eldest Son?”

He let out a small frown. “Master Donovar was unimpressed with one of the older boys, Rick. He said that the way a man speaks is how he presents himself to the world. Rick was rude to one of the village elders.”

I let out a contemplative hum. “The way you speak is a way that someone presents themselves to the world. I can’t deny that, but it isn’t the only way. However, being overly formal isn’t always the best way to present yourself. Moderation is a very important thing to keep in your life, Ryden. You aren’t just my Eldest Son; you are my son, my child; you are Ryden.”

Ryden looked contemplative. “So, just be formal sometimes?”

“When you think you should. With me? No. If you meet Lord Stark? Yes. It’s also what you want. You technically do have the rank to tell every villager we meet to call you Master Ryden, but do you really want to?”

A sour look crossed his face. “No, that sounds… tiring. And weird.”

I gave him a reassuring smile. “Yes, yes it does. That’s why I don’t normally make people do that. But it’s important to know when to pull rank. You will learn as you grow and grow into your own man. You don’t have to do as I do, and you don’t have to do as Donovar does. You can be yourself, and you can even change if you want to.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

I put my arm around him and pulled him in for a hug. “It’s what I’m here for.”

We spent a few moments in silence as we watched the village in the distance.

Finally, Ryden broke the silence. “Why are you here, anyway?”

“Just taking a break from talking with the village elders. They’re not opposed to me or anything, but they also don’t see the need to change. I needed a break from trying to sweet-talk them.”

“What didn’t they like?”

“Oh, they found something to say on every issue. What they really took an issue to was my idea to create a winter training session for boys in the area. They don’t like boys from other villages coming for the winter. ‘Might stir up trouble,’ they say.”

“Oh. How many boys would come?”
“Well, I plan to have it be over the course of a winter, so maybe a one or two-year program, with a
two week long break every six months. We would provide the food, so I expect many families
would consider sending their boys. I estimate maybe 20 – 40 boys, depending on how their families
react, and how many boys of the right age are actually in the area. I don’t want to arrange for boys
from very far away to come; maybe only under a day’s travel? Perhaps two.”

“Can’t you just order them to come?”

I nodded. “I could. But people don’t always like being ordered and can resist in many different ways.
For something as important as this, I don’t want any resistance. I want to work with them to make
sure everything goes smoothly, even if it gives me a headache now.”

“Is that why you aren’t talking about alcohol? I noticed you haven’t talked about it with any of the
villages, I think.”

I gave him a wink. “Sort of. It’s a headache I don’t want to deal with, but that’s only a benefit. The
main reason I’m not spreading around the knowledge of vodka and my other drinks is I want to have
them as a monopoly, for a time at least.”

“A monopoly? What’s that?”

“A monopoly is when I am the only one making something. That means I can control the price, how
much I make, and how much I sell.”

“Ohh… so if everyone knew, then they could choose the price?”

“Not quite. The price would drop, until the point where both sellers and buyers agreed to exchange.
Beer, for example, can be bought at different prices, both high and low, but there is no set price. But,
if I am the only one who makes vodka, and I only sell it to merchants for at least one silver, then the
lowest price anyone else can buy it for is one silver. So, in the end, there is a much more uniform
price.”

“Huh, but then why didn’t you keep the sawmills and garum? I know you have been spreading that.”

“Good catch. The sawmills are easy to copy and trying to keep it to myself would be pointless. They
also help spur new growth in the settlements that have them. That new growth can mean new trade.
And new trade means new coin. And new coin is more coin for us. Garum, on the other hand, is a
product that can be made easily by widespread people and transports well. Fish, for use in garum,
does not transport well. Which means what?”

Ryden smiled. “It means that having a monopoly in garum wouldn’t work, because you can’t get
enough fish in one spot.”

“Exactly! Good job!”

Ryden beamed with pride. We both lapsed back into silence as we continued to watch the village.

After a moment, Ryden spoke again, “Dad, why are you building these forts that won’t hold any
men-at-arms? In Donovar’s lessons, he says that castles always have guards.”

“Why do you think?” I asked.

Ryden frowned. “I don’t know; maybe we don’t have enough people? But then why bother with the
forts?”
“Well, you are right, in that they won’t have permanent guards because we don’t have the people. But they have a large variety of purposes besides the obvious. The forts will be made out of wood and then whitewashed in order to be simple. The Rangers can use them as way stations while on patrol, and the villagers can fall back to them in the event of an attack—" 

“About the Rangers,” he interrupted. “I’m still confused. I think I’ve heard you talk about them in different ways before – it’s confusing. What are they?”

“Ah, that’s probably because I’ve had a tough time deciding what to do and how to move forward. Eventually, I want there to be three levels of armed men. The first will be the typical garrisoned men-at-arms. The second will be the Rangers. The third will be men dedicated to the army. Where it gets a bit complicated is between the second and third.”

“Why?”

“Well, it goes back to that problem we were talking about earlier – the lack of people. At first, the Rangers will fill both roles. The second role is a primarily wandering patrol force that would deal with law enforcement and dealing with bandits. However, with the lack of people, the Rangers would be called to war if needed.”

“Oh, and you don’t want them to be called to war?”

I shook my head. How should I explain that the military shouldn’t be in charge of criminal and civil procedures? Did it even matter?

I slowly replied while I organized my thoughts, “Well, when you have a person that is in charge of too many things, it can lead to bad things, like corruption. This is especially important with organizations, such as the Rangers, because they would be in charge of both defending and punishing the people.” I paused for a moment to gather my thoughts again, as I wasn’t quite explaining it. “Ideally, I want the Rangers to focus on the law and protection of the area in regard to the people that live here. That means things like solving things peaceably when possible. The army, on the other hand, is for defending the area from others, whether that be invading a threat or defense from an invasion. The violence and bloodshed from fighting like that, does not always translate well to a more civilian role – such as dealing with two people arguing, and the Ranger trying to de-escalate the situation.”

I sighed. It wasn’t exactly right, but I supposed it was as right as this world would allow. “Does that make any sense to you? Or am I speaking nonsense?” I asked.

Ryden stared off thoughtfully into the distance. “Sort of. Can I think on it longer?”

“Of course! Anyways, where was I before?”

“Oh! You were talking about what the forts meant.”

“Ah! Right, so the forts can be used as way stations for the Rangers and fallback locations for the villagers. Eventually, they can also be expanded for garrison use and even secure food storage. They also send a message. They send a message that I care for the peoples’ safety and that I am willing to defend them. In the beginning, it will be a fairly symbolic gesture, but one that I hope carries great meaning for the people here.”

Ryden nodded along with my words. “I understand, Dad.”

“Good! So, how went your lessons today?”
Ryden grimaced. “We were working with quarterstaffs again.”

“Ah. Is Arthur still giving you trouble?”

Ryden frowned. “He’s just so good! It’s not fair – I’m the older brother.”

“Ryden, don’t let yourself get worked up over it. Everyone has their strengths, just as they have their weaknesses. Are you not better with your bow?” At his reluctant nod, I continued, “And at math?” He nodded again. “Arthur is good with a quarterstaff, just as he is with a sword. It is also what he is passionate about. Passion means a great deal when you set a goal for yourself, and Arthur is determined to be a warrior. You aren’t, are you?”

“No, Dad.”

“So, don’t pit Arthur’s passion and dedication to something you have no passion for. And when you find your passion, Arthur should not compare himself to it either. You don’t have to compare yourself against his accomplishments.”

“But I don’t know what I want!”

I chuckled softly. “People rarely do, and that’s okay. You will find your passion eventually – don’t worry. It might be tomorrow, or next year, or even ten years from now. It will come, just be patient.”

Ryden rolled his eyes. “Patience. It’s always patience with you and mom.”

“Patience is an important virtue in this world, and one often found lacking. Now, why don’t you go find Arthur and spend some quality time with your brother?”

Ryden stood up and started to leave but stopped before he left. “Thanks, Dad.”

“It’s what I’m for,” I replied. I nodded my head to the path he came from and said, “Go on, go have some fun.”

After he left, I stayed where I sat upon the ground, staring into the distance. Dealing with a large family was a difficult thing for me, as I had been an only child – in both lives. Sibling jealousy was a new concept for me, but Nyra’s approach seemed like a good one – as many of her ideas did.

I paused for a moment, trying to remember her schedule that she was keeping while here in this village. A nice dinner alone should be possible. It had been a while since they had spent any significant amount of time alone with each other.

Feeling reinvigorated, I made my back to the village whistling a tune as I went.

“Said oh girl, shock me like an electric feel.”
Act 2: Chapter 12

Thirtieth, Second Moon, 253 AC (+42 days)

It was another day of travelling along, and today I was on horseback, as opposed to riding in the wagon. After these months of travelling, I had mastered the art of dozing while in the saddle. At first, I had taken to doing what work I could or even talking with everyone in the group. But eventually, it became too repetitive. You can only ask, ‘How are you today?’ so many times to the people you spend all day, every day with before it becomes ridiculous. And we passed that limit only a few days into the trip.

An elbow in my side shook me from my rest, as Donovar pointed ahead of me to a guard returning to the party. During our travels, we had two guards keep ahead of the party to scout out any trouble, but it was not uncommon for one to return every so often.

A glance at Donovar showed he clearly saw something in the guard’s posture, though I couldn’t make out anything. The guard wasn’t rushing and didn’t seem frantic, so I wasn’t worried.

As the man approached, he said, “Master Michael! We’ve sighted Stonefisk! We are about ten minutes away!”

I thanked the man with a smile on my face, and we sped our group, who had all heard the good news, and we hastened our way to the village.

A few minutes later we came around a hill and finally saw Stonefisk laid out before us. The village itself was nestled between two slight hills on either side, with a larger hill behind it, opposite of the shore. The village itself consisted of small, rough houses – shacks, really – made up mostly of stone, the type that was commonly found strewn across the landscape. However, even from here I could spot a few wooden houses that sported what looked like planks, probably from my sawmill. The village itself was somewhat dreary, the stone houses blended into the stone landscape, and there was little in the way of vegetation – other than a few spots of grass. The only real color in the village was that some of the roofs and doors were painted in bright colors, but it was hard to detract from the bleakness of the stone.

From my vantage point, I could see people and animals moving throughout the village as they had been alerted to my party’s presence by one of my guards. I grimaced as I saw the animals freely mixing in the village and could only fathom at the diseases that must run rampant in such a place. From here, I could also see what looked to be the ruins of the old castle on the top of the hill behind Stonefisk. Not much remained, but I could see the rubble from where I stood.

We continued to make our way to the village, and I could see more and more people gathering, with some people even coming back to the shore. It looked like I would have a good-sized audience for a speech this time. I was lucky in that I had never feared public speaking; I never enjoyed it, but I also never hated it, and over this trip, my experience with it had grown by leaps and bounds. I had also planned this speech, as it would be different than the speeches I gave to other, smaller, villages. Usually, I would introduce myself, talk about how I planned to make their lives better and defend them from all threats. It was an uplifting speech if I did say so myself, and everything I said and planned was in a general sense.

This speech, on the other hand, was targeted towards the people here, as well as their history. This village was going to be a focal point in my lands, and I wanted these people to know it.
As the party wound our way into town, we made towards the open docks, where we had space for our audience to listen to us. I checked in with my group while we waited for our audience to assemble.

After about ten minutes, I hopped back onto my horse to make sure the crowd could see me.

I cleared my throat, then began speaking. “Greetings, people of The Fishing Town! I am Master Michael Ragnar, and I was recently elevated by Lord Edwyle Stark and put in charge of this land! After a raid by the despicable Ironborn upon my village, my family and I took up arms against them and together with the help of our fellow villagers, we were able to kill and capture the miserable dogs!”

I paused for a moment while the crowd cheered. “That’s right! Together we were able to take back our village and our pride! We decided to no longer live in fear of them, and to do so, we became strong! We have built up our village and are raising a castle to defend its people so that we will never have to fear the Ironborn again! Now, we have been going across this land to tell the people of our success and how we plan to defend them!”

“Most of these people live in tiny villages – collections of just a few houses – where they live far apart from each other as to hide from the Ironborn. They have been denied the ability to live with their families and fellow Northerners! But I tell you – we won’t be denied any longer!”

The crowd cheered loudly at that, as their excitement grew so too did their focus on my speech. “Now, I come to this fine village! I see that its people are not scattered! Not broken!” Another cheer rippled through the crowd. “I see the proud history of this village before me – in its people! I come to you today to tell you that things will be better! The castle will be raised again! Guards will protect you! You have stood strong, and now, together, we will stand stronger!”

Cheers and the stomping of feet erupted from the crowd. Nyra looked on with pride, and my children were paying rapt attention. I signaled for Donovar to join me on horseback. Once he was on, I continued my speech. “This is Master Donovar Armstrong. He is one of my vassals and will be the one who will raise and defend this castle! He is a skilled man-at-arms who has served Lord Stark loyally and with great skill in many fights, including the fight against Redbeard!”

Another slight cheer came from the crowd, with many looking appreciative of the man. These people had never been threatened by Redbeard’s rampage, but the King-Beyond-The-Wall was a story that was widespread. “For today, my group will be looking at the castle up on the hill, but we plan to begin meeting with some of the village elders and other people tomorrow, and I look forward to seeing what your village has to offer in the coming days!”

With a final cheer, my party began moving out of the village and starting the climb to the castle ruins. The hill it was located on wasn’t particularly steep or tall, but it offered an excellent view of the surroundings and offered a defensive advantage. The hillside was bared rock, except for a few weeds and flowers that seemed to grow in the cracks of the rock. If there had ever been any dirt on the hillside, it had been washed away many years ago. Between the storms and lack of plant life, there was nothing to hold the soil down, even though the slope of this hill was not as steep as a bare rock hill ought to be. My current theory was that when the Ironborn had started raiding and occupying this land so many years ago, the trees had all been cut down for ships. That combined with fierce winds and extreme water downpours washed away the soil. Poor farming practices probably exacerbated the conditions until it resulted in the current status of the land.

The ruins themselves were – well – ruinous. I could see the outline of where the castle walls used to be, but they had been destroyed in the age’s past, and the stones likely reclaimed by the villagers for their own homes. The keep was in similar condition, and any wooden structures had long since
rotted away. It reminded me of that scene in Lord of the Rings, where Frodo finds the statue of the Gondorian King in the wilderness that was decapitated. Not only were the manmade structures, which were once beautiful, destroyed, but the area was bleak and ruined as well.

Ryden startled me from my thoughts. “Dad? Can Arthur and I go exploring?”

“Not too far and take a guard with you. Be careful too; we don’t yet know what is stable.”

Ryden smiled and thanked me, then ran off with Arthur to cajole a guard into accompanying them. After they ran off, Nyra and I walked around the area, hand in hand. Donovar and his family went their own way and started to look around as well.

On closer inspection, my opinion of the castle didn’t go up. It lacked any sort of underground storage, though it was unclear if that was because the previous owners didn’t want to dig through stone, or if there were other issues, like flooding. We discovered another ruin of a large building within the walls that might have been an above-ground storage area or possibly a barracks of some sort. There was a lot of potential here, but also a lot of work.

Eventually, we were interrupted from our wanderings when Rodrick, Koryn’s goodfather, made his way over to us.

“Hello, Rodrick! It is good to see you again. How are you?” Nyra asked, warmly.

“Ah, Nyra! You look lovely as ever! I’m good, as is my wife.” He looked to me, and we shook hands. “Michael. Good to see you!”

“You as well,” I replied. “I was expecting you to come by sooner.”

“Aye! But your speech roused up everyone, ’n they had a lot of questions for me.”

“T ook it well, did they?”

“Certainly! Just what they wanted to hear! Everyone’s all excited and the like! Proud even, that their new Master was like them, and the new local Master served Lord Stark!”

“Excellent! That’s what I was going for. There’s a lot of work to be done, and I’ll need their help.”

“Aye, word of warning though. As hopeful as everyone is, some o’ the elders are a bit nervous. Don’t quite think what you want is possible. Don’t worry though; you can make ‘em do as you say.”

Nyra patted him on the shoulder. “Thanks for the warning, but we’ve been sweet-talking people the whole way. We can get them to change their minds.”

“Good, good! I’ve told enough stories about Michael, that they know he’s a good man, they just worry for the village.”

“Understandable,” I replied. “Do you think they will be up for a name change? Or will they resist that?”

He shrugged. “A new name ought to be good. What were you thinking?”

“Stonefisk. It suits the village I think and doesn’t erase its past name of Fisher’s Village, or it’s current name The Fishing Village.”

Rodrick grinned. “Easier to say than The Fishing Village, that’s for sure! Bring it up with the elders tomorrow, but it shouldn’t be a problem. Now, where is my daughter and her family?”
Nyra chuckled. “Don’t worry; they should be by in a few days. They are coming by boat, and we planned to have them arrive sometime around the end of this month.”

“Excellent! The wife has been looking forward to seeing her grandchildren! Claims it’s been too long.”

Nyra smiled wryly. “Are you sure you’re not looking forward to it yourself?”

Rodrick’s cheeks reddened a bit and let out a cough to clear his throat. “Ah, well, I suppose it has been a while. I need to make sure my goodson is taking proper care of his family!”

Nyra and I both laughed at his antics. “Of course,” Nyra said, reassuringly. “I would never assume otherwise.

“Thanks, my Lady. Anyways, I should be off! I’ll let the village folk know your keen to start talking to them tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Rodrick. Have a good night.”

He gave a quick doff of his hat and began his trek back down the hill.

I looked over to Nyra and said, “It looks like we have our work cut out for us here.”

“At least they seem willing,” she replied.

“At least they seem willing,” I echoed.

It was time to get to work.
First day, Third Moon, 253 AC (+1 days)

I contained my sigh as a few of the elders started to stray back to the topic of schooling. We had been discussing it for the better part of an hour already, on top of the hour-long introductions before that. The village elders wanted to keep cycling back to that topic, and not for any concerns about the curriculum, which would be mainly military in nature at this point, but about bringing in boys from a few neighboring settlements.

Family feuds were abundant, village feuds were a consideration, and straight up not wanting rabble-rousers from other villages to stay cooped up in Stonefisk – which the villagers happily accepted as a new name. I understood all their concerns and did my best to alleviate them, but they apparently wanted to circle back for some inane reason.

I cleared my throat, cutting off one of the elders who was speaking. “Unfortunately, Elder Tom, we have been over this before. In the interest in making sure we discuss everything on our list today, we need to move on.”

There was some grumbling, but everyone settled down in their seats after a moment. We were currently in the village’s tavern since it was raining outside. It was a bit cramped inside, with the village elders, some prominent tradesmen, like the shipwrights, along with me, Nyra, Donovar, and his wife, Alara. The tavern itself, was a typical Northern tavern, though the exterior walls were of stone instead of wood. It was well built and kept warm easily enough, even if the lighting was poor – especially on a day like today, where the door had to be closed to keep out the rain.

“Very well then. We’ve agreed that the school shall operate throughout the winter, taking in boys of 12 through 18 from the surrounding lands. Master Donovar will winter here, along with a few of his trusted men, and teach these boys. Supplies from Redbridge will need to be brought here, weapons, lumber, and the like, of which I am willing to pay anyone with a boat to transport. Now, that brings us to our next topic: Coin.”

Most in the audience perked up at that. “There are a few products and ideas that will be new to this village that I wish to introduce so that coin will flow for everyone here. The first is simple, as I need people to transport some goods via wagon or boat from Redbridge to here. I will be paying for the transport back, and I will be paying for seafood to be brought to Redbridge as well. This area is known for its Dungeness crabs, snow crabs, and large lobsters, and I will pay for them to be brought to Redbridge.”

I took a sip of mead while I carefully watched over the crowd. Most seemed interested in an easy way to make coin, but that was all. After all, it was not really a groundbreaking idea.

“This is but the first step. I want to strengthen what you are good at, but I also want to expand on what you can do. To that end, has everyone heard of garum?” I asked.

Most nodded their heads, while one of the old men croaked out, “Aye, m’lord. Rodrick’s been spinning these tales for a few years, ‘n brought some back this past year.”

“Excellent! During my time here, I, or someone on my behalf, will begin to teach on how to make this product! From there, you can find markets for it in Redbridge and even Seaguard! I know that the Riverlands have a huge demand for it but are unwilling to buy from the Ironborn. There is a lot of coin ready to be spent on garum, and as the largest fishing village on the west coast of the North, you
stand to gain from it."

There was light applause throughout the room as they liked the sound of that – especially the fishermen.

I continued, “Next, I wish to better the farming practices here, and expand the farmland.”

“Expand the farmland, m’lord?” asked one of the shepherders.

“Yes. With better practices and ways of doing things, we can improve the land you already have under pasture and create new pasture areas. With new tools, you can do more and do it quickly.” I held up a pair of shears and said, “See this? This will allow you to shear sheep much more quickly as opposed to the normal blades.” I passed them around the room for them to inspect. I wasn’t letting them know about the carding machines and spinning wheels just yet, as I wanted to maintain a monopoly on them as long as I could. I had no doubt I would lose that advantage quickly, but I wanted to milk it for all its worth, while I could. “There are other farming tools as well that I will show you on another day which will further help you.”

I saw one of the shepherders fidgeting a bit like he wanted to say something but couldn’t work up the nerve. I waited a moment to make eye contact with him, then asked, “Do you have something to say?”

“Ah, no m’lord. It’s nothin’,” he replied.

“If you have a question, speak up. I can’t help unless I know what the problem is.”

He blushed a bit and said, “Well, m’lord, I don’t right know how these tools ‘ll help make more pasture. Don’t grass need dirt to grow, not stone?”

I smiled at him reassuringly. “Good question. These tools will help, but indirectly. New practices on how you graze your animals will impact this more so, and how the pasture land is set up even more so. I will talk about this a little more once I’ve talked about the shipwrights.”

“Ah, my thanks, m’lord.”

Once I received the shears back, I continued my speech. “There is also a few more types of farming that I think will be well suited to this area. The first is mink. It’s fur and oils made from its fat sell for good coin, and mink are abundant in this area. Mink as historically been hunted for its goods, but if they are captured live, they can be kept and bred in pens allowing for even more fur and oil to be harvested. Unfortunately, I do not have any experience with such things, and while I have ideas for its success, this will need someone here that is willing to take a chance. If you know of anyone like that, please send them to me.”

The men in the crowd looked thoughtful, though the older ones looked more skeptical than anything. “The other type of farm is seaweed. There are plenty of shallow bays in this area that would be ideal for planting and harvesting seaweed, which is an excellent product for selling. It can be dried and transported long distances inland, meaning another source of coins for this village.”

That got a lot more interest, and the room was engulfed in the men talking with each other. Seaweed collection was not unknown in the area, but purposefully farming it was new and not difficult to understand.

“It will be important to start these quickly, and stockpile goods, as in about a year there will be a large merchant fleet coming this way to trade. This will be an opportunity to buy and sell many different goods – some that might not be available again for many years. I have worked to organize
the arrival of this fleet, and while the date is not yet set, it holds great promise for everyone along the west coast.”

The room erupted into noise as people tried to ask different questions over each other. Donovar signaled to one of the guards to bash his sword and shield together, while he shouted, “Silence!”

I nodded my thanks to him and continued. “One at a time. You there,” I pointed to one of the fishermen. “Ask your question.”

“Thanks, m’lord. What will they be buying?” he asked.

“There is no set list of things that they will be buying or selling. It will be up to each individual merchant. I suggest you stock as many special products as you can. Your crabs and lobsters are some of the biggest on the coast and are much fewer in number down south. The snow crabs specifically, I believe, do not like the warmer water. These will likely be in high demand. Wool is also always in demand. Next question.”

I pointed to another man, and he asked, “How will all these ships land here, m’lord? We don’t have the room or docks for such a thing.”

“Good question. Most will not be stopping, but there will be quite a few who do, and it may be staggered over a few days. Next.”

One of the elders asked, “Will we have guards t’ protect us? We’ve all heard stories about what merchants get up t’, and we have no brothels or things t’ entertain such men. They might try ‘n take it by force.”

I frowned a bit, as I had not exactly thought that out. I leaned over to Donovar and whispered, “Can we spare any men?”

“A few if we know the time in advance. It might not be an issue, however, if there are enough of Manderly’s knights and men-at-arms spread out in the fleet.”

I nodded and spoke to the crowd, “We will send a few guards to help during that time, and I will also ensure that the fleet, which comes from House Manderly, has enough honorable knights and men-at-arms to ensure such behavior does not occur. This also highlights the need for a winter school, so as to train the boys in this area to help defend against such behavior.”

“Any other questions?” I asked. Seeing none, I continued, “Very well. Finally, I wish to talk about the shipwrights. As you all know now, I want to see this village expand and to do so, we need more boats. I have already sent a few boys out to be apprenticed so that Redbridge can have some shipwrights, but we need some here as well. I know we already have some here, but we need more. So, I would like the shipwrights here to talk about how they go about finding wood to build ships with, as I think that will be the thing that holds everything back.”

The two shipwrights whispered to each other for a moment, before one elbowed the other, and he spoke up. “Well, m’lord, the wood is a big problem. We can only get it in the winter, where we gotta go inland and cut the trees down. Then we gotta drag ‘em back to the coast, but we keep ‘em hidden in some valleys and the like, so no raiders get ‘em. We don’t get much wood – maybe enough for a new boat for me ‘n Bill to make each, and some for repairs for the rest of the boats in the village over the summer. Too far to go for any more wood.”

I nodded as he spoke, as I feared that would be the case. “Very well, that’s about what I expected. What kind of boats can you build?”
Bill, the other shipwright, replied, “We can make small and larger fishing boats, canoes, ‘n my grandpappy told me how t’ make a knarr, but I ain’t ever made one.”

“Alright then. The first thing we need to do is plant trees.” I looked over the room and asked, “Does anyone have any experience with that?” Everyone shook their heads.

Damn. “Very well, that is something I will have to teach. This goes back to expanding the farmland as well. Currently, because there is no trees or other large plants, the water washes the soil away from the pastures, leaving bare rock behind. To start, we need to plant trees in existing farmland, and anywhere that can sustain it. This will be a dedicated job for someone, whom I will pay in coin, to raise new trees that can be easily transplanted. The trees will hold down the soil and allow other plants to take hold and thereby increasing pasture land. These trees, when planted in sufficient numbers can then be selectively cut down and used for boats and firewood.”

The shipwrights looked awed at being able to harvest trees easily, but that was contrasted by some of the sheepherders. One of the sheepherders asked, “But how’ll the grass grow if there’s a forest there, m’lord?”

“The trees will be carefully spaced out so that they do not interfere with the growth of the grass. This process is called silvopasture and will be a part of the teachings. Some of these trees will be fruit or nut-bearing trees that can provide additional food sources for everyone.” He didn’t look like he fully understood but was at least somewhat comforted by my assurances that it would be alright.

“There are tales that tell of the wealth of this land, long before the Ironborn came. How House Fisher ruled this land and managed great fleets of ships. From here, Brandon the Shipwright built his fleet – with the trees in this area. We know that trees can flourish here, and I will see it do so again! It will be a long process, but I fully believe that we can restore this land to the way it was before the Ironborn destroyed it so long ago.”

Another cheer went through the crowd at that. Another village elder made to stand, and with the assistance of his neighbor did so, and asked, “Forgive me, m’lord. I am but an old man, but how long will all this take? Things like the castle and these trees. Will I live to see such a thing?”

“That is a good question, honored elder. Currently, my castle is under construction, but I hope to start work on this castle here next summer. The training of the guards will start this winter, and the new farming methods will show improvements almost immediately! I know not how long it will take to build the castle until my Master Builder looks it over. As for the reforesting? There is no definite timeline, but I hope to see it before I die.”

The man bowed and said, “Bless you, m’lord.” As he sat down, I tried to contain my blush. Bless me? A bit extreme isn’t it?

But as I looked around the room, it appeared the old man wasn’t alone in his attitude. The shipwrights looked incredibly happy and appeared on the verge of tears. I had planned to speak about how I wanted to make sure everyone had plenty of food and how hygiene would help them, and their children live, but this gratitude was making me uncomfortable.

Nyra, sensing my discomfort, addressed the crowd. “We also plan to talk with everyone in the village, on another day, about some other important things that will cut down on any sicknesses in the village. We have seen great results with other villages, and we know we will see the same here.” With a smile, she turned back to me and gave me a little nudge.

I returned her smile and turned back to the crowd. “The final thing I want to talk about is mining. What is in the area?”
A muscular man stood up and replied, “My name’s Tren, ‘n I’m the blacksmith. There’s a good iron deposit about two hours or so walk away; copper is about half an hour, and a small coal about half a day. The coals not too good though – lots o’ them small seams, so I end up searching for new ones all the time.”

“Wonderful, but I will need you to show me their locations in the coming days.”

“As you wish, m’lord.”

“Excellent! If that is all, I believe we are done for the day. Tomorrow, I will meet with all the fishermen in the village, and I will go over how to make garum. I will make further announcements in regard to my schedule tomorrow as well.” I looked to Donovar and quirked an eyebrow, as to ask if he had anything to add.

He stood and addressed the crowd. “I will be looking for five boys who are willing to become men-at-arms and start training immediately! They will stay with me for the next month, while I am in the village, and then return with me to Redbridge for the summer to continue to train. We will then return for the winter, where they will become the start of my experienced and most skilled men-at-arms. I will start meeting with prospective boys tomorrow, so pass the word amongst the village. I will accept the fittest, and those with the greatest passion!”

With a final cheer, the crowd made it way out of the tavern, while I talked with Nyra.

“Thanks for coming to my rescue there,” I said, softly.

“You’re welcome. A bit shocked by their response?”

“Aye. Normally people are, at most, happy with my announcements. But… that awe… it was uncomfortable. I haven’t even done anything yet.”

“True,” she conceded. “But you will, and it will vastly change their lives for the better. And they can see that.”

I shrugged. “Still weird and uncomfortable.”

She pressed a kiss to my cheek and murmured, “All great men receive love and admiration. You deserve yours, and you will grow into it.”

Xxxx

It was a few days later when a boat with my sigil waving proudly on its mast sailed into the bay.

Over the last few days, I had toured the mines, marking them out on the maps and getting more details on them, and taught the villagers how to make garum. Nyra and Evelyn spent some time with the shepherders teaching them how to use the new sheep shears but held off on any additional lessons for farming or hygiene until Koryn and his family arrived.

I made my way down to the shoreline as the boat was pulled in. I waved to Koryn’s children as I tried to cheer them up as they looked wet and miserable in the boat. Koryn looked excited to see me, and Alessa looked like she wanted to get the hell off that boat. I didn’t blame them; travelling for a long time on such a small, utilitarian boat must have sucked especially when the wave splashed over the sides – like that one there.

As soon as I heard the sound of the hull scraping against the shore, the kids jumped out of the ship shouting, “Freedom!”
Laughing, Koryn and Alessa followed them at a slower, albeit still hurried pace.

“Rough trip?” I asked as I embraced Koryn.


I gave Alessa a hug and kiss on the cheek, as she said, “Aye, keeping everyone on a single boat was trying. Quicker than by wagon, but that’s the only nice thing I’ll say.”

“Well, the important thing is that you are here now,” I replied.

Koryn snorted. “Aye, but it seems the kids have taken off and not bothered to give you even a ‘Hello’.”

I laughed. “That’s all right, we’ll see them soon. They’ll find my kids quick enough – the village isn’t too large. Come on; I’ll show you to the tavern. They have a nice warm fireplace, and we’ll get you a warm pot of tea.”

As we made our way to the tavern, we were joined by Nyra. When we arrived, I got the innkeeper to make us up a pot of pine needle tea for our group, while Koryn and Alessa dried themselves off and got warm.

Once they settled down, Nyra asked, “How is everything back home?”

Koryn let out a whistle. “Busy. Very busy. We’ve received around 320 people I think?”

My jaw dropped. “That many? Truly?”

Koryn nodded. “Aye. Thereabouts. We got another hundred from the Glovers, one hundred from the Mormonts, fifty from the Starks, and maybe seventy or eighty from our surrounding lands.”

“Wow,” breathed out Nyra. “That’s a lot of people. Are Violet and Tylan handling everything all right?”

Alessa patted Nyra’s hand. “They are doing wonderfully and asked me to pass on their love.”

“Aye,” replied Koryn. “They’ve got everything running smoothly. It took a while to get sorted, and we had to leave Bran behind to help with settling, unfortunately.”

“Were most of those from the Mormonts and Manderlys farmers?” I asked.

Koryn nodded. “Most were, yes. Some of those from House Stark’s lands were assorted laborers, like transporting coal from the mines, or some construction workers that also helped with harvests. Mix and match really, so I put them to work in the mines.”

“Ah, was cement production lagging behind again?”

“A bit, but we also needed more iron and coal.”

“Any other news?” asked Nyra.

Koryn shrugged. “Some. Rodrick Stark says he awaits your letter when you return. As does Lord Manderly, regarding the kids’ meeting. Oh! And the harvest numbers were in. Very good yields this harvest, and some of the new farmers that arrived before you left even got some of their first harvest out of the ground for things like potatoes, turnips, and other vegetables.”

Alessa nodded along and said, “Aye, and we received a lot more orders for alcohol – mainly vodka, but quite a bit of brandy as well. Before we left, Violet delegated Jeran to making the alcohol. And Jeran was already buying up potatoes from the farms, and placed an order for wine from merchants.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “Good. That’s good. We need the coin coming in. How many orders did we get?”

Koryn shrugged. “Hard to tell, they kept coming in separately. I think it was up to a hundred barrels of vodka before we left? Somewhere about there.”

“A hundred? Truly? That is incredible!” replied Nyra.

“Aye, about there. The orders even purchased at more than we had figured they would. Most bought at six stags a barrel, though some were at five. So, just under three gold dragons total for vodka. I think there were maybe forty barrels of brandy ordered? Jeran wasn’t certain if we had enough potatoes for the vodka orders, but he told me to tell you, not to worry.”

“There were some soap orders as well,” said Alessa.

“Right!” exclaimed Koryn. “Mostly from Lady Stark, though we also received a letter from a Lady Cerwyn? They really wanted more of the winter rose soaps, but we ran out. Still ended up placing another order for a gold’s worth of assorted soap.”

“Excellent!” I exclaimed.

“I will have to make sure to expand the winter rose fields when I get back,” replied Nyra. “Hopefully, I get a better yield next harvest. I think I worked out most of the issues.”

I let out a laugh of relief. “This is wonderful news! I’m sure everyone back home will be fine – I’ve got faith in them. Now, we probably ought to tell you about the village. These people are, for the most part, very excited and willing to learn.”

Nyra spoke up and said, “They were very attentive when Evelyn and I taught them how to use the sheep shears.”

“I want to be there for the silvopasture lessons, as I think they are going to be really important for this area. I will show you later, but this area needs to be restored and reforested as the soil here falls between dreadful and nonexistent.”

“Not a problem,” replied Koryn. “How long do you want to spend here?”

“Over a week, but probably not two. I want to go over the silvopasture first, and then I will split off from you once I find someone to teach how to set up a tree nursery.”

“Makes sense. Are we going to push the co-op model forward?”

“As far as equipment? Yes. Regarding the tree nursery? No. The implementation of the silvopasture and restoration of the land is too important to try and break up into parceled land and risk someone delaying us. Not to mention the irregular nature of the existing pasture land. No, I will have to take on that cost and push it forward.”

“Alright, enough of that,” Nyra interrupted. “No more work talk for the day! You’ve both been cramped up in a boat for too long! You both need a good bath, and I assume some alone time.”
Koryn and Alessa blushed, while I laughed. They did stink, but I hadn’t wanted to mention it. Koryn quickly drained the rest of his tea with a muted, “Cheers,” before grabbing Alessa and making their way out of the tavern.

Nyra shouted after them, “Go find Evelyn! She’ll show you were the bathing area is set up!”

Even after they left, I continued laughing. Finally, Nyra elbowed me and said, “Oh, shut it. You know you’d want the same if we were in their shoes.”

“True. Doesn’t make it any less funny though.”

We sat in companionable silence while we drank the rest of the tea. Eventually, I noticed something. “Uh, Nyra. It looks like they forgot most of their clothes here.”

She looked over to where I was looking, before she sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Figures.”

It was two days later when we were finally able to gather all of the farmers and herders out on a nearby pasture on a nice sunny day. The sheep were grazing nearby, and the lack of any enclosures was certainly interesting, though I could tell why. Each pasture was mainly centered around valleys, and there was no reason for it to be enclosed as long as the herder stood atop one of the hills and used his herding dogs to keep the sheep in the valley.

It seemed to be that the herders here were using an intensive grazing model – not that they knew it. A lot of people tended to let their animals wander in large paddocks year-round, and let the animals constantly graze any new growth. This, however, had quite a few downsides. This constant grazing kept the grass short and did not allow the grass to reach the stage where it would grow quickly. It was far more efficient to move the animals around on smaller sections and let the grass grow. These people seemed to have inadvertently done that, which would make Koryn’s job much easier.

Koryn cleared his throat and began his introduction. “If everyone could be seated on the ground, I will start now.” He gave them a moment before continuing. “Welcome, to the first lesson for new farming methods and practices. Over the next week or so, we will be going over some new concepts and new tools that will make your lives better. You will see better yields, from how much grass is grown per square foot t’ how much wool you get per sheep, and you will make your lives easier as well. T’ start with, I will let Master Michael talk about soil, water, and trees.”

I stood up, nodding in thanks to Koryn for the introduction, and made my way to the front of the crowd. I gave them all a smile and said, “Soil and water. They are crucial to your jobs – as you well know. Without water, the grass and crops would not grow. But too much water, and you lose the soil as it gets washed away. But how much water is too much water? There is no set answer, but I can tell you now, that it should be more than it is now.”

I swept my arm before me, indicating to the pasture we were sitting in. “If you look around us, you can see what I mean. Right now, there is just grass growing in this valley. Grass has roots in which it holds down the soil, but they are not deep, nor are they strong.” I held up a clump of grass, with the roots dangling before it. “I dug this up from this pasture, and you can see how shallow the roots are. Without many different kinds of plants, water can wash away the pasture you have here easily. Does this pasture ever flood?”

One of the herders replied, “Aye, m’lord. Mostly just in the spring, but sometimes after a real bad storm, too.”
I nodded. “It’s those times that really washes away the soil. Light rains, like the one we had a few days ago, can be handled by the grass, but more than that damages the pasture. The solution to this is trees. As anyone who has ever tried to remove a tree stump from the ground can tell you – trees have deep roots. They do not want to come out of the ground, and they do an excellent job of anchoring the soil. There are two different applications, both closely related, for trees that I want to talk about today. I will try my best to make sure everyone understands, but if you have a question, please ask.”

Seeing everyone nod in understanding, I continued. “The first is what I call silvopasture. This, as the name suggests, means wooded pasture. The idea is that instead of wide, open pasture, like we have around us right now, we bring in trees, at a specific spacing to help the pasture. These trees will help hold down soil, meaning that pasture land won’t be continuously reduced, provide additional feed for animals through leaves and any nuts or fruits, provide windbreaks so that animals are sheltered during storms, and finally it will allow the village a source of wood. Everyone follow that?”

I got nods from most of them. “Good. Now, the key to this is planting trees wide enough apart that they do not block the sunlight from the grass. A good rule of thumb is that over half of the ground should receive sunlight. So, different trees affect this in a variety of ways. A tall, skinny pine tree, with foliage only at the top, will block out less sun than a mighty oak tree. Now, for ease of use, trees should be planted in rows, so that you can keep an eye out on your animals easily, and harvest hay easily.”

A man in the back raised his hand. I indicated for him to speak and he asked, “How wide should the rows be, m’lord?”

“Good question. Rows should be no more than thirty feet apart, and no less than fifteen. Again, it depends on the type of tree, but I would aim for fifteen-foot rows. Remember, if you notice that there is too much shade, or the rows are too narrow, you can prune and cut back the trees as well. Trees in a row should be about ten feet apart. Now, choosing the trees will be a tricky choice, and Master Koryn will go into this in a bit more detail with you later. But for now, what I will say is that the village itself needs hardwoods, like oak, and softwoods, like pine for building structures and boats. However, as farmers, you would also like things that make your job easier, with fruit and nut producing trees. This is a balance you will have to find, and one that Koryn will help you with. Any questions about silvopasture?”

“Do those nuts ‘n fruits need t’ be fed t’ the animals? Or can we eat ‘em?” asked another herder.

“They can be used however you like. The pastures nearer to the village might all go to food for people and the farther ones just for animals, to save on time. There’s not any strict rule; it’s about what you want.”

Another man asked, “What’s the point if we gonna cut down the trees?”

“Well, the trees won’t all be cut down. The trees that get cut down will be done randomly. So, you won’t cut down an entire row of trees. You might get one here, one there, and one over there. This limits the danger of cutting down the trees and will not impact the soil. Plus, when trees are cut down, they need to be replaced immediately with new growth.”

“Who’ll decide that, m’lord? You or Master Donovar?”

“That’s a bit too far in the future for me to answer now. Ideally, we will have enough pasture for each of you to separate your herds and have your own lands, and you can choose. But I understand that won’t work now, so we will leave it alone until it becomes an issue.”

“Er, m’lord? I don’t get how the trees ’ll grow here. The soil ain’t deep enough. I was out in me
brothers boat a few summers back, ‘n we stopped in a great forest! And the dirt was real deep there.”

“Good question! Soil will need to be built up, but we can also focus on trees that have a shallower root system, which I will talk about with my new tree manager, Sig. Master Koryn will talk to you all about different soil building techniques, such as intensive, rotational grazing, that will help you. Any other questions?”

Seeing none, I continued. “Alright then. This is something that won’t be started right away, as I will need to talk to Sig about getting started with tree seedlings, but the idea of silvopasture is something you should all keep in mind. Now, the other is a way of managing water by using trees. It’s called keyline design, and it is when you harness the natural flow of water to your benefit. As I travelled through this land, I saw that this area has many small lakes and ponds that hold the rainwater. This is good, as it means that there is a lot of available water for your livestock. Master Koryn will go into greater detail with you later, but for now, I want to focus on trees.”

“Trees are excellent at controlling the flow of water and can reinforce the banks of a river. I trust you all noticed the empty river bed at the other end of the valley?” I asked as I pointed towards the riverbed.

Seeing their nods, I continued. “That ever-expanding slope is eating away at your pasture land – washing away all this soil and grass. That is because the banks of that river cannot contain the water that flows through it. However, if you were to plant trees along that bank, along with some shrubs and bushes, you would see that bank start to hold, and your pasture no longer washes away. There is something important I want to share with you. It is called the Scale of Permanence. These are things that range from the unchangeable to the easily changed. For instance, the most unchangeable thing that we, as farmers, work with is the weather. Aside from praying to the old gods, there is little we can do to make it warmer here, right?”

A chuckle rippled through the group. “Next would be the landscape, as we can’t quite make these valleys disappear. We can build the soil, and make it a little smoother, but destroying the valley we cannot do. The next is water supply, followed by roads and paths. These two things are important when it comes to farming, and they can both be worked with, but it is hard to dig a well or make a path up a steep hill. Then comes trees, which can be easy to work with, but take a long time to come into full use. Then comes structures and fences. A piece of land might be really nice, but if you can’t make sure the animals don’t wander off or if you can’t live there, it’s hard to call it a good place to farm, no?”

“Finally, the soil is the easiest to change – for better or worse. What we all need to do in the future, is keep these in mind as we work. A valley might be perfect, except for one thing. That might be that there are no trees, like the valley we are in now, and we know that can be fixed easily. However, if a valley has no water, it becomes much harder to work with. For instance, this valley here has no immediate water source. But, if we were to build up the banks of that river and dam up the end of the valley, we can make a lake to catch that rainwater and give it to the animals. There are different amounts of work we can put into the area, and we will get different results because of it.”

“It is important to remember to watch how water flows, and how we can adapt and change that for our benefit!” I pointed to that empty riverbed again. “If we were to dig a new riverbed that extended this way, and then reinforced the bed with trees, we could change the flow of that water! And that is only possible with the addition of new plants. Any questions so far?”

“I don’t get when we use that permanent thing, m’lord,” said a grizzled, old man.

“Well, let’s take this valley for instance. It would be nice if there was a small building here perhaps, to help you shear sheep, or shelter you in the rain while you watch over your flock. Now, from our
scale, we know that that is not a difficult thing to do. On the other hand, changing the water supply would be much harder. Digging that new riverbed, piling dirt and stone on the new riverbanks, and planting those trees is a lot harder than building a shelter. Looking at the flow of water and trying to adjust that is a lot harder than picking a spot to build a shelter. And that doesn’t even include what to do if the rainwater runs out, or if there is a draught. So, if we were deciding to make this valley better first, or the valley next to it, with a good water source, it would be easier to work with the valley without water problems. Understand?"

Understanding dawned on the old man. A young man spoke up next. “So, a real nice valley with water ‘n everything wouldn’t be any good if you can’t get t’ it, cause it’s on a mountain or some such, right, m’lord?”

“Exactly! Knowing about the scale, we can then look into things even greater, like looking to see what kind of ridges are in the valleys, where water might be diverted or spread amongst crops. Koryn will go into that in greater detail later and will even take you to a valley to show you real-life examples, cause I know it can be hard to understand things when I am just talking like this.”

That got a few nods from people, who still looked a little lost.

“The key thing I want everyone to take away from this is two things: trees are amazing and talk things over with your neighbors. We will be leaving in a week or two, and while we will try to teach you everything you need to know, there will come a time where you have to make a big decision without us, and when that comes, talk to your fellows! Bounce ideas off of each other and think things through! Look at the land around you, and don’t be afraid to try new things! It might end up being silly to change the course of this specific river, but it could also be a huge benefit! And if you are truly lost, you can always send a letter to Redbridge with your questions. If you can’t read or write, find someone in the village who can – I know there are some who can.”

I looked over to Koryn and indicated he should come back. When he reached my side, I addressed the group again. “That’s all I wanted to talk to you about today. Sig and I will now be leaving to do some more detailed work on trees. I leave you in good hands with Master Koryn here.”

With that, I collected Sig, and we left the group. Sig was a young man at 17 years old and was of average height with curly black hair. He came recommended from a few families, and my first meeting with him had gone well. He seemed like an intelligent, young man.

“So, tell me a little bit about yourself, Sig,” I said as we made our way to a small valley I had spotted yesterday.

“Well, m’lord… umm…”

“First, you can just call me Michael during our lessons. Secondly, I am not actually of a Lordly house, just a Masterly one.” He looked panicked for a moment before I said, “It’s not a big deal. I’m not picky on what people call me.”

“Right then, er, Master Michael. My Pa and brothers are fishermen, while my ma stays at home and helps clean and dry the catch. But she also grows a few things, like carrots and onions and the like. I always liked helped her with it, and then a few years ago, Rodrick the Merchant brought back something he called ginseng. He made tea with it, and I really liked it – so did a lot of people, and I went out and found some wild ones. I had to go in the boat and travel a long way, but I found some. Then I found a nice little cleft in one of the hills and made a little garden. I now trade some of it in the village.”

“Impressive. Did you mistake any for poison ivy?”
“No, Master Michael. Rodrick told me how to spot the differences. He was real helpful!”

As we made our way into the small little valley, the term valley seemed a bit generous. It was a depression in a hillside on the southern face of the hill. It was about thirty minutes from Stonefisk, and not near other, larger pastures, so it was rarely used by any herders. It was mostly overrun by lilacs and lily of the valley, which were deadly to sheep and goats, so instead of expending effort to clear up a valley that would never be used, they let it be. It was, however, perfect for what we were planning.

“This little area,” I said, spreading my arms before me. “Will be the base of our operation.” I placed the large sack I had been carrying on my back onto the ground and started emptying it. I had a few small potted plants, as well as a collection of seedlings. “What we will be going over today is a review, as we will be getting more in-depth throughout the week, and we will break up my talking with some physical lessons to make sure you understand.”

At his nod, I continued. “To start, there are two ways you can plant trees, though not every tree can be planted the second way. The first is by seed.” I picked up a sealed pinecone and handed it to him. “That pinecone is one of the ways trees spread their seed. Now, the pinecone itself isn’t the seed – no, the seed is inside and only released when the cone is opened. We can open the cone with a little heat, such as putting it on a put above the fire for a few minutes.” I grabbed another pinecone, one that I had already heated up, and passed that to him. “Bang that on the ground.” When he did, little seeds fell to the ground. “Those are what turn into mighty trees. And different trees have different methods. Nuts are another form of seed, and fruit trees carry their seed inside the fruit themselves.”

“The other type of planting method is called cutting. This only works on some trees, such as willows and apple trees, and this is where you cut a small branch off of a tree and plant it into the ground. This will cause the branch to sprout and grow an identical tree to the original. This is especially useful for fruit trees, as every seed carries a different fruit, and they will never be identical. Of course, each method is more involved than I just went over, and we will cover that over the next week, but it’s a good summary. Do you understand?”

Sig had been sitting paying rapt attention to my speech. At my question, he nodded fervently and replied, “Yes, Master!”

I hid my grimace at his reply. Why couldn’t I have been a landed knight instead? Hearing ‘Yes, Master’ from someone sounded like they were my slave. Why couldn’t I have been a Ser instead? I wasn’t a warrior, but a Master was supposed to be one anyway.

Not letting my feelings show on my face, I replied, “Good. Now, I will tell you that I don’t know everything, and I won’t pretend to. A lot of what I will tell you will be for forming the base of your knowledge. After these lessons, it will be important for you to keep observing the world around you and learning from it. Learn from what you see, what you do, and how everything works together. For instance, I know that willows are a good tree to use alongside a riverbank. They tend to like water, but some types of willow like water even more.” I pointed out a group of sticks I had bundled together. “These are from a sandbar willow, with is a short tree, almost a bush, that loves water. It is even fine with being submerged for a time. This is a good tree to plant first alongside a riverbank. Then there are black willows, which grow taller and work well – just not as well.”

“There are many different plants that grow alongside the rivers as well, that will help you, but unfortunately, I am not overly familiar with them. This will be something that you will need to go out and observe, and then try for yourself. As for other trees, I will go over some of their intended roles throughout the week. I will also go over other things over the week, like the best soils to plant different trees in, why woodchips will be your new best friend, and many other, intricate things.
Questions so far?

“Yes, Master! Will you go over the plants that can be used in cutting again?”

“Yes, I will, but on another day. I have made notes for you on a collection of parchments with more detail that you can keep. This will be good for helping you learn, and helping you remember after I have left. Can you read?”

Sig fidgeted a bit before admitting, “Maybe, Master. My Ma got Rodrick t’ teach me, but it was long ago, and I haven’t done it since.” He looked disappointed that he wasn’t able to answer yes.

I patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry; we’ll go over that too and get you caught up.”

“Thank you, Master!”

I coughed and continued, “Aye, well… are you comfortable outside the village? Do you have any hunting experience?”

“Yes, Master! I’ve hunted with a bow before with my brothers to get meat.”

“Excellent! In the future, you are going to have to take some long trips out into the forest. You will need to observe where trees are in nature so that you can answer questions like, what trees do well when exposed to wind? What trees can handle flooding? You will need to be able to look around you and answer these kinds of questions.” At his worried look, I continued, “Don’t worry, we will go over this as well. It can be challenging, but it doesn’t have to be impossible. For instance, look around this little area we are in now. Can you tell me why there are these plants here?”

Sig looked around the valley bewildered. “Umm… well… no…?”

I chuckled. “That’s quite alright. And when you don’t know something, it’s always alright to ask for help. In this case, these plants are poisonous to sheep and goats. So, once upon a time, there may have been other plants here, but a herder likely came through, and the livestock went and grazed on those other plants. Can you tell me what would have happened next?”

He scrunched up his face in thought. “Well, the other plants would have been eaten right? So, they would be smaller and closer to the ground?” He looked to me for confirmation, and seeing my nod, continued, “Then these plants would have more sun? And plants can’t grow without sun. So, they would have taken over?”

“Correct! It probably took many times for that to happen, but eventually, it wasn’t worth it for the herders to come back anymore. It’s questions like these that need to be asked and answered. Sometimes, your questions will be wrong, and at other times it will be the answers. What you will have a lot of in your future, is your guesses to these questions and your attempts to find out the answer.”

“Now,” I continued, “let’s talk about the future. For now, this little valley will be where we work. Here is where I will show you how to do things like plant trees, move them from the ground to a pot, and then how to move it back into the ground. This little area will be a good place to start to grow your seedlings, though we will need to prepare the area a bit more. Eventually, I would like to get a glass greenhouse for you to work in.” He gave an awed look that caused me to laugh. “It won’t be for quite a few years, but that is what I am aiming for. When Master Donovar heads back to Redbridge, I will send with him a letter that will bring you supplies the next time a boat comes out. Things like a good cloak, tools for your travels, a good steel shovel, and many other goodies. These will help you with your job.”
“Thank you, Master!”

“Onto pay. I will be paying you five copper pennies a day, every day, to start. Payments will be irregular, and paid in chunks, as the coin will have to come alongside boats that are travelling from here to Redbridge. I will make sure that the payment is enough to cover the period missed plus the next month, so make sure to be wise with your coin!”

At his fervent nodding, I continued. “If you are good, and you want to continue, your pay will be increased the longer you work for me. This will be a job for the rest of your life if you work hard at it!”

Sig smiled brightly. “I will, Master! I will be the hardest learning person ever!”

I smiled. “Very well, let’s get into it then.”

As I started to go over the material again, this time in depth, I couldn’t help but think: at least he’s eager.

Xxxx

Nine days later saw us preparing to leave the next morning, after having spent a good chunk of time in this village both teaching and preparing the village for the future. Donovar would be spending another few weeks here before heading back to Redbridge, while Koryn and his family would be coming with us as we continued south along the coast.

The kids were all asleep, and Nyra and I were the only ones left awake. It had been a long day of preparation, made worse when Anari realized she would be cooped up again inside the wagon. She had thrown quite the fit and refused to do anything all day. Nyra had successfully stepped in, but Anari had been brooding all day.

I turned my attention to Nyra and just admired her. She was even more beautiful than when we had married, as motherhood had truly transformed her. We were both getting older now, and grey hairs were starting to show in my hair, but she carried it with dignity and grace.

Sensing my gaze, she looked at and met my eyes with a smirk. “Like what you see?” she asked.

“Always,” I replied, earnestly.

Her smiled softened as she let out a light snort. “Flatterer.”

I grinned. “Always.”

“Ready for wagons and horses again?” she asked.

I rolled my eyes. “I may not have thrown a tantrum, but I’m still not looking forward to it. My ass hurts just thinking about it.”

“It’s my head for me. All that bouncing around.” She made a disgusted face. “Work slows to a crawl while we travel.”

I nodded. “Aye, but at least we accomplished a lot here.”

“Yes, yes we did. Your new pupil seems to admire you.”

I chuckled. “Sig is a very earnest boy, and he did take to the lessons with a lot of vigor. I think Donovar will like him if he gets to know him.”
“Shame about the reading though.”

“It is,” I conceded, “But Koryn’s goodfather will re-teach him. Sig admitted it had been a long time and hoped he still remembered, but he seemed to have forgotten most of it. Oh well, he is determined to succeed, and I think he will.”

“Honestly? I think this village will succeed. They are determined to put the Ironborn behind them and rise up. They took to everyone’s lessons quite well, and the mood in the village is very happy.”

“They are. Though, it was only much improved after I had sat down with the elders again and talked about how I would bring coin to the village in detail.”

“Yes, but they remained skeptical afterwards. I think it was when you told Sig about his pay. That was when everyone really realized that there would be coin in the village. And a steady amount of it.”

“That probably reinforced the point for them. I will admit, my plans for transitioning the village away from a barter-based economy to coinage was a bit abstract.”

Nyra gave me a wry smile. “Abstract? I suppose that is fair.”

“Alas, they will have to just sit there and prosper I suppose.”

“Oh, woe is them.”

I laughed. “Yes, poor them. Anyway, shipments will start to become regular as they are already arranging a number of boats to go with Koryn to deliver fish to Redbridge, and then bring back lumber and other supplies. Garum will be a while as production has yet to start, and it will then have to ferment for a few months, but the coin for the shipments should be enough to get the village going.”

“Hmm, speaking of the shipments going back. Did you make sure to give all of our letters to Donovar to bring back home?”

“Yes. Gave it to him over lunch. I made sure he knew of some of the more important messages in case they were lost or destroyed by water.”

“Wonderful! Have you gone over the possible stopping points for the trip?”

“No, I’ll let Donovar explain where the major villages are along the coast, that would be easy for the people transporting goods to stop at night at. Donovar has a good copy of a map with them all displayed.”

I stretched out a bit as I relaxed in front of the fire as our conversation petered out, and we fell into a comfortable silence. After a while, my gaze drew back to my wife who continued to concentrate on knitting.

She felt my gaze after a few minutes and cast a sly glance my way. “Bored?” She asked, in a husky voice.

I blinked. “Yes, but I can think of something I’d rather be doing.”

“It will be the last time we have nice surroundings for the next few months…” she said, trailing off suggestively.
I pulled her over to me and placed her onto my lap, so she straddled me. “Best make use of our time then.”

**A/N:** Alright, there is a monster of a chapter; my longest yet. Don’t worry too much about the coin figures, as I may go back a change them, since I was having trouble trying to figure out monetary values. Just know that all the figures given were good.
I pinched the bridge of my nose as I felt another headache coming on. As we travelled out from Stonefisk, we had had good success. The people there were close enough to Stonefisk for some goodwill to carry over, and they were eager for my plans. But as we continued to travel, and the villages became smaller and sparser, people trusted less.

Oh, they were suitably obedient once they saw my banner, but gone was my hope to forge good working relationships with these people. They wanted protection, yes, but they were also fiercely independent. They paid their taxes, but that was the end of their interaction with any type of authority. And my intruding on that tradition?

The man in front of me crossed his arms, and while he was not in any way hostile, I could feel his resentment.

“I dunno, m’lord,” he replied. “Not something, we’ve done before.”

“Well then, how do you collect it?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Go out in a canoe and collect it. It stores nice ‘n good for eating over the winter.”

“So, you don’t try and farm the rice at all?”

He shook his head. “No, m’lord. Like I said, it grows by itself. Just like berries.”

I sighed and waved him off, and he was only too happy to leave me be. This area had an interesting type of food – rice. It was not what you would normally picture as rice; it was not small, white grains. These were a very narrow, dark brown rice that was found along the shore of many of the lakes and rivers that dotted this region. The rice seemed different but familiar at the same time. I couldn’t quite place this wild rice.

The region, on the other hand, I could place. It was a very boggy area, filled with peat and water. If the northern half of the peninsula was mostly stone, with eroding soil, this is where it all ended up. It was a miserable, bug-ridden place, with its miserable people as well. Still little to no trees, though the landscape was greener. I hoped that by the time we reached where I hoped to start Koryn’s new castle, Osend, the landscape would be much different. It seemed that this whole peninsula wanted to drain south, so I hoped that since the land was better on the interior portion of the northern end, it would be on the southern end as well.

The peat was interesting, in that I knew it could be an important thing. I just wasn’t entirely sure how. It was used in making whiskey in Scotland, though I had no idea if that was just a marketing ploy or not, and it was historically a good fuel source. The people, however, put a huge damper on any plan I could come up with. Frankly, there were people here – probably the same number as on the northern end of the peninsula – but they were much farther apart. Skilled trades were almost non-existent - if people couldn’t make it themselves, they didn’t have it. I had yet to meet a blacksmith that could work with steel in any significant quantity, but every family was able to fashion some plain metal tools for themselves.

Any economic plan for this area would need to rely on cottage industry, which put it at the bottom of my priorities. The people did not know of any major mines, and they obtained all their iron from the
bogs. For the first time, I was at a loss of what to do. I had had indecision before, but that was always caused by competing options or choosing priorities. Here, I had nothing.

The rice was a glimmer of hope, but I knew nothing about rice. How was it farmed? I knew of rice paddies as a concept, but not in detail. The people here didn’t even farm it, so I had nothing to base off of or improve; they just collected wild rice to add to their diets. Did the rice need to be prepared before planting? How deep into the soil? I remembered the fields being filled with water, but not all the time? Was that two different forms of rice farming, or did the fields need to be drained?

I let out a sigh. I didn’t know enough, and the people here don’t either; and even if they did, they were not inclined to help.

This trip had been wonderful so far – especially being able to see all my land – and while it had been challenging at times, nothing had discouraged me. But I was starting to feel burnt out, as every group of people reacted the same, and progress was slow. We did only a little teaching in the area, and it felt like we accomplished little, and I wasn’t sure how to change that.

I watched as the man walked away before a thought popped into my head.

“Hey!” I called. Damn, what was his name again? “Hey, you. Get back here; I got something for you!”

He looked startled and came back over. “You called for me, m’lord?”

“Yes, I need you to pass on a message. Ten gold dragons to whoever comes up with a way to plant and harvest as much rice as possible.”

His eyes bugged out, and his jaw dropped. “T-t-ten gold dragons?” He stuttered out.

“Yes, the first person to do so, and be able to tell me, or one of my people, how to do it, will earn ten gold dragons. Make sure you pass along the message to everyone to the north of you. I will be telling those to the south. Understood?”

He nodded his head. “Aye, m’lord! Err, are there any other rules?”

I shook my head. “You know what a field of crops looks like, right? Like a row of carrots or something like that?” The man nodded his head. “Right, well, I want that, but with rice. It can be planted underwater or on dry land – I don’t know which. Figure it out. The person who does gets the gold.”

There was a glimmer of greed in the man’s eye. “I’ll tell everyone m’lord!”

“Good. When my tax collectors come through, I am sure that they will have found that you passed on this message, correct?”

The man paled a bit. “Yes, m’lord!”

I gave him a thin smile. “Excellent! Off you go now; I look forward too seeing what you come up with.”

The man walked off as fast as he could, though I wasn’t sure if it was fear driving him or motivation for success. Probably both. At least my problems for this area, if not solved, were at least pushed back.
Seventeenth day, Fourth Moon, 253 AC (+14 days)

The view from where we stood was quite breathtaking; it reminded me of my home, back on Earth. We stood atop a hill that overlooked the plains that were spread out before us. There was a wide river to our backs, and the shoreline had a few young trees dotted along it.

This was the spot that we had decided would be the location of Koryn’s castle and accompanying town, Osend. It was inland from the ocean a bit and located on the apex of one of the bends of the river. It was an excellent location for a castle, as it not only overlooked the surrounding area, which looked to have good farmland, but it also would serve as protection from the interior of my land. The river was called the Twin Lakes River, and it was a massive waterway, probably on par with the Mississippi River, and stretched from the ocean all the way to the Twin Lakes themselves and petered out into the Wolfswood. The castle would stand where the river was narrowest, for ease of defense.

The river would serve as the highway into the heartland of my new domain, and this castle would protect it. We still had exploring to do, in the sense of what the landscape was like further north of where we were, but the information we had suggested that there would be a few good navigable rivers that drained into the Twin Lakes River from Rillplainshire. That meant a lot of goods would be moved along this river, so it needed a strong defense to ensure its success.

I was already planning on how to see how successful it would be, by organizing a caravan to travel from Redbridge to the Twin Lakes, and then travel by boat down to Osend. It would be interesting to see at what point boating could be done; would the boat have to be taken at the Twin Lakes, or could it be done sooner?

“Well, Koryn? How does it feel to see the site where your castle will be built?” I asked.


“Mm,” I agreed, “I can picture it now.”

“I can even picture the town spread out below.”

I turned around to look at the river. “And I can just see all the boats travelling along the river. Boats of all sizes carrying goods to and fro.”

“A lot of boats could fill that river, that’s for sure. Way bigger than the river back by the farm.”

“Yeah, it is. No idea how we’re going to bridge that though.”

Koryn grimaced. “That does sound like an enormous job. Would Jon know how to do such a thing?”

I shrugged. “No idea. There’s probably a bridge that goes over the White Knife, so he might. I’ve heard that House Frey has a bridge that goes over a similar river, so it’s probably not impossible.”

Koryn chuckled. “Aren’t they the house that is known for their bridge? If so, it probably means it’s unique and a bitch to build.”

I laughed along with him. “Probably. To be honest, we don’t even need it at this point. The Ryswells own the other side of the river, and I don’t even know how close the nearest settlement is, so it’s not
exactly a priority. We’ll have to make do with ferries to start.”

“Aye, that’ll do.” He let out a low whistle. “That’d be a massive bridge, especially if we have it tall enough to let boats pass under it. Though, it would make defending the river easier.”

“I suppose it would. We could have archers at the top to rain down on the boats below.”

“Aye, we could even put a chain or something up between the arches to physically stop the boats.”

I let out a thoughtful hum. “That’d be pretty hard; I don’t really know though. We’ve got lots of possibilities regardless.”

Koryn shrugged. “Maybe, but I can picture it now. The bridge would provide a good seawall for the ships and let us shelter some of our fleet there behind it. They could sally out at will and fall behind the bridge if needed! Archers and ballista to support them, with the castle itself on the flanks, the enemy would be destroyed.”

I could see it in my mind as he described it. It was a powerful vision. “We will have to keep it in mind when we draw up the plans for the castle.”

“How are we going to get everything built? I know you hope to get some work started at Stonefisk next summer, but what about Osend?”

I frowned lightly. “It’s a bit tricky, but I’m hoping the summer after, as I will need to juggle people around a lot to get everything done. Once Jon and Tylan evaluate and get Stonefisk started, they will, I hope, be able to split their time between Stonefisk and Osend. That is if Jon is still able to continue to work with us. He has been away from his home in Winterfell for quite a few years, even if he does go back for the winter.”

Koryn nodded. “Aye, he has been away a while. Would Tylan be able to do it by himself?”

I shrugged. “No idea. I hope that Jon won’t leave until at least Tylan is ready. Even then, that still doesn’t address the issue of labor. Stonefisk has some locals that could work, but I would still need to send some experienced workers there to help make things go smoothly. Here though?” I waved my hands through the empty land. “We have no one to work with. We might be able to attract some families from the countryside to move here and work, but a larger share will have to come from Redbridge. Not only workers but farmers and tradesmen as well. That will be a challenge unless we get more people moving to Redbridge.”

“What about existing families and making sure they survive? Surely that will increase the number of people we can work with?”

“It will – to a point. I think that in fifteen years or so, we will see a large population boom, as people have more children and those children survive. But that doesn’t really help us with this problem over the next two to six years.”

Koryn frowned. “No, I suppose not. And we still haven’t touched the topic of the navy.”

“No, no we haven’t. I’m still not sure where it will mainly be based out of, but I am leaning towards Redbridge. We will probably only have enough to defend the river – at least for the next ten or twenty years.”

“How large would a fleet to defend the river be?”

I snorted. “No idea. Probably be based more on longships rather than large warships, but other than
that?” I shrugged.

“Would that be something those boys you sent off to be apprentices would know?”

I shook my head. “No, not them.” I tilted my head to crack my neck, and continued, “No, but Lord Stark would. I’m planning to go with Ryden to meet his betrothed after we get back, so I’ll be stopping at Winterfell, and I will talk to Lord Stark about it. Maybe get his blessing and coin for a real fleet as well.”

Koryn blinked in surprise. “Would he actually support that?”

“Maybe. Historically they haven’t, not since they lost their fleet so long ago, but Lord Stark might be willing to do differently now.”

Koryn let out a depressed sigh. “Still wouldn’t help with our people shortage.”

“Probably not,” I conceded. I patted him on the back and replied, “Don’t look so glum! We are in new lands, exploring the site of your soon to be castle! Come, let’s get started on seeing what resources are in the area!”

Koryn gave me a wry grin. “Aye, let’s do that.”

Xxxx

Koryn and I sat before a little makeshift table, with a map unrolled across it. Over the past week, we had explored the surrounding area for resources and were now compiling all our information.

“Nyra stumbled upon a nomadic trapping family who told her about the different kinds of animals in the area, as well as the types of fish. All of it was about what you would expect,” I said.

“Most of the surrounding land would make for good farmland, though I am obviously unsure of the rainfall for the region.”

I nodded. “I will send a letter to the Ryswells to see what they receive as it ought to be the same.”

“There are few trees in the region, which will have to be fixed, but I have no idea why there aren’t more.”

“It is odd,” I agreed. “I would expect a faster recovery rate, so maybe the people in the area are cutting them down too quickly? Maybe too much or too little animal activity?”

Koryn shrugged. “As time goes on, I realize that the more I learn, the less I know.”

I snorted in agreement. “Too true. In good news, I found what I think to be a good-sized salt deposit.” I pointed to a spot a bit inland and marked it on the map. “The locals seemed to have a sort of open pit mine that they use. According to Nyra’s discussion with the one family, they use it for salting their meat, and it is where a lot of the nomadic hunters and trappers gather every so often.”

“Interesting! A salt mine would be a huge boon for us.”

“It certainly would, as it would boost our garum production nicely.”

“I found some tin and copper as well,” he said, pointing out the locations on the map. They are about a day’s walk northwest.”

“As you know, when we split to explore, my family ranged alongside the river following it north.
We went for two days but found little of note – just more of the same as here.”

“We ranged inland and found that the land quality definitely increased. There were good water sources and good soil. It was good horse country as well, but that’s not overly surprising as the Ryswells are just on the other side of the river, and they are renowned for their horses.”

“Any sources for iron?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Not that I saw, but I also didn’t see anyone to be able to confirm that.”

“Well, barring the lack of iron, this stands to be a very productive area: good farmland, good horse country, good fishing, good water access, and good resources. With the Twin Lakes River, we also have a lot of water power ready for mills, blacksmiths, and the like. A good place for industry.”

Koryn nodded. “Aye, hopefully, we can find an iron source.”

“It would be nice, but we also have other options, such as bog iron from the west or iron from the mountains to the north. It’ll be a pain to transport, but far from impossible. We’ll also have to get Sig to start planting trees here as well, and probably import peat for fires.”

“I think this will be a huge area for farming; inland is very flat and easily convertible to farmland.”

“I hope so. This will be the farming heartland for the area, I think. Iowa is good, but much of it is rocky and quite hilly. This will also be our source for horses and cavalry. The Ryswells have managed to have incredible success, and I think we will as well.”

“We will need to get more people who know what they are doing.”

“True,” I conceded, “But I think I can poach off some talent from the Ryswells.”

Koryn scratched his chin as he looked over the map. “The map is filling out quite nicely. There is a lot more detail than before.”

“Aye, I’ve tried to make sure everything is here.” I pulled out another map below it and continued, “This map here even shows the different terrains, whether it be bog or forest. It’s missing some information in the interior, but we’ll get that eventually.”

“Huh. You can probably color up to about here,” he said, indicating with his finger on the map. “To show that this land here is similar to there. That’s about as far as we ranged.”

The map was a whole host of colors, mainly concentrated on the coast, but we were slowly filling it out. It was quite beautiful.

“Alright, that ought to do it for now. Come, let’s go see what the rest of the family is up to.”

We both stood up and made our way back to our families.

Xxxx

I stood with my head craned back, looking at the stars glittering above me. One thing I had always loved about this world was the lack of light pollution; the stars never seemed so bright back on Earth.

Slowly, I made my way back to the campfire. My family was gathered around one, and the guards and the caravan workers at another. It was well past dinner, which had consisted of a nice, if simple, stew, and but not so late that the younger children were starting to fall asleep.
As I approached the group, I heard Ryden talking to Koryn’s son, Tobas. “Oh, and I got to swim across the river with Dad!”

“No fair!” replied Tobas. He turned to his dad and said, “Can I swim across tomorrow too, Dad?”

Koryn chuckled. “Maybe; it depends on how well you do with your training tomorrow. Don’t think we haven’t noticed you’ve been slacking off since we parted ways with Donovar.”

Tobas pouted as I took my seat. “Nuh-uh,” he replied, refuting the accusation.

Alessa rolled her eyes. “Just because the men that are training you aren’t Donovar, does not make them blind.”

“Fine!” He said, exasperated. “I’ll work extra extra hard tomorrow. Can I swim then?”

Koryn looked to me. “Only if your Uncle goes with you. He’s the strongest swimmer here.”

I nodded my head. “Aye, I’ll go with you, Tobas. Ryden can come as well, but none of the younger children.”

Tobas launched into me with a hug. “Thank you, Uncle Michael!”

I patted him on the back. “No problem; it’ll be fun.”

Nyra clapped her hands together to gather everyone’s attention. “Why doesn’t someone sing a song, before we start putting some of the youngest to bed?”

Anari pouted. “I’m not tired! I wanna stay up!”

Nyra patted her on her head. “I’m sure you do, but it’s almost bedtime.”

Evelyn replied, “I’ll sing. Jesryn, do you want to go grab the guitar?”

Jesryn went over to the wagons and located the guitar. When she returned, she asked, “Can I play?”

Evelyn nodded. “Sure, you ready?”

At Jesryn’s nod, Evelyn started to sing. “Come up to meet you; Tell you I’m sorry.”
Interlude: Ten

Twenty-fifth day, Fourth Moon, 253 AC (+1 days)

He stood atop the hill, proudly looking over his town, which was laid out before him. He could see the boats out in the ocean, and the women and children were scurrying about in the village itself. The village was no longer a desolate thing, hanging on to the rocks, that looked to just weather the next storm and nothing more. No! There was life here! The people shone brighter and were invigorated with passion!

Donovar smiled to himself. Yes, they had accomplished much in Stonefisk, and though it was but a start, what a start it was! These people truly had the drive to succeed and worked towards that goal with vigor! Barrels of fish were lined up along the shoreline in preparation for tomorrow’s departure, and the barrels of garum were already being filled and fermented!

He cast his gaze over to the longship that would take him and his family back to Redbridge tomorrow. It would be one ship of many that would depart tomorrow, but it would be the only one that would be staying in Redbridge; the rest were transporting goods. His two children, along with his lovely wife, would be departing and the boys were already sad.

He was proud of his boys, though their passion often led to more work, he had never thought that a bad thing. To be so passionate was indeed a blessing from the gods.

Donovar shivered. He could only imagine the misery of living a passionless existence as so many people did.

Passion was life. It was everywhere, but the problem was that not everyone recognized that. They shuttered themselves away from that passion, not always for the same reasons, but with always the same results. Life was both hard and beautiful, but it could hurt fiercely and give generously. Growing up, his family and community had felt that pain and fell into themselves to blunt it. They lived their lives because they lived and for no other reason. Laughter was rare, as was daring. If winter was long and food ran short? Oh well, some will die, and that is life. The tax collector roughs up a few people and takes more than they ought? Oh well, that is life.

He shook his head. That was not life, that was bare existence. Life is taken with both hands and pushed ever forwards! To embrace passion in all its joy and pain, for how can you know joy if you have never known pain? It was the reason he left them; when he had heard of the rampaging wildlings, he knew he had to step forward and do something. And when he was given a chance to do more with his life, he pushed forward and did more. And more after that, and ever more. He would not allow himself to live passionlessly, and he would not let his fellows do so either.

He was lucky then that these people of Stonefisk had shrugged off their apathy and had embraced life and passion with both hands! The five boys he had selected to train to become his commanders had trained hard over the month that they had been there. They were rough to work with at the start, like all clay, but he had begun shaping them into a work of art!

Donovar had started them on the absolute basics: building muscle and endurance. With this, as well as passion, they could truly become the jewels of youth that shone with radiance! Next, they would begin working on literacy, leadership qualities, and actual fighting skills. He would get them into shape so that they could shape the next group of men. These men, if they stayed good and true could end up as his sworn vassals, and further spread their passion!
Lord Stark’s lands were filled with his minor vassals, and it was a busy place. Not like here, where he would be the only Master for leagues around. He wanted that, that lattice of support and strength to ensure that his people would prosper. One man can make many great things happen, but to keep it from falling into ruin? *People* need to be there to support such things and to support they must be strong themselves.

With this, Donovar could ensure that his people prospered. If he could not get his people to succeed through trade, as Master Michael insists is possible, then he will make sure his people fight with unmatched skill and vigor for Master Michael and Lord Edwyle!

Donovar smiled brightly as he knew, that would not be necessary. These people have strength in their heart, and he was proud to watch over them, and watch them succeed!

**A/N:** Sorry for the delay in chapters, and such a short chapter at that; I’ve been a bit sick and haven’t felt up to any writing. This is sort of a filler chapter, to give a little update on Stonefisk’s progress, but it is mainly to flesh out Donovar as a character a bit more. It isn’t perfect, but I’m a little burnt out on writing it, for now, so I’ll probably come back and edit it later since I want to move on with the other chapters. I plan to finish the travel arc, and hopefully a few more chapters before the new year.
Climbing the mountain had been tough. Well, to be fair, there wasn’t too much actual climbing, but it was an extremely challenging hike to get to the top.

But the view? The view was worth it. I could see the river valley before me stretching out into the distance towards the north; to the south lay the Twin Lakes River and its tributaries. It would be a prime way for an overland highway route and would make for good farmland because the valley was oriented north to south.

It would make for a good place for a castle as well, with a fairly large hill located near the middle of the valley close the Twin Lakes River. The mountains on either side were large and, as I had just found out, hard to pass over, would stop any potential enemy movement. We had not explored the entire valley, but our maps provided by Lord Stark indicated that it ought to continue close to Redbridge.

I just wasn’t sure if a castle was worth it since I didn’t face any threats from inland. I mean, I suppose it would be useful in the event of a peasant rebellion, but I would like to think I’m a good enough Master not to have one occur. Besides, there was no one in this area to rebel.

In time this would make for a good trade route and might make for quicker transport to Osend than sailing along the coast or sailing from the Twin Lakes. I sighed - another thing to measure then.

Still, it wasn’t a huge priority. Rillplainshire, on the other hand, had been a very interesting experience. It reminded me of a very wet American Midwest, with a very flat landscape, good growing capabilities, and lots of water, both rain and river. There were a few larger tributaries that flowed from the mountains into the Twin Lakes River which would eventually provide excellent transportation for goods, with a few smaller rivers as well.

The best part of Rillplainshire? I found soybeans.

I found soybeans! My jaw dropped when I had found them, as I had grown them back on my farm on Earth. I recognized them immediately, even after so long, and began collecting as many as I could. Rillplainshire would provide an excellent place to farm them, as they were a very water-intensive crop, and rotating them with corn would provide a beautiful cash crop for my people.

As we had travelled north along the Twin Lakes River, we had encountered a few settlements along the river on the opposite shores, which was promising. I had feared that the area would be completely vacant, and I was happy to see it wasn’t. The communities were all agricultural in nature, and quite a few had a focus on horses.

After I had found the soybeans, we encountered a boat from one of these villages a few days later, and I got the chance to ask them about it. Apparently, it’s been present in the area forever, though they weren’t exactly sure about that. They eventually settled for it being here for a really long time, which I thought was better, but I had given up on trying to make sense of this world. The medieval government and environment reminded me of Europe, but there were definitely North American crops, and now apparently an Asian crop. It could have been brought over, perhaps even accidentally, as there was some limited contact with the far east in this world, which I figured might be the same as on Earth. Ultimately, it was irrelevant, but it was mildly annoying.
The people used it mainly as forage for animals and didn’t cultivate it themselves, which while odd, was not unprecedented. It was the same in early America, where soybeans started out as a niche crop, mainly used for forage for animals, and that wasn’t changed until the 20th century. It was weird that it wasn’t used more, knowing what I know, but I suppose to the uneducated it wasn’t that crazy. I mean what is the difference between this plant and the million other unfarmed plants?

Still, the occurrence of soybeans really pushed up the priority for development in Rillplainshire and Osend.

I was unsure if soybeans could be used in the valley before me, as I would need to study the land a bit more. It looked like lush land, but did it receive little rain because of the rain shadow effect from the mountains? The valley was certainly useful otherwise, but it would be nice to kill two birds with one stone.

I looked over to Koryn who was panting beside me, having just reached the top of the mountain, with one of our guards just behind him.

“Quite the view, eh?” I asked.

“Aye,” he replied, absently as he looked at the scene. “Stunning. Absolutely stunning.” He turned to me and grinned. “I’m glad you convinced me to make the journey up.”

I smiled. “Definitely worth it.” I looked over to the guard, Aiden, as he looked around as well. “And you, Aiden?”

“Incredible, m’lord,” he replied.

I looked to Koryn and said, “I think this would make for a good farming community as well as a good location for a road to connect Redbridge to Twin Lakes River.”

Koryn hummed speculatively as he pictured what it would look like. “Perhaps, but would the farming here really be that much better than Rillplainshire?”

“Probably not, no,” I conceded. “It would be good for obtaining lumber though, for building Osend and other villages.”

Koryn scratched at his chin in thought. “True enough, I suppose. Some farms to support the lumber operation then?”

I nodded. “Aye, I think that’ll work. A road through here isn’t really a priority, so there’s not much need for anything bigger. Though, with all the animals here trapping would be pretty good.”

Koryn laughed, while Aiden let out a snort.

Once we left the plains and started to reach the mountains again, trees became more common, eventually forming a large forest, and with all those trees came larger animals. We had a bear try to steal food from us a few days back, but we were able to rally and kill it. The sound of wolves at night had been pretty common as well, though they had yet to make any moves toward us.

“True enough,” Koryn replied. “It’ll certainly be a pain to get a community up and running here though.”

I smiled brightly. “We ought to name the pass.”

Koryn rolled his eyes. “Oh, please. Not another one of your names.”
“Oi, what’s wrong with my names?”

“One word,” he deadpanned. “Rillplainshire.”

Aiden snorted again, letting me know I had no ally there. “What’s wrong with that?” I asked.

“What’s not?” Koryn countered.

“It has the same number of syllables as Winterfell,” I defended.

Koryn shrugged. “Winterfell makes sense. And any other name you come up with includes the Old Tongue for some reason.”

“Fine, you come up with a name then.”

Koryn grinned. “Let’s call it Koryn’s Pass!”

I laughed. “No way! That’s awful.” I looked over to Aiden who was laughing. “What about you, Aiden?”

“Is Aiden’s Pass out of the running?” he asked, jokingly. At my nod, he continued. “Call it Bear Pass or something, then.”

I glanced over to Koryn who shrugged. “That’s a good enough name as any. I have a feeling that bear won’t be the last we see while we’re here anyway.”

Koryn was once more gazing out into the pass. “You know? That hill would make an excellent spot for a castle.”

“I had a similar thought,” I replied. “But there’s no real need. We don’t have the people, and honestly? I’m not worried about an invasion from the Tallharts or Ryswells.”

Koryn laughed. “No, I suppose not. Shame though, it would make a great location.”

Silence fell between us as we took in the view.

It really was a shame about the castle, but perhaps something else could be done? Perhaps a fortified manor or watchtower-type thing? Something to house a guard, but not necessarily withstand a determined siege. That might work, but who would be in charge of such a thing?

I would need to make a new role or something, as I wasn’t overly happy about the typical feudal structure. For some of the small villages that were out of the way and relatively unimportant, I was planning to give them the option of a mayor or council, depending on the size. The village would vote, and that person would make decisions and represent them to me. It wasn’t much in the way of democracy, but it would introduce the topic and make life easier for myself. Importantly, I wouldn’t be giving up any of my power and end up making myself work harder to achieve my goals.

So, perhaps a type of temporary military type role as well? Not elected, but an appointed governor-type thing? No, let’s call it a Sherriff. They would be in charge of protection of these types of medium settlements, with a small garrison of troops. Medium settlements like this important lumber camp, possibly more remote mining camps, and other locations that are far from any of the three castles but doesn’t warrant a true castle.

The more I thought about it, the more I liked it. It would be a well-paid position, maybe with some kind of pension to offset the lack of inheritance that a Masterly house would provide. The pension
would be a new concept, and it might meet resistance from those who aimed to achieve a Masterly status, but people might be able to accept it regardless.

It could work, especially if each Sherriff was provided a cushy fortified manor that their family could live in. It would provide status and comfort and allow them to retire with a lot of money and a guaranteed pension. It would be a prestigious job, in a prestigious building, with lots of coin. It could work.

I think I’ll chew on it a bit more and then talk it over with Nyra; she’s much better at thinking about people’s reactions.

With a last stretch, I turned to Koryn and Aiden. “Ready to head back? I’d like to be back before dark.”

Koryn sighed. “Aye, we probably should. We’ll be cutting it close; it took longer than I thought to get up here.”
Act 2: Chapter 17

Thirtieth day, Fifth Moon, 253 AC (+23 days)

She let out a grunt as she stood up and rubbed her head furiously.

“Damn, that hurts,” she said.

I rubbed her back soothingly. “Is it any better than last time?” I asked.

“I think, but if it is, it’s not much.”

We stood in silence for a few moments, with her leaned against me, while we waited for the worst of her headache to fade.

Eventually, she straightened herself and said, “It’s somewhat passed now. Unfortunately, I didn’t feel any deposits.”

“None?”

Evelyn shook her head. “No, none. I’m still unsure of exactly what I’m doing, and since we don’t know the result of what happened back at the Twin Lakes, I don’t even know if I am doing anything right.”

I squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. “That’s alright. Why don’t you go back to the camp and lay down for a bit?”

“I could do with a nice little nap,” she said, grudgingly.

“Don’t worry; we’ll figure this out, eventually.”

With a smile, she made her way back to camp, and I could hear her collecting one of the guards who remained a ways away, out of sight.

I smiled softly at my brave daughter. Before we had left Redbridge, Violet had asked Evelyn to continue working with her warging abilities regarding her sensing. She had come across a sort of breakthrough on her travels, where she was able to get a sense for metallic content in the ground. It was short ranged still, and she wasn’t entirely certain what she was sensing, but it was fascinating. Unfortunately, it had the side effect of giving her a massive headache.

She continued to work at it though, and with her skill, she was able to find a salt deposit at the Twin Lakes, as well as what we think might be iron and another unknown metal. We had also found existing tin and copper mines already present, though they were long abandoned. Her senses tended to have a buzzing effect that I thought might be some sort of echolocation-type thing? We weren’t entirely sure how it worked, and I have no idea how she detected the salt since it wasn’t a metal, but we were working on it.

The unknown metal had gotten me excited, as I was extremely curious as to what it was. My imagination ran wild with thoughts of gold or precious gems that would fuel growth for my lands. It was hard to reign in these thoughts, but I was pretty giddy. With the iron deposit, we had stopped by a small, abandoned and exhausted iron mine to compare the buzzing, and Evelyn had said that the buzzes seemed to be fairly similar, but this unknown metal was very different.
The Twin Lakes had been absolutely beautiful, and reminded me of pictures of Switzerland, but much larger! If the lakes were combined, they were probably about 150 miles or so – just smaller than Lake Ontario, one of the Great Lakes. The land surrounding it was ideal for farming and trade, as for the most part the mountains were not pushed up against the lakes, except in the middle where the lakes are bisected into a river. The area was hilly, but not unmanageable, and was already populated, if sparsely. The river that connected the two lakes was deep and wide and would make for easy transportation between the two lakes, which was good as the hills that separated the two lakes made for poor overland transportation.

The Tallhart side had plenty of villages oriented around farming, lumber, and mining, while my side had a few farming families as well as trapping. The Twin Lakes was already marked for future expansion, especially once we figure out what the mystery metal is. We had marked the different locations of the major mines to be explored later, and then we continued on our journey.

Initially, we were going to continue along the northern portion of the Twin Lakes River heading towards the Wolfswood, then follow the Wolfswood back to the coast and then along the coast back to Redbridge. However, we had gotten curious at one of the tributaries to the river and followed it upstream to find the valley we were currently in. It was dominated by a large lake that ran east to west, and good land on the south and north shores. The north shore was sloped, but fairly level, and would make for good growing. The south shore was similar but was heavily shadowed.

As Evelyn had said, she was unable to feel any deposits, so this would not be a mining valley, but with its north shore, this could easily be a wine valley. The heat retained from the water would provide warmth in the valley, and the light reflecting off of the water would also make the valley warmer, meaning this would make a perfect wine valley. It was picturesque as well, though that was just a bonus. There was only one pass into the valley, which was from the east, where a river flowed into the Twin Lakes River and contained enough space between the mountains to easily transverse them, which was good as the river was turbulent and would not carry goods for large portions of the river. The entire valley was elevated, so to the west, there was a slight river that went over a cliff. It was a small river, especially late in the summer as it was now, but there was evidence to show that in the early spring there was a lot of water that went over the waterfall.

All things considered, it was actually pretty close to Redbridge, so creating a community here shouldn’t be too difficult, though I would need to find people who know winemaking. I had no experience with it, either in growing grapes or making wine itself. Winemaking would be another good business to get into, especially if I convert a portion of it into brandy to add further value.

I made my way back to camp, collecting my guard on the way, and spotted Koryn relaxing by the lake. We were currently on the southern portion of the valley, having already explored the northern side last week, as we looked for any type of deposits.

As I neared him, I called out, “Lazing about today, Koryn?”

Without opening his eyes, he replied, “Of course; it’s a beautiful day in a beautiful place.”

I didn’t disagree, so I sat down beside him. “True. It’s a bit weird to realize how close this is to the farms. We could have come here before and been enjoying this place for years.”

“I don’t think it’ll be that easy to bring carts back to Redbridge though.”

I shrugged. “It will be once we get a proper road going.”

“I suppose. It is really close though.” He let out a sigh as he opened his eyes, and quickly placed his hand above them to shield them from the sun. “Did Evelyn find anything?”
“No, no buzzing at all.”

“No buzzing at all.”

“Pity. How’s her head?”

“She thinks it’s getting easier each time, but she is still taking a nap,” I replied, worriedly.

“She’s stubborn, just like her mother.”

I laughed. “I still worry.”

“Haven’t you said before: no pain, no gain? She is just taking after her parents; bending the world into new shapes and forging a new path.” He shook his head in wonder. “Life is different now, and I think this change is only going to continue. She will be no different than you. Her and Violet are determined to see what they can do with their abilities, and there will be growing pains, but I think they will persevere. They are much too like their parents to do otherwise.” He let out a sly smile. “Who knows, maybe we will see the rise of magic again.”

I couldn’t contain my snort. “The rise of magic, eh? I doubt it, but I find it hard to believe my girls won’t succeed regardless.”

Koryn sat up and cast his gaze over the lake. “Still, life is different now.”

We sat in silence for a while, enjoying the day. It was bright and sunny, and the heat of the day was pleasing, even if we were on the south side of the valley. Eventually, I broke the silence and said, “I think I will make this into a wine valley.”

“A wine valley? That’ll be something.”

I pointed to the north shore, on the opposite side of the lake. “Over there will be a perfect spot for rows upon rows of grapes.” I pointed towards the eastern portion. “There we can have a little village for the farmers and winemakers and the rest of the community.”

“Sounds like we need to find some winemakers then. Do you know how to make wine, Michael?”

I shook my head. “No idea. I don’t even know how much wine a field can make, or how much wine a person can make.”

“More to add to the list then. What about the western portion of the shore?”

“I was thinking something to bring us together.”

“What do you mean?”

“As you said before, things are changing. Once you get your castle, and you and your family move, we won’t see each other as much. No more walking over to each other’s houses, no weekly gettogethers, and the children will start to grow apart. It’s not like we will never see each other again, but we will see less of each other. So, I think we need something to help us as a family. I was thinking about building a large house – no, a mansion – that would be right along the shore. Enough to house all of our families, and our children, and their children, so that we can get together in the summers and just relax and have fun as a family. For a week or a month, whatever it is, I don’t want us to lose our sense of family.”

Koryn was a bit misty-eyed. “That sounds lovely.”

I grinned at him. “Another thing for the list.”
He laughed. “True.”

“When we get back to Redbridge, I am going to sit down and get my priorities laid out and organized. I’ve learned a lot over this trip, and my original plan is going to have to change.”

“It has been quite the trip, hasn’t it?”

“It has,” I agreed.

Koryn grinned and pulled a bottle out of a sack that he had next to him. “Do you want a shot?”

I looked up exaggeratedly and replied, “You do see where the sun is, right? A bit early in the day don’t you think?”

He just laughed. “Maybe, but all this talk got me thinking about the old days. I still remember taking a shot before your wedding, do you remember?”

My mind flashed back to us sitting on the porch; me nervously anticipating the upcoming ceremony, Koryn’s laughter and reassurance, playing checkers, Jess cooking the food, the old house – the memories were overwhelming. “Aye, I remember,” I replied. “I didn’t even have a proper bed back then. Just some furs and blankets shoved beneath me.”

“Aye, you’ve come a long way since you arrived.”

“While I miss the simplicity, I can’t say I miss my old bed.”

Koryn snorted. “I don’t think my body could take that abuse anymore.”

“You say that like we’re really old now.”

“I don’t know about you, but my body has been sore this whole trip. Sleeping in the wagons is the only thing keeping me going.”

“True enough, I suppose. I still don’t really consider myself old yet; I’m 43.”

Koryn took a swig of vodka and passed the bottle to me. “Weren’t you just complaining about your age just the other day?” He asked, dubiously.

I waved him off while I took a drink. “Nah, that’s just an excuse to get me out of work. It’s a handy excuse.”

He laughed. “Can’t say I haven’t used it either.” He took another drink and raised the bottle. “To the next chapter of our life!”

I took another drink and murmured, “To the next chapter.”

A/N: I’m happy I could get this chapter out before Christmas, as a nice treat for everyone! I hope everyone has a happy holiday!
Twenty-first day, Sixth Moon, 253 AC (+21 days)

“Morning, Papa.”

I mumbled a greeting toward Violet, as I was not in the mood to say anything aloud.

“Not feeling good?” She asked.

“Headache,” I replied, softly.

“Ah, it was a bit of a late night, last night, but it was a good homecoming party regardless.”

I gave a hum of agreement. It had been a nice party, and it was wonderful to be back, but I found as I was getting older my body liked to be taken out of its schedule less and less. As had happened last night, I went to bed much later than I would normally, and my body was making me pay for it.

“Do you want me to go everything now? Or did you want me to make you a pot of tea first?”

I motioned for her to continue.

“Well, as you saw briefly yesterday, when you rode in, nothing burned down. So, that’s good.” I snorted, and she continued. “I think I ought to start us off on a good note. I, er, finished one your projects for you.”

I raised an eyebrow but kept my eyes closed as I listened to her speak.

“I mean, you were close – almost there, really – but I, uh, finished.” She said, lamely. “I managed to make a good paper product.”


She gave me a satisfied smile. “Yep. I’ll show you later, but I reworked the process a bit and added some steps, but I can reliably make paper.” She held out a small stack of it for me to inspect. They were unlined, obviously, but otherwise looked like paper. A bit rougher than what I remembered it ought to be, but it was paper, nonetheless.

“That is wonderful,” I said, quietly but with pride. My daughter the inventor.

“It is. I have been taking lots of notes – it makes it easier to keep track of everything.”

“I’m proud of you.”

She gave me a glowing smile. “Thanks, papa. But it really was your work, for the most part, I just got the last bit to work.”

I closed my eyes again as my head started to hurt once more. “It will be a good business to get up and running, even if there won’t be that many potential buyers to begin.”

“True; it will have to be something for a later date. But I still want to make enough for our own needs; I don’t want to go back to making a minimal number of notes.”

“I agree. We’ll make enough to suit our needs, and when Ryden and I go to White Harbor to meet
his betrothed, I will bring some samples with me to try and scope out demand.”

“That should be fine; I know someone that would be willing to learn to make paper as a job. More than that though, I think we will need more settlers.”

I hummed in thought. “One man will be plenty for now. Would he be capable of eventually becoming the manager and teaching others?”

“Yes, I think he could rise to the challenge.”

“Alright then, can you deal with that?” Once she gave her assent, I continued, “This reminds me though – I need to get caught up on the status of the villagers.”

“Well, at the time Uncle Koryn had left, we had received about 320 people, I believe? That was over the course of the first two months you were gone. Then this last three-and-a-half months we received an additional 691 people.”

“Holy shit.”

“We now have a total of 1,789 people in Redbridge and the immediate area.”

“That is a lot of people. What do you mean by ‘immediate area’?”

“Well, with the influx of people and the increasing mining needs I set up a new mine with an accompanying farming community. It’s pretty small, only about thirty farmers alongside twenty miners but it serves us well.”

“Mhm, smart. Where is it?”

“The mine? It’s southeast of us. I’ve added making a road to it a priority as it takes just over a day to get to, but the path right now is horrendous.”

“Good, that’s good. I want to start to expand inland a bit.”

“Oh? Are you changing your plan? I thought you wanted to expand northwards along the coast?”

“Yes, I want to change the plan a bit as I’ve learned a lot on the trip. But we can go over that in a little while. First, how’s the castle coming?”

She chuckled. “Alright then. The castle is coming along nicely – if I do say so myself. The walls are up, and the towers are being raised. Preliminary work on the keep and other buildings has started, but they are not the priority yet.”

“Excellent,” I exclaimed. “I had feared it would have fallen behind when Koryn had mentioned some production issues.”

“The new mine solved that, as did the influx of people.”

“And what of the alcohol and other trade goods?”

I heard her shuffling some papers. “Alcohol sales have been good. We’ve sold more vodka to various lords, and those orders have been easy to fill – I’ve got records if you want to see them.”

I waved her off as I didn’t feel like getting up just yet. “Maybe tomorrow. What about the brandy?”

“We’ve received another round of orders, but we are waiting on more wine being delivered. We had
ordered enough wine originally to cover what we were unable to fill on the first round of orders as well as this latest batch. Another order for more wine has been placed again, and hopefully, the first order of wine arrives in the next week or two.”

I heard some papers shuffled again. “Soap sales have been good as well,” she said, “We have gotten a large order from the Manderlys, and smaller orders from the Lockes, Flints, and Cerwyns. I have also sent out a letter to get a few quotes on what it would take to build a glass greenhouse.”

“For the winter roses?”

“Yes, as well as for general use – depending on the price.”

“There’s been more interest in the winter rose oil?”

“A lot. Every order requested some, but they have thankfully settled for others. The soap purchases seem to be driven by the Ladies of the houses, and scent being the primary purpose.”

“Hmm, the greenhouse will be important than in order to produce that many winter roses – they are incredibly difficult to cultivate otherwise.”

“Agreed, but I think we will be able to afford it. The next harvest came in a month ago, and taxes are due in a month. I’ve already set aside the portions that will have to go back to the Glovers and Mormonts as per your agreements with them about the settlers. I’ve made sure we retained a portion for our own use, and the rest I think we can sell.”

“Hmm, I would also like to set some aside in case of any sort of famine.”

“Famine prevention? That’s doable,” she said. I heard her write it down, before she replied, “It won’t be too hard to implement it for Redbridge and the surrounding area, but farther out will be a challenge.”

I sat up on the couch and took a sip of water, while I thought over the issue. “True, I think any type of famine relief will have to rely on castles for protection and distribution, as I don’t want anyone to steal the large stores of food. We can incorporate that into the Stonefisk plans, and when we start on Osend as well.”

“Alright, in other news I’ve managed to sell some garum to your friend, the tavern owner in Deepwood, Arlan. Not too much, but I got him to send on samples to his contacts to try and push out the word of our products.”

I gave her a bright smile. “Smart!”

“Sales of the farming equipment have been excellent, but since all of them are bought with loans, we haven’t made much money. All of the new farmers have adopted these machines and our farming practices, and most, but not all, or the people who have lived here previously have done so as well. Most of those who have declined typically are smaller farms, so it’s not a big concern. Production is still slow, and we have a huge backlog of orders, but we are steadily churning out machines.” She ran her hand through her hair in thought. “I’ve been keeping track of all the loans and cooperatives that have formed, but the details have been fairly barebone. With paper though, I really think we need to start expanding how much information we keep.”

I nodded. “Aye, that would be good, but we need people that can do that for us.” I patted her hand. “I know you’ve worked hard while we were away, and now that we are back your workload will reduce, but not enough to start this up.”
“We will have to find literate people willing to work for us then.”

“Yes, and I will keep an eye out when I head to White Harbor. Hopefully, I can find some scribes.”

“What about a Maester?” she asked.

“Lord Stark said that we won’t get one until well after the castle is built,” I replied. “They won’t send a Maester to live in an unestablished area, especially a backwater like this.”

Violet frowned. “That would solve a lot of problems though.”

“Perhaps, but it would also open up new challenges. For instance, I am still trying to keep our farming equipment secret – well, not secret, but rather low-key. If everyone starts producing lots of food, not only will it create political instability as power shifts but it will also lower food prices. I want us to benefit from that for as long as possible.”

She looked skeptical. “Will we really be able to keep it a secret?”

I shrugged. “Not for long, but it will be slow to start. Maybe someone will realize the potential and take a risk. They’ll likely start small, maybe our closest neighbors like the Glovers will be the first, and they will notice the difference it makes. They’ll expand and expand, and others will take note. Then as more people do it, the more people will be exposed, and the knowledge will spread rapidly. After all, who wants to make less than your neighbor?”

She nodded. “That makes sense.” She put her papers down and picked up her cup but frowned when she realized it was empty.

I stood up and grabbed her cup. “I’ll get us another round of tea if you want to set up the table? I’d like to hash out the new development plan. Make sure to grab my map out of my pack as well.”

I wandered over to the kitchen and began to boil some water. Reaching into the familiar cupboards, I pulled out our tin of teas and began fixing up the cups. It was nice being back in the house again – in any sort of familiar territory, really. The rest of the kids were doing farm chores once again and falling back into that familiar pattern. Nyra went to see Donovar’s wife as Violet had told us last night, she was pregnant once again.

I poured the water once it had boiled and I made my way over to the table, where Violet had set everything else up. I sat down and passed Violet her cup and looked over the map.

“First,” I said, “we need to make priorities. Do you mind taking some notes, Violet?”

“Sure thing, papa.”

“Let’s start off with Priority 1. This will be the important things that need to be done as soon as possible. After that, we can have Priority 2, which will be things that are important, but not critical. Priority 3 will be good, but not necessary or time-sensitive. Priority 4 is long-term goals, and Priority 5 is a ‘would be nice’ category.”

Violet let out a snort. “Would be nice category?”

I laughed. “Yes. For instance, we came across a pass that looked to be a good overland route that could stretch from Redbridge all the way to Twin Lakes River, which we called Bear Pass. It would be nice to have communities all along that road, but I think it is important, but not critical, that we set up a lumber site near the opening of the pass along the river to make lumber for Osend. Understand?”
Understanding lit up her eyes. “I see. That would make the lumber camp a Priority 2 since Osend itself would be a Priority 1.”

I nodded. “Aye, that’s the shape of it.” I cleared my throat. “So, the original plan was to expand along the coast northwards and concentrate on Iowa. It was a barebones plan, more economic in nature, but with the new perspective we all gained from the trip, it’s time for a new one.”

“To start,” I continued, “Redbridge, Osend, and Stonefisk are going to be considered Priority 1, with a focus on Redbridge and Stonefisk. Both villages will aim to increase population, through immigration, increases in birth, and decreases in death, alongside production growth. We already know what products and industries we want to target, and that hasn’t really changed much. The only thing that is new to you, Violet, is a tree nursery program and rice.”

“Rice?”

“Rice. I found to the south of Stonefisk, some wild rice growing in the lakes in the area. The locals eat it, but they only gather it in the wild and don’t cultivate it. I put up a ten gold dragon reward to the person who could farm it, so we will have to see if anything comes of that.”

“I remember from your stories that rice was an important food, right?” At my nod, she continued. “That will be really good then. And what’s this about a tree nursery?”

“Most of the coast and even Rillplainshire is almost completely lacking in trees. It’s astonishing, and not in a good way. So, I set up a lad in Stonefisk to start growing trees that we can plant all along the coast. It won’t be a direct money-making industry since I am paying for the whole thing myself, but it should bring in money indirectly – through increased productivity and farming yields. We can add both of those to the development plan for Stonefisk. Osend will have a few interesting changes as well. We found soybeans on our travels, which will be a very important crop to grow. There was a nearby salt mine as well as tin and copper mines in the area. As we originally assumed, the area will be perfect for raising plenty of horses, and the river will be a huge transportation hub.”

I scratched my chin. “Priority 2 will consist of Rillplainshire, a wine valley and tentatively, Twin Lakes.”

“A wine valley?” asked Violet.

I pointed it out on the map. “This is an ideal location for wine production and considering our issues with getting wine for making brandy; I think this is an important area to get started.”

She nodded. “Alright. Rillplainshire for the soybeans I assume?” At my nod, she continued. “And Twin Lakes?”

“The other side of the lake, the Tallhart’s domain, is fairly heavily populated and the area has plenty of resources. I say tentatively because Evelyn found a mystery metal there. I want to send a team of miners, when we have enough to spare, to go and see what it is. Depending on the result it may get bumped up to a Priority 1.”

“Alright, so the only region without a priority is Woodshire. What do you want to assign that?”

“Priority 3,” I answered. “I want to send Koryn there still with his teaching program and set up some basic fortifications at these locations I have listed out. Otherwise, I will likely leave the area alone for now and long-term I want to improve the roads there.”

“Simple enough. What other projects do you want to list?”
“Roads. Roads and bridges,” I said. I leaned forward and put my finger on Redbridge. “I want a good road leading from the castle to Redbridge proper. I know we’ve cleared the trees and straightened out the path, but I want to lay down stone and create a good road. Possibly concrete, especially for the main road.”

Violet nodded. “That should be fine. You didn’t see it when you came in yesterday, but the road is coming along nicely. The Fresno scraper has mostly leveled the road; there is just some work on releveling a gully, to be less prominent. Work on the sewer system is still slow as all of our concrete is going towards the castle right now.”

“Excellent! I will go for a tour around the village tomorrow to check on the progress of everything.”

I took a sip of tea while I organized my thoughts. “So,” I said, “the next road should be to the new mining community you set up. For now, just crushed stone. After that, I want to start expanding the road northwards to Deepwood Motte. To start I want to straighten and level the road, but eventually, I want to surface it with crushed stone. At the same time, I want a road going towards Twin Lakes and the wine valley. Another road from Redbridge to Stonefisk is also needed, with similar construction to the Deepwood road. And finally, a road from Redbridge to Bear Pass to Osend. I also will talk to Lord Stark about building a real road to Winterfell through the Wolfswood.”

Violet nodded, making a note of the roads. “What priority do you want to assign them?”


“What about the Wolfswood highway?” she asked.

“Let’s not assign anything to that just yet. Let’s see what Lord Stark has to say first.”

Violet bit her lip as she looked over her notes in thought. “This will be difficult to manage. The amount of man and horse-power we need to complete all these roads will be insane. Are you sure you don’t want to focus on money-making things first?”

I leaned back in my chair and raised an eyebrow. “Why do you think I am prioritizing roads?”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking.”

I gave her a mock pout. “Fine, ruin my fun.” At her exasperated look, I laughed. “Alright, alright. Roads are crucial in transporting goods and people. The better the roads are, the more goods can be moved. The more goods that can be moved means more people will be involved and more coin as well. This will drive growth, in both population and trade as people come here to do business. For example, that mining village you started? It will likely remain small unless we fix that road. It’s too far out, with not enough around it to drive growth. But if we shorten the time it takes to get there, it opens up possibilities. It’s not magic – I mean if we made a road from that mine further inland to nowhere, in particular, it wouldn’t do much. After all, why would anyone go nowhere?”

Violet nodded in understanding. “I think I see. But we will still have large stretches of ‘nowhere’ along these roads that you said you wanted to build.”

“True, but they will start to slowly fill in since they are there for a purpose. First, growth from existing places will expand along the road. Then, it will keep crawling along as the population expands. Even then, I have a way to stimulate growth further. We need to encourage some sort of inn along the roads. Say, one for the distance someone could travel on foot per day. These inns will
attract people to settle nearby in order to service them and create future growth.”

“Ah, I see what you are aiming for. So, the population won’t necessarily follow the coast, so much as the road.”

“Exactly! Now, the road will hug the coast, somewhat, but it will also cut across inland a bit.” I pointed out what I meant with my finger. “I want to connect these major settlements via road, and that road should head towards either Redbridge or Deepwood as a final destination.”

“Ah, so this plays into what you wanted with the village spacing you had talked about before, right?”

I shrugged sheepishly. “I was a bit premature with asking Koryn about that, but yes. Eventually, there will be villages spread out all along this road, but I will leave it up the people moving there to deal with the exact locations, for the most part.”

“That will be a lot of inns. It’s what? Three hundred miles, maybe more as the crow flies to Deepwood Motte? A person can walk about 20 miles a day, so that’s at least 15 inns. Some of those would be the responsibility of the Glovers, but still, that is a lot of inns.”

I nodded. “I don’t disagree; it would be a Priority 3 if anything. The inns wouldn’t be fortified or anything, but they could have a separate section for anyone on my business to stay in.”

“Like reserved rooms?”

“Something like that. A separate stable for horses and wagons. It could even be available for anyone who is travelling to stay for free during the winter. The innkeeper would own the inn and food, but I would be responsible for the separate section of the building.”

Violet nodded. “It’s interesting, but I agree with the Priority 3 – it’s too much work for now.”

“That’s about it for roads. Did you manage to finish the different brands for the products, like I had asked before we left?”

She nodded. “Yes, but I don’t have them here with me. I created a design for the barrels that will contain the cement as Ragnarock.”

I grinned. “I love that name.”

She laughed. “I know you do. It’s too punny for you not to love.” She took another sip of her tea and continued. “The branding for the soap products has been made, so that the bags that the entire order comes in reflects the name Sunset’s Soap. I’ve also been toying with an idea you gave me a few years back, regarding wax paper. Now that we have paper, I have been fiddling with making some wax paper in my spare time. Individually wrapped soap would be good for the more expensive soaps, I think.”

“I agree! It would certainly make the products even more unique.”

She smiled happily. “I didn’t bother with making a brand for garum since we won’t be controlling its production, but I did for the alcohols. Vodka, also known as Northern Water, has been made for the barrels it will be sold in, and brandy as well - though, I didn’t come up with any name for brandy. The design I came up with for the brandy does, however, clearly state where it’s from.”

I waved her off. “Don’t worry, if it needs a name, we can come up with one later. Or let our customers name it for us.”
“Alright. Oils have been branded as well, just like brandy – no names, just location. I will show you the designs for everything another day.”

“That’s fine; you’ve done wonderfully!”

“Thanks, Papa.”

“How’s Tylan been doing with his apprenticeship?”

She gave me a bright smile. “He’s really been enjoying it! And he’s been learning a lot. He definitely enjoys the more theoretical aspect of it though, such as doing land surveys or designing something rather than managing the workers.”

I smiled ruefully. “I can believe that. I’ll talk to him and see if we can’t promote anyone to take some of that workload off him.”

“He’d be grateful if you could.”

I drained the last of my tea and stood up. “I think that’s enough planning for now. Why don’t you pack everything up, and see if you can’t spend some time with your mother? I know she’s missed you fiercely while we’ve been gone.”

“Sure thing, papa. What will you be doing for the rest of the day?”

I yawned once again. “I think I’ll take another nap. Maybe putter around the farm after that.”

She gathered all of her papers up and kissed me on the cheek. “I will see you tomorrow then? We’ll do a walkaround of the castle and village?”

“Sounds good, I’ll see you tomorrow, Violet.”

Once she had left the house, I wandered back to my bedroom and laid down on the bed and let myself drift off to sleep.
We set out early in the morning, with fog heavy in the air. The air around us was heavy and silent as we walked along the path to this morning’s destination. Violet and I had not bothered to take a guardsman with us today, as I refused to feel the need to be guarded in my own home. It was an overcast day, with the sun yet to break free from its cover and push back the fog.

The path we were travelling down was well worn but had not been made into a proper road. It was wide enough to allow the occasional wagon to pass through, but as it only led from my farm to Sunset’s Rest, it saw little use. The trees hung heavy over the trail, their leaves blocking out what little light there was. It was not unusual weather for the area, and if we were lucky, the sun would be out by lunchtime.

Today, Violet was showing me around the area, detailing the changes and some of the progress that had been made over the last seven months that I had been gone. Since Nyra had explored a bit yesterday, she was watching over the children back at the farm, as they went about their chores. She had been tightlipped when she had come back yesterday saying that she wanted it to be a surprise for me.

As Violet and I strolled down the path, my level of excitement started to increase as we neared the castle. Finally, the castle emerged into view as the fog thinned out to reveal the castle walls standing proudly.

The walls were almost complete, all that was left was the stone face that was to be put up, to keep the look classic – with a bonus of hiding the exact strength of the wall. The walls themselves stood tall at 45 feet, which I thought ridiculously tall, even though they fell short of Winterfell’s 80 feet, or Storm’s End supposed 100+ feet walls. They were 15 feet thick, with crenellations, machicolations, arrow loops, and a walkway along the top.

We entered through the gatehouse, which consisted of two still unfinished towers, and would eventually have a steel portcullis. Once we entered the castle proper, I could see workers scurrying about. They were mainly centered around finishing the gatehouse towers, with a secondary focus on the other towers along the walls. Looking around the cleared space inside the walls, I could see the basic forms set up for what would eventually be the buildings. Areas had been cleared, and markers were placed in anticipation of construction work, and I could see in one corner of the yard, there was a large pile of cut lumber; another area had stone, barrels of concrete and other supplies. A section was cleared out for a small, simple barracks and a shelter for workers to eat under.

There was a water tower already erected, with a windmill atop it spinning merrily in the wind. Eventually, there would be a blacksmith’s shop set up next to it, that would allow the blacksmith to utilize that wind power.

Spotting Master Builder Jon underneath the worker’s shelter, Violet and I made our way over.

He looked up and smiled as soon as he saw me. “Good morning, Master Michael! How was your trip?”

“It was excellent!” I replied. “I both saw and learned a lot on my travels. How was everything here?”

“Progress has been very good,” he said. “Steel and iron production has been lagging behind, but it is
better now that your daughter,” he nodded toward Violet, “has set up that new mine. It’s still got some kinks in the supply line, but those should be fixed soon enough.”

Violet smiled at Jon. “Thank you. I’ve already talked with my father, and we plan to fix the road leading to the mine, starting as soon as possible, which should ease the situation.”

“Wonderful, my Lady,” Jon replied, warmly.

“Have you been happy with the progress and the concrete, Jon?” I asked.

“I have,” he confirmed. “Progress has been swift since the concrete is so easily shaped compared to shaping and fitting each individual stone. I have been most impressed with this product of yours, from what I have been able to test. Obviously, it is untested against a siege, and its long-term quality is uncertain but other than that? I am quite impressed.”

I nodded. I didn’t disagree with him, even though I knew what concrete was capable of back home, the reality was that this was not the quality-tested, professional product that I was used to. “It might not last thousands of years like Winterfell, but it is much cheaper and easier to do.” I shrugged. “Everything has a cost, in this case, ease versus long-term quality.”

“Quite true, Master Michael. Quite true.”

“Do you have a revised completion estimate for me, Jon?”

He nodded. “Aye, but it’s still rough and dependent on the season. If we get another year of summer, we will be done by the end of next summer, assuming a yearlong summer.”

I scratched my chin as I thought. “So, you need two years and a bit to finish?”

He nodded. “Aye, once we finish the towers, the keep and other buildings will be easy enough to erect. The detailed work will take time, but the castle will be operational while that work is completed.”

“Any other issues?” I asked.

“No, everything else is coming along nicely. That lumber mill of yours is incredibly helpful, and I’m going to petition Lord Stark to have one built at Winterfell. It’s very useful.”

“Good! Glad I could help.”

“Ready to continue then, Papa?” Violet asked.

“Yes. Thank you for the update and all the work you’ve put in while I was gone, Jon.”

“You are most welcome, Master Michael.”

With that, we left Jon to his work and exited the castle. We continued down the road that led back to Redbridge, as it curved along outside the castle walls and down the hill. The main road was wide, roughly twenty feet, as I wanted the main road to be able to accommodate a lot of traffic. I wasn’t entirely sure what would be needed, but as it was now, it was very wide, especially with no traffic or buildings to hem it in. The Fresno Scraper had already gone through the road, creating a sort of level ditch that was below the surrounding ground. Off to the side of the road, there was an even deeper trench, that would hold the sewer line was already dug out and was waiting for the sewer itself.

“How soon do you think we will be able to lay the sewer line down?” I asked.
“We have a timetable set for two more months. We wanted to make sure it was in and buried before the fall rains,” replied Violet.

“Smart. How long until we can lay down crushed stone as a base?”

She flipped through her notes before answering, “Three months at the soonest. We are running into manpower issues. I’ve moved some people around, but we are running at peak capacity, so we don’t have much to improve.”

“Hmm, any word on any more new arrivals?” I asked.

Violet shook her head. “No, but then again, they never sent any real notice before either.”

“Pity; I really hope we can get this road done before winter, even if it is just stone and not concrete.”

“Concrete will be a long way off – we just don’t have the material.”

The conversation trailed off as we walked along the road before we came to a makeshift bridge that spanned a small gulley.

“Were we unable to smooth this gulley out?” I asked.

“Not this one. Jon said that the spring waters would need to flow here. Trying to dam it or build atop it would just lead to disaster. He said that might change as the farmland expands, but for now, a bridge is needed.”

I rubbed my foot against the wooden board, clearing some dirt off the surface. “Will we have the resources to make this another red brick bridge?”

She nodded. “Timetable has it set for next month. We want to get it in before the sewers so that we can incorporate it into the bridge, and make it look a little nicer.”

“That’ll be nice. Would we be able to have the sewer follow this gulley and out to the river?”

She chuckled. “I figured you would ask that, once you saw this. I’ve already posed the question to Jon, and he said that it would be possible, but it would defeat the point of having the sewage come out downstream of the population.”

I facepalmed. “Ah, I forgot about that bit. So, it’ll just continue down along the road then?”

Violet smirked. “Yep, but I had Jon make up plans for another connection here anyway. We can use it for emergency release, or even as the population expands and we want to add new sewer connections.”

“That’s my girl,” I said, fondly.

She patted my arm consolingly. “It’s a daughter’s duty to look after her father in his old age.”

My hands clutch my chest in mock offense. “Ah! You wound me! Old?!”

She nodded gravely, though a twitch of her lips betrayed her. “Yes, old.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Is that way of your way of saying I’m a grandparent?”

Violet blushed. “No, you’re not a grandparent, yet.”
It was my turn to pat her on the arm. “And that’s perfectly alright.”

We continued our walk down the road and passed a few locations that were marked out as future intersections. The road would have a curb, in order to manage water flow, so these sections would go without a curb, and we would make sure that no one built anything there, only to have it torn down later. The growth was slowly pushing out from Redbridge proper, rather than Sunset’s Rest, so it wasn’t a worry yet, but I felt it best to be prepared.

“Say, Papa,” said Violet, as we started to near the ‘industrial sector’, “I was thinking we ought to include bricks into the road somehow. It would tie in with the name, as well as look nice.”

I mulled what she said in my head as we walked. Brick wasn’t as strong as concrete, but we also weren’t going to be maxing the stress thresholds of the concrete regardless. “Perhaps,” I allowed. “It would be a nice look. Perhaps in small quantities at the intersections? Liven it up a bit? Maybe use it to help people navigate even?” I thought out loud, as I gained interest in the idea.

“Oh? Like a big ‘A’, nice and stylized to help people know where to go?”

I nodded. “That sounds good. Nice and simple. We can put up posts if it needs it, at a later date. We can also put brick walkways at the side of the road, or on the smaller roads, once we have some. We can even have the road over the sewer lines made of brick so that it can be torn up easier if need be.”

Violet smiled. “Sounds good. Shall I get Evelyn to make up some designs?”

I nodded, and we entered the industrial sector. The main road ran east from the shoreline, following the middle of the ‘island’ of land between the two rivers, to Sunset’s Rest. The industrial sector ran south off of that road, near the bottom of the southern river. In time we hoped to divert that river, so that it would not meet the northern river, before exiting to the ocean near Redbridge. This would allow our sewage not to contaminate the water near the village, as well as any pollutants from the industrial sector like the tannery produces.

Our first stop was the blacksmith’s shop. There was a towering wheel in the water at the back of the building, and even approaching the building from the outside, I could hear the hammers going. The building was sturdy, and though it was new, it already had a black coat of ash and soot on it.

We entered the building, and one of the apprentices, that I didn’t recognize – but clearly recognized us – motioned for us to wait and ran off to find his master. There was a pause in the hammering for a moment, before it started up again, and Bronn strolled out from the back. He wiped his hands off on a towel, before clasping arms with me.

“Michael! It’s good to see you again! How was your trip?”

We exchanged pleasantries for a few moments, before Bronn said, “Was there something you wanted to check up on? I do need to get back to the anvil – we are working non-stop lately, and I haven’t had much free time.”

“Oh, I just had a few questions for you, if you didn’t mind.”

“Sure, sure, go ahead.”

“How’s the waterwheel working for you? I know we got it set up before I left, but I hadn’t had the chance to talk to you about it before I left.”

Bonn lit up. “Ah! It’s great! Work is so much easier! I’m spitting out iron and steel now! The only hold up now is making the iron into steel. It’s a bit easier now that Don, the weaponsmith next door,
and I came together to have a nice big bloomery, but if you got any new ways to do that, I’d be mighty pleased to put off work for the rest of the day!”

I smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, Bronn. I’ve got nothing for that.”

Bronn shrugged. “Damn, oh well. I’ve got apprentices manning that for the most part, so it’s not much sweat off my back.”

“Oh? How many apprentices do you have?”

“Eight! It’s a big step up from my old place beside my house. It makes the workload easier, but I’ve been thinking about picking up another when another group of people drifts into town.”

I let out a low whistle. “That’s impressive.”

“Thanks, Michael! Well, I have t’ get back to it. I’ll get an apprentice to run over and grab Don for you.”

“Thanks, Bronn.”

Once he had left, I turned to Violet. “He seems to be doing good.”

“Yes, I think he enjoys having people to boss around.”

I laughed. “I meant more about his trade, but I can’t deny that either.”

She leaned forward and whispered, “So, you’re sure you can’t find a way to make more steel?”

I shook my head and whispered back, “No, I’m afraid not. I know it can be done. I just don’t know how to do it.”

She frowned. “Maybe if we get a few more apprentices for him, he can start to experiment a bit?”

“I doubt it. He’s not the experimental type of guy. Don might though – we’ll have to wait and see.”

A few moments later, Don wandered in. He was a big man and looked like the stereotypical blacksmith: large, corded muscles on his hairy and heavily scarred arms, and a large beard that was mostly grey – even if he hair was still brown.

“You Master Michael?” he asked, in a surprisingly mild voice.

“That I am. Pleased to meet you; have a seat.” Once he was seated at the small lunch table that Bronn had, we exchanged a few pleasantries, before I started to question him. His answers were similar to Bronn, with the same complaints. He had four apprentices to Bronn’s eight, but as a weaponsmith, his work tended to be a bit more detailed and specialized.

When I asked him about the status of armoring my men, he replied, “I’m making good progress, Master Michael. I’ve been focusing on weapons t’ start, and I have fully armed your men. Arrowheads are in a bit worse o’ a spot, but we are making ‘em in batches t’ make it easy.” He scratched his chin in thought. “I think we are set t’ do another batch in a week or two? Anyways, we are focusing on mail for all your men right now. I’ve got 14 or 15 sets of mail made now, and I’ve sent them t’ Master Donovar already. I hope t’ get another two before switching back t’ arrowheads. Once the mail’s all done, I’ll switch t’ brigandines and other armors.”

I blinked. A very concise summary – I think I like this man. “That sounds good, thank you. Did you have any ideas on how to better turn iron to steel, rather than what we have now?”
Don blinked in surprise. “Not really, Master. Even this water wheel thing is new t’ me.”

“Ah, no worries. I thought I might as well ask.”

“Sorry I couldn’t be o’ more help,” he said, awkwardly.

“Nonsense! You’ve done great work so far! I was just curious.”

He looked at me weirdly, before averting his gaze. “As you say, Master Michael.”

“Well, that’s all I had to ask. Thanks for your time.”

“Of course, Master Michael.”

Once Don left the room, I stood up and led Violet back outside. “Weird man,” I commented.

She shrugged. “He was fine at the start. He went weird once you asked him about new things.”

“Maybe he isn’t good once he’s out of his comfort zone?”

She shrugged again. “Maybe. I’ve heard good things about him regardless, and Donovar is happy with his work.”

I chuckled. “As long as Donovar is happy.”

We continued to walk down the road to the woodworking sector. Compared to the smoke and steel of the blacksmiths, the smell of wood was powerful here. There were various buildings lining the street: a cooper, a fletcher, a bowyer, and a general carpentry shop. They all seemed busy, so we didn’t interrupt their work, as I had no questions for them other than pleasantries – I had made no real innovation for them. Though now that I think about it, introducing them to my wooden lathe would be helpful. A few of the buildings already border the river, and water-powered lathe would be interesting. I had Violet make a note of that as we continued past the buildings.

There was another building in the process of being built, which Violet had indicated would be the future site for the paper business. My only reaction to that bit of news was to tell her the name of the company would be Dunder Mifflin, and that I would accept no others. She looked at me weirdly, but accepted it, as she was long used to my weirdness.

“There is still more work I want to do with the papermaking, but now that we have a product that is good enough, it has moved off of my priorities a bit.”

“Oh? What else did you want to try?” I asked.

“I wanted to try different blends, and other plants as well. I know you’ve told me cotton is supposed to work, and I know it isn’t practical for us, but I would still like to try it out. And try things like adding some clay to the mixture or trying to whiten the paper with things such as soda ash.”

“Sounds like you are making your own list, just like your dear, old dad,” I said, teasingly.

“Oh? I thought you said you weren’t old?”

I laughed. “Semantics.”

After that, there were a few other dirty businesses such as tanneries, that not only smelled but put out pollutants into the water.
As we finished the industrial sector loop and started to come near Redbridge, there were a few other professions in this area, such as potters, a shoemaker, and even a seamstress. Then came a warehouse type structure that held a proto-factory that worked spinning wheels and carding machines.

There was also a warehouse for finished goods near the docks in Redbridge that stored a variety of things like spun wool, finished alcohol and other goods. The building was made with bricks and was a very striking sight. There was a guard on duty, but I didn’t recognize him, though Violet assured me that he was one of the thirty guards that Donovar had recently added to my men-at-arms.

We waved to him as we passed but didn’t stop to talk. There was another, separate warehouse that was for our fishing products since they were so smelly. This was where the dried fish was stored to be sold for the upcoming merchant fleet, and where the garum was fermented and stored as well.

The rest of Redbridge had also expanded as more and more people moved to the area. Most were farmers and chose to live on their farms while others commute from the village, and others were a mix-mash of professions who chose to live in the village. The village itself was now crowding the river both to the south and east. The original floodwall that had been built in the wake of that disastrous spring, back in 236 AC, had been improved and enlarged in order to accommodate the additional houses and make sure that the village was secure.

Seeing the bustling village brought hope to my heart. Maybe one day we would even have a thriving restaurant industry.

We didn’t bother to explore the new farms as they were very spread out. Instead, we chose to find a nice spot on the beach and sat down to watch the ocean.

“Have you had any legal issues come up?” I asked.

“A few squabbles but nothing major.”

“Good – that’s good. I’m not looking forward to when it inevitably occurs. Did anyone dispute your judgement?”

She waved off my worry. “No, I made sure to have guards on hand to make sure they saw my authority.”

I smiled at her. “Smart girl.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course, I take after Mama.”

I put my arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. “Love you too.”
Thirteenth day, Seventh Moon, 253 AC (+21 days)

Koryn snorted as he finished the letter in his hand. “This is their offer? Can we even call this an offer?”

There were amused smiles around the table as the rest of the family agreed with him. We had finally received a letter back from Lord Greyjoy about possible trade opportunities, and the letter was less than stellar. Not that I expected much, but I had hoped for a little more to work with.

“An offer to talk might be a better way to describe it,” I replied. “It avoids any mention of an apology for the raid, and completely avoids talking about the history of them raiding our shores. For all that, it looks like he is interested in seeing what kind of trade we could do between us.”

“Well, your original idea was to have them buy the goods from us, and then transport them south and sell them, correct?” asked Nyra.

“Yes, I don’t think it is smart to let the Ironborn take anything from us, with only a promise of future payment,” I said, wryly.

Koryn laughed. “Aye, that’d be a bit much.”

Violet worried her lip in thought. “What would we trade them for? And when? We are still stockpiling for the merchant fleet, and I don’t think we can replenish our stores to sell to the Ironborn anytime soon.”

“Not anytime soon, I would think. At least a year, perhaps even next summer,” I replied.

Nyra nodded. “It will take long enough to exchange letters and hammer out the details. We can drag it on as needed.”

“That’ll work,” I replied thoughtfully. “I need to see what Greyjoy is willing to trade. I would imagine iron, but I have no idea what else they could sell us in exchange.”

“Garum?” asked Alessa, Koryn’s wife.

I shook my head. “No, we can make our own garum easily enough. I will probably even have the garum hidden when we do make the trade, just to make sure there are no bad reactions to us copying their food.”

“As raiders, I would imagine they have loot? Jewelry, gems, weapons, and other things they steal. We could buy it from them,” suggested Violet.

Nyra looked dubious. “Perhaps some of it, but we don’t really have any use for gems or jewelry. We would just hold on to it until we can sell it off to someone else.”

I shrugged. “Too much would be a bit of a problem but having a store of precious items tucked away wouldn’t be a bad thing.”

Zane looked uneasy. “So, are we just going to let them sail into the docks here at Redbridge? That still seems like a bad idea to me.” He clenched his left hand in remembrance of the raid. His left arm had a large scar running down most of the forearm that still pained him. Luckily, it had never gotten
infected and healed up relatively nicely, but it had made his arm a lot weaker and unable to hold anything heavy.

“No, I was thinking we would eventually set a specific date for them to come, and to arrive at Stonefisk, not Redbridge,” I replied.

Koryn sighed. “That means we would need to ship goods there, and ship guards there as well.”

“True, but it’s less distance for the Ironborn to travel and get distracted.”

Koryn snorted at the idea. “Yes, we wouldn’t want them to get distracted.”

Violet looked surprised. “Surely they wouldn’t raid when they are directly following the orders of their liege lord?”

I grimaced. “Probably not, but the Ironborn are not known for their smarts, kindness, or forward thinking.”

Koryn chuckled. “If they did raid while under orders from Greyjoy, Lord Stark might finally be able to get the King to do something about them. Granted, that’ll mean we have to suffer another raid.”

“Aye, and when I set it up, I’ll make sure they only come at an arranged date. I don’t want Ironborn arriving continuously throughout the summer.”

He nodded. “That’s smart.”

I shrugged. “We don’t really have the population to sustain continuous trading, and I’d rather everyone know that if there’s an Ironborn ship out on the water at an odd time, it’ll be raiding, and for them to take precautions.”

Zane’s face hardened. “We need t’ make this a show of force, too. Show ‘em that we aren’t weak, and if they raid us again, they won’t like what comes of it.”

Koryn nodded in agreement. “A strong statement is a good idea.”

I scratched my chin as I thought it over. “A fully armored guard spread throughout Osend would send a strong message.”

“Having some sort of fortification would be good too,” Nyra chipped in.

“You mean where the castle ruins are?” I clarified. At her nod, I continued, “That could work. We are already planning to build a barracks there but adding a wooden tower, or some other defensive features could work too. I’ll take it over with Jon and Donovar and get their opinions.”

“Even a temporary castle-type of thing would send a big message to them,” Koryn replied.

“When I stop by at Winterfell and talk with Lord Stark, I will ask him about possibly sending another ten or twenty guards with me to help us with this trade.”

“Do you think he would give you any?” asked Koryn.

“Most likely,” I replied, “He is interested in making sure this works, and that we send a strong message to the Ironborn. The only reason I think he would decline is that he wants me to do it all myself. After all, he has already loaned me ten men.”

“At what point do those men have to be sent back at?” inquired Violet.
“Probably at the end of summer, but I will be confirming that with Lord Stark. After the latest intake of soldiers, our forces stand at seventy men, with another five for Donovar’s castle. About three-quarters of those men will be for garrison duty, while the rest will be Rangers.”

“I wouldn’t think we would need to ask Lord Stark for more men to help us with the Ironborn trade if we have that many people. It would look better on us if we didn’t have to ask,” said Nyra, with a thoughtful look on her face.

I leaned back in my chair and took a sip of the well-watered wine while I collected my thoughts. “It’s not as much as you would think. I can’t send all seventy men to Stonefisk for the trade, because what if they betray us and raid Redbridge again? We can’t take that risk. At most, I would send half of that. And with 35 men, that’s not even a longboat’s worth of potential raiders. It depends on how many ships come to trade, but I want to be able to treat it as if they were all potential raiders.”

Nyra grimaced. “If we received twenty men from Lord Stark, on top of the ten we already have, and send 35 men all to Stonefisk, that would put us at 65 men. Would that be enough?”

“Well, I would send Donovar’s five men as well to defend their home, plus any of our family would be around in case of an emergency. So that’s what? 75 men? I think we should limit the trade mission to about 100 people then, for the first trip. If they behave, we can increase the second mission and go from there.”

Zane smirked. “So, we’ll treat them like dogs then?”


“That will be a small trade mission then,” said Violet, getting us back on track.

I shrugged. “Not much we can do. Still, if they send two knarrs, depending on the size, would probably be about twenty men. Throw in a longboat for protection, and that’s sixty men coming. Seventy, if we get three knarrs. The boats themselves can carry anywhere from ten to thirty tons of goods each, so there would still be plenty to trade.”

Violet nodded. “I mean – any trade would be good, but it won’t be as big as the upcoming merchant fleet. And much riskier too.”

“True, but this is but the first step, in a hopefully prosperous and long relationship with the Ironborn,” I replied.

Koryn looked amused, and Zane was disbelieving. Oh well, can’t convince them all, I suppose.

“Oh,” said Koryn, “I know you were going to speak to Donovar about the number of guards a few days back. What came of that?”

“Ah,” I replied, “we were mostly discussing how many Rangers I should have, and how to call up levies if needed.”

“How many Rangers do you plan to have then?”

“Ideally, I would like to have one percent of the population as Rangers, which at this point would be around 370 people.”

Koryn let out a low whistle, while Violet’s face blanched. “370 people??” she asked incredulously.
I gave her a reassuring smile. “Ideally. Obviously, we can’t afford that now, but we will work up to it. It’s further complicated by the fact that my people are so spread out. I can’t really hire a Ranger from the people near the guy who is trying to farm rice, for instance. And if I hired 370 Rangers from Redbridge only, it would kill our growth.”

Violet looked a bit calmer. “That’s a bit better,” she mumbled.

Addressing Koryn, I said, “We also worked a bit on what exactly you and he would both owe me in terms of vassalage.”

“Aye? Meaning what?”

“Usually, you would provide men for any fighting for a fixed period as part of your terms for being my vassal. However, I would much rather Rangers and professional men, than untrained and barely armored boys.

Nyra nodded firmly. “Good, I don’t want any young boys fighting in wars for us.”

I returned her nod. “Aye, neither do I. Anyways, we were planning on a tax that you both would pay me in order to fund the Rangers for a reduced number of possible levies. We also did some planning in order to come up with districts to see how we can call up men as needed, but we have yet to come up with anything final. I can show you that later.”

Koryn nodded. “That’s fine. I can try and help you with the district thing, but I don’t know how much use I will be.”

“A fresh set of eyes might help regardless.”

“When do you want to send out the letter to Greyjoy?” asked Violet, bringing us back to our original topic.

“It might as well wait for Ryden and I to pass through Winterfell in another two months. Otherwise, we would have to pay for a messenger to bring it there, and then ultimately on to Pyke.”

“Ah, did you still want to work on a draft letter now?”

I shrugged. “Sure, why not? Can you go grab some paper and ink?”

While Violet went off to grab some supplies, Nyra went about refilling everyone’s drinks and brought out a few more snacks.

When Violet brought the paper back to the table, I looked down at the stack and realized it would be even more paperwork for me. Damn.

Containing my sigh, I turned my attention to the family’s discussion on the proper greeting we should start with.

It was time to get to work.

A/N: Sorry for the delay in chapters. I’ve started my master’s program, so updates will be a bit more delayed than I typically aim for. I don’t have an exact schedule, but I am aiming for a chapter a week, depending on my workload.
Interlude: Eleven

Fifteenth day, Seventh Moon, 253 AC (+2 days)

A nervous energy race through him – well, not nervous exactly, more anticipation.

Koryn was looking forward to the future so much that it felt as if he could not wait until it occurred. His hand clenched and unclenched; he felt the need to move or at least do something. Planning sessions with Michael usually left him like that, ever since he had first laid eyes upon Osend. At least, he felt that energy when they weren’t talking about awful things, like the Ironborn. The latest planning session that had just ended had stoked his imagination. Michael and Donovar were trying to finalize the concept of districts for a military call-up and seeing them go over what might happen in the future for Osend was thrilling.

To see all that land and responsibility was captivating. He may have ended up daydreaming in the meeting, thinking of what that would look like one day. The towns dotting the landscape, people transporting goods down rivers, or as Michael says, ‘the gears of civilization turning’.

He pulled his hood over his head a bit tighter as the rain started to come down harder. Luckily, it was not windy today, so his cloak kept most of the rain off him. He was walking the familiar path home from his goodbrothers house and passing through the fields which were showing signs of growth, now that the last harvest was over a month behind them.

By the time he reached the door, the rain was pouring even harder, and he hurried inside.

The house was quiet, except for sounds coming from the kitchen. Koryn stripped out of his wet clothes and boots and laid them to rest by the fire to dry out. Making his way to the kitchen, he found the heart of his life preparing dinner.

Alessa looked up at his entrance and smiled at him. “Ah, your home. How was Michael’s?”

He walked over and pulled her in for a heavy kiss, pulling her tight against his body. “Good. Though, it’s got my thoughts going again.”

“Oh? Thoughts of Michael has your hands wandering?” She said, playfully, as Koryn’s hands moved over her body. “Should I be offended?”

Koryn snorted. “Hardly. My thoughts are moving too quickly; my body wants to move as well.”

“Move like a newlywed, perhaps,” she replied, as she hit his chest playfully.

“Are you saying I ever stopped worshipping you?” teased Koryn.

She rolled her eyes. “Ass.”

Koryn nuzzled her neck. “Your ass.”

“Anything new today?”

He shook his head and rested it atop hers. “No, not really; just more about the districts. I just kept thinking about what the future holds. I want to start working on our castle, and I want to build, build, build, and build some more. I can finally understand Michael now, and what drives him to constantly build things.”
Alessa laughed. “You finally understand your best friend?”

He rolled his eyes. “Understand more.”

“Right…” she said, unconvinced.

“So, mean to me,” he teased. “I am excited for the future, though I know I will miss Redbridge after we move. It has always been home, but Osend is calling to me. I can feel it.”

“Well, I can certainly feel something,” she said, dryly.

Koryn grinned. “Plans have been going through my head too, though many are silly.”

“Speaking of plans, did you ever talk with that horseman?”

“Aren? Aye, I talked with him this morning. He was part of the first group of horse experts from the Rills that arrived with horses for Michael that stayed here. He was willing to become my stablemaster once we get Osend started. He said it would be nice to be closer to his extended family, who still live in the Rills.”

“That’s wonderful news!”

“Aye, but it has even more thoughts and plans racing through my head, going so quickly I can’t even finish them.”

Alessa chuckled as she rested her head on his chest. “Try and start writing some of them down? It might help.”

Koryn felt himself grimace. “I hate writing but judging by Michael’s workload, it might be inevitable.”

“Might as well start then.”

“I think I’ll hold off for now and keep dreaming of sweet things instead.”

“Oh? Sweet things? Should I be worried?”

Koryn chuckled. “No, you are my sweet thing, oh heart of my life.”

“Nice save,” she replied, dryly.

“Thanks. I meant sweet things as in thoughts of trying to create a new breed of horse perhaps. The Dustin’s are supposed to have the best in the North, while the Dornish the best in the south. What if I crossbreed them? Will that work? Would it survive the cold of the North? That’s how my thoughts race. Question after question. Potential after potential.”

“It’ll all work out,” she said consolingly.

“I know that. I know that even if I don’t do anything new, I will probably do a fine job. But I don’t want to do just a fine job. I want to do the best job I can. To Protect and Serve.”

“I know, dear; I think we will flourish at Osend. Though it is still a pity that we couldn’t get Stonefisk, instead of Osend. It would have been nice to live close to my parents and brothers. Having a castle towering over my old home would have been nice too.”

Koryn chuckled. “There’s still time to convince them to come with us.”
He could feel her shake her head beneath him. “No, they are set on staying. My parents don’t want to move only to leave my brothers behind, and my brothers don’t want to move and leave their wives’ families behind. Or so they say.”

“Are they jealous of you?”

“Of course, they are. I just hope my brothers get over it soon. At least Zane and his family will be coming with us.”

Truthfully, Koryn was very happy to have them come with his family. It would have been lonely having neither Zane nor Michael around once they moved to Osend. Michael had already drawn up plans for Zane’s family to take charge of an inland farming community in Rillplainshire, that would focus on soybeans. It would be a good fit for Zane, who had never quite taken to planning with the same enthusiasm as Michael had, but was still a farmer through and through. “Aye, I am happy about that. Though that means we have to find someone to take charge of both of our families’ farms. It doesn’t feel right to leave them outside the family.”

Alessa hummed contentedly. “Somehow, I still underestimate Michael.”

“Oh? How so?”

“That mansion idea of his, for the wine valley? It seemed rather strange and a bit over-the-top, but as the reality of moving is setting in, I can see the wisdom of it. Of bringing the family back together. I really want to do something similar for my side of the family as well.”

“Aye, it is a good idea. I’m sure we can think up something for your family as well. Still, it’s bloody crazy to think about – owning multiple houses, one of which will be a bloody castle.”

Speaking of moving had gotten him thinking of who would inherit the farm once they moved. He would like to give it to one of his kids, but he also wanted all of his kids to come with him. After all, a castle would offer a better life for them than this farm. He would have to talk to his kids about it at some point, but failing that, he could just leave it to Michael or one of his children.

“Where are the kids at?” he inquired.

“The boys are with Donovar, and the girls went to the school in the village to play with some friends. They should be back in another hour or so.”

A grin formed on his face. Sweeping his wife into his arms, she let out a shriek. “What are you doing, you oaf?”

“It’s all this energy, oh heart of my life. I’ve got to put it to use somehow, and the kids won’t be back for a while.”

The heart of his life rolled her eyes. “Energy, right.”

“What?” he asked, rhetorically, as he carried her to the bedroom. “You were doubting my commitment earlier. I need to show you just how important you are to me.”

With a heave, he tossed her onto the bed. “Ass,” she said, as she sat up.

“Your ass,” he replied, as he went to shut the door.

“My ass,” she said, fondly.
The door shut with a heavy thump.

A/N: This will likely be the last post before the year mark since I started this story (January 21, 2018)! Don’t worry; this isn’t me saying I will stop the story! I just wanted to thank everyone who has been reading along this whole time and offering feedback! I’ve written around 143K words over the past year, which is much more than I ever thought I would do! I’m not sure how long it will take me to finish this story, but I hope you all continue along with me for the journey!
Twenty-eighth day, Seventh Moon, 253 AC (+13 days)

Nyra and I walked hand in hand through the village, on our way to the town square, where the food was being sold for the festival.

Flower garlands decorated the houses in the village as people celebrated a successful harvest. A large maypole had been erected in the field opposite of the town square, where kids were currently having fun wrapping the colorful ribbons around the pole. The older kids were currently playing raggedball, while some of the younger played football.

There was a tournament going on throughout the day, and while our kids had not won, they had had fun. I also set up a few other competitions, such as races, an archery contest, and a strongman competition. I had participated in the archery competition but lost to one of my promising new recruits, Arlan, so I was not upset at the loss.

Besides, I hardly needed the prize of five silver stags that I was putting up myself.

The smells coming from the square were wonderful, as Nyra and I looked around. There were multiple fires scattered around the square, with various roasts, such as pig and lamb, along with other foods being prepared. There were few spices, as it was a luxury most could not afford, but some of the local ones were still used, if sparingly.

Most of the foods were being served on the traditional trenchers, bread since disposable plates were unheard of. Some few brought tableware with them, but most settled for the trenchers. There was flatbreads, buns, and slices of bread being served for that purpose, and we wandered around the various stalls looking for a meal.

Eventually, we settled on a hot dog, made with fresh sausage and topped it off with garlic mayonnaise, cabbage, onion, and topped off with crumbled potato chips. Nyra received the same, and we went to find a spot to eat.

There was no cafés or restaurants in Redbridge yet, but while we were planning for the festival, I made sure that there would be plenty of tables and chairs in the main square for people to sit and enjoy their food. Once upon a time, the food would have all been potluck, with everyone contributing, but with so many people we switched over to a vendor stall style event, with some people bringing their own food.

After we claimed a table, I went over to another stall and got two cups of a nice, light mead to complement the food, and the heat of the day.

We sat silently watching the children run around the square, enjoying themselves while we ate.

Eventually, Nyra broke the silence and said, “When will you be giving your speech?”

“I’ll do it immediately after this last raggedball game is over. This is the final match in the tournament,” I replied.

“You ready?”

I grimaced. “As ready as I will ever be, I suppose.”
“Speaking of being ready,” she said, wryly, “I wonder if our boys are ready.”

“For what?” I asked, confused.

She smiled softly and indicated to the far side of the field where our children sat, alongside a huge group of other children, who sat watching the game.

“I don’t think I’m seeing it.”

She chuckled. “Off to the side a bit. The group of girls.”

I looked to where she indicated and saw what she was talking about. Off to the side of the group was a bunch of young girls making doe eyes at Arthur and Ryden and giggling to each other. “Oh, those poor boys,” I muttered.

Nyra laughed at my reaction and swatted me on the shoulder. “They know Ryden isn’t available, but that won’t stop them from looking. That will make it that much harder for Arthur though.”

“Let’s see how you like it when the boys come around looking for Evelyn and Anari,” I muttered, mulishly.

Nyra raised an eyebrow. “Me? I was quite fine with Tylan dating Violet. If I remember correctly, it was you who was distraught at your little girl growing up.”

I grunted, not willing to accept or reject that statement, which just caused Nyra to laugh more.

“Don’t worry, love,” she said, “it is still a way off for the girls.”

I rolled my eyes. “I remember you saying that exact same thing when Violet was still a child.”

“And see how wonderfully that turned out?”

“That’s not the point,” I said, pouting playfully.

“That’s completely the point, dear.”

“Michael! Nyra!” called out a voice, interrupting our conversation.

I turned my head to see my friend, Carn, making his way over to us. “Good afternoon, Carn.”

“Afternoon t’ you too! Mind if I join you?” he asked.

“Of course not,” Nyra replied, warmly.

“How’s the family?” I asked.

He smiled softly. “Good, good. I even got a letter from me boy in White Harbor. Says his apprenticeship is going good.”

“That’s wonderful!” Nyra exclaimed.

“Aye, I’m happy for him. My other boys have been working hard too. My wife is out somewhere with Tyna, my daughter, doing something. But they’ve been good too. How about you?”

“Good,” I replied. “Violet and her husband are doing wonderfully, and the younger children are enjoying being back home.” I indicated my head towards the field where the children were playing
and said, “They are also enjoying playing with other children for a change.”

Carn laughed. “I can imagine. Jon says ‘hi’ by the way.”

“Oh? Where is he?”

“He might be around later today, but his goodfather asked him for his help on something. Not sure what.”

“Ah, pity. I hoped he would be able to enjoy the festival with us.”

Carn took a sip of his beer. “Aye, and what a festival it is.” He smiled at Nyra. “I sense your hand in it.”

She gave a pleased smile. “A bit,” she replied, modestly.

Carn leaned back in his chair and looked around the square. “Different from how it used to be, but I find myself not minding all that much.”

“True enough. The festival has grown way beyond what it used to be, and there are so many faces I don’t recognize in Redbridge anymore,” I groused.

“That’s true,” Nyra replied, “But life is better.”

“Aye,” agreed Carn. “Even that fool, Jon, can agree to that.”

I rolled my eyes. “I swear, you and Jon act like a married couple all the time.” I snickered. “You even have names for each other.”

Carn looked aghast. “You take that back! Jon is a fool, ain’t two ways about it!” He looked about nervously. “And don’t let my wife hear that she ain’t the sole love of my life. I’ll let her take that out on you, not me.”

Nyra and I laughed. “Remember that time, maybe ten years ago, when she really let Jon have it? What did he say again?”

Carn let out a loud laugh. “Oh, aye, I remember that! He made fun of her cooking, ‘accidentally’.”

We passed the next hour reminiscing as we waited for the raggedball game to end. It was a peaceful afternoon, one of the first since we had returned from our trip, and it was nice to spend it remembering good memories.

Eventually, the game ended, and people began to congregate on the field, while the winners of the tournament celebrated their victory. At the end of the field, we set up a small little podium so that I could easily address the crowd and I made my way over there with Nyra. Jon had yet to arrive, but I could see many of the people I had known for years, as well as a sea of new faces.

I climbed up onto the podium and waited a few minutes until the trickle of people coming onto the field was finished.

I cleared my throat and said in a loud, clear voice, “Good afternoon, people of Redbridge! Have you enjoyed the festival so far?”

A loud cheer answered me. “Excellent! The contests today have shown that we not only know how to have fun, but we are skilled at it!” Laughter washed over me, and I paused to let it die down. “Team Awesome has won the raggedball tournament, narrowly beating out Team Winners. Arlan
has won the archery contest; Jory the strongman; and Cat, Dan, and Rickard the races!”

“It warms my heart to see us all here today! To have overcome our challenges and come together as a village! To celebrate another record-breaking harvest! To celebrate peace and prosperity!” Another loud cheer erupted from the crowd.

This public speaking thing wasn’t too bad after all. I would kill for a microphone though.

“We are at the start of our journey! The foundation has been made and laid, and now we begin to build and grow. We will bring more land under plow and more food into our stores! Come winter, they will be bursting, and they will damn well stay that way throughout it!”

An enthusiastic roar of approval swept through the crowd. Hunger in the winter was a specter they all feared. It was the imminent, inevitable end that crept through their homes until it permeated every inch of their lives. Every thought became tinged with that knowledge – the knowledge that there wasn’t going to be enough. Maybe the winter was longer than it should have been; longer than the summer that preceded it. Maybe rats got into the stores, or some of the food rotted away. It mattered not what the reason was, only that there was always a reason.

“We are building new homes! Homes that hold the heat in those long, cold winters. Homes to make our lives better! We have soap; we have coin, we have drink, we have food, we have each other! As more and more people come here to join us in our success, I want us all to remember! To remember that so long as we work together for our future, that our future will be bright! To our future!”

“To our future!” came the echoing cry from the crowd. I could see my family standing in the crowd looking at me brightly. I saw other families huddle together a bit closer as they joined in with the cheer as one. Young men eyed their sweethearts, and the old looked upon the young in triumph, as the fruits of their labor lived on in their children.

Looking at the crowd of my people gathered before me on this bright, sunny day, I knew I had triumphed as well, even if my journey still had a way to go.

A/N: So, this concludes the sort of foundation laying of Act 2. Act 2 is not finished but going forward it will be a bit more plot focused, with the building taking more of a backseat. Next chapter is the visit to White Harbor, and hopefully, I will be finished in a week or two depending on the length. It looks to be a long one so far, so we will have to wait and see.
Act 2: Chapter 22

Eighth day, Tenth Moon, 253 AC (+41 days)

When White Harbor finally rose into view, my party breathed a sigh of relief. We were a small party, only five in number, including Ryden and myself, and we had ridden at a good pace from Redbridge. We had briefly stopped at Winterfell to greet Lord Stark and sent a raven to Lord Manderly, but we were able to get by with only a day’s delay and quickly moved on.

The trip itself was simple, and we designed our route so that we could avoid many of the different minor lords’ holdings and avoid introducing ourselves. Once we passed Winterfell, the trip became much smoother as the lands became more populated and the dirt roads more numerous and well maintained.

As we approached the gates to the city, we skipped around the line of waiting merchants that waited off to the side and made our way directly to the guards at the gate.

“State your business,” said one of the guards, who appeared to be the Captain, as he wore finer armor and had removed his helm during the heat of the day.

“I am Master Michael Ragnar, along with my son, Ryden, and my retainers. We are here at the invitation of Lord Manderly.”

“Ah, pardon my Master Ragnar; you are expected. Please, if you will wait just a moment for my squire to get my horse, I will escort you to Lord Manderly.”

“Very well, Ser?” I asked, leadingly.

“Ser Arton Porter.”

Ryden’s eyes lit up. “Are you truly a knight, Ser Arton?”

Ser Arton nodded. “Yes, Master Ryden. I, along with a good portion of the city are followers of the Faith, and I pursued knighthood so that I could serve my Lord Manderly.”

“It is an honorable path you have taken,” I commended him. That was how you were supposed to address such things, right?

Ser Arton smiled and inclined his head.

Guess so. After a moment, a young boy came leading a horse along with four more guards. Ser Arton mounted his horse, and he, along with the guards escorted us to the castle. The city was remarkably clean, much more so than King’s Landing had ever been, and the cobbled streets themselves were straight and wide.

The people on the road before us split and let us pass as Ser Arton led our party. We received many curious looks as none seemed to recognize my banner.

The houses that lined the streets were made of whitewashed stones, that had steeply-pitched roofs of dark grey slate. The castle dominated the skyline, being built atop a hill rising above the city’s thick walls and was just as pale as the rest of the city, and truly gave the city the name of White Harbor.

Ser Arton and our escort brought us through the portcullis and into the main yard of the castle. The
guards here were dressed differently than Ser Arton and the other city guards. They wore fine armor with cloaks of blue-green wool, but their most striking feature was their silver tridents that they held, rather than spears as someone might expect.

It was a dazzling display of wealth, one that was shown throughout the castle as well. The castle was adorned with banners and ancient weapons – even wooden figures from the prows of ships.

Lord Theomore Manderly stood before the great hall of the castle waiting patiently for us. He was a portly man, clearly not martially inclined, and finely dressed.

Dismounting, I made my way over to him, with Ryden by my side and we both slightly bowed our heads in greetings. “Hail, Lord Manderly, I thank you for inviting us into your fair castle.”

Up close, I could see his shrewd eyes looking me over as I greeted him. “Hail, Master Ragnar, be welcome!” He snapped his fingers, and a servant rushed forward with a plate of bread and salt. “Please, have some bread and salt and enjoy my hospitality!”

Ryden and I ate our pieces, which we washed down with wine another servant brought forward.

“Thank you, Lord Manderly,” we both chorused.

“Ah, call me Theomore. It might get confusing calling everyone Manderly,” he said, chuckling.

“Of course, Lord Theomore,” I replied, amused.

“Come on inside, let’s get you off your feet! You must have had quite the trip!” We followed as he turned and led us inside the great hall. My guardsmen were led away by the Manderly’s household guard to be shown to where they would be staying.

The hall, called the Merman’s Court, was a sight to behold. The walls, floor, and ceiling were made up of light wooden planks, that seemed to fit together perfectly. There was artwork decorated everywhere, mostly of creatures of the sea, with a large dias at the other end of the room, where a large, cushioned throne sat.

We sat at one of the tables as servants loaded up food and drink for us.

Lord Theomore remarked, “I know I always prefer a light meal after a hard day’s travel.”

I smiled gratefully. “Aye, it is most welcome, Lord Theomore.”

“Please, just Theomore. After all, in but a few years time there is to be a marriage,” he said with a wink toward Ryden, who blushed.

“True enough, Theomore. Just Michael for me as well then.”

We exchanged pleasantries for a while as we waited for Theomore’s brother’s family to arrive. It would be Theomore’s niece, Alice, that Ryden would marry. Theomore was a talkative man, and it made passing the time with him easy, as he had an opinion on every subject and was willing to share it. Eventually, the family entered the hall as one.

The middle-aged man that led the group, Mateo, was Alice’s father and was an incredibly large man. He was past his prime, but the muscle was still clearly visible, even if it was slowly turning to fat. His wife, Kiara, on the other hand, was a complete contrast. Brown hair to his black, small figure to his large, and she seemed to glide over the ground, her body appearing motionless as she followed at her husband’s side. Alice entered the room alongside her father and mother and looked even better
dressed than her parents. Her brown hair was artfully curled beneath her headdress, which complimented her double layered dress, that, like her mother, helped to make it seem like she glided across the floor. All of their clothes were finely made, with a variety of complex designs made in not only dyes, but lace, weaving, and fur trim to accentuate the clothing.

I looked over to Ryden, who looked like a feather could knock him over, and stared at Alice with all the emotion only a horny teenager could. Holding back my laughter, I turned my attention to the newly arrived party as they greeted Theomore, before turning to me.

“And you must be Master Ragnar,” said Mateo, in a booming voice that echoed around the large hall.

“Please, call me Michael! It is a pleasure to meet you, at last, Lord Mateo,” I replied.

“Ah, let me introduce you to my family. This is my lovely wife, Kiara, and my beautiful daughter, Alice.”

They both curtsied and murmured greetings. “Unfortunately, my son Marlon is with his cousin, Theomore’s son, Wyman, out in the city and could not be here right now, but you will see him later tonight.”

“Come now, let us let our guests retire to their rooms before dinner! After a long journey, they can now relax in comfort – let us not take that from them.” Theomore interrupted.

He waved for a servant to come forward. “Kavvin here will guide you to your rooms and bring you to our welcome feast in a few hours.”

“My thanks for your consideration, Theomore. I’m sure we will enjoy our stay.”

The servant led us deeper into the castle and into the guest quarters of the keep. The room he brought us to was one of the largest of the bunch and well furnished. Thick rugs lay on the floor, and tapestries lined the walls to give a warm atmosphere in the room. The attached privy even contained a bar of my soap, which I was unsure if that meant they use it throughout the castle, or just stocked it in my room to solely impress me.

I sighed, and Ryden turned to me curiously. “What’s the matter, Dad?”

“Nothing really,” I replied. “Politics gives me a headache, and I can never tell what’s truly important. Your mother would have dealt with this easily; I wish she could have come as well.”

“I’m sure it’ll be okay,” he said, distractedly.

I looked over to him, and he still had the same spaced-out look he had since he first saw Alice. I barely contained my snort.

Teenagers. Hopefully, they can connect more over dinner and the rest of the visit. I have a feeling this will be very trying.

The hall was loud and filled with many of Theomore’s knights and other retainers, as they ate and laughed, all the while serving maids darted throughout the halls filling up drinks and bringing more food. The food, unsurprisingly, was excellent. Not only was there fresh meat, the wide range of spices and drinks put anything I had had so far in this world to shame. Meads, wines, and ales from all over Westeros and Essos were in abundance, as were the spices that I could not even begin to guess at names.
I kept a cautious eye on Ryden, who seemed to be inhaling a pale green wine from Myr, as he talked to Alice’s older brother, Marlon. He seemed to be managing, but I gave him a few discreet glances to make sure he was aware of how much he was drinking. I was seated next to Mateo, who proved to be a very loud and jovial man, especially once he was in his cups, and was an excellent dinner companion.

Eventually, the main meal was slowly replaced by the maids and desserts were brought out. Pastries were in abundance, with elegant and meticulous detail paid attention to each one - it was amazing. There were sauces, like sack – a fortified wine – that highlighted House Manderly’s wealth, and it was an impressive display. I had no idea if they ate like this regularly, or if this was just a show for my sake, but the fact that they can do it even once was incredible.

“This is quite the feast,” I complimented, addressing Theomore.

“My thanks, Michael,” he replied. “I find a good feast tends to make everything better!”

“I must say, some of these spices are quite incredible. I don’t even recognize some of them.”

Theomore preened. “Some of them come from afar in Essos, but that is the power of trade.”

“It is underappreciated,” I agreed.

“Very much so,” he said, sadly. “But! That offers opportunity for the bold! This is how House Manderly has become such a powerful House! We are responsible for bringing the amber, furs, timber, and fish of the North to market, and if someone in the North wants goods from afar, we are the ones who bring it to the North.”

“Trade indeed makes the world work.”

“Exactly! No land can be truly wealthy on its own; some lands, like mine, can mine its own silver, but not gold; I can obtain fish, but not lemons; Barley, but not silk.” He paused to take a sip of wine.

“This has all been built on the back of hard work and trading, with boats being a central feature of that platform. The North is now at its wealthiest since Brandon the Burner destroyed the North’s fleet.”

“I can only imagine. My knowledge of history is sorely lacking, unfortunately.”

He took another large swig of wine and ate a pastry. “We will have to remedy that. I will have my Maester send some books back with you.”

Mateo laughed. “Aye, this is a feast – enough history! Tell me, Michael. Do we finally have another house in the North that is of the Faith?”

I chuckled as I replied, “Unfortunately not, Mateo. I hold to the Old Gods – in honour of my mother.”

“Oh? My brother has heard rumor that your mother is from the North. What house is she from?”

“I’m not certain. She was a maid who went south with her Lady when she had married.”

“Do you remember the Lady’s House?”

I shook my head. “No, I was too young to remember, and my father never mentioned it before his death.”
"Oh, how horrid. You may still have family out there somewhere! Brother, can we do something about that?"

"Oh, you don’t have to do that,” I said.

"Nonsense,” replied Theomore, waving off my objection. “I can inquire around for you.”

I coughed into my hand. “Truthfully, I am a bit worried about perceptions in case it is a bad situation. But I know my children would want to know if they have any cousins out in the world somewhere.”

Theomore nodded. “I can be discreet about it.”

“Thank you,” I replied, gratefully.

Theomore stood, and the hall fell quiet. “Come, Michael. Let us retire to my solar for the night, so that the rest of these good people can relax in comfort.” He turned to his niece. “Alice, why don’t you, the Septa, and Marlon show Ryden here around the castle a little more.”

I smiled encouragingly to Ryden who looked nervous about being in closer contact with Alice, but he stood up and made his way over confidently, nonetheless. I felt pride in my breast as I followed Theomore and Mateo deeper into the castle to Theomore’s solar. Even late at night, the castle was well lit – though it hardly compared to modern lighting – and we passed by the servants who had already prepared the solar for us.

The solar itself was richly furnished with a multitude of furniture and tapestries, all adorned with exquisite detail and was designed to draw the eye. The tapestries lining the wall gave the impression of a warm room – which was greatly at odds with the cold stone corridors. They displayed battles and victories, all done in excellent detail, even if I didn’t know what battles they depicted.

The rugs were also impossibly thick and incredibly plush, with vibrant color. I couldn’t help but stare at them as Theomore pointed to a plush chair near the fire for me to sit at.

“Do you like the rug?” he asked.

“It’s incredible,” I replied, honestly.

“It’s Myrish carpet; it’s the finest carpet available. It uses only the finest materials, dyes, and skilled artisans. The Myrish keep the exact process a secret, but supposedly, it takes thousands of hours to make a single carpet.”

“It sounds… wonderous,” I said, cautiously.

Mateo let out a booming laugh. “Expensive more like. We’ve had that in the family for a few generations now.”

“Only the best for our House,” admonished Theomore.

“It does speak well of it,” I agreed.

“It does,” agreed Mateo. “I just find that the Myrish are overrated – and slavers at that. Their monopoly on trading the carpets is awful as well.”

“Yes,” replied Theomore, “The insurance to cover the trip of the carpet to White Harbor was exorbitant. Much higher than otherwise, but they won’t let the carpets leave the shores if you don’t have proof of buying their insurance.”
“Less bloody than fighting over trade routes at least,” said Mateo.

Theomore laughed. “Aye, they do call themselves civilized I suppose.”

“How widespread is fighting over trade routes?” I asked. “I’m afraid I’m rather unfamiliar with it.”

Theomore stroked his chin as he thought over the question. “It ebbs and flows. Some years the fighting gets intense over various routes and goods, and some years it’s quiet. A full-scale war hasn’t occurred in a long time, but small action on the water does. It’s been quiet for a while now, but it has been picking up in south Essos, especially around Tyrosh for some reason. There have been a few changes over the past few moons in the politics around there, so most of our ships have started to avoid it – you never want to get caught up in another country’s politics without being given leave from your liege.”

I nodded. “A sound policy.”

“The fighting is mostly centered along the narrow sea, as the other regions are either indisputably controlled, like Qarth, or too wide to bother, like the Shivering Sea. Though some exceptions exist, like the Ibbenese and their whaling, and other areas, like your coast, are vacant of all trade.”

“Damned Ironborn,” I muttered.

“Damned Ironborn,” both men echoed.

After a moment of silence, Theomore said, “On to happier matters. The merchant fleet should be at Redbridge in two-and-a-half to three months from now – depending on their speed and how long they stay at different ports.”

“Excellent!” I exclaimed.

“Don’t be surprised either if the fleet grows in size by the time it reaches you. A fleet that large is bound to pick up followers who smell the scent of profits in the air.”

“Like sharks with blood in the water,” Mateo mumbled.

Theomore grinned. “Aye, something like that. Regardless, you can expect to see trade booming in your village soon enough, Michael.”

“Me and my people are ready,” I reassured.

“Have you had your dock fees set?”

“We have,” I confirmed. “I set them at a fair price, but I plan to drop them after the fleet leaves to attract custom.”

“Smart,” complimented Theomore. “It doesn’t truly apply since you are the only House in your lands right now in a position to do so, but what kind of tariff will you set? If you make it known while you are here in the city, more merchants will be willing to make the journey if they know the cost of doing so.”

I shifted in my chair. “Well, I hadn’t exactly planned on any sort of tariffs.”

Theomore and Mateo both blinked in shock. “Truly?” Mateo breathed out.

I nodded uncertainly. “Once I get some passable roads up there might be a road tax, just a flat charge per wagon, but nothing extreme.”
Mateo looked uncomfortable and looked to speak, but Theomore took charge. “Michael,” he said, seriously. “It’s important for you to have tariffs. Especially once you have vassals – it’s how they gain a significant portion of coin – especially in the time between harvests. That coin is also not taxed by Lord Stark or the King. If you don’t have a tariff, you are leaving essentially free money on the table, which as a new house you cannot afford.”

What he said made sense, but free trade was supposed to be the best, right? How was I supposed to explain that, especially if I was vague on the reasoning? And was I missing something? Free trade means free trade, right? There was no special rule or something I was missing to make it work, was I?

I bided my time to think over a response as I took a long sip of my drink.

“I believe that the more barriers you put in front of trade the harder it will be. If I don’t have any tariffs, the price of the goods goes down, which means that more people can afford it. Which means everyone wins.”

Theomore looked at me strangely. “How do you win from less coin from tariffs?”

I blinked. Right – I forgot there was no sales tax. “Uhh, by allowing more people to purchase more goods it makes them work harder because they can get more?”

Theomore was disbelieving. “That’s a bit… out there. But most people don’t need to lower the prices to afford these expensive goods. All but the absolute poorest of noble houses should be able to afford the price of tariffs, without a reduction in the number of goods purchased.”

“Ah, I see the confusion. I wasn’t just talking about noble houses, but smallfolk as well.”

“Smallfolk will buy Myrish carpet? Or expensive wines from Essos?”

I shrugged. “I mean they could, but I was thinking more practical products or less expensive luxuries that they might be able to now afford without tariffs. It would incentivize the people to work harder and to come to my land as well.”

Theomore stroked his chin. “I suppose I can see the logic in that – to a point. But it all seems rather idealized, but I suppose it would convince some people to move to your lands. However, I think it would be better to have the tariffs and give some sort of handout to newcomers and incentivize that way.”

I nodded. “I do that with land already, but this is to make sure that everyone works hard.”

“I will admit; it’s an intriguing idea but one with too many holes. Still, I look forward to seeing what actually happens.”

I smiled. “I think you will be pleasantly surprised, Theomore.”

“Well, I will wait to be impressed. What else did you have in mind to do while you were here?”

“I had hoped to go around the city a bit and talk to some people that I hadn’t been able to convince over letter to relocate to Redbridge.”

Mateo nodded. “That sounds fine. But we must go hunting together! My newest dog is quite skilled and comes from an impeccable bloodline. Well trained and easy to handle!”

“Oh? Are you a big fan of hunting dogs then?” I asked, politely.
He nodded vigorously. “They are magnificent beasts!”

“My goodbrother feels the same to all dogs. He has been trying to create new breeds as well.”

Mateo perked up. “New breeds you say? What bloodlines?”

I shrugged helplessly. “I am afraid I don’t follow his passion as much as I ought. I’m sure if you sent a letter, he would have an enthusiastic reply for you.”

He nodded. “I will! Pity he can’t reply before you leave; otherwise, I could send a dog home with you! I will have to send another at some other time. Perhaps when we all meet for the Fall Gathering at Winterfell?”

“That sounds perfect.”

“Before we should let the night continue on any further, we ought to talk about the dowry for dear Alice.”


“I remember the same with Ryden.”

“For my niece, the granddaughter of the previous Lord Manderly, I offer up a 200-gold dragon dowry.”

My jaw dropped. A hefty sum. “That is very generous of you, Theomore.”

He waved away my compliment. “My niece deserves the best.”

Mateo said, “I also wanted to give me daughter a small dowry of ten gold on top of that, strictly for her, I hope you understand. No offense intended or anything.”

I smiled reassuringly. “I understand, Mateo. I would do the same for my daughters.”

“Are we in agreement then, Michael?” asked Theomore.

“I hate to seem ungrateful, but I was wondering if we could perhaps modify the terms?”

“Oh? In what way?”

“Coin is always useful, but I find myself in dire need of ships and people at this point. I know you cannot order people to move to my lands, but I believe a ship may be possible.”

“A ship, eh? I imagine you are thinking of a trading ship? Something that might double as a form of defense in emergencies?”

I nodded. “Aye. I have multiple boys from the village out being apprenticed, as you know, but that is still years away from being complete and adding any ships to my non-existent fleet.”

Theomore’s gaze became unfocused as he was lost in thought. “I believe that will be manageable. I have a ship under construction now that would suit you well. It’s a carrack, roughly seventy feet in length with a displacement of 200 tons and needs a crew of forty. It’s a newer design, with three masts and a higher profile to help deter pirates. Unnamed as of yet, but it will suit your purposes.” He paused for a moment, before adding, “You will need to find a crew and captain for it though.”

“That sounds perfect! I’m sure the Lady Alice, will be a wonderful ship.”
Mateo let out a booming laugh. “Just like her namesake I’m sure.”

“When is construction scheduled to be completed?” I asked.

“Four months time perhaps. Mayhaps a bit longer,” replied Theomore.

“Then in regard to the crew, could I perhaps send a crew back with your merchant fleet? Have them learn the ropes, so to speak, from your men? Same with my new captain?”

Theomore twirled his wine in his hand as he thought over the question. “That might work, but it depends on the haul that the fleet carries back. Space on the ships is limited so they might not be able to carry all the men you need, but I will write a letter regardless to see what accommodations can be made.”

“Wonderful!” I exclaimed.

“To the Lady Alice!” toasted Theomore.

“To a happy marriage,” replied Mateo, also raising his cup.

“To many happy grandchildren,” I replied.

We had been in White Harbor for two days now before I had finally had a chance to explore the city a bit. Yesterday we had gone out hunting with Mateo which had been an experience. Not a particularly fun one, but an experience, nonetheless. Using dogs to do most of the work stripped what little interest I had, but at least there had been plenty of food and drink to be had. Still, life was made by the experiences you had, and this had been a new one for me.

Luckily, I had been able to beg off today and do my chores around the city. I only took one of my guardsmen, Rodrick, with me while Ryden was spending the day with Alice. I had already visited a few people that I wanted to attract to Redbridge, such as another fletcher, bowyer, and some ex-miners. Ex-miners mainly because all the current ones in the area were already employed by Theomore in his silver mines and I couldn’t compete with that. But some retired miners who could no longer work? As long as they could teach my people how to mine effectively, it was all I needed from them. I got mixed results, but I still managed to lure some people away from White Harbor without promising too much.

I had also taken the time to go to the few inns that were frequented by merchants, mainly of the landed variety - trying to spread word of trading out to the east coast, and the opportunities and lack of competition. I tried to be low-key and spread the knowledge subtly, highlighting the lack of competition to the overworked merchants. I felt it fell on fertile ground, but I would have to wait and see if any decided to make the trek.

My last stop for the day was at a blacksmiths shop. Specifically, the one where I had purchased cast iron all those years back. The street that the blacksmiths had all congregated on lacked a fancy name like the Street of Steel had, back in King’s Landing, but it retained the same atmosphere. The smoke and soot hung heavy in the air, and the street was blackened from the materials.

Locating my destination, I entered the shop, which had changed little over the years and saw an old lady snoozing on a chair – somehow ignoring the loud noises of metalworking coming from the back.

“Hello?” I shouted, trying to draw her attention. “Hello?!” I tried again, shouting even louder.

With no response, I nudged her with my foot. I tried again with a little more force.
She shot awake and shot me a dirty look. “Why you kickin’ me? You ought t’ talk like a civilized person and all.”

I shared an exasperated look with Rodrick. “Sorry, ma’am. I was hoping to talk to Sig.”

She grumbled to her self as she pulled herself off the chair. “Wait here, ‘n I’ll go grab him.” She wagged a finger at us. “And don’t go kickin’ anything.”

After a few moments, the sounds of work in the back slowly stopped, and Sig joined us up front. He was much older than when I had last seen him, but that was to be expected – I was no different.

“Looking to buy something?” he asked.

“Not at the moment. I was wondering if you remembered me. I bought that cast-iron contraption from you years ago and sent you a few letters previously.”

“Oh! You’re that new Lord out on the coast, right? Err, m’lord.”

“Masterly house actually -not technically a Lord. I was hoping to talk to you about the cast iron.”

“Oh, right. Err, how is it holding up?”

“Excellently,” I replied.

He blinked in shock. “Good?” He shook his head a bit. “Good,” he said again, more authoritatively.

I laughed. “Have you sold any more of them?”

He shook his head. “No, m’lo- master? The metal is too weak for any tough use. I’ve used it a few times, mainly for decorations and the like, but there’s no real demand for it otherwise. Too expensive too.”

A loud snore interrupted my response. I looked over to the chair and saw Sig’s mother had fallen back asleep.

Sig’s face reddened. “Sorry about that, Master Michael.”

I waved him off. “No worries. Anyway, I know there will be demand for cast iron in my new holdings, and I want someone there who is able to make it. In your previous letters, you said you weren’t interested. Is this still the case?”

He nodded. “Aye. I can’t move my whole family, and I’m too old to start up a new shop.”

“Pity. Do you have any apprentices that might be willing to move?”

Sig sucked in air between his teeth as he thought it over. “My newest apprentice – maybe. I’m not ready to retire yet, and the city has enough blacksmiths, for now, so he hasn’t been doing much lately.”

“Is he here?” I asked.

“No, not today, Master Michael. I can send him to you if you’d like.”

“That’d be perfect. I’m staying with Lord Manderly. I will tell the gate guard I am expecting him then.”
Sig gave an awkward bow. “Well then. Err, thank you, Master Michael?”

I laughed. “No, no. Thank you.”

I left the shop and headed back into the city happily. Another check off the list.

After a week of being in White Harbor, Ryden and I were alone in our rooms preparing for our departure tomorrow. We would be heading back to Redbridge, stopping at Winterfell on the way back to pick up Rodrik, for which I was grateful. Theomore had been an excellent host, and it had been nice getting to know my future daughter-in-law’s family, but it would be nice to be back home again.

I had achieved what I set out to do, and we would be returning with quite a large party of people who would be joining us in Redbridge. Theomore had also taken me to the shipyard and shown me what the *Lady Alice* would look like by showing me her nearly completed sister ship. It looked very similar to the pirate ships of Earth, much more so than the other carracks here typically looked – excluding the cannons of course. Theomore had said this was the latest design and he hoped it would launch White Harbor into shipbuilding fame if they could be credited with a new ship design.

Ryden was disappointed to be leaving, as he had enjoyed spending time with Alice, especially as his embarrassment and discomfort started to wash away as they spent more time together. She was very level-headed and would make an excellent partner for Ryden. Some of her personality reminded me of Nyra, which I did well to never mention to Ryden.

With thoughts of home in my head, I drifted off to sleep.

**A/N:** Boom. New chapter. Sorry for the wait; this took a lot longer than I would have thought as my Masters is taking up a lot of my time and energy. The next chapter will be shorter, so it should be out in a week or so.
“Did everything go well for you in White Harbor, Michael?”

“Very much so, Edwyle; I picked up a variety of skilled tradesmen and got along with Theomore and Mateo quite well. Ryden also greatly enjoyed Alice’s company, and made good friends with Marlon and Wyman.”

Edwyle nodded seriously as he leaned back in his great chair. It had been a while since I had last been inside Edwyle’s solar – it had been a simpler time. “Good; good. It is good that you are becoming more accustomed to your situation. Is the dowry settled and a date set?”

“We have tentatively agreed on the summer of the year closest to when Ryden turns 18 namedays. The dowry has also been settled – Theomore is putting up a large trading ship,” I replied.

“Eighteen is a bit old – but Alice is a year younger is she not?” asked Edwyle.

“Aye, thereabouts.”

“Not an unreasonable age then. A ship is a grand price – but then House Manderly has always been willing to show their wealth in such a manner.”

“I am happy that we came to an agreement in the form of a ship rather than coin. A method of trade is much needed, especially as it will be a few years yet until we can make our own ships.”

“Do you have the ability to repair such a ship before you can even make them?”

“It’s something we need to work on still, but I have plans in the works. We might have to end up going down to Lannisport for a while, but we’ll make do. Even still, we are already logging and drying out timber in preparation for repairs and building ships.”

“Your foresight does you credit.”

“Thank you, Edwyle. Truthfully, ships are only one part of my plan for trade – the other, which I hoped to talk to you about today was about trading over land.”

“Ah, you speak of improving the roads between Sunset’s Rest and Deepwood?”

“Of a sort. Even the road from Deepwood to Winterfell is very rough in certain sections and is frequently washed out. Even the Kingsroad here in the North is not comparable to the portion in the south, or even some of the bigger roads like the Goldroad.”

Edwyle scratched his chin. “I know of what you mean, but it’s just not viable. Even the Kingsroad as it now stands sees little traffic, and if it were not mandated by the King, I would see it reduced.”

“Ah, well I suppose there are two issues then. The first being that the Kingsroad is good, but it doesn’t benefit the North in the best way possible.”

“What do you mean?”

“Goods can easily be brought north or south along the continent easily enough because of the shape of it – just like Essos can go east to west. Goods can be moved from Lys to Astapor much easier than
from Lorath to Qarth, just as Storm’s End to White Harbor is easy compared to Karhold to Deepwood Motte. The shape of the land dictates how trade is done.”

Edwyle chuckled. “I see what you are getting at. You want a road running from Sunset’s Rest to White Harbor?”

I nodded. “Of a sort. Winterfell to White Harbor is already served by both the White Knife river and the Kingsroad well enough. But an extension to The Dreadfort would bind the North together.” I stood up and walked over to a map that Edwyle had on the wall. I dragged my finger along the proposed route and said, “This would create a belt to connect the North and facilitate trade. Goods can travel much easier across the continent and lead to new growth.”

“New growth?”

“New villages would have to sprout up to support all of the merchants carrying goods back and forth. Inns to rest for the weary and for more production of goods. The highway in the Wolfswood, which I have been calling the Wolfsway –”

“Highway?”

“Ah, it’s just a term I use for the Kingsroad. It’s much bigger than a normal road, and is elevated above the surrounding land – hence, highway.”

“Interesting… continue.”

“Allright. So, this Wolfsway will help to open up the Wolfswood a bit and can help with tree cutting and the making of lumber. The villages would also see coin from the inns that host the travelling merchants – and it would make it a lot nicer for people like you and I to be travelling along.”

“And in regions already somewhat occupied – like the land between Winterfell and The Dreadfort?” he asked, saying the last place’s name with a hint of something that I couldn’t quite place. Derision? Disgust?

Continuing the discussion, I replied, “The land is not fully settled as the North has always lacked the people to have every acre of land under plow, and there is still room. Opening of this road would drive new opportunities for the smallfolk and new places to settle. One of the blacksmiths I picked up from White Harbor lacked any such opportunities. He’s fully trained but was unable to work fully as there is a glut of blacksmiths inside the city. I’ve heard similar stories from others that have come to settle in my land.”

Edwyle looked at me with sharp eyes. “And why do you think that is?”

“That long winter back in 230AC. It killed a lot of people, especially those who were poorer, which tended to be those without any sort of skills. This left a lot of people with extra skills with no one to sell them to.”

Edwyle scratched his chin. “That is close to the conclusion that I have determined as well. You think this road would solve that?”

“To a degree. With new opportunities, the smallfolk will have more children, and with more wealth, those children will grow and have children themselves and complete the cycle of life.”

“I can see some of the logic behind what you say, but I remain unconvinced that the cost of building such a road would be feasible.”
“Which is the second problem. However, I think I have solved that issue.”

Edwyle gave me an amused look. “You’ve managed to make roads cheap?” he asked, skeptically.

“Not cheap, no. But cheaper I think I can do. I’ve made a creation that allows for the digging to trenches and levelling of earth. This has already allowed for making a big road, quickly, from Sunset’s Rest to Redbridge.”

“Is it truly that much quicker than digging by hand?”

“Much, but it does require some upfront cost in either horses or oxen, as well as the machine itself.”

“I suppose that helps to level the ground, but it does little to clear the ground or to prevent washouts.”

I nodded. “True, but if the roads are carefully constructed and topped by stone, it would do much to prevent that and make upkeep cheaper over the long-term.”

“Stone? How would making a stone road be cheaper? Shaping stone is incredibly time consuming.”

“I’ve actually solved that issue as well. By utilizing the motion of a river, we can crush stone into a small size.”

Edwyle raised an eyebrow. “That certainly sounds impressive. Provided that these ‘creations’ work, and that it makes the project cheap enough, will there be enough traffic?”

“I believe so. Trade is already picking up in my lands, and it will continue to increase – especially after the merchant fleet from White Harbor arrives, and word begins to spread of the opportunities available. Additionally, I am attracting experienced miners or at least people who can pass on the knowledge of the trade, to my lands as I plan to prospect the mountain range thoroughly to determine if any profitable materials can be found.”

Edwyle laughed. “Hoping for gold, eh?”

I smiled wryly. “One can always hope, but even copper or tin would be a nice find.”

He scratched his chin while he thought over the proposition. “The mountains haven’t been heavily prospected before, but exploratory investigations have not yielded fruit before – so there may be a chance. I do like the vision you have painted, but I cannot authorize such an expenditure at this time. For now, my Uncle is set to accompany you back to your castle, and while he is there, he will look at these creations of yours and assess their validity. If they prove promising, I will rethink this.”

I smiled, disappointed but not overly surprised. “I hope that they will meet your Uncle’s expectations then.”

Edwyle refilled his cup and poured some wine for me as well. “You look parched – have a drink.”

I took the cup from him gratefully and raised it. “To a good future,” I toasted.

Edwyle looked thoughtful. “To a strong North.”
Act 2: Chapter 24

Twentieth day, Eleventh Moon, 253 AC (+27 days)

“’tis certainly level,” mused Rodrik as he scratched his salt-and-pepper hair.

“Quick too,” I commented.

“Aye, quick too. How reliable is this machine?”

“Quite; its edge may become warped over time and needs to be readjusted, or a bolt might snap, but it’s a simple enough design that not much goes wrong on.”

“Can it handle rocks and tree stumps?”

“It depends on the size of the rocks, but the rockier the ground is, the less it can manage – it messes with the edge. Tree stumps are almost always no, so they have to be pulled out ahead of the machine.”

“It certainly does hold promise, but even still, managing a road from here to Winterfell will be a task and a half. That stone crushing machine you have there works wonders, I tell you.”

“Aye, it certainly makes the building process much simpler. What did you think of the concrete?”

Rodrik laughed. “Oh? You mean your Ragnarock?” He cut off my protest. “Aye, I’m sure you had nothing to do with the naming. At all. Anyway, it seems like an intriguing thing. Weaker than stone, but easily shaped can have many advantages, but I think it a mistake to have built a castle from it. Granted, your castle was done much sooner than if it had used traditional methods – which have already stood the test of time.”

“I’ve planned to make the main streets in Redbridge out of concrete, which will help with water and snow, I think. After I’ve tested it out, and my people have gotten used to building with it, I might start to extend it out.”

Rodrik scratched his chin. “That might work in populous areas, but unfeasible for remote sections.”

“I agree.”

“I’ll recommend to my nephew that he pursue this further.”

“And the farming machines?” I asked as we watched the team pulling the Fresno scraper disappeared from view as they continued their work.

“Unlike these machines of construction, I can’t see too big a benefit for these machines of farming. Sure – they make things better and more can be harvested. But the cost? Few can afford such a thing, especially enough to make it profitable. They seem overly complex and unnecessary for many areas. Here, in Redbridge and the coast, it works because you lack enough people farming to compare to other noble houses - other areas have enough people to work. I can’t imagine how much you’ve spent on this endeavor. I will still pass on my observances to my nephew, but I don’t imagine he will be enamored with the farming machines either.”

“Fair enough,” I replied. I had kept my agricultural machines out of sight for the most part, and only let him see them standing still in a barn. I wanted to keep control of them for as long as possible.
Once everyone had them, the price of food would drop, and I needed to reap what coin I could for as long as I could. Eventually, it would get out, and I could not stop that, but I would make sure that I was positioned as best as I could when it happened.

We nudged our horses back to the direction of the castle and began our trek back. As we did so, we passed through Redbridge proper, and I was happy to see how it was building up. Warehouses began to dominate the area near the docks, and they were being filled just as quickly as they were being built in expectation of the coming merchant fleet. The docks themselves were progressing, and though the docks meant to hold the larger ships were still few in number, we should be able to handle all of the smaller ships.

Out of sight and more inland, was the lumber mill, where we had already begun to store drying wood and stockpile planks for sale and eventual use. The village itself was also growing up and out. Some of the new houses, after being consulted by Tylan and Master Builder Jon, were being built with a second level above the home – especially along the main street. These houses were built right next to each other to help with heating in the winter and were a stark contrast to some of the simpler houses that had previously made up the village. The industrial sector was rapidly growing as well as more people started to come to the village, and even the new arrivals I had brought with me had started up their own shops. The new farms were also rapidly growing as more and more land came under plow, and people adopted our new methods.

As we rode and the castle came back into view, I admired it from afar. I could already see the walls towering above the landscape atop the cliff, with the towers fully constructed and looking awe-inspiring as they dominated the scene. The defensive portions of the castle were complete, as was the main hall and guest area. With the coming merchant fleet that would contain some minor nobility, I had the workers focus on the housing of these people, over the main keep – especially since many of the more expensive decorations for the main keep where my family would live had yet to arrive. The guest quarters were not simple but definitely lacked the expensiveness that the main keep would have.

We also lacked trained servants that other nobles would be used to, but I did not overly care. I had hired some of the villagers to act the part and help around the castle in anticipation of the coming fleet, as well as Rodrik’s arrival, but I had no need of them for myself.

Still, the upcoming arrival would be an experience to remember.

I had just finished my lunch, about five weeks after Rodrik had first visited when a messenger had alerted me to ships on the horizon. They were too far out to tell, but the number of them indicated that the merchant fleet had arrived.

By the time Rodrik and I arrived down at the docks, the ships filled the bay before us. Great ships dwarfed smaller cogs, and small boats were dropped from a few of the largest ships and began to make their way to shore.

Rodrik pointed them out to me and said, “Those will likely carry the Captain of the fleet and whatever nobles came along for the voyage.”

As we watched, the lead boat hoisted the Manderly banner above, while the others hosted a few banners I didn’t recognize.

“Whose banners are those?” I asked.

“Minor lordlings and knights that are sworn to Lord Manderly.”
“Ah,” I replied as we watched the boats row into shore. As some of them began to dock my people began to orchestrate the process as excitement swept through the watching crowd. The preparations had all been completed, with our warehouses filled to the brim with all the goods we could muster. Alcohol by the barrel, spun wool, garum, planks, whatever we could make we were ready to sell.

As we waited, Nyra and Rodrik’s wife, Arya, joined us on the docks. Arya was much younger than Rodrik, being 34 years old compared to Rodrik’s 53 and came from House Flint of the mountains. She was an interesting woman and a very proud woman. She carried herself regally without seeming pretentious but was also very quiet but not exactly timid. She was full of contradictions, but she appeared to love her husband and daughters genuinely, and she got along with Nyra much to my relief.

The couple’s daughters were also sweet girls if a study of contrasts just like their mother. Both seemed dutiful and obedient and appeared to be the picture-perfect daughters any Lord could ask for – up to a point. Lyarra possessed a competitive streak that she loved to throw herself into, while Branda was happy to follow her sister’s lead, she clearly had a love of the outdoors. If given the choice between knitting inside or spending the day outside lazily by the river, she would choose the latter every time. They got along well enough with my kids, though Lyarra was thick as thieves with Dacey, Koryn’s eldest daughter, and Branda drifted toward Aline, Zane’s middle daughter.

We exchanged pleasantries while we waited, and we were joined shortly by Donovar who received a welcoming smile from Arya. Thanks to Donovar’s contributions to the Battle at Long Lake, where Raymun Redbeard’s army fought the Northern army under William Stark, Donovar was well-received by Arya since her home had been devastated by the Wildlings before that battle.

When the first party came ashore, I was happy to see that Theomore’s other brother, William, who had visited previously, was the first one off the boat.

“Hail, William! It is good to see you again!”

“Michael! The same to you!”

“How was your voyage?” I asked.

“Long,” he replied, wryly.

“And who are your companions?” I asked.

William introduced me to his landed party and acted as a guide for introducing the various captains, knights, and lords that had all arrived. I handed them each off to one of my family members who explained to them their accommodations back at the castle with the help of Rodrik and William who let me know who was the most important that merited it with the limited space we had.

The rest would either sleep on their ships or pay to sleep at the lone inn that was operating in Redbridge. Or possibly pay a villager to stay in their home if they were desperate, but I would play no role in that.

Once the most important people had been attended to, and William returned to his own duties aboard his ship, I sought out Donovar. I found him arguing with a merchant at the other end of the docks.

“And I tell you! This was a long way to come, and I have yet to see any wares! The dock fee is outrageous!”

I couldn’t see Donovar’s face from where I was, but I could picture him rolling his eyes clearly.
“You haven’t seen anything yet because you haven’t paid. And you have to pay because no one asked you to come here. I can tell you are from the Reach, which means that you tagged along with the fleet.”

“The fee is still outrageously high!” complained the merchant.

“Come now; I know it’s not – it’s very modest. It is not good to lie so much. If you do not pay you must leave – otherwise, you will force me and my men to become most passionate with you.”

When I finally approached within arm’s reach of the group, the merchant had grudgingly paid and walked back to his ship.

“Trouble?” I asked in lieu of a greeting.

Donovar smiled in greeting. “Michael! Not much trouble, no. A few have been like that – trying to weasel out of paying, but nothing malicious.”

“That’s good. Are the patrols all set up?”

Donovar waved the guards around him on to continue their patrol before answering, “Aye, it’s been done. No issues so far, but some of the haggling did get a bit extreme. The men calmed that right down though.”

“Trading started already?”

“Mostly just the ships selling what they already carried or inspecting what we have for sale.” He indicated toward the docks where the merchants were already offloading the goods on their ships. “I don’t know all of the details, but some of the space in the warehouse has already been rented out.”

“Excellent!”

“Aye. I don’t know how much longer everyone will keep trading, but I’ll have all the guards stay till they start turning in, and then keep a small patrol keeping watch overnight.”

“Good work. Well, the sun is starting to set, so I am going to make my way to the castle to see to our guests.”

“Good luck,” Donovar said, laughing.

My first time hosting a feast was interesting. Everyone was gathered in the main hall of my castle – all my guests, my extended family, and Donovar’s family as well. It was a loud affair, but there was excellent food, and the company was good too.

I leaned over to William and asked, “So, how did the first day go?”

William smiled. “Good. The trading was slow to start, but it will pick up tomorrow.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Everyone is still getting their footing in a new market. A few daring merchants have made some trades, but the rest are content with a few smaller trades until the prices become more determined.”

I blinked in confusion. “More determined? Aren’t they determined when they reach an agreement?”

“Yes.”
“Then how would it get more determined?”

“It’s determined when it’s bought.”

“So, they won’t buy until the pricing is more determined, but it won’t be determined until someone buys it? How does that work?”

William laughed. “That’s about the size of it. Truly, people will trade in smaller quantities to test out the market before going big. It’s a bit of a balancing act. Waiting can also yield results or leave a person ruined.”

I laughed. “That’s a bit too weird for me. I think I’ll leave the trading to others.”

“Oh, don’t count yourself out just yet. You’ve seemed to be doing quite alright yourself so far.”

“How was Stonefisk?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Docking was a bit of an issue as none of the larger ships had been able to dock, but the smaller ships managed just fine. Most of the trading had finished within the day as there wasn’t too much to trade, but it had been a nice break for the fleet, and it was a charming little town to explore. The Masters say it’s the farthest west in Westeros a man can go it was certainly interesting being there even if you can't tell - Though with the way the winds had blown it was easy to tell that you are exposed.”

“And how was the rest of the journey?”

“Nothing overly new, except once we past Lannisport. I had never journeyed farther north by ship than that on the west coast. Trading along the way went well enough, and we picked up many goods from across the realm – wool for the Stormlands, fruit from Dorne, wine from the Reach, and animals from the Westerlands and even some spices from King’s Landing. We picked up a good number of stragglers as we journeyed northwards as people found out our purpose and decide to join in on the safety of the fleet – as it’s a once in a lifetime opportunity for many of these traders to not only go past the Ironborn but to trade in such a northern place. Especially for those in the Westerlands and the Reach who wouldn’t normally journey to White Harbor or other east coast Northern settlements.”

“That’s wonderful! Was there much trouble on the trip?”

“Nothing major,” he replied. “But I didn’t concern myself too much about what the ships were doing so long as they kept moving. I just had to keep herding them along,” he said, laughing.

I chuckled. “I’m sure it was like herding cats.”

William snorted. “Aye, something like that.”

“Well, I appreciate everything you’ve done anyway.”

William raised his glass and said, “You’re quite welcome, Michael.”

The next day had been busy, and as William had guessed the trading had started in earnest – especially after the inn last night had served my alcohol and given the traders a taste. Most of our goods sold well, and while we had not yet sold everything most of the luxury goods had already sold.

Today, I planned to take William out to the new mining settlement so that he could see its progress
and a more thorough tour of Redbridge to see the changes from the last time he had visited.

Presently, we were eating a hearty breakfast before we set out for the day. With so much company I opted for more opulent food at Nyra’s suggestion in order to impress our guests. Today was bacon, baked beans, cloud eggs, served alongside fresh bread. It was more effort than I would normally put into breakfast, but with the hired help it was no real trouble for me. And, the cloud eggs seemed to be a hit with many of my guests.

I was trying to make connections with as many people as possible, so I would invite a few new people each day to dine with me, Rodrik, and William since I had no intention of slighting them by not eating with them too.

One of the knights down the table from me exclaimed, “With these eggs, I am certain I cannot lose my spar today!”

I chuckled, “I am glad you like them, Ser Kayl. Who are you sparring against today?”

Ser Kayl grinned. “I finally managed to get an agreement out of Master Donovar.”

“You’re the only one I’m worried about. I’m afraid I must cheer for your opponent. No hard feelings?”

He laughed. “Aye, no hard feelings. I must say though; your men are quite skilled for such a new force.”

“Thank you, Ser Kayl. Master Donovar is an excellent teacher and has done well with them.”

“Quite,” he agreed. “Pity none of them follow the Faith; a few of the younger ones show a good foundation of a future knight.”

“Forgive me for asking, but why is that?” At his confused look I clarified, “Why is there no type of knight equivalent for someone who follows the Old Gods?”

Ser Kayl blinked. “Because to be a knight is to follow the Seven?” he trailed off questioningly.

I looked to William who shrugged and Rodrik who looked intrigued. “Rodrik do you know why?”

Rodrik scratched his chin. “History? What I mean is that when the Andals came with their New Gods and new traditions, like knights, the First Men refused to adopt them in order to stay distinct. The North has always stood on its own and wasn’t going to copy the south.”

“What of Aegon? Surely when he conquered Westeros, he would have tried to bind the North closer?” I asked.

Rodrik shook his head. “He had other, more important matters to see to first – if he even saw a problem. Truthfully, the North never saw a need and the southerners didn’t see a need to force us.”

“But surely having a knight that followed the Old Gods would be a good thing, would it not?”

Rodrik chuckled. “We still aren’t keen on copying the southerners.”

I shrugged. “But aren’t we sort of already? A Master like myself is similar to a landed knight, and many young men across the North still squire to experienced men – even though there is no title of ‘knight’ waiting for them.”

William laughed. “Aye, you may have a point there.”
“What would this northern knight do then? A knight is a defender of the Faith and fights with them in mind,” mused Ser Kayl.

“I’m sure this ‘northern knight’ can swear to the Old Gods. The Night’s Watch does something similar do they not? Besides I have heard tale of some knights who swear to the New Gods, but still, worship the Old,” replied William.

Ser Kayl’s face tightened. “That is a separate issue I believe. But swearing to the Old Gods could work, but that is outside of my knowledge.”

“I think it’s just a matter of title that is lacking as everything else seems to be in place.”

Rodrik seemed to mull it over before answering. “You have a point,” he conceded. “However, I am uncertain how to address it. As just copying knighthood might give offence to those knighted and would cheapen it in the eyes of the rest of the North. But I do like the idea, as the men of the North who follow the Old Gods should not be denied the honor associated with being a knight – even if it ends up being a bit different.”

I shrugged. “I’m afraid I’m out of ideas – it was just a thought of mine.”

Rodrik waved me off. “I’ll bring it up with my nephew – he has a head for these types of things. More than me anyway.”

One of the villagers who I had hired to help me for the next few weeks, Davis, approached me and whispered into my ear, “There is an issue. A merchant is demanding to speak to you.”

I frowned at the news. “Very well,” I whispered back. In a louder voice, I said, “If you would please excuse me, an issue came up that needs tending to. I hope to be back soon, but if I’m not, I will send a messenger to you William about that tour.”

Leaving the men behind me, I followed Davis out of the hall, and we made our way to the castle gates where a disgruntled man stood off to the side.

Seeing me, the merchant perked up. “Master Michael?” He asked in a gruff voice.

“That’s me. What seems to be the problem?”

“I have no place to stay! I was not told that this place had only one inn!”

I blinked in confusion. After two nights he was only just now complaining?

“I can’t quite place your accent. Are you from the Westerlands?” I asked.

“Aye,” he confirmed, confused.

“So, it seems to me that you just came along without anyone asking.”

The man’s face started to redden. “It’s still unacceptable!”

“What did you expect? This is a new village.”

“And it should have been made clear that there is not enough room for everyone!”

I scratched my chin. I kind of felt bad for him, but he was being an ass. “I haven’t had complaints from anyone else,” I stated.
“They are just too scared to say anything.”

“Well, I don’t know what you expect me to do. There is no more room in the castle.”

The man’s eyes sharpened. “Fine! If I am forced to stay aboard my ship, I expect to be recompensed for my trouble!”

“You want a discount?” I asked in disbelief.

“It’s only fair,” the man harrumphed as he crossed his arms against his chest.

What an ass. Fine, well, he shouldn’t have tried to make me feel bad for him.

I smiled at him reassuringly. “Well, I suppose I could give you a good deal. We have some spun wool that I can give you for under market prices.”

I could see him trying to contain his smirk. “I suppose I could make do with that – provided it’s well below market prices.”

I continued to smile, though not for the reasons he thought. “I can do that. Just wait here a moment, and I will send a man with you to the warehouse to place a special order.”

As I turned, I could see the smirk emerge on to the man’s face. I walked over to where Davis stood and whispered to him, “Take him to Brise for me. Let her know that he’s a shithead and to give him 10% higher than we figured on a good deal.”

Davis smirked. “Aye, Master Michael.” Davis quickly schooled his face and walked over to the merchant and led him out of the castle.

What a dick. Unfortunately for him, he didn’t realize what we were selling. With the spinning wheels and carding machines we could significantly undercut any competition, and we had already begun to spin all the wool we had purchased from the fleet and planned to sell it all back to them for a large profit. However, this dick didn’t know how cheap we could go so even 10% higher would seem like a good deal to him – at least until we started to sell to the rest of the fleet for even cheaper.

It would take another day or so before we started to sell the wool, and some of the fleet will have already made their way onward to Bear Island – and a few even to Shadow Tower at The Wall – but they would return eventually. And when they did, I would have even more spun wool to sell.

I just wished I could watch this dick’s face when he realized what I had done.

Unfortunately, I didn’t see the look on his face so I can only imagine how sweet it was. The sales of the spun wool were incredible, and we had completely sold out – even of the wool we had dyed as well. On the bright side, he never did come crawling back to complain - the dick.

Over the past week, some of the ships had begun to move on – either northward or to the south as they completed their trading – but the main core of the fleet had yet to leave. That changed today however as the city was in a flurry of activity.

From my position atop the castle walls looking out to the west I had a commanding view of the surrounding area, and I could see the reason clearly. Fall had arrived.

The first hints of color were racing through the leaves of the trees and last night had been much colder than previous nights – a sure sign that fall had arrived. With the length of the summer, fall would be comfortably long and enable the fleet to arrive safely back at White Harbor and the farmers
to harvest all of their crops. Still, the change in seasons was a catalyst of change, and the fleet had no intention of being caught in the sea during winter.

Rodrik joined me on the wall as I thought over what had to be done before winter set in. “Good morning to you, Michael.”

“And to you as well, Rodrik.”

“A time for change, eh?”

“Aye, but at least it didn’t happen a month sooner and send the fleet back without ever coming here.”

“True,” he conceded. “Were you planning to attend the Lord’s Gathering at Winterfell?”

“Yes; I may have missed the previous one, but I really should attend this one.”

“I agree. I know I had originally intended to leave in a few days, but perhaps we ought to go together?”

I nodded. “That sounds wise. We will have to push back the departure date though as there are things I need to complete before we leave.”

“That will be fine. Hopefully, a messenger from Deepwood Motte will arrive soon from my nephew letting us know when the gathering will take place.”

“Perfect. I look forward to the day when I can receive raven’s myself and get these messages much quicker.”

Rodrik laughed. “Aye, that would be nice. Anyway, I will leave you to your thoughts.”

After he left, I looked back out over my land. The trade had been extremely successful, and we had sold almost everything we had intended to and bought everything we had hoped for. My purse was heavy with coin once again, and it was a huge relief not to be cutting it so close to running out.

With so much coin I would also be able to start on Donovar’s castle next summer, especially as work on Sunset’s Rest started to wind down. Speaking of, I ought to send Donovar to check on Stonefisk immediately so that he can go and return before we leave for Winterfell. It would let his men-at-arms that he recruited from there see their families again before winter set in.

I would also need to finalize the list of people who would go to White Harbor to be trained on the Lady Alice. Lucas, Zane’s third son, was very interested in ships and I had it in mind to have him become the captain one day. And at the age of thirteen, he was a good age to start learning as well.

Our stores of food were well stocked, people had plenty of warm clothing, and everyone had a roof over their heads. We were ready for winter.
Twenty-sixth day, Twelfth Moon, 253 AC (+36 days)

“And so, I bring this gathering of Lords and Masters to a start!”

There was polite applause throughout the hall interspersed with a loud hoot from Lord Umber – a giant of a man, whose voice and mannerisms were the same size as his height. The hall was packed as the nobility of the North, and their families attended the main meeting. The minor nobility, like Donovar and his family, if they decided to come, were elsewhere for this meeting. Some families, like Koryn, didn’t come – though in that case, it was because I asked Koryn to stay behind to keep watch over everything for me. Some of the minor nobility were invited to this specific event, and those invitations were highly prized as they indicated that the family had Lord Stark’s favor.

Lord Edwyle Stark stood proud at the head table as he gazed across the hall. “As usual, we shall start with the business of the realm first.”

Lord Umber snorted loudly, which Edwyle duly ignored. “As to the wider realm, grain yields were lower than expected this past summer in the Reach as a result of a prolonged drought. Prices will be higher than normal, and the Maesters assure me that winter will be longer than the summer was, but not unreasonably so.”

There was some worried muttering across the hall as the men who had yet to place orders to stock their winter stores were concerned about the higher prices. It was not something I had to worry about as we likely had more than we needed, but we lacked the ability to sell and transport any excess – except to maybe the Glovers. I would have to talk to them later.

Once the mutterings quieted, Edwyle continued to speak. “The Riverlands was generally unaffected, but it won’t make up for the loss. The King has been quiet since his son’s death two years ago, and no new policy has been drafted. Overall, this past summer has been quiet for the southerners although Lord Manderly has indicated that Essos may be heating up.”

At Edwyle’s indication, Theomore addressed the hall. “The Disputed Lands have seen an increase in fighting which is unusual for the fall season. The seas are still quiet, so I am unsure of the reasons at this point.”

Lord Karstark stood and said, “Will this have any impact over the winter?”

Theomore shook his head. “Doubtful. Come spring there may be additional trading opportunities,” here was where most of the nobility’s attentions were lost – though Edwyle, myself and Lord Bolton continued to pay attention. “Especially, if we have excess grain at the end of winter. If the fighting heats up on the sea, we may also see a spike in prices for seasoned wood. For now, what grain has been brought to the North from Essos is higher priced than expected as the landowners have been holding on to it tightly and waiting to see if full-scale war breaks out once again and grain prices climb ever higher.”

Theomore yielded the floor back to Edwyle, who once again addressed the hall. “As to the North, yields were average this summer with tax collection being without major issue. As to the wildings, the Night’s Watch has not found any evidence of any sort of resurgence of a King-Beyond-The-Wall. Lord Umber, if you would report?”

Lord Umber heaved himself out of his chair and in a loud, booming voice, said, “Only a few small
raids this summer. They’ve still been licking their wounds from Redbeard’s attack and word from the Rangers at the Night’s Watch say that there aren’t any large groups.”

Edwyle nodded toward Lord Karstark, who said, “The coast has been quiet with only a few raids.”

Lord Mormont spoke without prompting, “The Frozen Shore has been silent. We had one raid early in the summer, but the damned cannibals must have had a rough winter.”

“Poor them,” scoffed Lord Umber.

“Indeed,” replied Edwyle, sarcastically. “I would also like to take this moment to formally introduce the newest house in the North to their first gathering – Michael Ragnar and his family.”

I stood up and gave a shallow bow to the room. “I am honoured to be here and counted amongst your number.”

Edwyle resumed his speech as I sat down. “I’m sure you have all had contact with Michael over the past few years, and I am pleased to say that he has already become quite established in the region, and I look forward to next summer as he transforms the Stoney Shore into a productive region.”

“Furthermore, most of the merchants have arrived in Wintertown already, though as Lord Manderly has already said, some prices may be higher than expected. All of your taxes have been received and counted without issue. Are there any concerns to be addressed?”

Lord Flint, from Flint’s Finger, stood and asked, “Has there been any progress with the Ironborn? I remember that letters were sent to him directly?”

Edwyle replied, “There were letters from him, but no agreements have been made. Michael, can you explain further?”

I stood nervously and addressed the group, “As Lord Stark said, no agreements have been made. I’ve been trying to get agreements from them so that they can, uh, channel their energies elsewhere and hopefully next summer I can have a small group of them trade for me.”

“Trade? With the Ironborn?” asked Lord Flint incredulously.

“Aye, trade. If I can get them to see us as a source of steady, conflict-free coin, they will hopefully turn elsewhere for plunder. With closer ties and the backing of the Greyjoys, hopefully, the Ironborn will not plague our shores.”

Lord Flint sighed. “I know you are new, but Ironborn are deceitful untrustworthy beasts. They are forbidden from breaking the King’s peace directly, so they skirt the laws – they attack, but not our strongholds - only our smallfolk - so they are never caught.”

“I agree, Lord Flint, but you exaggerate,” replied Lord Mormont. “We know that since the Targaryens gained the Iron Throne, the attacks from the Ironborn have dramatically decreased. There are a few limited raids in the spring, perhaps summer if the winter was extreme, but the damage is not disastrous.”

“A death by a thousand cuts is still a death,” retorted Lord Flint.

“I agree,” I said, “which is why I want to turn their attention elsewhere. They attacked my village, but that was before I had a castle and they are now unlikely to attack again as they risk breaking the King’s peace. But many of my people are vulnerable, so I need to do something to make things better. This may not work, but I need to do something.”
“Aye, their stranglehold on the west coast seas has killed the desire for any merchants to travel,” Lord Mormont replied.

“The trade fleet that recently passed was a great boon,” stated Lord Flint, reluctantly.

“That is another part of my plan,” I said. “I hope to one day afford enough ships to secure the seas along our coast and encourage merchants, but that is a long way off. For now, trade fleets like we just had are our best option as the Ironborn will not attack that for fear of breaking the King’s peace.”

Lord Flint turned to Edwyle. “Might we expect any aid from the King in this? Perhaps funds for ships?”

Edwyle stroked his chin and pursed his lips. “Doubtful. We have had a few fruitful letters that may hold promise, but I would not expect anything to come of this for the spring. Next summer, I intend to head down to King’s Landing to address the King directly.”

There were nods of appreciation amongst the assembled nobility. “Any other concerns before we end?” asked Edwyle.

With no other concerns coming forward, Edwyle moved to end the meeting. “Well then, this first meeting of the Lord’s Gathering of 253AC is hereby closed. Let the festivities begin!”

There was a loud cheer throughout the room, with Lord Umber leading it. As the room began to disperse, I made my way over to Theomore who had yet to stand.

“Michael,” he said, greeting me with a nod of the head.

We clasped arms, and I said, “Theomore, it is good to see you again!”

“How was my brother faring?”

“Good – sea-travel suits him.”

“It’s in our blood,” he said, bobbing his head. “And the fleet?”

“Excellently! They departed quickly once fall made itself apparent, but most of the trading had already been completed by that point.”

“Wonderful! And? Was it everything you hoped it would be?”

“Aye, and profitable to boot. I don’t know about the other lords – I will talk with them later – but for my own purse, it was well received.”

“Excellent. And your men for the Lady Alice? Did they depart successfully?”

“They did,” I confirmed. “With the upcoming winter there was some confusion, but your brother convinced me that there was still plenty to learn during winter and that they could even do some trade routes down to southern Essos.”

“Quite. There is plenty of profit to be had in the area – even during winter. Come spring, I’m sure they will have made a tidy profit and will become well acquainted with the ship.”

“That would be wonderful. I’ve sent my nephew along as part of the crew as well. I hope that one day he will be its captain.”

Theomore nodded. “Wise. Well, I’ll make sure he is well looked after while he is in White Harbor.”
I smiled gratefully. “Thank you. That will be welcome news for his mother – she’s worried for him, and this is his first time away from home.”

“Of course!”

“Oh, by the way, do you think it would be feasible to have these fleets be a more frequent thing? I touched on it briefly during this meeting, but I think that it is not only feasible from a profit perspective, but also essential for starting to control the coast.”

Theomore looked thoughtful. “Possible but I will have to review the information from the fleet myself when it returns to know for sure. Come spring I will have an answer for you, but if it is profitable, I think we can make it work. If not, perhaps Lord Stark might consider paying some of the cost – or perhaps even the King?” At my doubtful look, he chuckled. “Perhaps not, but there are different options open to us, fear not. The Ironborn will not stop us for long.”

“The sooner the Ironborn recognize the land and sea are ours, the sooner they can piss off,” said Lord Flint as he joined us.

Theomore chuckled. “Robin, good of you to join us. How did you find the fleet?”

“Well received – extremely so. Good timing too. We purchased most of our food needs from them directly – certainly at a lower price than what is being charged here. I understand that a good portion of that which he had bought when the fleet returned was from you, Master Michael?”

“Please, just Michael is fine. And yes, it was. We had a fair sized surplus even if we faced a truly terrible winter.”

“Truly?” he asked, astonished.

“Aye, we have a very fertile under plow and are working on some new methods to increase crop yields.”

“We will have to talk further about this later then; it sounds most intriguing. Are there plans to have more fleets in the future?”

“We were just discussing that actually,” replied Theomore. “According to Michael, it will likely have been quite profitable, and if so, then we will look to do so again next summer.”

“Excellent. Can you keep me apprised? I would be most grateful.”

“Of course,” assured Theomore. “Michael, this certainly seems to have been an excellent idea of yours. I look forward to many profitable ventures in our future.”

I smiled. “As do I.”

I felt a large hand clamp down on my shoulder. A loud voice from behind me said, “You must be the new one – Michael!”

I turned to see Lord Umber towering over me. “Ah, yes, that’s me.”

“I hear you are the one to thank for that marvellous new drink!”

“The vodka?” I asked.

“Aye, the Northern Water. Wonderful stuff! Wonderful stuff!” He peered down at me before giving me a beaming smile. “And I know just the thing to celebrate! Come; let’s see who can drink the
I looked in a panic to Theomore and Robin who just looked at me with pity. Damn it. I was fucked.

The next morning was rough, and last night remained a blur. According to Nyra, Lord Umber, Jon, was somewhat impressed with my drinking ability. I think she was just trying to raise my spirits.

With a pounding headache, my family and I made our way to the tourney that was being hosted by the Starks. Unlike their southern counterparts, the North tended to eschew the traditional tourney aspects like jousting and instead focused more on melees and wrestling. There were also other competitions, such as horse racing, strength competitions, drinking games, and a whole manner of entertainment. Today was all about fighting, and Arthur and Ryden had both argued with Nyra and I about participating. With my headache, I was an easy opponent, but Nyra still managed to keep them out of the melee, and they would take part only in the wrestling and strength competitions. Though they were forbidden from the special wrestling match that occurred in the snows at night.

Apparently, the participants would fight in loincloths, which vaguely reminded me of sumo wrestlers, and would fight late at night, outside in the cold. The matches were fierce and quick, as the cold quickly set in and could be made even worse by snow. Nyra thought it ridiculous and would not allow the boys to participate.

Tomorrow, there would be a large hunt for the men while the women stayed behind and had their own gathering. The day after would be one of relaxation, followed by a dance at night, with the fourth day being the final competitions amongst the top placing participants from today’s tourney as well as the horse race. Finally, a great feast would be held on the last day to bring a close to the festivities.

Already, many of the nobility had sent off retainers to purchase goods to prepare for winter, and while I lacked any retainers to do such things for me, I planned to go out the day after the hunt to explore a bit and see what was being sold. We brought little with us to be sold as most had already been sold to the fleet, but we did bring some more spun, dyed wool that had not been made in time before the fleet had left.

Nyra and I made our way to the stands, as Donovar and Zane’s families went separately, and made our way to the quietest section – essentially the furthest point from where the Umbers had gathered. As we took our seats, one of the servants brought us drinks, and some food and I slunk further into my seat and pulled my hat down closer to my eyes, trying to block out the light.

The strength competitions were first and involved various competitions like the caper toss, where contestants carried trees, boulder pickups, and wagon pull. Ryden and Arthur were both competing against other children and young teens for this contest instead of against adults who competed with much larger weights.

The first few competitors were young teens that I didn’t recognize, but from those cheering the loudest, I could tell which house they belonged to. Rickard Stark, Edwyle’s son, put up a good attempt and scored highly, but did not win. Ryden struggled through but managed to place in the top ten, while Arthur seemed to have channelled Donovar and gained a second wind after almost dropping the tree and managed to finish.

Nyra and I stood and cheered for them as they each crossed the finish line, and we were incredibly proud of our boys. The rest of the strength competitions were interesting, with Ryden and Arthur placing in similar positions in all of them.

The wrestling competition was next, with the adults going first once again to let the children rest. The
wrestling was, well – boring. I had had a few friends compete back in high school, but it had never
been something that interested me. It also lacked a commentator that many sports had back on Earth,
and in general, lacked the atmosphere I had always associated with sports. Ryden lost his match, and
since it was a single elimination format, he was disappointed to have done so poorly. Arthur, on the
other hand, ever the martial one, won his first two fights before losing against one of the eldest
children competing.

The rest of the day passed too slowly for my poor head, which was made all the worse by seeing
Lord Umber seemingly unaffected by the previous night’s drinking and even competing in events.
Bullshit. The hunt the next day was just as uninteresting as the hunting I had done with the
Manderlys, as even the new setting and company did little to improve the event for me.

Blessedly, the third day arrived, and I was able to relax. Constantly dealing with the nobility and
trying to create closer ties was exhausting, especially since I knew that I was different. Not just on a
social level, but my interests, my opinions, my morals, they were all different. It was hard to connect
with people that I didn’t share at least something with. With the Manderlys, trade was a connector;
the Glovers and Mormonts, our trade deals. Even for the former, my ties with the Glovers and
Mormonts was positive but still distant.

Selling off the colored wool was simple enough, as spun wool was always in demand and with
prices inflated in preparation of the coming winter, the profit was high. I ended up purchasing some
supplies I knew that we could use more of, like linseed oil, but otherwise just wandered through the
town.

A voice shook me from my wandering. “Excuse me! Is that you, Michael?”

I turned to see a vaguely familiar person approaching me. “Perhaps?” I answered.

The man approached me with squinted eyes that I saw light up with recognition. “Aye! It is! I
thought you looked familiar! Do you remember me?”

I shook my head. “You look familiar, but I can’t place you.”

He mock gasped. “Oh, the horror.” He held up his hands in a placating manner. “That is quite
alright; truthfully, our single encounter was more to my benefit than yours. So, tell me, what is a
farmer from Deepwood Motte doing in Winterfell?”

I blinked. “Err, what?”

“You told me years ago that you were a farmer when you assumed, I was asking you to join me as a
bard.”

Memories of the event started to trickle in about the event. I think I had been in Deepwood seeing
Arlan, the innkeeper, about something?

“Oh! You were the bard asking me about my songs.”

He smiled brightly. “Aye! My name is Royce, and I am happy to see you again! Would you like to
grab a drink?”

I laughed. “Sure.”

He led the way to a nearby tavern which was only half full as it was well past midday. As we sat
down, Royce flagged down a serving girl and ordered us two beers, but I interrupted, “Just a small
beer for me.”
When she had returned with the drinks, Royce said, “So, what is a farmer doing around here?”

I chuckled. “I actually got a bit of a promotion. I was elevated to a Masterly house after an Ironborn raid on my village.”

Royce’s jaw dropped. “Truly?”

“Truly,” I confirmed. “It happened a few years back. And you?”

He shook his head in wonderment. “Nothing so great. I took your advice to heart and adapted my music, and I found great success with it. It went well in the North, but it really took off when my wife and I travelled to Braavos.”

“Oh? How is it? I’ve only heard stories.”

“Magnificent. Utterly unique!”

“And what brings you back?”

He smiled sheepishly. “My wife and kids. Our children had been born in Braavos and have never known their homeland. My wife decided we ought to come back, and so we did. Poor timing with the winter though.”

I laughed. “Poor timing indeed. How long have you been here?”

“Three months,” he replied.

“Did you just plan to winter here in town?”

“Aye, we had purchased a home for the winter.”

I scratched my chin in thought. “Well, I’ve got a proposition for you. I’d love to pick your mind over winter about Braavos and music in general, so I’m offering to host you over the winter.”

The man gaped. “That is very generous, Master Michael.”

“I don’t need an answer now, so talk to your wife about it and let me know. I’m staying in Winterfell but let one of the guards know you want to talk to Master Michael Ragnar, and they will get me.”

“Thank you for the offer, Master Michael.”

We clasped arms, and I said, “Well, it’s been interesting seeing you again, but I have to go. There is a ball tonight, and my wife would be furious if I missed it.”

With a grin, I downed the rest of my beer and made my way back to the castle.

The ball was loud, but Nyra was loving it, and I was happy seeing her having fun. They had all worn their finest dresses, supplemented by purchases they made here, along with some modest – compared to the other nobility at least – jewelry. The children also had fun and made new friends, and Ryden even briefly danced with Alice, even though he was being closely watched by her brother Marlon. Luckily for us, Northerners weren’t formal in their dance, so we didn’t stick out like completely sore thumbs for not knowing any formal dances.

Of course, with any social gathering, there was an undercurrent. Jockeying for position, or gossip running amuck, the hall was littered with multiple groups of people talking. While Nyra was dancing with her brother, I made my way over to a lone man who sat at a table in a secluded corner.
“Mind if I sit?” I asked.

“Aye, feel free.”

“My name is Michael Ragnar. Nice to meet you.”

“Cedric Forrester.”

“Ah, I’ve heard of your house before in my talks with Master Glover.”

Cedric chuckled. “Good things I hope?”

“Aye, good things. I had been talking to him before about sustainable and consistent farming, and he mentioned your excellent stewardship of the forests.”

Cedric smiled. “I will have to thank Master Glover for the compliments. My house has always been dedicated to preserving the integrity of the forests.”

“It sounds like a beautiful place.”

“Ironrath is,” he confirmed. “It sits proudly amongst the trees – a strong and beautiful place.”

“How are the snows in the winter? You are more inland than I, but I would imagine the trees would help.”

“They do,” he replied. “It can still get quite deep, but nothing like the eastern side of the mountains where Winterfell is. The trees help us shelter from some of the worst of it and the mountains protect us from any easterly winds carrying snow.”

“It seems quite cozy.”

“Aye, nice and warm in the winter – though it does not compare to Winterfell.”

I laughed. “Few things do.”

We were quiet for a while as we let the ball continue around us as we drank.

Cedric eventually broke the silence. “I hear you have had success with attracting trade to your land.”

“I have,” I confirmed. “We had a successful trade fleet visit, and we are looking to expand into new trades all the time.”

Cedric scratched his chin. “I’ve been looking for a better source of salt for a while now. Our salt mine was depleted many years ago, and trade from White Harbor has been our main source, but it is expensive and a long journey.”

I nodded. “I can see your trouble. I have good news for you; I hope to open a new salt mine by the Twin Lakes this next summer.”

He blinked. “Truly?”

“Truly. It has a few other good sources for mining, but as far as we can tell it also has a sizeable salt deposit. I would be happy to trade with you.”

Cedric grinned. “Excellent! I am sure we can talk details once you’ve got it going.”
As we clasped hands in agreement, a loud voice interrupted us. “Look what we have here. Bloody Forresters will sell themselves to anyone it seems.”

Cedric scowled angrily at the approaching man, whose girth outcompeted Theomore’s. “This is none of your concern, Whitehill.”

The big man, a Whitehill, laughed. “Oh, such a strong spine.” His eyes cut to mine. “Too bad it’s consorting with an up-jumped peasant,” he said, mockingly.

“At least we have Ironwood,” Cedric retorted.

Whitehill’s face pinched. “Because you stole what was ours!”

Cedric rolled his eyes and laughed mockingly. “No, your House is just incompetent!”

Like a ghost, the pale Lord Bolton appeared from nowhere at the side of Whitehill. “Ah, Lord Whitehill. I had something to discuss with you – come with me.”

Lord Whitehill glanced over to his liege and smoothened out his face. “Of course, Lord Bolton.” As they left, he turned and hissed out a warning, “Don’t think I’ve forgotten this insult!”

After they left, and the crowd around us went back to their own conversations, I asked Cedric, “Is that something to be worried about?”

He waved off my concern. “No, it’s the same thing every time. I swear, they live to come up with ways to insult my House so that when we meet, he can try to feel superior. Fool doesn’t realize it will never work.” He stood abruptly. “I need some fresh air to cleanse his stench from my nose. I look forward to talking with you later.”

“I as well.”

As the atmosphere of the party returned to normal after Cedric and Whitehill had left, I continued to nurse my cup of wine as I was not looking for a repeat hangover any time soon. I finished my cup and made my way over to the other side of the room, where Nyra had finished dancing and made sure to avoid the Ryswells – I would never forgive Dunn for his comment at Violet’s wedding. I saw Donovar talking excitedly with Master Cassel, and Zane was nowhere to be found – but likely out in the kennels with Mateo. Before I had reached Nyra, however, I was waylaid by a tall, brown-haired man.

“Master Michael,” he said, warmly.

“I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage – I have yet to recognize the faces of everyone here.”

He laughed, just as warmly as he talked. “Oh-ho-ho, that is quite understandable. I am Lord Denys Dustin of Barrow Hall.”

I smiled in recognition. “Greetings, Lord Denys. I have been looking forward to meeting you for quite some time now.”

“As have I,” he said. “Come, let us talk in private.” He led me out of the hall, and we made our way to the top of the wall surrounding Winterfell. He motioned some of the Stark men-at-arms that were already atop it away and gazed out among the fields surrounding the castle.

When he didn’t speak, I broke the silence. “How have you been enjoying the party, Lord Denys?”
He chuckled. “Oh, quite busy but rewarding all the same.”

“That is good to hear,” I said, venturing to see what he actually wanted to talk about.

“I hope to have good relations between us,” he said.

“I do as well.”

“I wish to apologize for not coming to your daughter’s wedding, but I had prior commitments that could not be avoided.”

I blinked. “Ah, do not worry, Lord Denys, I understand.”

“Truly, I think it is a shame, but I imagine it was a wonderful event.”

“It was,” I confirmed.

“It needs to be rectified. Perhaps next summer I can host you at Barrow Hall? There is plenty to see – Barrowton is the North’s second largest, year-round, town after White Harbor.”

“That sounds like a wonderful opportunity. I gratefully accept.”

“Wonderful! There is much you can learn from my House – I always say it is important to lead by example. And while you are there, I am sure we can come to some other agreements as well – for food and the like. I’m sure even some of my smallfolk may even take up an offer from you to move to a new place.”

Was he trying to take me under his wing? I wasn’t sure what he was trying to do with this conversation, but I nodded anyway. “I look forward to seeing your famed castle.”

Denys puffed up. “I am sure you will be impressed. Come; let us return inside.”

“Actually, I think I will stay out here a while and enjoy the fresh air if you don’t mind.”

With that, I was left alone at the top of the walls as the guards continued to maintain their distance. All of the politicking was a headache, and I found myself constantly not knowing what was going on. And Northerners were supposed to be simpler and more straightforward.

I snorted - straightforward my ass.

“No, she said that Lady Bolton has been busier this gathering – much more so than usual,” Nyra whispered.

“Oh, perhaps she’s been bored?” I replied.

Nyra rolled her eyes. “No, Lady Marna commented on how unusual it was. It’s not like I have a reference point, but the woman was very outgoing.”

“Did she approach you?”

“No, she greeted me once when I was in a group with others, but never privately.”

I shrugged. “That fits with most people’s reactions to me. Polite and formal, if distant.”

“We’ve had some good conversations with some people, like the Tallharts.”
“True,” I conceded. “But some really rubbed me the wrong way, like the Whitehills.”

“The Whitehills are the vassals of the Boltons.”

“Really? But they are so distant from each other. How does that work?”

It was Nyra’s turn to shrug. “No idea. But it could be something to worry about.”

I snorted and raised an eyebrow. “Something to worry about? I’m sure when we next see them, years from now, whatever thing they have planned will come to failure or success, and I’m sure that whatever social ladder they are climbing will not affect us.”

“I suppose. I just don’t like not knowing.”

“I find ever since we arrived here, there is much we don’t know.”

“We will need to be more involved then,” stated Nyra.

I grimaced. “Maybe a bit more.”

She rolled her eyes and cut off any more of my objections. Lord Edwyle stood before the assembled hall for the last speech of the gathering, as many of the nobility had had their fill of excitement and pleasure and now looked forward to returning home before the increasingly frequent snows hampered their passage.

“My Lords,” said Edwyle, “I bid you welcome to our final feast before your departure tomorrow. I trust you have all enjoyed yourselves?” A loud cheer answered him. “Excellent. My Maester has finally counted the taxes and compiled the records you have all provided and has determined that the North had a comfortably above average yield this year. Take heart and may this keep you in good company over this winter.”

There was polite applause to this statement, but many did not take it seriously. It would mean good things if the winter was shorter than the summer, or even of equal length, but if the winter ran long, it would do little good for us. Still, any good news heading into winter was welcome news.

“The Night’s Watch,” he continued, “has been most grateful for your donations. The King has also sent a generous donation to make up for many of the other kingdoms sending so little. The food and supplies shall see them through the winter as they continue to guard us against savages.”

Edwyle raised a cup into the air. “My Lords and Ladies, I hereby bring this Lord’s Gathering of 253AC to a close. To the North!”

“To the North!”
Interlude: Twelve

Second day, First Moon, 254 AC (+1 day)

He stared into the fire as the hour continued to grow later. He had been here a while, but these moments had always given him his greatest clarity. He was safely ensconced in his solar the night after the other nobility had all left Winterfell to return home after the Lord’s Gathering.

Edwyle was confident that it had been a successful gathering – unique too, with the addition of new noble houses – the first in a long time.

Thinking of Michael, his thoughts drifted to the risk and reward of his previous actions. The hints that Michael would repay the money that Edwyle had given him through increased taxes was already evident, and it looked to only to grow further. Giving away that money to House Ragnar had been risky as it had left his supply of coin dangerously low, which left him dangerously exposed to any unexpected events or even, gods forbid, a war he could now not afford.

Coin and existing taxes had already been reallocated to address this lack, but the lack of coin going to its previous destinations would have ramifications – even if he could not see it yet. Still, he had been able to address many of these issues, and stymy other ones before they could grow, at this latest gathering.

Luckily, Michael’s good showing here had quelled some of the doubt – even if not all, but that had never been a reasonable expectation. Michael’s clearly good relations with House Manderly had also been a boon, and with Theomore’s clear approval, Michael had started to develop a reputation of being a West Coast Manderly.

It had been amusing to see Michael be unaware of the undercurrents that moved around him, but it was something that needed to be addressed in time. Having a vassal be uninformed like that could only be born for so long. Seeing the Dustins trying to grow their power block by taking Michael as a subordinate had not quite succeeded, though Denys seemed to have thought it did.

Manderly seemed to have staked quite the clear claim to Michael, but Michael had also given signals that he was attempting to form his own block with the Glovers and Mormonts, who were currently out in the cold. The Manderlys had always stood alone among the Great Houses of the North but retained great power by themselves and still managed to hold a great number of lesser houses to themselves and be a major player.

The only other block of similar size was the Boltons who always managed to punch above their weight, especially compared to the Dustins, who had the Ryswells within their block. It seemed as though the Dustins were trying to make moves and make a real third party to compete against the Manderlys and Boltons. Interesting developments but Edwyle was not worried. So long as all were underneath his House, and their loyalties clear, then these moves proved to be inconsequential.

It mattered not what block Michael attached himself to, with his House so recently elevated, his loyalty shall not waver. If only the same could be said of every House.

And to top it off, Rodrik’s report of Michael’s land and new processes was certainly food for thought. The so-called ‘Fresno Scraper’ was certainly potent and the example that Rodrik had brought back – though it was kept under wraps – was intriguing. Tests needed to be done in the spring, but perhaps Michael’s vision would come to fruition.
What was truly fascinating was the farming implements, as well as the concept of a Northern Knight. Michael seemed to have downplayed the importance of his farming machines – for what reason, Edwyle could only speculate – but even with Rodrik not seeing it, the implications were clear. They would be transformative. Their potential enormous if they indeed performed as well as he guessed – and seeing how well the Fresno Scraper did, he had no reason to doubt such things.

The coming decades would be transformative, and a new social class may help to ease the troubles. If men are given an easy way to rise, they will be less likely to tear others down so that they can do so. How it could be done eluded him still, but transformation on the scale that he foresaw was a thing of years – decades perhaps. All he could be certain of, is the name Michael had suggested, Mounties, was to never be considered.

He shuddered. A brilliant man, but his naming abilities left something to be desired.

Still, next summer, perhaps a trip to King’s Landing was in order. He would need to King’s approval for a new social class to equal that of the knights, and perhaps deals can be struck for a small Northern fleet. He dreaded what favours he would need to trade to obtain them, but his duty to the North was clear and perhaps he could get away with simply supporting one of the King’s smallfolk policies. Plans needed to be made, and with Rickard now a man, he ought to be included so he may learn how to rule. A trip to King’s Landing would benefit him as well, as I was not getting any younger.

He nodded to himself. That was the beginning of a plan. Now, all he needed to do was start to move the pieces into place. He could feel himself start to smile as ideas started to fall into place.

Yes; yes, that could work.

A/N: I have a feeling tonight’s episode will depress me, so I thought I would do what I can to try and cheer someone up by releasing a short interlude.
Second day, Fifth Moon, 256 AC (+840 days)

Spring was like a race. When the first signs of it showed, your body tensed in anticipation – ready for the signal to finally start. When things finally started to sprout and grow, the race was off. It was a race to get everything done as soon as possible, and there was always work to be done.

Even with my elevation, the nature of the work may have changed, but the quantity never seemed to diminish. But the race was never a sprint. It was always a marathon.

It was summer now, and though the winter had been slightly longer than the summer, my people and I handled it well. The reports from winter had finally been completed, written on Violet’s paper, compiled from the reports from Stonefisk and some of the closer, larger settlements near Redbridge.

The reports themselves were extremely positive. Our stores were still substantial, even after winter, and the number deaths over the winter was very small – relatively speaking. Few people went hungry, at least in the Redbridge and Stonefisk and the other areas that had adopted my new machines and methods, and most of those who died had been the elderly. Sickness was still an issue, some of it unavoidable, but it was decreasing as more and more people started to adopt more hygienic practices.

My office was stuffy, even with the doors to the building open, but I continued to flip through reports.

There was already a whole host of pregnancies, so growth was looking strong. Hopefully, in the coming months, we would also see new arrivals start to arrive. Letters of mine that I had stockpiled throughout the winter had finally left a few weeks back with their recipients being all over the place. Correspondence to the other nobility, like Lord Flint, Manderly, and Forrester, as well as letters to contacts in Braavos that Royce the Bard had recommended to me. I planned to obtain some direct merchant contacts as well as a few other things – like musical instruments. Royce had described a city that was akin to an Italian Renaissance city, and I was curious to know what kind of culture they had created for themselves.

I also hoped to learn more about their insurance schemes that the city was known for. It was early for me yet, but I hoped that in a few years when I had a fleet that it might prove to encourage trade – and make a tidy profit for myself. Like so many things, I believed I understood the basic idea of the insurance, but the devil was in the details. I didn’t know if I was missing a key aspect, and I had no idea where to even start or creating such a program.

Eventually, I hoped to roll it into a true Bank. An institution that would provide insurance, be responsible for the machinery loans to farmers, a sort of credit union, and something that would offer other services to merchants, like receipts. The receipts were a concept I had thought up over the winter that I thought may have merit. The bank would operate as a commodities market and allow the merchants to buy and sell goods quickly, with a guarantee behind the receipt. The receipts, just as the credit union, would allow the bank to quickly gain a reputation for trustworthiness.

In domestic news, the maple harvest was a success, and we managed to collect a lot of syrup and sugar. Over the winter, a few enterprising people ranged out to find large groves of maple trees to tap. Industry had started back up again, and goods were being made once more. Our iron stores ran out in the winter, so the blacksmiths had been quiet for most of the winter, but the mines were going once again, and with the castle nearing completion, its demands on iron and steel were diminishing –
allowing other goods to be made. On the civilian side, the main priority was stoves. The cast iron stoves were catching on in popularity – mainly among the middle class, if you could even truly call them that – as were the rocket stoves. Even simple fireboxes were in demand, but that was mainly as a result of supplying my Rangers with the easily compactible contraptions.

Winter had seen to the more widespread adoption of my longbow training program. I hadn’t quite made it an order for all smallfolk to practice their archery, as England had, but I incentivized as much as possible. Archery competitions, with sizeable prizes, and the promises of those being skilled enough being hired at a premium in any wars that might arise. Laws were always a good motivator, but money was the universal language.

A shout broke my attention. “Father!”

I looked up to see Violet walking towards me quickly. “Father! A large group of travels was spotted coming down from the north road. A lot of wagons and the like.”

“Immigrants?” I asked.

Violet shrugged. “I don’t know. Someone passed the message to me, and I came to get you.”

“Does the guards already know?”

She nodded. “I sent someone to alert them.”

“Excellent!” I held out my arm for her to take, and we began to make our way down to the village proper. I relished the feeling of the sun on my skin after two years of winter, forcing me to either bundle up or stay inside. As we walked along the main road, I hummed happily as we walked along the freshly finished concrete road that made up the main artery of the village. Wide and smooth, it made an excellent way to travel, especially as the ground was still muddy from a fierce rainstorm we had yesterday.

When we finally arrived at the outskirts of the village, we could see a huge procession making their way to the village. My men were already at attention but relaxed as they watched the group approach.

At the sight of my men, the column slowly – slowly – came to a halt.

Violet and I walked closer to the head, accompanied by my guardsmen, while a group of elders split from the column and walked to us. They bowed before me, and the assembled elders mumbled, “M’lord.”

“And what might you all be doing?” I asked, loudly, making sure my voice carried to the entire group.

“We’ve come t’ live here, m’lord. We’ve heard tale that you are looking for people,” answered one of the men.

“I have good news for you then! You’ve come to the right place!”

A cheer emanated from the column as word was passed along.

“And where are you all from?” I asked.

“Lots o’ different places, m’lord – we all met on the road. My group is from the northern part of the Tallhart’s lands.”
“Cerwyns,” replied another.

“Widow’s Watch.”

“Starks.”

“Northern part of the Stark’s lands.”

“Boltons.”

“Dustins,” replied the last.

“A diverse group,” I said. “You can settle your people in the open field until we can sort you out. Leave a representative with me, though so we can talk about what your people can do.”

The group of elders went back to their group, and the column started to move again. A few moments later, the elders joined me once again.

To the man that had answered, Tallhart, for his group’s origin, I asked, “How many people in your group?”

“Fifty, m’lord.”

“And what do these people do? Farm? Blacksmiths?”

“We all farm, m’lord.”

I looked over to Violet who was already busy writing down the information. I let her finish before continuing, “Good. The group from Lord Cerwyn?”

“Four-and-fourty, m’lord. All farmers.”

I looked to the man from Widow’s Watch. “Just one-and-ten, m’lord. My family solely. Lumberjacks is what me family does.”

The man from Lord Stark’s lands answered, “Two-and-eighty, m’lord. Mostly farmers, but we got a family of bakers, and another of candlemakers.”

The other Stark man replied, “One hundred and twenty, m’lord. We’ve got a mix of farmers, and carpenters, and a potter – even a fletcher. Our whole village up and moved, m’lord.”

“Where were you from?” I asked.

“I’ the north of Winterfell, along the Kingsroad. West of the Lonely Hills.”

I nodded - not a prosperous region.

The Bolton man said, “Roundabouts two hundred. We got a mix as well, but mostly miners.”

My eyes lit up. “Miners, you say?”

“Aye, m’lord. Used to work in Lord Bolton’s iron and copper mines, mostly.”

“And how did you come to get here?”

The man shrugged. “Heard from a man telling tales. He said that the Master of this place was looking for miners and the like. I figured that if the story reached all the way out there, the need ought to have
been great. Pay as well – besides it’s not like Lord Bolton was paying well.”

I smiled. “Smart man. Well, you are right; I am in need of miners. We will have to talk later in greater
detail. Tell me though, who was the man who told you? A man from Lord Bolton?” I probably
ought to know if I owed Lord Bolton a favor.

The man shrugged once again. “‘Dunno, m’lord. Didn’t recognize him, but I think he was a
merchant or somethin’.”

Not a favor from Lord Bolton – excellent.

“And you?” I asked the last man.

“Three hundred, m’lord. Mostly herders and some farmers, from Lord Dustin’s lands.”

Once Violet had finished writing, I addressed the group again, “Excellent. Welcome to your new
home. Over the next few days, my son and daughter will be around to talk further with you so that
we can get you settled in your new homes.”

The men all bowed, and I took my leave with my daughter and guards.

As we left earshot, I told one of the guards, “Make sure Donovar knows to leave a few guards
around the group. We don’t know them just yet, and I don’t want any trouble.”

The man nodded and split from our group. Violet tugged on my hand and asked, “Ryden will be
coming with me?”

“Aye, he needs to learn more administrative tasks.”

“True – he will be Master one day,” she replied, without bitterness.

I winced. We had already had this discussion as a family about inheritance, and while we would be
conforming to traditional practices, it still sat wrong with me. Violet understood and held no
bitterness – none of my children did – but it rubbed me wrong. Regardless of who succeeded me as
the head of our house, I would make sure all my children were secure.
**Act 2: Chapter 27**

**Tenth day, Sixth Moon, 256 AC (+38 days)**

My men and I waited atop the hill overlooking the ocean below us amongst the ruins of the old castle at Stonefisk while we watched over the ships coming in over the horizon. Donovar was with me, as well as Arthur, Ryden, and some of their older male cousins to help inflate our number and project our strength.

And project we did. We all sat atop horses, well armored and with high-quality weapons. We were not resplendent like the knights from the stories, but we had a fierceness about us. We all wore a red gambeson as our first layer of protection, from both war and weather alike. In the future, I planned to let the men be able to pick the color of the gambeson based on their home village, in other words, Stonefisk would be a grey of some sort or blue for the ocean, but red suited Redbridge just fine. In addition, a brigandine - a leather chest armor that was lined with steel plates - offered more protection from oncoming blows, and the faulds helped to cover the thighs of a mounted man. The leather was brown and contrasted nicely with the steel rivets and red gambeson. There was also a small coat of arms painted on each man’s chest showing either my sigil or Donovar’s, depending on the man. I could not yet afford a brigandine for every man, but the leaders of each squad had one, and I was slowly equipping the rest.

Few of us wore them right now, but our distinctive green helmets helped to set us apart from others and unify us as a force. The helmet itself was an interesting piece of equipment. It looked somewhat similar to the traditional Northern halfhelm, but the back was slightly elongated, and it had cheek flaps that could be opened and closed as needed. It gave much better visibility to my men than a greathelm would, while still offering more protection than a halfhelm.

Our gloves were leather, but of good quality and waterproofed with mink oil. Protection for our lower legs was still a work-in-progress, but the greaves we had did their job. The shields were not in the Northern style of a kite shield as it proved too cumbersome for long distance travel and did not fit with the purpose of the Rangers. Instead, we wore round wooden shields – reminiscent of a Viking shield – usually made of either fir or poplar, painted with my sigil. Each man also wore a brown cowboy hat and a dark green cloak.

Each man carried a sword, spear, and a shortbow, in addition to any other personal weapons they chose to carry. The sword was made in the style of a cavalry sword, so it had a slight curve to it along with a basic basket to protect the users’ hands. Each man, in the theme of self-sufficiency, also carried supplies for themselves, both tools and food, wrapped in their bedrolls and other bags that hung off the back of the horse. Eventually, I planned to have every Ranger have two horses to help carry their supplies and allow them to cover more distance.

It was an impressive sight.

One of the younger men put his hand on the shaft of his tomahawk to calm his nerves, but otherwise, our group remained calm as we watched the ships roll in.

“Remember lads,” I said, addressing the entire group. “Calm and steady. We don’t want to provoke any fights, but we aren’t going to roll over for the bastards.”

There was a round of laughter to ease the tension, and before it could resettle, I pushed my horse forward and led our group down the hill. By the time we reached the docks, the Ironborn were nearing it themselves.
The _Lady Alice_ was already docked and towered over the smaller fishing boats that also occupied the harbor. It was the first time that the ship had come to its home waters, though it had yet to visit Redbridge, and it was a sight to behold. The rigging looked very complex, and after being given a tour, I could say that the interior was even bigger than it looked. Over the winter it had plied the Essosi trade routes and pulled quite the profit. It was here now to help transport goods to and from Redbridge and Stonefisk once the trading was completed with the Ironborn.

I dismounted my horse as the lead Ironborn ship, emblazoned with a large Greyjoy kraken on its sail, came into the dock. A few men jumped out of the ship onto the dock and began to tie the boat off while the men still onboard put away their oars.

A tall man, dressed in fine - if salt-stained - armor stepped out of the ship, accompanied by two other men – one was a short man with an eyepatch and the other a skeletal man of middling height.

I stepped forward and said, “Lord Greyjoy.”

He looked over me and my men casually before replying, “Master Ragnar.”

Over the course of my time in Westeros, I had seen many different people. Some pleasant, some not; Some happy, some angry. Lord Umber was a man who projected strength through each of his actions and after seeing him wrestle, I could say that he translated that strength into violence easily and skillfully. Quellon Greyjoy was different.

He was violence.

The way he took stock of his surroundings, the way he walked, his positioning in relation to his men, his armor, the way he stood – ready to fight for his place at a moment’s notice. When the Ironborn had raided Redbridge, they had clearly been violent - to claim otherwise would be folly.

But, where those men had violence in their hearts, Quellon was the human embodiment. His grin was sharp, and eyes cutting and cunning. This was a dangerous man.

“Do you have the steel and iron ingots?” I asked, keeping my voice steady.

Quellon smirked. “No bread and salt?”

I could hear one of my men shift nervously, but I kept my eyes on Quellon. “Would you abide by that?”

His mouth pinched together. “Of course, Greenlander.”

I gestured to one of the villagers to bring the tray I had prepared over and handed it to Quellon and his two followers. After they had eaten, Quellon said, “Aye, I have the ingots. Do you have the food and other goods?”

“Aye. I’ll have my men bring the food out while yours unloads the ships.”

Quellon gestured to one of his men who returned to the ship and started shouting out orders. I did the same to the villagers who began to bring out the food.

“Come,” I said, “Let us have a drink and a chat while we wait.”

Quellon looked bemused and gestured for me to go first. I led him and his man to the inn and got the innkeeper to bring us each a shot of vodka and a cup of brandy.
He eyed the drink curiously but followed suit when I raised the vodka. “To a good future,” I said, tossing back the drink.

He copied me but to my disappointment didn’t cough or otherwise react to the strong drink. “Interesting,” he said.

“It’s called vodka, but my people have taken to calling it Northern Water.”

He twirled his empty cup in his hand and said, “And you sell this?”

I nodded. “I have a few barrels with me to sell if you are interested.”

“And the other drink?” he asked, pointing to the other cup.

“Ah, this is a special one called brandy. Go on, have a taste.”

He raised the cup and took a sniff of it before taking a big sip. He smacked his lips in appreciation. “Not bad. This for sale too?”

I shook my head. “Unfortunately, not. We’ve sold out already, but if you continue to trade with us, we should have more ready. Especially if you bring wine.”

“Wine?”

I shrugged. “It’s hard for us to get around here, as it’s not grown locally.”

“And that’s what this drink made of?”

I chuckled. “No - that’s a secret.”

He smiled dangerously and leaned forward. “Surely, if we are to trade, there must be trust between us.”

“Surely, you see that you must extend the olive branch first?”

“I am here, am I not?”

“You are,” I conceded. “But trust must be built up. It is true though that I have not heard tale of any raids this summer in my lands.”

He nodded, accepting the compliment. “True, I have ensured my people’s cooperation.”

“And does that apply to all lands in the North?”

“Do you pretend to speak for the North?”

“No, but the rest of the North waits to see what happens between us. If this is a success, but your people simply turn to the rest of the North, the Lords will reject this.”

He chuckled. “And? Will they strip you of your title if this fails?”

“No, but the patience of the North is running out. Can you not control your people and stop them from attacking their countrymen?”

He let out a full-bellied laugh. “Countrymen? What are Greenlanders to us?” He stopped laughing and narrowed his eyes. “And control? I am Lord Greyjoy. I am the Iron Islands in the flesh.”
“What then of your letter to Lord Stark? You disavowed any who might raid as out of control renegades. Was that a lie?”

The unnamed companion of Quellon put his hand on his axe hilt as he scowled furiously. “Watch your mouth, Greenlander.”

Donovar responded for me and said, “Quiet; you haven’t had the courtesy of introducing yourself first. Your passion has no place here.”

“It was not a lie,” said Quellon, taking back control of the conversation. “Some men flee and go beyond my control. I am not bothered if a few men flee the Iron Islands, and what they do afterward is not my concern. It is not my fault if the North cannot even protect their own.”

“Still, I trust that such men will not be a problem any longer? For the entire North?” I asked, carefully, so that he did not take offense.

“That depends on the amount of food we bring back with us.”

“I have arranged enough to fill your ships, plus additional items, like the vodka, that you may wish to buy.”

Quellon nodded. “And in the future?”

“The future is wide open. We can continue to trade iron and steel for food, or we can open up other trades as well. You can purchase ships full of some of our goods, like soap or vodka, and then resell it down in the Westerlands or the Reach. There lies good coin for you and your people.”

“Food is what my people desire – at least at the beginning of summer.”

“Then food we can trade.”

Quellon grinned. “I will let my people know that they can visit freely to trade.”

I shook my head. “Not yet. We must work on our trust still. In one year, we can meet again to trade here.”

He banged his fists on the table. “One year?! That is completely insufficient!”

“My people need time to replenish their stocks in order to sell again.”

“Once a year, with these few ships will hardly make a dent in the needs of my people.”

“Food is hard to come by and takes long to grow.”

“Five times the number of ships next year, and we will talk about even more next year.”

“Twice the number, and in six moons you can have the same number as today come to trade for non-food goods.”

“Ridiculous. That is too little.”

“The non-food goods will allow you coin, which you can spend on food in places like the Reach.”

“Coin we have. And the Reach denies us most of our needs.”

“That sounds like a problem of your own making.”
He narrowed his eyes. “It can be your problem just as easy.”

I gestured for him to calm down. “Easy now. It won’t be quick, but once they see the success here, they will reconsider. What we do here can be a signal to the rest of Westeros.”

He leaned back in his chair, his mood flipping to contemplative. “Perhaps, but that does not address the fact that we have coin and wealth aplenty. Food is what we want more of.”

“But is it you and the Lords that have coin, or is it your smallfolk too?”

“What’s your point?”

“Well, it’s not your Lords ‘going rogue’ now is it? It’s the poorer bastards – the desperate. Let some of them make this trade and gain some gold out of it.”

He stroked his beard in thought. “Perhaps, but again – our ability to trade coin for food is limited.”

“It sounds like you need someone to flip for you.”

“Flip?”

“Err, help you out. Change sides. There is no formal ban, correct?” He nodded, so I continued. “Well, you need someone to sell you food and buy food from others to supply you. That sounds like a lot of coin to be made for whoever does that for you.”

Quellon chuckled. “That may be true, but it could be no minor Lordling.”

“I had intended to talk with the Lord of Seaguard. Perhaps together-“

“We have no need of your help!” interrupted Quellon’s companion.

Quellon shot him a glare and said, “My friend is not wrong. We have always paid the iron price ourselves. We shall pay the gold price ourselves just the same.”

“Fair enough.”

“Three times the ships next year, with another fleet – the same size as today – in six moons for non-food stuffs,” said Quellon, returning to negotiating.

I reached out my hand and said, “Agreed.” We clasped arms, and I poured us each another shot. “To good trades,” I said.

“To the gold price,” he replied.
The pickaxe swung down, marking the start of the construction of the castle of Stonefisk.

Donovar was beaming as he handed off the pick to his son, who also took a swing. The workers who had been watching then dispersed to go about their tasks as work officially started on the castle.

Over the past few months, we had been ferrying down supplies from Redbridge to prepare the castle as well as workers. It had been hard, but I managed to convince a fair number of workers to move from Redbridge to Stonefisk. Work would go slower with fewer people, but the castle was smaller and crushed stone much easier to come by. Along with the iron and steel that we traded the Ironborn for, which had stayed here, our supply situation was well in hand.

The old ruins were being torn down, and the footprint of the castle expanded. The previous storage cellars would stay the same as no one wanted to mine through bedrock to expand them – and they were of a good enough size already.

The Lady Alice was currently ferrying cement and wood so that we had enough supplies. Housing for the new workers had been the first thing to be built, then storage for our materials, and now, finally, the castle. Once things settled, Master Build Jon – who I had managed to retain for another few months – and Tylan would head down to the future sight of Osend to start some surveying and to complete Tylan’s education.

They were currently overseeing everything here, but with an experienced crew and command structure, they would hopefully be able to take the Lady Alice or our longship, Sown Wind, down and within the month.

Industry had also gotten a kickstart in Stonefisk. A blacksmithing apprentice that had graduated from Redbridge had moved here to supplement the single blacksmith already here, and the forges were working nonstop. Apprentices had been taken in, and the village was already busy. Garum production was increasing, and some cottage industry was picking up as well.

Farming had also seen marked improvements as Koryn had fully finished his teaching program – managing to capture everyone from Stonefisk all the way to the Wolfswood. Births were also way up, though not on the same level as Redbridge – but with the surrounding people beginning to migrate to Stonefisk in search of better opportunities, the village was growing.

Donovar took in another ten recruits and would be staying with his family in Stonefisk until his castle was complete. One of my senior guardsmen, Rickard, would be taking on the role of the Captain of my guard, while Tormund would be the Captain of the Rangers. It was a long time in coming, but things were progressing as planned, so the transition was going smoothly.

Speaking of progress, I signaled Tormund over. “Tormund, do you remember that contest I set up down to the south? About the rice farming?”

“Aye, Master Ragnar.”

“The tax collectors haven’t passed word that it has been completed and they don’t know what the progress of it is. Can you select three men to accompany someone there to investigate?”

“Of course, Master Ragnar.”
I rolled my eyes. “At least just use Master Michael.”

Tormund grinned. “Aye, Master Ragnar. Who will be going with the Rangers?”

“I’m not sure yet. Probably my nephew, Bran. He’s only here because Koryn wanted him out of the town after he had some girl trouble.”

Tormund coughed to cover his laugh. “That’s one way to put it, Master Ragnar.”

“Yes, well as a young man, it can be hard to resist the attentions of that many young women, which is only made worse by him reveling in his new station. Regardless, Koryn wants him out of the town for a while to get some responsibility pushed into him. A trip like this might be beneficial.”

He nodded. “I will get the men prepared. When do you want them to leave?”

“Tomorrow will be fine.”

Tormund raised his fist to his heart in a salute and left me to my thoughts. Rice would be a huge benefit if we could get it going, and it would provide this area with another revenue source. Seaweed farming was picking up and was quite delicious. With some rice, I could finally satisfy that Japanese food craving I’ve had for the past few decades. Now if only I could get some Chinese food, Mexican, and some damn chicken wings.

It wasn’t that I didn’t have chickens, but you only got two per bird! And birds were too bloody useful to kill. Tomatoes would be nice too, for a nice, greasy, cheesy, extra meat pizza.

My stomach rumbled loudly as I silently cursed myself for getting worked up. Brushing my thoughts aside, I went in search of Sig, who I had left in charge of my fledgling tree nursery.

After asking around, I found him at the original site that we had picked out to start the nursery, and I could see a wide variety of trees in the field before me. Some looked to be freshly planted and looked incredibly tiny, especially next to some of the older trees which looked to be ready for transplant. The edges of the field were lined by taller, more established trees that were roughly between 4 feet and 6 feet. I couldn’t see Sig from where I was, so I wandered the rows inspecting the trees.

They all looked good, and I was happy to finally be able to inspect them. When I had come a few moons back for the Ironborn trade, I was unable to get more than a cursory look around to make sure that things were as Sig had said they were, as I left soon after the Ironborn had.

Finally, I spotted Sig sitting down and the far end of the field, potting some saplings. I called out to him, “Sig!”

He looked up and waved when he saw me. He stood up, brushing the dirt from his clothes and met me halfway. “Master Michael,” he said, bowing his head deferentially.

“Sig, it is good to see you again.”

“You as well, Master Michael. Has work on the castle started?”

“It has, they will be in a frenzy for a while, so I thought I would come by to see you. How are things here?”

“Good! As you can see, the trees are taking hold nicely and I have already established trees in many valleys!”
“Do you have a map?”

“I do, but not with me. I can show you later if you wish?”

I nodded. “That’ll be fine. Has there been any notable difference in the soil erosion and quality?”

He waved his hand in a so-so motion. “A tiny bit, I think. The trees are still young so they don’t provide the full benefit, but there is less wind in the valleys with trees now, so I would think that it would affect the rain too.”

“And have you had any trouble with the nursery itself?”

“Not once I’ve got the hang of it. Getting the right manure mixture to build a good soil took a while, but I’ve got it now – thanks to your help through letters.”

“That is good to hear. And have you been enjoying the job so far?”

He nodded eagerly. “Yes, Master! My parents are right proud of me and the girl I got my eye on thinks I’m good!”

I chuckled. “That is good to hear. Any questions for me while I am here?”

He shuffled a bit before asking, “When you first taught me all this, you said something about a glass house? T’ raise the plants in? Is that still something you want t’ be doing?”

“Aye, but it will be a few years yet. I’ve put in an order for Myrish glass for a greenhouse for Redbridge already so that we can begin to grow winter roses. It will be a while before I can turn my attentions here.”

Sig nodded. “Understood, Master.”

“Good, well I-“

“Master Ragnar!” a voice called out, interrupting me.

Sig and I turned to see one of the villagers running over to me. “Master Donovar requests ‘yer presence!”

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Someone got caught stealing.”

“So, he was caught stealing three chickens?”

“Aye, they caught him trying to leave the pen of one of the new villagers,” Donovar replied.

I rubbed my face tiredly. “Damn, I knew that at some point I would have to dispense justice. I just didn’t want to.”

Donovar tried to comfort me. “At least it is not a hanging crime.”

“True, but I cannot shirk from my duty regardless,” I replied.

Donovar nodded proudly. “Aye. Perhaps, we can try that new thing that you wanted to try out? With
I smiled. “Yes, it would be a good time to try that.”

“None of the chickens were killed or harmed, so no fines are needed.”

“We can just have him work for the village then for a year, perhaps?”

“We will need to explain to the villagers how the punishment works – though I worry that some of the other lords might see it as slavery.”

I shook my head fiercely. “It is not slavery – merely community service. His actions threaten the community, and the community needs to be compensated. He will be given a definite time to serve, that if he fails to serve, and to the best of his ability, the alternate – more traditional – form of punishment will be carried out instead. He will not be whipped, he will be given food, and forced to only wear the orange jumpsuit.”

“The punishment for trying to flee should be high, though.”

I nodded. “I shall send a letter to Lord Stark and see what his opinion is on the matter.”

“And what work should he do?”

“I will leave that to you since you will be staying here. However, I would suggest simple, if laborious tasks. Perhaps, just hauling rocks or digging or mining. You could even set him to preparing the ground for the road to be put in.”

“I will not let you down, Michael! If I do, I shall do all the work again myself, and ensure that Lord Stark likes your idea!”

I chuckled. “I know you have your reservations – there is no need to lie. With just the one man and not a serious case either, this is easy to manage. Have faith, Donovar. Hard work will see us through.”
Act 2: Chapter 29

Fifteenth day, First Moon, 257 AC (+61 days)

Barrow Hall had surprised me. Many castles, to my initial surprise, when I had arrived on this world, were built of wood – especially the smaller and more unimportant ones. A few great castles were made of wood, like Deepwood Motte, and were things of beauty. They also made sense, in that a castle surrounded by forests would be easily constructed out of wood.

Barrow Hall was neither small or unimportant and was not surrounded by vast forests – yet it was made of wood. To be sure, there were trees around, but hardly in the same density as the Wolfswood. Barrowton was a large city, if not as nice or large as White Harbor, and the castle itself was nicely built. But the castle had existed for hundreds, possibly thousands of years. Rebuilt many times, but still here. Why had it never been built with stone? Even little by little, it could have been done – yet it hadn’t.

I didn’t comment on it, as I hoped to have a good relationship with Lord Dustin, but the whole thing frankly had me stumped.

Regardless, the whole visit had been somewhat pleasant. Denys Dustin was a gracious host if a bit pushy, and the rooms we were hosted in were luxurious. The food was plentiful, and the atmosphere of the city was a nice change of pace. Barrowton reputedly had around 10,000 people in the city walls, which was more than I could count to confirm. It certainly seemed much larger than Redbridge, but it was hard to draw a comparison between the two. For one, Barrowton was much more densely populated, and only counted those within the city walls.

Redbridge, as it stood today, had roughly 3,000 people in the general area. Another three groups of 100 people came from the Glovers, and our population growth was rapidly outpacing the death rate. Unfortunately, many of my people still needed to be farmers, so our population was overwhelmingly rural and spread out. Saying there were 3,000 people in Redbridge was a bit misleading.

“It certainly is an interesting proposal.”

Denys’ reply tore me from my thoughts. I turned to him and said, “Oh?”

He smiled reassuringly. “I’m glad you brought this to me first. It is interesting but needs some work.”

I stifled the urge to fidget and let him believe that I went to him first about my community service proposal. Lord Stark had already replied with tentative approval, though with some modifications.

“Though I do wonder how it would fare in a larger community such as this,” said Denys, gesturing to the city that stretched out before us.

“That is why I chose orange, Denys. Something bright and easy to see. The distinctive style of clothing also makes it more obvious. If someone was to run while wearing it, he is easily seen. If he sheds the clothing, a naked man is also easily spotted.”

Denys chuckled. “True enough. Together, we can word a proposal for Edwyle and send it to him once he returns from King’s Landing.”

Once again, I stifled my urge to curse. How should I get out of this? Denys would eventually realize that our relationship was not as he imagined it was, and while I did not want to be treated as he seemed to treat me, the benefits of it were great. Already, I had secured a steady, if not overly large,
supply of wine for my people and opened a market for my drinks, soaps, and garum. I still hoped to take some of his smallfolk as well.

I would probably have to send a separate letter to Lord Stark to apprise him of the situation.

“That sounds wonderful,” I replied.

“Speaking of wonderful, I must congratulate you on the news. A grandfather – that is a beautiful thing.”

I smiled. “Aye, my eldest daughter, Violet, gave birth to a daughter, Rose. Both are doing wonderfully as well.”

“Excellent, excellent. And your other children?”

“My second daughter is still unmarried, and my eldest son is set to wed Alice Manderly sometime next year. The details are still being planned out, but I’ve left that to the women.”

Denys laughed. “A smart choice. Speaking of marriage, what do you think Edwyle has gone south for?”

I blinked. “What do you mean, Denys? I thought he had said that he wished to show King’s Landing to his son and bring some issues forward to the King?”

Denys waved that explanation away. “Yes, yes. I’m sure that is a part of the reason. But what is it that drove him there?” His tone took on a lecturing quality. “The North has always kept to itself, except to occasionally show just how strong we are, and this trip is quite the surprise to the lords of the North. But interestingly, Edwyle’s son, Rickard, is unmarried. Coincidently, King Aegon’s granddaughter is as well. These are the details you must be aware of, Michael, so that you may always be prepared.”

“Ah, I had not realized. Is – is that a good move? Politically?”

Denys stroked his short beard. “It could very well be. Minor and major rebellions have plagued King Aegon’s, and he is not well loved by many of the southern lords. Tying the Starks, as a powerful House, to him makes for a great deal of sense in his eyes. As to the Starks? In desperation, Edwyle may get an excellent deal for such a marriage and possibly some deals with southern lords for food come winter. But knowing Edwyle, he will be wary of any such offers.”

“Why is that?”

“King Aegon had promised marriages before, for his children, but all except his youngest daughter have broken their promises and married others. He might try again with his grandchildren.”

“A Targaryen Stark. That would be quite the marriage.”

Denys nodded. “A first. Though it would involve the North more in the affairs of southerners.”

“I thought you said the North has always made a good showing?”

He chuckled. “I did, but it was not just war I am speaking of. Court intrigue has never been the First Men’s strong suit. The flowery language the Andals like use to hide their motives is always them simply hiding their daggers.”

“Does that mean you think a marriage would be a bad thing?”
“Perhaps, perhaps not. If Edwyke uses it for steady gains for the North, I believe it would work quite well. But if he tries to grasp something big?” He shrugged. “Southerners hate to share power and make sport of tearing down their rivals. A new player on the scene would ruffle feathers. An ambitious new player would do a lot more.”

“Do you think they will reach a deal?”

“Impossible to say. Edwyke has never expressed an interest before, but perhaps he’s seen something to drives him to become tied closer to the throne?”

I bit my lip. Perhaps he had seen more than I thought? Seen the inevitable changes that I brought? I had been keeping things close to my chest, but I had no doubt that my machines would eventually escape my grasp and set about changing the country.

He was a smart man, but to see something without the hindsight that I had? It was doubtful, but his actions were hard to reason otherwise.

“Perhaps,” I said. “Doubtless, he thinks he has a good reason.”

“True. Good relations with others is a key aspect of being a successful lord. It’s a shame that Lord Ryswell could not be here; it would have been good to cultivate a better relationship between the two of you. Perhaps later we can all get together, and perhaps invite Lord Flint and Lord Tallhart.”

“That sounds like a good idea. I have had construction begin on the castle at Stonefisk, and I hope that once that is complete in a few years that I can begin the castle at Osend.”

“Osend?”

“Ah, that’s the name for the future village, Denys. It will be located slightly inland, along the Twin Lakes River. My goodbrother’s family will take that over, and I will finally be a true neighbor to Lord Ryswell.”

“I see, that would be good. Speaking of new places, I have found a few people willing to move with you.”

“Oh? That is much appreciated, Denys,” I replied gratefully.

“Mostly third sons and the like, some with their own families, ready for a new adventure.”

I chuckled. “The older I get; the more adventurous younger people seem to get.”

Denys laughed. “I agree. There are about sixty people, but I’m sure they will work hard for you.”

Sixty was hardly a large number, but every bit helped. Plus, all it cost me was the trip here. Still, I could encourage them to send messages back to their families about how much they love Redbridge?

“That is most gracious of you, Denys. This will help me greatly in the coming years.”

“Oh, Michael. We will help each other; I am sure we will accomplish much together.”
Eighteenth day, Fifth Moon, 257 AC (+123 days)

The rain pitter-pattered on the hood of my cloak, drowning out most of the noise from around me. Under the edges of the hood, I could see Ryden suffering beside me on his horse as we made our way back to the castle. We swung around the cliffside, following the concrete road, as we finally neared the castle.

It was hard to make out in the heavy rain, but the etched sigil of my house was displayed prominently on the wall leading to the gatehouse. While the heavy rain made for poor travelling, it was a welcome relief from the dry summer we had been having. Not a drought by any measure, at least around here, but dry nonetheless, and yields were down.

Unfortunately, the rain was the best part of the day. Ryden and I had ridden out to the mining village to pass judgement on a criminal. This time, a man beat and robbed a fellow miner of his pay. The man almost got away with it, not letting his victim see him, but then he went and spent the money lavishly. The miners were paid well, but consistently. It was easy to spot a man living above his means, and he was given the choice of losing his hand and exiled or community service for four years.

It was the harshest judgement I had passed down so far, but the man’s victim was severely beaten and would be unable to work for at least a month, if not longer. The money that was being saved by not paying for the man’s community service would instead be going to the victim as compensation. Not everyone was happy, so I was satisfied that it was a good enough compromise.

Curiously, both men were immigrants and new to the area. Most of the crimes I had dealt with involved the criminals being new to the area, and I had no idea what to make of it. I was duly recording it, but I had no idea what it meant or what to do about it. Was it that many newcomers were young, hot-headed mean? Were the people that already lived here just saints?

I snorted.

I suppose it was just a result of more people, living closer together, with more wealth flowing around that got people bothered.

“Dad!” A voice shouted over the rain.

I looked to the side to see Ryden riding closer to me. “Something has to be done about the increase in crime,” he said, speaking loudly to be heard.

I smiled, amused to see his thoughts in the same direction as mine.

“I’m afraid I don’t have any great solutions,” I replied.

“Let’s start small and build it up then.”

I nodded. Wise boy. “Let’s build up the sense of community then. Organize village sports leagues.”

“Like football and ruggedball?”

“Aye, bring the community together for some fun. We can even have an inter-village tournament at the harvest festivals. The best team from each village can compete for a prize.”
“Wouldn’t that just increase tensions in the villages? Especially with money on the line?”

“It could,” I conceded. “We would need some impartial referees to sort that out. But, it would help bind the community together, since they would need to form teams.”

“How many teams do you think a village could even make?”

I shrugged, but it was hard to tell if Ryden saw the movement. “No idea. It’ll have to be something we sort out eventually.”

We were quiet again as we rode past the gatehouse and entered the stables. I had yet to fully staff the castle with servants as I really didn’t want to waste the money, and I didn’t see the need when it was just my family that would be benefitting from it. It still kind of grated on me to be waited on like that when I was not infirm. Still, as time went on, people were slowly hired on. A cook was needed to help feed the garrison, and eventually, more and more help was obtained as our garrison expanded.

It was a situation that would have to be solved eventually as I knew any noble guests, we would receive would expect servants and it would reflect poorly on me and my family if we didn’t have any.

As we hurried inside the main keep, we discarded our wet cloaks and shed out of our outer layers. The cool, damp air was slightly warmer inside the keep, but it made our wet clothes seem all the colder.

Footsteps echoed down the hall as my thirteen-year-old daughter raced towards us and leaped in for a hug. “Daddy!”

I laughed as I twirled her around. “Anari,” I replied warmly. I put her down, and she hugged Ryden as well.

Her face scrunched up as she said, “You guys are all wet.”

Ryden laughed. “That’s what happens when you leap before you look.”

She stuck out her tongue primly. “Still should have said something.”

“And miss a hug?” he said, laughing.

Anari pouted. “Well, if you’re going to be like that, I won’t tell you the news.”

“What news?” asked Ryden.

She stuck out her tongue again but didn’t answer. Ryden looked to me with a raised eyebrow as if to tell me to get the answer out of her.

Chuckling, I said, “We are oh so sorry, my favourite youngest daughter. Please, would you tell us the news?”

She put on an exaggerated thinking pose. “I guess… but to really make it up to me, some spending money when the trading fleet comes in would really make things better…” she said, trailing off as she widened her eyes innocently.

Ryden snorted while I rolled my eyes. “Perhaps, but it depends on how good you are until then.”

She brightened immediately and replied, “Oh, thanks, Daddy!”
“The news?” I asked.

“Oh! Right. A messenger came in for you but left the message with Violet – she’s in your study. Apparently, it was important.”

Ryden laughed. “Trickster – you would have had to tell us anyways.”

Anari gave him an impish look. “Maybe,” she allowed. She skipped off back to her rooms, but not before looking over her shoulder and saying, “Mom said she would be back for dinner – she’s out with Auntie Alessa.”

Ryden continued to laugh as we made our way to the study. The study was a cozy room – inspired by Lord Stark’s own – and while not filled with expensive, high-quality materials, it was perfect for me. Violet was sitting at the desk, going over some papers when we entered.

“Afternoon, sister,” said Ryden.

Violet looked up. “Ah, you both are here. How did the sentencing go?”

Ryden shrugged as he removed the last of his wet clothing and hung it up by the fire, before plopping down on a nearby rocking chair. I still felt the cold in my bones, so I stood by the fire to warm up.

“It is done. Anari said there was a messenger?” I asked.

“Yes, Father” She smiled wryly. “From the Twin Lakes surveyors.”

Ryden and I both shot to attention. “The results are in?” I breathed out.

She chuckled. “Yes.”

“And??” asked Ryden impatiently.

“And what, dear brother?”

I couldn’t see it from where I stood, but I knew Ryden’s left eye would be twitching madly.

“Violet…” I said, trailing off.

She laughed. “It’s good news – I swear.”

“Then tell us! Stop teasing,” Ryden said exasperated.

“Silver – it’s silver.”

I laughed with joy and Ryden let out a whoop!

Violet was beaming with happiness. “Quite a bit, according to the initial report. It was right where Evelyn had indicated the unknown metal.”

Still smiling, I said, “Wonderful news! Still, it is curious how Evelyn was not able to identify the silver.”

Violet shrugged. “In my testing, it seems like refined metal has a different sense to it than raw ore. There is some feeling of sameness between the two, but I’ve only been able to recognize it with great familiarity between the ore and the metal.”
I let out a hum of consideration. “That makes sense, I suppose. Regardless, I will have to send a letter to Winterfell. This is not something we can or even should hide from him. Ryden, I know you were planning to go on patrol with some Rangers to the south to visit the established rice farms, but I think you may have to divert to Twin Lakes. We need to establish a presence there immediately.”

Ryden nodded. “I agree; I will organize a patrol to leave in two days.”

“That’ll be fine.”

Still smiling, Violet said, “Will this change any of our plans?”

“A bit. The Twin Lakes settlement has moved up in priority, although it was already high.”

“By the way, Violet,” said Ryden. “I thought you had stopped your research once you figured out you were pregnant with Rose?”

Violet nodded. “I did, but this discovery was before the pregnancy. Still, I plan to continue when I am not pregnant.”

“Oh? What is your next project?” I asked.

“I still want to figure out how to find other skinchangers.”

I grimaced. “Please, be careful with that.”

“I know – I know. The North doesn’t have the same attitude as the Andals, but it can be far from welcoming. It’s just – I think I can do it. Sometimes I have almost felt a ghost of a thread from some people. It’s maddening that I think I’m close to figuring it out, but not being able to complete it. Besides, having skinchangers would be a huge boon for us. Can you imagine Rangers with an eagle companion to help scout?”

“I understand – we’ve discussed the possibilities before; I just don’t think the dangers are worth it, but I won’t forbid you – you’re all grown up now.”

She laughed. “Thanks, papa. I hear your advice, but this is something I want to pursue – ever so slowly.”

I hugged her. “Good. Now, go on and get out of my seat. I have some letters to write.”

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