Down a Rabbit Hole to Westeros

by Lamia_Kuei

Summary

A SI into Selyse Florent, later Selyse Baratheon. Refusing this time around to be vexed by a mustache, lack of indoor plumbing, and no more guacamole in favor of keeping her eyes on the prize: Surviving the upcoming Long Night and not letting Melisandre go Full Melisandre.
It happened in May. May Day, May Day. My mind was wandering. Unfortunately for me, this time it was a literal thing and I went to sleep knowing exactly who I was and where, and when, and woke up somewhere completely else.

I think I was lucky, as far as these kinds of things go, not that I have anybody else to compare notes with. I could have switched in public or something, with witnesses, in a place of very great danger while I was vulnerable from the disorientation. I’ve consumed enough media to know the so called rules of dimension swapping. It’s probably even codified, except I no longer have access to the internet to check. I didn’t even know how screwed up the stakes were, not until weeks after the jump.

I envied the sci-fi end of the spectrum in cases like these. Like in Trek. Ridiculously unstable Empire that espouses stabbings for military promotion purposes aside, at least they had computers. Here? I nearly made myself sicker by using up valuable recooperation energy fighting off some robed guy trying to stick leeches on me.

In the process, I found that my body was way smaller than I remembered, weaker not just because I was sick from what felt like a serious flu, and that I was probably not going to get out of this place with the aplomb of Dorothy from the Land of Oz. Or Alice from Wonderland. Or Wendy from Neverland.

My name is Selyse Florent. And I am a ten year old girl in the Reach, of Westeros.

My convalescence gave me time to think. I allowed myself to wallow about being a woman in Westeros. I was going to get into panicking about Night King: The Freezening 2.0 later, because as far as I can remember from the TV series alone, I’ll have 99 problems and my vagina was one of them. Literally so, as my fertility was my fortune and StorySelyse had some shitty rolls of the dice. Metaphorically so, because here a woman basically hoped that she could be a widow of a Great House like Olenna or Cersei and then people paid attention to what they had to say and you could field armies in your name. Only, to hope that your own Lord Husband croaked after you gain the requisite heirs and spares was gauche and unladylike, so you didn’t actually say so.

The other method of power was dragons and that was out of reach for me.

I also spent a couple minutes pounding my little fists against the mattress at my sides when I realized that this meant that I would be going through puberty. Again.

I punched ineffectually some more when I remembered that I’d be getting a moustache and I was the wrong gender for that to be acceptable. I’d have to invent waxing. For my face. When my only experience with such methods was cringelaughing while watching the relevant scene from 40-Year-Old Virgin.

After Maester Bryan judged that I made a full recovery and I was presented to my mother for inspection, I set about with a will. Was I absolutely sure that I would be going through puberty. Again.

I didn’t even know how old I was to be before getting married. The show didn’t go there. The wiki didn’t go there. I didn’t enjoy not having actual deadlines to measure my progress against, so I
hustled.

I obtained a blank notebook from Maester Bryan and started a bullet journal. I had habits to track and in the future this low tech method would be as accurate as I could get with predicting my menstrual cycle. I needed the journal for peace of mind; the idea that I was actually going to be a good player in the Game, good enough to last longer than StorySelyse. So in addition to mundane habits like making sure I had my vegetables because I didn’t want to perish from scurvy, brushing my teeth after getting a brush especially crafted for me as well as daily flossing with lengths of leftover sewing thread (I may not be pretty, but I sure as heck was going to have all my teeth), and fighting for the right to take baths once a week (daily was seen as unacceptable weirdness as well as wasting servants’ time and resources), I laid out a curriculum for survival as a lady in Westeros. I followed it like my life depended on it, of course.

I faced the facts. I was not going to beautiful or pretty or anything but big-eared and mustachioed. And tall. I paid attention to my grown relatives in Brightwater Keep and as far as I could expect, I was going to be on the wrong side of yet another Westerosi beauty standard for women. So I must be learned and sensible so that I could be the Kevin to Stannis’ Captain Holt. It didn’t help that I’ve been told that I’m more a Gina Linetti type. So not appropriate for Westeros.

I didn’t remember precisely the ridiculous list of accomplishments that Caroline Bingley insisted made a true lady in Pride and Prejudice, but things were not so far off from Regency standards to current Westerosi standards. So in addition to a new routine of walking the outside perimeter of Brightwater Keep’s curtain wall as one of the few acceptable activities for ladies that had anything to do with developing some cardiovascular strength, (because as foolish as that was, I held out hope that maybe, this crapsack world would give me a break and I’d be Elizabeth and Stannis could end up being a sort of Darcy. Hah. With the way expectations go to shit in this world, he’ll probably be an emotionally constipated Mr. Rochester type. Or a completely inaccessible Captain Ahab.) I practiced the heck out of dancing. I was even able to pass off doing squats, pilates, and various calisthenics as leg strengthening exercises in service to said new obsession with dancing. I was going to be graceful as fuck in any dance and nobody, not even Cersei Lannister, was going to do anything but say that I showed well on the floor.

I took up music lessons. Singing and playing the harp and mountain dulcimer. I used the excuse of needing to increase lung capacity and strengthening my diaphragm to take up a routine of jogging from one bailey to another within Brightwater Keep, belting out scales as I went. Every so often I would amuse the guards by asking if they’d noticed or not if this time I could hold a note longer. Fortunately, I wasn’t tone deaf. I sounded pretty good, actually.

My singing kept us ladies entertained during the mandatory sewing portion of the day. Unlike Arya, I wasn’t mad about it. Because here was another area where I knew there was an advantage I needed to exploit on my own behalf. Actual couture sewing can do wonders for a body. If my squats and jogging up and down bailey tower stairs didn’t end up giving me a booty (who knows how my breasts were going to come in) then I’d just have to make dresses that implied I had a booty. I would ruche, I would pleat, I would drape, I would color block, I would princess seam, I would bias cut the shit out of fabric. Sequins were not a thing in Westeros, so I could not pray for inspiration from RuPaul as I marshalled my chubby little child fingers to give me even stitches. So with every well hemmed handkerchief, not lopsided button hole, and successfully set in sleeve, I was giving thanks to the fashion goddess Chanel. I would’ve included Versace in the mix, but I was aiming to impress Stannis in the future, not give him an aneurysm.

I managed to get Maester Bryan to actually explain some historical geopolitical background while I was rote-learning the heraldry, Houses, and locations of major keeps and cities. I stubbornly slogged through Valyrian lessons because who is to say I wouldn’t need to beg Daenerys for my
life in the future. I didn’t need any math more complicated than multiplication and division in order to do housekeeping accounting as judged acceptable for ladies, but I managed to build a reputation for being such a precocious learner that Maester Bryan ceased to be too resistant or disbelieving once I started attempting algebraic proofs. It wasn’t like as a girl I would be allowed to learn anything like actual classical Logic. (Incidentally, Logic as a topic did not even truly exist for the Maesters. Fuck. Guess I’m going to have to introduce the Scientific Method and have Maester Bryan take credit.) So the logic of math it is. Can’t be having Stannis dismissing me for being too emotional in my decision making, after all.

I think over time I began to imagine Stannis as a more pissy, bitter Vulcan.

It took a bit of detective work and proof before Lord Alester Florent, my uncle, saw that I was not a common girl by fourteen. I was allowed to investigate the housekeeping records because my mother was gratified and glad that I (unlike my other girl cousins) was dutifully interested in the business of being a useful wife to a future husband. I transcribed a past year’s records into double entry bookkeeping and discovered that the dry goods merchant that the Florents worked with was shorting us on sugar and other spices by weight.

Between the housekeeper and head cook not micromanaging and a number of servant girls who learned early to not ask questions at the risk of getting hit by a wooden spoon on the wrists or their ears, nobody wondered why certain sacks or boxes came in with actual stones inside. The servants unpacking the dry goods merely disposed of the rocks by habit instead of bothering the head cook and with many being so young as to have never served in any other keep before, all was well in their point of view. They of course had no idea that the merchant charged by the pound and we were paying for useless rocks.

I gathered up the evidence and wrote out a report of conclusions, on how the merchant was cheating us and depended on multiple servants not knowing what was what in a shipment of dry goods in addition to general illiteracy.

Lord Florent questioned me harshly, not believing that a girl could discern what grown adults could not. I countered that cunning is as cunning does and conmen always depended on lords and ladies to not trouble themselves over the details of trade.

“Cons are safer than outright theft. At no risk of bloodshed, this man has taken Dragons worth from our House. Other Houses blinded by honor may trust whomever they like. I say, trust, but verify.”

Lord Florent drummed his fingers, repeating my last sentence to himself.

“You did well, Selyse,” he finally said. “It was clever of you.”

I curtsied, smiled in what I hoped was a winsome manner, and quipped that as We Dare With Craft, it behooves us to warn others that they must not dare against us. I worked to have Lord Florent approve of me since my own father died of a horse riding accident very shortly after my youngest brother Erren was born and I had no memory of him.

The merchant was horsewhipped and sent to the Wall. Double entry bookkeeping was instituted for the accounts of Brightwater Keep from then on and Maester Bryan wrote up a treatise and instruction text on the subject and sent it off to the Citadel. In case it was ignored, he sent copies to some of his other maester friends from his studies directly. I took the time to teach all of my cousins who were old enough to comprehend and the importance it. Serendipitously, Uncle Axell did not need to have much prodding by Lord Florent before embarking on a big auditing of accounts. Maybe he would be castellan of Dragonstone again. Maybe not. But I saw it useful to me
to have the man gain years of practical experience beforehand.

As for the servants, this incident made it so that it made sense to start instituting a system of checks. Major servants were taught at minimum to be able to read the numbers and names of the most common supplies and goods that would be coming into the keep and to use the weights on the scales and balances kept in the kitchen. Goods coming in would be weighed and measured, opened and sifted through, and undergo another weighing and measuring before acceptance. Discrepancies must be brought to the attention of the merchant and any severe conflicts would be brought to the attention of the steward. And woe betide the merchant who gained the attention of Lord Florent himself for attempted cheating. Weekly inventory would be done, with younger servants made to follow a more experienced servant to learn how to properly do the counts and writing for it.
The Florents were a pretty unpleasant bunch, though not like the Freys or anything heinous like the Boltons; they were a pack of pretentious snobs persistently clinging to past glory because of descent from Gardner Kings’ lines. Putting on airs. Generally deficit in the humor department aside from ye-olde-time-y staples such as flatulence jokes. I began to try lifting up the quality of humor and entertainment in an attempt at self preservation. I would be waiting for a while before getting stuck with Stannis and he already wasn’t a barrel of laughs. Not to mention that clown of horrors that is Patches. Fuck me, I was going to have to live with Patches. I wasn’t going to go my days without laughing genuinely.

I tortured everybody with puns and knock knock jokes. After that were rounds of Mad Libs in the sewing room or dinner times. We challenged each other with riddles. I took to writing down the better ones into my notebook. Soon enough, my cousins were copying me and having their own notebooks for copying jokes and riddles into.

Then, I started telling stories, with foxes as the heroes and tricksters. I found a sad gap in Westeros storytelling. There’s grisly, properly Grimm tales stuff like the Rat Cook, romantic stuff like Florian and Jonquil, but nothing properly Aesop or Mother Goose in tone. I just started off with the Gingerbread Man. Eventually, I recalled enough of the plot to regale the family with a modified retelling of the Fantastic Mr. Fox, which was gratifyingly well received. Eventually we even put on a skit. After dark, I went for more properly grisly stuff, like Bluebeard and Tell-Tale Heart. Nothing like murder to amuse Westerosi, after all.

My family did wonder at this veritable fountain of imagination. I offered to show my younger brothers Imry and Erren, along with my cousins. I showed them books that Maester Bryan allowed me to read, such as The Princess and the Queen and The Loves of Queen Nymeria. War and murders and political maneuvering. I explained that history was full of stories and parts of stories. I read and read until I had parts to mix about in my head. And then I would take a walk. I would walk and think and fit the pieces together. I told them that I had (and I really did) asked visitors to our keep about the trickiest liars and scams they ever heard of, the strangest murders, and just plain juicy gossip. I would trade stories for stories and write down notes in my notebook. It took paying attention, a good memory, curiosity, and time to think. They were skeptical, but when I challenged them to prove me wrong, they really had no choice but to start reading, searching for inspiration from lies and truths.

I managed to jockey myself into a position of influence amongst us kids. I sussed out a con, after all. I was clever, a credit to the memory of our foremother Florys the Fox, the adults were saying. It tickled the kids’ imaginations. They would join my rambling walks and I told them the stories that I was more sure the adults would not approve of; Tom Sawyer, I adapted Pirates of the Caribbean and Treasure Island and kept Dorothy and the Land of Oz rather the same. Assassin’s Creed, with the whole hidden culture of assassins? These kids couldn’t tell Renaissance Italy from Braavos, Tyros, Myr, or Volantis. It was all fantastical enough.

I didn’t plan to have them idolize lying liars, assholes who double deal, and the idea that everyday we were hustling. I was bored and missed unlimited streaming access to the internet. But if somehow I managed to give any of these Florents some idea of street savvy, some idea that chivalry was institutional hypocrisy barely holding back the insane amounts of cruelty and violence of this world such as the Boltons or Lannisters could unleash, it would be worth it.

I could not predict the chaos I was unleashing on the castle. The boys were supplementing their
arms training with a mutated game of Hide and Seek; ambushing each other in the halls, headlocking and with very serious announcements of “Throatstab- throatstab- You’re dead!” Being kids, it was decided to simply refer to this game as ‘Murder’ and the girls joined in too and we were having a jolly time until Imry had the bright idea of actually trying to rappel his way down a wall and well… corporal punishment with wooden paddles. Totally still a thing in Westeros for all genders.

Lord Florent didn’t really approve, but as the boys were absorbing the bullshitting skills of my stories, they managed to convince him that we ought to continue our sneaking games, as at least, if none of the guards could locate a pack of children sneaking around, perhaps they were leaving the castle open to actual infiltration.

“It’s like a bloody mummers troupe invaded us!” humorless Uncle Axell complained.

We mimicked bird calls, the low born tones of the servants, the swaying walk of drunks, I got the boys to teach us girls how to whistle, how to properly give and take a punch, we would hide sticks up our sleeves and practice quick dagger draws in jest, we rooted through the basements seeking treasure (there wasn’t anything) and secret passages (actually existed. In case of sieges. Good to know.) The girls learned how to convincingly faint, inspired by Elizabeth Swann. If the Tully kids could come up with their own code, so could we. I worked out a series of dashes and dots and just called it Florent Code instead of Morse Code. We knocked out messages to each other between doors, signalled each other in the evenings from one baily tower to the next using flashes of candlelight, we played at dead drops and when there were visiting merchants or lords, choosing to tail and spy upon these persons unused to our appearances.

When we were judged too rambunctious, Lord Florent would try to forbid the boys from the training yard and all of us from the music room as a form of grounding. That just meant we invaded Maester Bryan’s library and starting reading as much as we could and summarizing what we learned to each other. It was also an excuse to completely recategorize the library. So yes, I instituted the formerly Dewey Decimal System as the Florent Decimal System. Maester Bryan was thankful once he got done hyperventilating over a pack of kids turning his precious library upside down. He wrote up another paper on the merits of such a categorizing system and forwarded it to the Citadel. He never did get any reply and was starting to feel slighted on my behalf that my perfectly good ideas weren’t being well-received.

He was so well disposed to me that we worked together on a project to discover the principles of Mendelian genetic inheritance laws with pea plants. When we get to writing it up, we’re going to probably call them the Bryanic Inheritance Laws or something suitably meaty like that. The results from the first generation were so interesting that he immediately started a program of carefully recorded crossbreeding. I left him to it, telling him to get results from at least five generations of plants. Afterwards, I recommended that if he wanted a better response from the Citadel, to have some of his other maester friends conduct their own experiments and to share their results with him. Multiple people with conclusive results, I reasoned to him, would necessarily mean better chance of acceptance and accolades.

I wasn't going to risk depending on the rare (because of its sheer size. Expensive to copy out) Maester Malleon’s Lineages book when the time came. I wanted replicable, publishable, spreadable, genetics treatises up and running. And just in case there were to be any objections based on the fact that the initial test was based off of plants, I also asked that Maester Bryan ask his maester network of colleagues to start looking into the results that came from chickens, goats, sheep, and pigs with trackable color variations.

Once he saw the sense of my suppositions when it came to genetics, he was entirely more open as I
explained to him my ambitions regarding the periodic table. I posited to him the idea that gold was fundamentally an element that was untransmutable from any other material, making the ultimate goal of alchemists an impossible proposition. He replied that perhaps the technique was merely not yet achievable and that perhaps seekers of the method needed to experiment longer. I said that I was of the mind that metals such as gold, silver, copper, iron, tin, lead, zinc, and other such substances are elements that cannot be changed except by alloying. And this alloying also worked for non-metallic substances such as sulfur or carbon, only of course we should come up with a different term for the process.

Eventually, I laid out the principles of a periodic table.

While I was pushing the boulder of improving chemistry knowledge up that hill, I was also trying to increase cashflow for the Florents, which would allow me to more freely conduct experiments and do buildouts. Wool made the Medicis rich enough to start their banking business. And Cotton was King, as was said of the Antebellum American South. I wasn’t allowed to swing the hammer myself, but Alekyne and my brothers good naturedly gave the orders to carpenters to start putting together prototypes of the cotton gin and carding drum. I was going to play on the Florent thirst for outshining the Tyrells to good use.

When I must practice my harp and dulcimer, eventually every one of them joined me (before, the girls only made desultory efforts at basic competence) and I got the boys to make up a rhythm section and we jammed and I managed to introduce the concept of acapella to them. Now, given how young we were and the fact that we did performances for just the family and household, I had to keep things PG. I went with some of those classic doowop young love type hits like “Stand By Me”, “Be My Baby”, “Put Your Head On My Shoulder”, or “I Can’t Help Myself”. I stayed on the lower register on the high harp to approximate bass tones, Melessa or Rhea on a mountain dulcimer was as close as I found to a guitar, tambourines for the youngest kids and Imry and Erren with the drum set I collected through trial and error. Alekyne turned out to be a big ham, hungry for applause and was always glad to be the front man, when it wasn’t my turn to front a trio with Melessa and Rhea.

It was fun.

It was important because I knew the crapsack was going to one day open right up on all of us and I hoped that maybe some of this simple happiness, these moments of laughter and camaraderie would keep them warm during the winter.

So yes, I started to love all these dish-eared assholes. Even Delena, poor girl. She really is the prettiest of us. And what did it get her the first time around but a bastard and no chance for respectability for her? I mean, yes, I was hoping that maybe I could butterfly away a shitty evening number one with Stannis, but for her sake, after getting to know her, I cared and wanted to spare her getting screwed by Robert Baratheon. I tried to get her to wise up a bit. I tried to do that for all of them.

My relentless campaign made Brightwater Keep a place of joy, of liveliness and curiosity.

Later I was to find out that visiting lords and their retinues were impressed and servants reported back to me some gossip: “That Selyse girl, plain as nightingale, poor thing. But blessed with a voice as lovely as one!”. We were basically asked to put on a performance every dinner like some sort of Von Trapp deal, where the visitors raised their eyebrows at first at the impropriety of it, but by the end, they were tapping toes and giving applause. We told tales, posed riddles and very occasionally Lord Florent allowed the long tables of the hall to be pushed to the sides so that we could have a few dances.
Everything was going so well.
Brightwater Keep: Accursed Puberty

My first menstruation occurred annoyingly in the middle of the night, making a mess. I was fifteen. I was waiting for it with a low key dread since twelve, but apparently I was to be a late bloomer. My mother let me know that now Lord Florent was receiving letters of interest from other lords about his niece. I asked if he was seriously considering them. My mother said yes, but as I had made so much progress since ten, that Lord Florent thought he ought to be more careful about which House I should be married into. Turns out the man was pragmatic enough to see that a sensible girl who could handle household accounts like a boss in addition to mastering ladylike pursuits was a credit to his House that he wasn’t willing to let go so easily. Suited me fine. After all, if I was traded off before Stannis got into the marriage mart, what the heck was I going to do?

At this point, it was permissible for me to join Lord Florent’s party when he was obligated to travel to other lords’ keeps for feasts or on business. I had to make that change from little girl to young woman in appearance. This was not a coming out or debut, like for the Regency or Victorian period, as Westerosi culture didn’t have such a thing.

I was getting away with (and started a little fashion trend of my own for the Florent girls at large, if I may say so) white pinafores over front buttoning dresses that came to my calves, with stockings and laced shoes. A rather Dorothy in Oz look. I had my hair in two braids on either side of my face, Wednesday Addams style, which did the trick of hiding my ears, and all the other Florent girls copied me. The pinafores also had the benefit of pockets.

Mother campaigned and Lord Florent consented for me to have three entirely new dresses suitable especially for the festivities of feasts and dances. Mother and Melessa planned to contribute a few of their older day dresses for making over, only I seemed to shoot straight up from growth spurts and everything they had was simply too short for me. So we ended up needing to buy up new lengths of cottons for practical everyday dresses as well.

Mother clucked and been at a loss once we all realized that I was as tall as I privately predicted at ten. Men don’t like tall girls, everybody said. They like women who could look up becomingly at him through her fluttering lashes. And here I was, staring at them straight in the eye. Or worse, literally looking down at them. I laughed. Frankly speaking, I was tall and skinny and with an unpretty face. I hoped for resembling Katherine Hepburn. I got Wallis Simpson. At the least I wasn’t going to do my eyebrows like the Duchess. Ghastly.

It must have said something about how well I cultivated my close relationship with my brothers and Cousin Alekyne that they privately told me that if they heard any outsider boys saying things about how I looked that they would come together and beat the stuffing out of them. I thanked them very nicely and reminded them that they ought to be crafty enough to get back at said potential dishonorable fellows without getting caught.

StorySelyse probably let cumulative years of low self esteem and lack of feminine friendship bring her down. I didn’t come from that world and I had different references of beauty to bolster myself. I experimented for weeks before this point, but I finally got a mixture of honey, sugar, and lemon juice that worked for hair removal, with trial and error on my leg hairs. Of course all the ladies thought I was insane at first, but then my mustache grew in. And then they were supportive (though skeptical). My handmaid, Megga, was begging me not to make her do it, sure that she would be dismissed without references for hurting a Lady, but I smeared on my perfected batch with a spoon to my upper lip, pressed a strip of cloth onto the mess, braced myself against my chair with a death grip on the chair arms, grit my jaw, and ordered her to rip.
Well, it hurt like a motherfucker, as I expected. Melessa and Rhea both shrieked when I bellowed like a boar stuck with a spear. Megga burst into tears. But I was already reaching for my hand mirror.

“It’s gone. It’s GONE!” Hot damn!

I know in the scheme of things, the successful deployment of a depilatory technique that hurts like a motherfucker that I’d have to undergo every few weeks isn’t that important, but this mustache was about 50% of StorySelyse’s problems. I defeated it. I’ll take the incremental wins as they came.

Second on the agenda was figuring out a hairdo that was both womanly and hid my ears. As it was, all the ladies of leisure in the Reach defaulted to the styles set by the Tyrells. I recall Margaery’s breezy waves from the show; center part, twisting the locks at the temples towards the back and secured half up and letting everything else fall free. It’s a nice look. Acceptable in my old dimension, even. Not like Cersei’s architectural hairdos. I wasn’t here to sit for hours while two separate maids wrestled with my hair. I had things to do with my days. Also, I wanted to be different from the Tyrells. Florent-y pride and the constant impulse to be out from under the Tyrell shadow made it an acceptable endeavor.

I gave it some thought and I decided to go for the Edwardian style of updo. Gibson Girls were shown playing golf, swimming, being sporty outdoors women. I was going to go for volume at the top to balance out the horizontal of my ears, and to hide my ears with said volume of hair as well. It was an updo style that would look good freshly brushed for feasts as well as (I hope) looking great tousled like Brigitte Bardot when she was in Contempt.

It worked out splendidly. Megga took well to arranging pompadour rolls with the requisite volume at my forehead and temples with the locks of hair at the front of my head. For the rest of the hair hanging down to my back, it depended on the occasion. For no fuss daily wear, it was easy to have a single braid and coiling that into a bun set high like a ballerina and pinned securely. For more fancy occasions, I’d go to sleep overnight with my hair in a myriad of small, coiled braids at the crown of my head, the whole wrapped in a scarf to keep my hairpins from working free in my sleep. I’d wake up with a good explosion of waves and volume the next day and the hair at the back would be worked into a myriad of twists, the ends of the locks pinned and tucked underneath a bun. What I loved was the fact that things didn’t have to be neat. Tousled was the point. Tendrils working free was just an artistic touch and not a mistake.

I was still mad about the lack of pockets in ladies wear. For daily wear, I commissioned Chanel style jackets with lovely four pockets on the fronts, in black or blue with white braided cord trims, to subtly reference my House colors. Boucle wasn’t available, so I settled on broadcloth instead. Chic. Practical. I called them Florent Jackets, which were quickly adopted by the rest of the ladies and they were unisex enough for the men and boys to ask for their own versions.

I actually enjoyed the fact that Westerosi men were not relegated to blacks, navy blues, or brown tweeds in terms of fashion. I kept the structured silhouette and then went for the pizzazz of French military jackets from the Napoleonic era, using either black or the blue shade of our heraldry flowers, braided cord trim in white, and a bright foxy orange at the cuffs and upright band collars, with brass buttons. They were worn with dark trousers and shined leather shoes or boots. I amused myself by introducing orange spats or gaiters into the equation should they wish to further accessorize.

My new long dresses I kept sleek as much as possible, against the fashion instincts of the rest of the ladies. I couldn’t afford to be as bold and brassy as Wanda Woodward from Cry-Baby, but I did
identify with her ethos: I wouldn’t be caught dead in a full skirt. Less Scarlett O’Hara, more Morticia. Slinky was where it was at; I didn’t need anything hiding my booty.

I had a booty, lucky me. It only took years of walking, dancing, squats, and going up and down stairs. I did not, it turned out, develop equally bodaciously in the bosoms area. That was not to say I let that little detail bring me down either. Curved darting and ruching did the job of emphasizing what little I had and princess seams nipped in at the waist for emphasis. I abhorred a straight seam joining a bodice to a skirt; my dresses were of an unbroken line from the underbust to hem. I draped on the bias, letting gravity skim the fabric closely over my hips and buttocks, and kept the skirts slim downward. At a little above knee height I allowed for the fabric to flare out for a modest mermaid silhouette. For the daily wear dresses, I added contrasting colored piping at the seams. I kept my sleeves narrow and unadorned, the better to wear my jackets over.

My feast gowns were entirely velvet, exposing my clavicles (but not any cleavage), with a drop back low enough to show off my shoulder blades and long sleeves. My mother, my cousins, everybody advised me to embellish, embellish. To pile on laces, cording, embroidery, something. I resisted very strongly. Nobody understood my aim until I put on a full outfit after finishing the sewing on my first dress, which was solid black.

My hair was up, my dress was on and hugging me properly, and my pieces of jewelry were worn for the first time. I was allowed to have pieces of my own. I commissioned seven blue flowers of various sizes, referencing our heraldry, made from pavé set faceted sapphires. They could be brooches, they could be pinned into my hair, they could be strung as pendants, they could adorn a belt. This time I had one pinned jauntily to my hair over my left ear, further blocking my ear from view, I had one at each shoulder of my dress, the largest one where my decolletage would be, and finally the rest forming a cluster at my right wrist as a corsage.

“Ready?” I called out from behind the cracked door. Everybody was crowded into my mother’s sitting room and I had changed in my own chambers, not wanting to spoil the big reveal.

My family cried out with impatience. I nodded to Megga, who pushed hard on the door; it swung open with a dramatic bang. I was standing with my back facing the waiting crowd, with a hand on my hip. I had Megga make everybody stand clear to give me a runway space beforehand. I gave a smile over my shoulder and spun, before striding forward, doing my best Naomi Campbell strut.

“Oh, Selyse! Selyse!” Mother kept on saying, her hands clasped to her mouth, her eyes watery with pride.

My brothers were gobsmacked, just staring at me. Melessa and Rhea were clapping.

“She actually looks good enough for going out visiting,” Cousin Alekyne muttered, bewildered.

Delena frowned and shoved him ineffectually. “She’s lovely!”

I sashayed to my uncle, Lord Florent. I dipped smoothly into a curtsey, with my wrists and fingers turned elegantly, poised like for a dance.

“Greetings, my lord,” I said.

Lord Florent gestured so that I may rise, standing tall and confidently meeting his eye. His gaze was friendly, though assessing as he looked at my tousled upswept hair and tight black dress, relieved only by the glitter of my sapphire flowers. I was giving some Hollywood bombshell realness. Was he able to comprehend it, or was I too modern, too alien?
“I’m not a man who knows about fashions and dresses and other such things,” he said. “So may I just say that you look wonderful? My niece, the clever, storytelling, musical Selyse. And now people may say, lovely, in truth. By the gods. It’s miraculous a change.”

I smiled at him with my perfect white teeth and thanked him.

“Though, I do perhaps rue that you have turned out looking so well. Now all the ladies of House Florent will be spending my gold to adorn themselves as finely to match!” he joked.

Everybody all laughed.

“Well, my ladies. You must make your choices and have your dresses and finery ready. You will have a chance to show it all off very soon.”

“Soon? How soon?” Melessa asked.

“Lord Whent puts on a tourney at Harrenhal, for his daughter’s nameday and invites many. Some say he wishes to outshine Lord Lannister.”

“A tourney!” Alekyne cried out. “May I join the lists, father?”

“And me!” Imry echoed, but mother shushed him.

Everybody crowded around Lord Florent asking questions, wanting him to show them the invitation to read.

“Niece. You do not seem so excited,” Uncle Axell had walked over and murmured under the din.

“If Lord Whent wishes to outshine Lord Lannister, a great many Houses and Great Houses besides will be there,” I swallowed before saying.

“Aye. Nervous, are you?”

“Many eyes would be on me,” I lifted my chin. “This just a moment of stage fright, Uncle. I will be quite ready for gaze of the crowds when the time comes.”

Uncle Axell nodded. He was the most openly a jerkass of the Florents in residence, but he had taken a liking to me. I had flattered his ego about his perspicacity in searching out fraud against House Florent with his auditing and said that I hoped that when I was married with a household of my own that I would find a clever and as fine a steward as him. He was never praised much in his life and never noticed for much either, being a younger son with a bad attitude and judged ugly, besides. The earnest trust and admiration from a niece that everybody in the family valued was quite a boost to his self worth.

So here it is; finally a touchstone event that would have me figuring out when I was in the story.
Finally, after what felt like an entire month and a half, the household deployed for the tourney. Lord and Lady Florent, Cousins Melessa, Alekyne, and Rhea. Mother, Imry, and I. Erren was judged too young, as was the rest of the cousins. My last uncle, Ser Colin, joined us to compete in the tourney along with a number of other household knights. We traveled with two wheelhouses, one that could seat six and one that could seat four. At any hour, a number of us cousins would be riding because those wheelhouses had shit all for suspension and the roads were just plain shoddy.

Away from the adults, I posed information gathering as a game. We all had our notebooks and charcoal pencils, so it would be easy to make notes. They asked what they ought to be listening for. I wasn’t too sure, myself, I confessed. I only heard that many lords were starting to choose sides between the King and Prince and that we ought to know how the various Houses would ally themselves. To that end, if we could find any sure news of betrothals, that would be very good. Numbers of knights and the Houses they served would be helpful. As we had never done this before, I cautioned everybody to not wander off alone, to confirm headcounts with each other before writing things down.

Harrenhal was amazing, in that it was an excessive folly, a testament to one man’s grasping, greedy hubris. Everybody else was overawed by the sheer size of it. I oohed along with everybody as it came into view, but honestly, I was more interested in the fact there reputedly was a bathhouse in the premises.

Outriders were sent ahead and fortunately, the Whents had been planning this for nigh on a year because our party was lead to a ready campground. The servants went to work setting up the tents and family rode on, to enter Harrenhal proper and pay respects to the Whents. This was not a straightforward endeavor; along the way, various other lords and their family would approach us to greet Lord and Lady Florent and of course that meant everybody had to stop and introduce each other and much small talk was made about the travel conditions on the road and the weather.

Of course. Small talk was small talk across dimensions.

There were some curious looks from how differently our family party was dressed. For traveling, us girls chose to put on whimples under broad brimmed hats to keep the dust out of our hair, so there were not too many looks our way from the front. That was not to say that our new, more figure-conscious tailoring didn’t result in double-takes and ogling when we walked away. Cousin Alekyne had no compunction with doling out cuffs to heads or shoves as he went. Imry was more put out as he was young enough to still have illusions about proper chivalric behavior. Rhea was unsure at all the new attention, but it was yet another measure of the trust I’d built up that she could voice it and I could reassure her as much as I was able so that she wouldn’t shrink in on herself in public.

Suffice to say, we did finally meet the Whents, made nice, and servants were sent to find our camp so that we could have a change of day clothes sent over after an overdue visit to the bathhouse. I savored the opportunity to be fully submerged in hot water. This was a quiet lull and I was filled with a leaden feeling in my stomach. Events of import would happen this week. I would be a witness to history. And the crapsack would start tipping over.

We made our way afterwards to the stands for the opening ceremonies. As we sat, we were
scribbling away at our notebooks, casing the attending Houses in the crowd. Us cousins managed to get Lord Florent and Maester Bryan to allow us to bring along his far-eye. The crowds were truly massive. So I’m scanning the section of the stands reserved for the Great Houses. I spent many minutes looking at the Starks. I had no clue who was who amongst the brothers. And there was poor Lyanna, bright and healthy and with a smile on her face as she spoke to one or other of her brothers.

Her smile turned false as Robert, (who else could that big linebacker physique belong to?) would lean close to her and make some grinning statement or another, gesturing big and reaching over her to shove the shoulder of the brother sitting next to her. I guess he would be Ned, then.

I was about to pass the far-eye on as we were taking turns, but then I saw the one sitting next to Robert’s other side.

It had to be Stannis.

Did I feel a fatal attraction, a bolt of lightning? Nah. First off, given how old I know I really am, the fact that he currently looked like a high schooler was off putting. Made me feel like a dirty old lady. But I was able to recognize that he was crushworthy, pimples and all, if I was a true contemporary.

I had a type and he was hitting all the right notes. I’ve always gone for the intense, lanky brunettes, like Spock or Loki. It was arresting to see how Stannis looked so lean compared to Robert right next to him. He was still and silent, not included in the conversation at all, unsmiling. It was really disconcerting how much more attractive to me I think he would be once he grew closer to my mental age. He had these dramatic, strong eyebrows and I think he will get Cillian Murphy levels of cheekbone to balance out that currently awkwardly large jawline. Yes, he also did have resting bitchface, but I was predisposed to expect that.

“It’s my turn, Selyse, what’s taking so long?” Rhea tapped my shoulder.

“Just a Baratheon.”


“... He doesn’t impress me much,” I passed the far-eye to her.

Rhea and Melessa gasped in fake amazement of me not being impressed by the very manly Robert Baratheon. I shrugged.

“What about Stannis?” Rhea asked, looking through the far-eye. “Though he looks very… stern.”

“I like his eyebrows.”

“Nonsense! Eyebrows of all things, Selyse!” Melessa reached for the far-eye. “Let me see!”

They spent time looking at Stannis and teasing me good naturedly about my odd tastes.

Finally, a blast of horns announced the proper start and the royals were announced as they entered the royal box.

Oh, it was bad.

“Is that the King?” Lord Florent reached for the far-eye, astonished.
“Gnarly,” I muttered, unable to help myself.

The man did not look well. He looked stank and I am willing to swear that he had let himself go to the point that he had actual dreads. With a hair type that’s not naturally prone to dreads. I could hear the incredulous murmurs of others in the stands at his appearance.

Everybody silenced for the ceremony of Jaime Lannister’s swearing in to the Kingsguard.

He looked so young. So proud and hopeful. It curdled my stomach to think on what would be in store for him.

“Poor fool.”

“Why would you say that?” Melessa asked.

Lord Florent looked over, raising an eyebrow in silent question.

“King Aerys spurned Cersei Lannister as a match for Prince Rhaegar. Lord Lannister is no longer Hand because of this slight. And now his heir has taken vows that mean forswearing his inheritance and is willingly putting his head on the block. Hostage to the King.”

Lord Florent frowned, looking back towards the row of Kingsguard.

“Really?” Rhea frowned also. “Is it really that bad?”

“There is no precedent for the heir of a Lord Paramount for entering the White Cloaks precisely because of what it means to forfeit such an inheritance. The King knows this. Lord Lannister knows it. That boy doesn’t. He actually thinks this has to do with his skill at the sword and chivalry instead of the King not wanting to be killed stone dead by the most dangerous Lord in the Seven Kingdoms. It’s all about the hustle, like I said.”

My cousins looked surprised, but not too shocked by my thinking. Lord Florent nodded.

“Let’s not speak more of this here. It isn’t the right time,” he finally said.

We cheered with the rest of the crowd when that ceremony concluded. We settled in to watch the first rounds of the jousting, waiting to cheer for Uncle Colin. Witnessing a joust in person had a totally different quality than on screen. You get to the exciting parts with cuts. Here, there was waiting for the knights to get to their starting positions opposite each other on the field and then a sudden thundering gallop and the crash of impact was as startling and exhilarating each time it happened like it was the first time. I was certainly entertained.

Uncle Colin didn’t even get to joust this round; the list was long in truth. We’d have to wait until tomorrow. And hopefully, he wouldn’t get unhorsed immediately. When the sun was sinking towards the horizon, people started filing out, to get ready for dinner. This first night would have a grand, proper feast in the Hall of Hundred Hearths. This would be the debut of the Florent velvet wiggle dresses (so called by Erren comparing us girls to caterpillars moving on a leaf.)

Well. Deep breaths. Time to work.

I coached Melessa and Rhea beforehand. So I was sure they had their chins up and kept their strides steady. Easy sashay.

Lord and Lady Florent were announced first, followed by Cousin Alekyne with Melessa on his arm. Uncle Colin entered next with Rhea and then it was Imry with me and mother on either side.
I’m not going to lie. As we were shown to our assigned seating for the feast by a servant, people literally stopped talking upon seeing us pass by. We were the Girl from Ipanema, we were Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell entering the cruise ship dining room in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. We were slaying.

I had to muster all my self control to maintain nonchalance while overhearing the whispers as we passed by.

“Florents? Did I hear right? Those are Florents? Really!?”

“I thought Florent girls were plain!”

“They look incredible!”

We were seated and all the while we were eating, people kept coming by to greet Lord and Lady Florent and to blatantly look over us cousins. Only the adult contemporaries or more senior than Lord and Lady Florent approached. We looked so different that not even the young people we knew already from within the Reach approached to greet us ourselves.

“I’m not sure I like how they are all looking at us,” Rhea murmured to me.

“It’s envy,” I replied.

“Oh,” Rhea looked a little surprised. “I’ve never been envied before.”

“I think I like it,” Melessa chirped.

I reminded them to eat, as we had to keep our strength up, but not to load up on anything too heavy with butters or oils.

There was a hush as Prince Rhaegar was announced; he had a new song to perform. King Aerys would not deign to dine at the feast. Apparently his paranoia meant that he almost never ate in the company of any crowds.

I got to say, now that I can see him closer in the confines of the hall, with the glow of candlelight on his hair, he was ridiculously otherworldly to look at. It was like he was run through the best of Square Enix’s movie filters for protagonists, with freaky deaky purple eyes and hair flowing in a breeze while he was indoors. And like many Final Fantasy products, Prince Rhaegar was a confusing, beautiful mess. This motherfucker, here. Ugh.

So he sits, busts out the harp and does the Wonderwall bit. He was very good as a musician, very good expression. Everybody was affected because he was a good showman. But I was too busy stewing about his lousy life choices to be much more than impressed by him on technical merits. …And there goes Lyanna, crying because she was so overcome by emotions. Ugh.

He makes his bow, we get the applause over with and the group of musicians on the other end of the ridiculously oversized Hall start tuning and warming up. For the upcoming first dance I will be partnered with Imry while it is up to Melessa and Rhea to cajole Lord Florent or Uncle Colin to stand with them as Alekyne is scanning the room for somebody to ask. And off he goes, confident stride and an easy smile. Even though I’m the same age cohort as them, I’ve thought of all my cousins as these little kids and me more of an older cool aunt, really. Seeing him be this self-assured and gentleman-like made me feel wistful and proud.

We line up, facing our partners and later my mother would say that the way we Florents looked was so well compared to everybody else, it was shocking. That was one way of putting it. The
dresses emphasized every sway and jiggle below the waist as we skipped and turned up and down the floor in the figures of the dance. Imry was grinning because I was happy myself. Even if nobody else asked me after, this was one good, happy memory of looking good, feeling good, and just dancing. We passed Melessa, Rhea, and Alekyne, who were all also smiling. It was lovely.

Apparently the obviously admiring looks that us Florent girls garnered put a fire under Randyll Tarly’s ass, because he came charging up after the end of the dance to claim Melessa. Lord Florent had been leading him on a slow motion haggling for Melessa’s hand. His jerkass personality as well as his more overt allegiance to the Tyrells had kept uncle from committing firmly. I wasn’t subtle about my scorn for Tarly’s non-reading ass when uncle told all of us that Tarly was turning out to be the most prestigious contending suitor. I warned Melessa that as well settled as she would be at a place like Horn Hill, he was a hard, cruel man. Melessa confidently and sensibly told me that may be so, but she was seventeen and it was about time to be a wife and if he laid a hand on her, she’d just throatstab him and make it look like an accident. Chandelier fell on him, that sort of thing.

I do not see her as joking, either.

As it looked like a settled thing, I resolved to warn her about him mistreating any of her future kids and to especially make it known early on that literacy was a nonnegotiable.

Lord Tarly had the audacity to scowl at and intimidate any other potential partners for the rest of the dancing. Fortunately, I got both my uncles and my little brother to step in so that Melessa could relax. Imry was happy to do so, since he wasn’t confident enough yet to ask for his own partners. Rhea was happy to dance with anybody at all who asked and she was not without a partner for the rest of the night.

I could see that some fellows were about to ask me, but when they started walking towards me, they would suddenly comprehend my height and abort, turning to pass me and making it look like they were heading towards servants to get another drink or something. It was fucking hilarious; who did they think they were fooling? So while I waited for the taller men to work up their own nerve to approach me, I sipped at a drink while observing the floor with mother or Lady Florent and gossiping.

And… Brandon Stark asks me to dance. Huh.

I accept and off we go. He compliments me on my dress, I thank him nicely. He then apparently thought I was supposed to respond more effusively because he accuses me of smirking at him. Get a load of this jabroni.

“Smirking? Me? Smirking? Surely not!” I tried for lightly flirtatious but the Gina Linetti came out and I’m afraid it was just plain sarcastic.

The pattern separates us for a moment so when we meet up again he comes back with:

“If you want to be seen as more agreeable, you ought not do that.”

“I disagree with that,” I retort with a smile.

He tries to get me to express any concern about his opinion. Not today, sonny boy. It’s like the only girl to ever disagree with him is his little sister and every other was overawed by him being Young Lord Stark, heir to Winterfell. I try to keep things light and change the subject. His pride won’t allow him to just shut up and dance, more’s the pity.
It was excruciating. He tops it by asking me what my problem was, more or less.

“You will not be pleased by any answers on that subject from me. Let us dance and not speak on it more, my lord.”

He frowns, but finally does so and we finish the dance. He leads me off the floor and does not return me back to mother or Lady Florent.

“I do not understand why you should be like this,” he finally says.

“Who are you to tell me how I should be?” I snag a goblet off a passing servant’s tray because I needed a drink.

He scoffs.

“I am, as you know, the future Lord Stark and you’re just a-”

“Continue that sentence and I will pop your eyeballs out of your skull,” I smile pleasantly at him. “And shove them up your arsehole. Understand?”

Oooh, he looks pissed now. He glares at me and my smile settles into a smirk. I think he’s actually trying to loom except I’m equal to him in height. One of us has to step away. I’ll be damned if it’s going to be me.

“You’re not even pretty anyway,” he sneers. “Nobody else asked you to dance, after all! Be more grateful.”

I can’t help it. This high school level bullshit was the last straw. I guffaw in a distinctly unladylike manner, which only makes him turn red and I hold his gaze as I cackle in his face.

Mother and Imry start rushing over to me since I’m making a scene.

“Selyse?” mother asks, looking between Brandon and me.

“Mother! Brandon Stark said something most amusing! You simply must hear it!”

Brandon takes a step back as both mother and Imry look at him expectantly. He mutters excuses about needing to rejoin his family and takes off.

“Selyse?” mother puts a hand on my arm. “What was that?”

“He was being tiresome and rude, mother,” I shrug. “About my face. That’s all.”

Imry looks set to chase after Brandon and do something foolish, so I take his hand.

“He doesn’t matter. Words are wind, remember, and his are worth less than a fart to me.”

“But-!”

“Come on, Imry,” I smile at him, willing him to drop the subject. “Let’s dance this next dance, shall we?”

I nod reassuringly to mother and we step out.

Afterwards, to further illustrate that I was somehow trapped in a farce, Robert Baratheon starts striding towards me. I brace myself, but Imry beat me to the punch.
“Are you going to call my sister ugly too? Fuck off then!” Imry glares at him.

Robert looks down at the kid who is like, two entire feet shorter than him and the incongruence causes him to bellow out a laugh.

“Don’t you laugh at me! I’m not afraid of you!”

“Peace, peace. So you want to defend the honor of your sister; that’s being a good lad!” Robert raises both his hands, palms open. “I do not come here to insult anybody.”

“Good thing, too,” I wryly raised an eyebrow. “I suppose you cannot do worse than Brandon Stark thinking that I’m a bitch, yes?”

Robert stares at me, agog at the casual profanity.

“He must needs remember foxes can shake cocksure little pups by the scruff of the neck for misbehavior as well as any wolf. If he doesn’t want the response of a bitch, he ought to remember about minding his manners.”

Robert chuckles.

“Stags don’t have scruffs, my lady. What of that?” he grins at me.

I have to admit Robert in his prime was handsome and charismatic. But I was not here to be tempted by his whirlwind attentions. I had plans that didn’t need fucking up.

“Watch your step so that you don’t trip on a foxhole and break your leg,” I smirked.

“Obviously,” Imry nodded solemnly and smirked also, imitating me.

“Then I will step carefully,” Robert replied, still grinning. “It seems I must take care to not anger crafty foxes.”

“See that you don’t,” Imry impudently replied, his eyebrow raised skeptically as Robert extended his hand out to me, offering to lead me to the floor. “I may be smaller than you, but I shan’t have more disrespect about my sister or my lady cousins.”

Robert laughed again.

“My sister is the best sister in the entire world!” Imry declared fiercely. “So go and dance if you like and that had better be all. I’ll be watching.”

“Mouthy little lad,” Robert said as we went down the dance pattern. “That will get him in trouble one of these days.”

“I expect Uncle Colin and our master-at-arms to teach him to back his words up with skill and force.”

“And if he meets men more skilled than him?”

“He’ll be out and about with a shovel. Digging some foxholes.”

“That’s hardly honorable,” Robert shook his head, after chuckling at the idea of Imry skulking about with gardening implements and murderous intent.

“Perhaps fools who would insult ladies to their faces should not be surprised by the inevitable
responses.”

“... Come now, it’s not so surpri- bad, is it?” Robert only barely managed to catch himself.

“I do not deny that I am no great beauty. It is also true that it takes a very foolish man to insult a woman to her face about her face and not expect her to turn on him. Are you such a fool, Robert Baratheon?”

Robert opened and closed his mouth, but he must have seen the meaning behind the teeth baring grin I gave him and we danced the rest of the dance fairly amiably, speaking about feast banalities such as our favorite dishes prepared and the other couples in the hall. He remained bemused after leading me back to Imry.

He must have been resolved in the first place to do better than Brandon in conversation with me, as he succeeded in eliciting only mild annoyance this evening. Guess that meant he really was in love with Lyanna enough to keep his wandering eye in check for this one feast, at least. He went back to the Stark party, gesturing back towards me and laughing, slapping Brandon’s back while Brandon scowled.

“Are all Lord Paramouts such assholes?” Imry wrinkled his nose.

“That can’t be so much a surprise. You really must hold your temper better, Imry. Lord Paramouts are dangerous.”

“I thought I did! But, well...” Imry squeezed my hand. “You really are the best sister in the world. I hate them all mocking you about your looks.”

I squeezed his hand back.

“Thank you, Imry. Want to dance again?”

Imry shook his head.

“Maybe Uncle Colin is free this time.”

So I passed the rest of this first feast dancing with my male relatives and had a tolerably good time thereafter.

The rest of the tournament passed well, considering what was in store. We cheered for the horse race, cheered for Uncle Colin until he was unhorsed on his third round, went to see the mummer show (Cripes, it was garbage. Shakespeare was difficult enough for modern readers and audiences in my dimension but worth it for the insights into the human condition; this was full of Punch and Judy level fart jokes and domestic-violence-as-slapstick. Gross.) The singing tourney was more entertaining by far. Us girls went up and down the impromptu marketplace opened by the merchants drawn to the location by the sheer number of crowds, window shopping.

Our choice of attire was subject of much gawking. The presence of our personal guards prevented us from being accosted, but there was much leering from uncouth men and scandalised whispering on the part of women. I had worried about Melessa and Rhea, but they admitted to me from the start that they liked that my designs resulted in skirts that weren’t heavy and that they didn’t see what was so very scandalous about our clothes in comparison to our first exposure to Dornish fashion. I loved the opulence, patterns, cutouts, plunging necklines, and gauziness myself after seeing Dornish attendees. But as I was amongst Andals, it was better for me to be suggestive with form fitting instead of actual skin baring, Rhoynish style.
We ended each day exhausted by walking and our heads full of sights and sounds, writing down our observations into our notebooks late into the night.

Suffice to say, when Prince Rhaegar crowned Lyanna as Queen of Love and Beauty, I almost missed it. The silence that came after was ominous. Brandon jumped to his feet, pulled down by Ned and Benjen, ignored by Rhaegar as he rode away. I had the far-eye up just in time to catch Lyanna’s blush and smile, before she ducked her head and her brothers hustled her out of sight and the murmur of the crowds punctuated by indignant cries from the Dornish present followed their retreat.

Chapter End Notes

I actually visualized Stannis as more Mark Strong and Renly as more Cillian Murphy. Murphy's got a bit more prettiness going for him. Selyse is a combination of Wallis Simpson and Diana Vreeland. Lord Alester's the aerodynamic and sly face of Vincent Cassel. Alekyne's a young Mark Craven. Imry's Crispin Glover; he can be innocuous like McFly or set to murder stare like the Thin Man. Erren's a less twitchy Jesse Eisenberg. I see the rest of the Florent women as SNL women in general: Amy Poehler for Melessa, Kristen Wiig for Rhea, and Julia Stiles for Delena.
Brightwater Keep: Robert's Rebellion and Aftermath

On the way back to Brightwater Keep, I spoke about my so-called conclusions to Lord Florent. He was not sure about my (frankly crackpot. But to be a good forger, you have to leave some flaws. Too perfect is too obvious) theories of Rhaegar’s propensity for polygamy, but he did agree that some short-sighted, rash action would come either from the Martells, Starks, or Baratheons in response to this slight.

Lord Florent was finally done toying with her suitor over her dowry and Melessa was married to Randyll Tarly before the year ended. I expected to miss her, but the extent of depressed spirits that came upon me knowing that now I would be separated from my good friend and cousin forever, more or less, surprised me. I immediately commissioned scribes (it was good that Brightwater Keep was so close to Oldtown) to make copies of her favorite stories of mine, especially Fantastic Mr. Fox, to send to her, along with copies of sheet music of transcribed songs that us cousins performed.

Melessa was the first of us cousins to marry and enter that new state of adulthood. By now, our daily laps around the Brightwater Keep curtain wall became working meetings between us cousins. Cousin Alekyne had by now come around to my attitude about improving industry and economy for Florent territory. Lord Florent was more cautiously conservative about such things, but Alekyne had been exposed to my projects with Maester Bryan and could clearly understand the purpose of methodically increasing crop yields, of focused breeding programs to improve livestock quality, of improving the quality of roads within our holdings in order to ship goods faster to markets, and in general caring about trade, unlike the rest of conventional nobility. He saw the sense of it and I was assured of him working on implementation with dogged conversations with his father.

Imry and Erren wanted to become proper knights and they were on their way by squiring for Uncle Colin. They were still enchanted by my rendition of Assassin’s Creed, however, and kept up their practice of eavesdropping and sneaking around no matter what. Maybe they could serve as the basis of counterintelligence for the future. Who knows? At least they weren’t afraid to spend their free time absorbing information and developing some situational awareness.

Rhea kept up her music practice with me and sewing. She had a patience and affinity for numbers, and could tap out and transcribe the fastest with the Florent Code. After a lot of encouragement, Maester Bryan was willing to expose her to more mathematics than I. Back in my own dimension I only barely passed pre-calc because I couldn’t graduate without it. Rhea was a true mathematician and found great fulfillment solving equations. Her memory was excellent and it was exciting to think on how useful she would be for future endeavors. I thought she’d be wasted if she should marry old Lord Hightower but kept that to myself. It wouldn’t do to show my hand to Lord Florent yet without any real power of my own.

Events unfolded in due time. Lyanna disappeared. Brandon Stark was roused to ride south to disastrous response by the Mad King.

I don't remember if the Florents participated actively in one way or another during the Rebellion in the story. When news came that Lord Stark and Brandon were executed and that the Lord Arryn was refusing to turn over his wards in favor of raising banners in revolt, the scope of disaster of it almost meant that I was shut out of Lord Florent’s solar as he went to discuss the matter with his brothers and Cousin Alekyne present. Fortunately, Alekyne fought to convince Lord Florent to allow me to sit in on the meeting.

It was all very confused and emotional on the part of Lord Florent and Uncle Axell. I waited to see
if House Florent was to take a neutral position and it looked like Lord Florent’s cautious nature
would set the tone. He asked me for any insights. I recommended to begin gathering our fighting
men to go into a defensive, watchful position, and emphatically not do what the Tyrells might do. I
also reminded him of my thoughts prior to the tourney at Harrenhal, about not wasting Florent men
one way or another in a conflict between the Targaryens.

“This is not between the King and Prince, it is now three Lords Paramount and the Crown!” Uncle
Axell objected.

“Unless the abduction of Lyanna Stark is merely a ploy by the Prince to distract his father and
waste forces loyal to the King against the rebels before making his move. A greedy prince might
try anything at all. He was not at the Red Keep, after all,” I countered. “We do not know where he
is, we do not know enough. As it is, we are not in the way of any armies on the march. Wait and
see, while preparing. Brandon Stark’s rash actions brought about his and his father’s doom. We
ought not follow his example.”

Since my appeals were pretty in line with Lord Florent’s usual thoughts, he resolved to stay neutral.

House Florent made no moves except alerting our levies to ready themselves defensively and to
wait. Lord Florent almost heeded the Tyrells when a call went out to march on Storm’s End. I
reminded him that Lord Robert Baratheon managed to evade Tarly and prevent a decisive defeat
and that a leader who knew how to maneuver over terrain was still formidable, especially when he
would be meeting up and augmenting his forces with Hoster Tully’s banners. Lord Florent agreed
that it was highly likely that the Riverlands would muster on the side of the Arryns and Starks,
given Hoster’s choices in betrothals for his daughters. It was only logical. Uncle Axell chafed at
this, much preferring the odds of Storm’s End falling to siege, but Lord Florent was firm and that
was that.

The ultimate wisdom of Lord Florent’s decision and my assurances did not become clear until
Robert’s victory and killing of Prince Rhaegar on the Trident. When news by raven came that
Robert was declaring that he would take the Iron Throne and become king, it was clear that ending
the war would only be a matter of time.

We stayed safe and aloof, receiving ravens and biding our time.

News came that Robert was going to have a coronation. King’s Landing was close enough for Lord
Florent to personally go to pledge fealty. He set off with an entourage that could travel quickly.

“Look for opportunities while there,” I suggested to him before leaving. “Many would see the
Reach punished for the siege on Storm’s End. Excepting us, as we were not there. Do remind Lord
Arryn of your very wise decision.”

“Niece, you cannot seriously think we would be rewarded for doing nothing,” Uncle Alester
admonished me.

“If the Tyrells end up not being punished as they ought to be by the new regime, then it is very
likely that we will end up benefiting somehow, as a form of leverage against them. After all. Lord
Tully has no more daughters.”

“Ah,” he tapped the side of his nose. “I will let you know of any opportunities of that sort.”

“Thank you, Uncle. Travel well!”

The year that Robert’s Rebellion ended was the same year that Samwell Tarly was born. I leapt at
the chance to see Melessa again and to assist during her lying in with Lady Florent and Rhea. I thought I might as well brush up on my child-caring experience, since it has been a while for me to be around a proper infant. I also took it as an opportunity to assess how lackluster the library at Horn Hill was and to write up a list of books that I could feasibly gift to Melessa. It turns out that given that there were actually no Tarly women currently living at Horn Hill at all, Melessa was able to bring the castle staff onside relatively quickly with her sensible, friendly ways.

Samwell was a healthy, pink and round baby, with an open, friendly face that was just darling. The idea that he would be scorned by his asshole father was really awful. I reiterated to Melessa my fears that Lord Tarly’s assholery would not be held in check with regards to his children and to educate her children to value curiosity and learning, as well as the ability to fight.

Lord Florent stopped by Horn Hill on his way back from King’s Landing to see his first grandchild and so that the group of us Florents can return to Brightwater Keep all together. We tried Tarly’s patience and hospitality without any remorse, fussing over Melessa and the baby. It was only after Lord and Lady Florent, Rhea, and I returned to Brightwater Keep that we heard that Lord Stannis was charged to make an assault on Dragonstone, to finish off the Targaryens once and for all. While that was going on, news came that King Robert will marry Cersei Lannister, fulfilling Tywin’s bid to have his daughter on the throne as queen.

Lord Florent saw the upcoming royal wedding and celebratory tourney for said wedding as another opportunity to seek out Lord Arryn, the new Hand of the King, to investigate how receptive he would be towards potential alliances. He did not see any trouble at all with including the oldest four remaining of us cousins; Alekyne, Rhea, Imry, and I for the festivities. My eighteenth birthday passed as months worth of preparations were completed in King’s Landing to suit House Lannister’s prerogatives for a grand celebration. We were already on the road by the time Stannis returned from Dragonstone empty-handed and to face King Robert’s ire.

With the celebratory atmosphere and Lannister forces bolstering the Goldcloaks, King’s Landing will likely never be safer to explore. While Lord and Lady Florent schmoozed and made sure to be seen, us cousins set out to explore the biggest city in Westeros. We circled, happily lost in the marketplaces, until we learned to orient ourselves according to where the Red Keep, Dragonpit, and Sept of Baelor were in relation to each other over the horizon.

The overarching foul odor of King’s Landing prompted evenings of proto-urban planning discussion, jumping from sewage management, to perhaps ordinances banning horses and livestock from entering the city proper, to refuse and dung collection teams funded by taxpayers living within the city, to bringing in more clean water by piping, aqueducting, wells, or plain rainwater collection to facilitate cleaning, to the founding and construction of King’s Landing public bathhouses. It was fun to do this kind of speculative brainstorming and to find out that we collectively didn’t know enough about the state of the royal treasury to make educated guesses on feasibility.

However, the pros and cons analysis all came out such that just because one or another or a combination of such solutions would cost a lot of money in terms of merely reducing stink, implementation would increase and recoup itself such that the expenditures would be worth it.

We took in the pageantry of the wedding ceremony of King Robert and Queen Cersei at the Sept of Baelor, we feasted and danced afterwards, and enjoyed the wedding tourney. Lord Florent and Lady Florent worked through whatever Vale acquaintances they had and finally managed to wrangle Lord Arryn into accepting a dinner with us. To lower the presumed pressure on Lord Arryn, Lord Florent also invited Bronze Yohn Royce and his family.
Us cousins put on a fine show that evening. The conversation was sparkling, as we told anecdotes of our explorations of King’s Landing, made jokes, and entertained before the food was served by singing songs, and playing instruments. Imry asked that we bring out our slates and chalk after dinner and so we teamed off and played rounds of Pictionary. Alekyne and Imry took Lysa Arryn into their team and Rhea and I teamed up with Andar and Robar. While we were occupied by the game, Lord and Lady Florent were laying out praises of our capabilities. It was self evident that us cousins were comfortable in mixed company, able to entertain ourselves with talent and wit. It was on Lord and Lady Florent to reveal our ability to handle household matters and Lord Florent was unstinting in praise of his hopes for Alekyne’s future management of Brightwater Keep and holdings, speaking of the success of the ideas that Alekyne had discussed with him that were already improving crop yields and land fertility.
King's Landing: For Science

Chapter Notes

Warning: Mention of experimentation on animals. Mention of experimentation failures that require euthanizing.

Later, Lord Royce approached Uncle Alester on his own initiative, willing to open discussion of a marriage between our Houses. Lord Florent agreed that it was a sound idea and they entered into talks. It turns out that Rhea, being lively as me that evening and more conventionally prettier, had turned Andar’s head. Lord Royce also put forward the idea of a daughter of his for Alekyne. Uncle Alester consulted with Alekyne, who stated that he would be willing to meet with any of Lord Royce’s daughters, and to see if any seemed suitable in sense and temperament, with a head for numbers. In the meantime, us cousins put forward the idea that Rhea would like to assess compatibility with Andar with more of these supervised dinners and perhaps joining our exploration of King’s Landing, where Alekyne and Imry would be present for propriety’s sake.

This was as good a reason as any to prolong our stay at King’s Landing and Lord Arryn, seeing how Rhea and I were honestly trying to befriend and engage with Lysa, saw the benefit of hosting the dinners within the Red Keep. Lord Florent found a manse formerly owned by a now attainted Loyalist knightly House for pennies on the Dragon and snapped it up. He left Uncle Colin ultimately in charge, advised Alekyne to see this as a period of trust in his good behavior without direct supervision, and for us to all take care to be a credit to House Florent. Lord and Lady Florent returned to Brightwater Keep. Mother and Uncle Colin’s wife, Rosamund of House Oldflower, brought Erren and the younger cousins altogether to the manse to stay.

Maester Bryan agreed with me that it was imperative that our more rigorous course of study continue, so Lord Florent hired on a Maester Willis. When Maester Willis was not teaching, he was assisting us older cousins on our King’s Landing book collection project. Manses and other properties of loyalist noble families were abandoned. I put out an idea to Lord Arryn to allow for the properties to be sold off at public auction, and for the funds to enter the treasury. He found it reasonable. Lord Florent did quietly scoop up more properties ahead of said auctions, since we were becoming such good friends. Nobody else who could afford it much valued books, which allowed us Florents to make uncontested low bids on entire libraries. The visiting young Royces didn’t know what to make of us diving into crates of dusty books with a verve. There were the usual histories and herbals. Occasionally, a copy of law codex was found or a text on more esoteric subjects such as engineering or architecture or math. I was hoping to get my hands on some Northern lore, anything to do with the Long Night and anything having to do with Essosi sciences or culture.

During these bouts of cataloging, us cousins would sing as we worked, snacks were provided, and the Royces were suitably entertained. We of course could not invite them to just sit inside the manse all the time, so we supplemented by outings within King’s Landing. The Royces were a little intimidated by the intense, happily argumentative tone of discussion that we Florents had over books and hypotheticals for solving different problems and plans for the future, as well as the unfamiliar collaborative decision making processes I had introduced years ago.

Besides the overarching book collecting and cataloging project, there were a number of other
projects. Alekyne was very interested in shortening lead times from increased production of crops up to reducing processing times and packaging and transportation to market. As the manse, which we dubbed the Foxhole, was larger than we needed, one wing became a work space and workshop. I’ve began pulling together different facts and data into different subject notebooks, writing down what I remembered of my home dimension as speculative ideas. My cousins were so used to my imaginative stories, that they didn’t blink an eye about what seemed to be outlandish scribblings. Maester Willis was very shocked indeed, but Maester Bryan has long been sure that no matter what, at least my ideas are fascinating to explore.

I was trying to figure out if an actual fountain pen would be feasible, which meant trying to find a fine metalsmith willing to experiment with me and I was concerned with practically inventing a sextant (obviously I wanted to be that much more useful to Stannis in the future). I knew for sure that a moon or known bright stars and a horizon and angles were involved. I did enjoy reading ‘Carry On, Mr. Bowditch’, after all. Astronomy was a thing maesters studied and there must be some almanacs somewhere in this stinking city. And if not, well, guess we’re inventing almanacs. Once I and Maester Willis can explain what the heck I’m trying to do, I’m sure I can sic Rhea and her mathematical mind on the whole thing with an abacus and we’re in business. Nautical navigational revolution, here we come.

Oh. Magnets. Need to find out if that’s a thing.

Rhea was inspired by Alekyne’s agricultural explorations to think on preservation processes. Bottled wine was seen as the model to expand upon and she would oversee experiments in the kitchens, putting various foodstuffs into glass bottles and jars sealed with cork and wax, boiling them, and seeing what happened. I hinted that perhaps a tin container would be more useful and with less risk of breakage and she enthusiastically followed up.

Imry was still a little young for serious thinking, but he wouldn’t let go of the Assassin’s Creed hidden blade. Oh, well. I found a spring latch door lock, allowed him to see the spring in action, and told him to start mocking up a wooden model of the potential blade and see where it took him. I really doubt that at sixteen he’d be able to tinker to the point of figuring out how to make a switchblade, but it would keep him occupied, at least.

How did this seem to the Royces? Intimidating, mysterious, odd. Fortunately, our musings were not purely theoretical. They did not really understand our new appreciation for the filthy lucre gained from trade, but Andar understood immediately the benefits of producing more food and then being able to preserve it in easily transportable ways when it came to sustaining troops on the move in war. Runestone being a seaside holding and so close to Gulltown also meant that even he understood the urgency that I had for hammering down a method so simple, that possibly functionally illiterate captains could use to successfully find longitude while out in the open sea. And for that, Alekyne had to insist as Rhea’s brother that if Andar thought he could reduce her to overseeing the household and arranging occasional feasts while giving birth when she could be the key for a mathematical revolution in sea trade, he had another thing coming.

Andar comforted himself that even though he didn’t have the education or the capacity to comprehend the rows of numbers in charcoal pencil that Rhea was working on, he could see that she was pretty enough, pleasantly mannered, and not prone to extravagant spending. Our House was descended from First Men kings, like his own House. It was prestige-wise sound, she would come with a rich dowry, she was accomplished with more conventional ladylike pursuits and she liked him back. Furthermore, he liked Alekyne as well, finding him adept with the sword and bow and a good rider, despite his preference for sitting indoors tinkering and experimenting instead of hunting, hawking, or the lordly hobby of visiting whoreshouses. Why not? He went to speak with his father, so that Bronze Yohn could send off a raven to Lord Florent to begin the marriage
articles haggling.

We dined at least once a week with Lord Arryn and Alekyne took the lead on my behalf, asking him about matters of state. The contrast between an heir that was responsible and eager for improvement, prosperity, and peace to the lackadaisical King must have pained him, but he seriously gave answers and Alekyne was impressing him with questions seeking more details and data, and asking for my thoughts and the both of us poking away using our collaborative pros-and-cons methods before making suggestions that may be unorthodox, but fairly sensible.

Through the dinners, we were able to convince Lysa, lonely and already being bullied by Cersei, to come visit us. She could do her sewing with us, she could listen and be entertained by our singing and playing instruments, and in general be in better company than Cersei and her snobbish Westermen entourage.

I did not know if it would be possible to build something useful out of cultivating Lysa. Perhaps it was too late by the time she made the decision to date-rape Baelish. At the least, the Royce girls trying to catch Alekyne’s attention, a Jeyne and Marsella, shared her hesitancy about the scandalously hoydenish manners exhibited by Rhea, Delena, and I. We were always forthrightly stating opinions and arguing with Alekyne and Maester Willis. In their point of view, arguments were all disputes. Instead of an energetic process that winnowed out unworkable ideas while brainstorming. Frankly speaking, these ladies never had an idea about anything in their lives.

While I was not able to fully engage with Lysa due to my time commitments, Rhea and Delena were happy to fill the gap, telling her stories, posing riddles, amusing her with puns and jokes, and challenging her games of Connect Four or the Florent version of Uno, where we substituted the High Valaryan word Mere for Uno.

They were present for the 3 month long mark of Rhea’s canning experiment. Now, I had warned Rhea strenuously to take all precautions when it came to using human test subjects. We ceremoniously opened up some of the jars, (saving the others for another 3 months. I figure a three month keep time was too ambitious already, but who knew? That’s what experimentation was for.) and fed some to pigeons, chickens, and caught feral cats. She had ambitiously prepared some with sausages and fish. Now canned sardines was obviously a thing in my old dimension, along with Spam, but this was simple water boiling, not pressurized canning, so I was the most leery of those and sadly was proven correct when the cats perished after round of bad suffering, where we had to euthanize them. Rhea was a little disheartened, but I was encouraged by the fact that my own hypothesis that high acid foods (which, by the way, litmus existed already in Westeros. Huge load off my back because I certainly had no idea how else to conduct this most basic of chemical experiments without it. Apparently it came from ground up lichen. Amazing.) would prove better preserved. It was then that we got some servants to find some friendly-enough denizens of Flea Bottom and to escort them to the Foxhole.

Since this was Rhea’s experiment, it was on her to clearly explain that she was working on developing a way to better preserve food and that she showed the five men and women of Flea Bottom the pigeons and chickens that had not died so far from eating the food. She said they were free to eat what we had uncorked, but that they were to stay for a few hours after eating, so that Maester Willis could be on hand to help if they should suffer from stomach upset. They were rationally hesitant, but hungry.

So they took spoonfuls of the jams, sauerkraut, and pickled vegetables. I was all for dumping most any vegetable into brine and vinegar, since I knew already that they would keep very well. As they sat and waited to see if they would get sick, us cousins set out to sing and perform our songs back to back to while away the time. This act of entertaining the smallfolk scandalized the Royces and
Lysa, but we didn’t much care. Alekyne also privately cynically supposed that if they were to die on Rhea’s account, at the least they should do so having had a happy hour prior. Alekyne debuted Summer Wind, The Best Is Yet to Come, Can’t Take My Eyes Off You, and Wouldn’t It Be Nice. For the girls, we went with Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White, How Deep is Your Love, and You Can’t Hurry Love.

The experiment was a success as they all didn’t die. We brought out some day old bread so that they could pile on the rest of the jar contents on top and to have a proper meal instead of the spoonfuls they were allowed before. They left, after touching their hats or bobbing curtsies. Us Florents immediately celebrated, hugging and patting Rhea’s back.

“Three entire moons! Maybe longer! That’s more than enough to make trips to Essos and back and not needing to reprovision!” Alekyne crowed.

“You should write to Lord Florent about this,” I told Rhea. “This is a real accomplishment!”

“I will begin writing up a paper for Maester Bryan and the Citadel,” Maester Willis added. “This will be most valuable once winter comes.”

Andar quietly congratulated Rhea, who beamed at him.

“Once we see what happens in three moons, I think we should let Lord Arryn know,” I mentioned to Lysa. “Would you be able to set up a meeting? It would be important to the defense of the Seven Kingdoms to have the Royal Fleet with such an advantage.”

Lysa wavered.

“Rhea is a little shyer than me and Lord Arryn is so important as Lord Hand of the King.” I continued. “And we do not know Lord Arryn so well as you, who are his wife. So you see, this is a very important favor we ask of you, to bring this to his attention.”

She agreed and I wrote down the earliest possible date the jars could be opened into my journal. We continued on, entertaining the Royces and Lysa. By now, both Lysa and Cersei were pregnant and it showed. Lysa bowed to Lord Arryn’s dictates and remained at the Red Keep for her health, so Rhea, Delena and I would go to keep her company about every other day.
Inevitably, we met Cersei. Now here, I cautioned Rhea and Delena prior to stepping foot in the Red Keep to be very circumspect indeed. After all, the unmitigated lunatic thinks everybody who isn’t a Lannister is an enemy. Our appearances were of course an easy aspect for commentary, so the very first instance of Cersei seeing us in the halls of the Red Keep on the way to Lysa’s chambers were her opportunity. We stopped and curtsied upon her approach.

“And who are you?” her voice was already lofty and sneering, eyebrow raised.

“Selyse Florent, Your Grace.”

“Rhea Florent, Your Grace.”

“Delena Florent, Your Grace.”

We stood, not volunteering anything more. Delena was biting her lip. She was young enough to want to fill up silences with some innocuous chatter, but I warned her beforehand that in the world of a royal court, babbling was seen as a nervous weakness. Silences are a power move. Obviously the Queen is the most powerful, so it is up to her to choose to break silences or not. In fact, I warned Rhea and Delena that if she chose to ignore us entirely and therefore make others similarly ignore us in order to assert social power, then that was that.

“Why are you here?” Cersei finally indulged her curiosity.

“We are guests of Lady Lysa Arryn, Your Grace,” I replied. “She has invited us to tea and sewing.”

“Sewing.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” we coincidentally chorused back at her.

Shit. She might take that as a mockery.

“Well,” Cersei tilted her head. “I see that you Florents have… interesting ideas about sewing.”

Her gaze went down and back up. Her sneer was still in place, to intimidate, and it would have if it weren’t for the fact that all of us knew very well that we looked awesome. So not even Delena blushed or dropped her gaze.

We stood there, placidly waiting. She finally sniffed, dismissed us with a turn of her head and walked off without another word. We curtsied as she left.

When we went to see Lysa, I warned her that we had come to the attention of Cersei and that it was her prerogative and highly likely that she might order us to go to tea with her in the future, in order to inconvenience Lysa, just because she could. Lysa sadly nodded, knowing that was precisely the sort of thing Cersei would do, but she smiled when we all said that we of course much preferred
It happened exactly so. The next visit, we could not go through the halls without notice and in fact she probably had servants waiting to warn her. She swept in our way and invited us to tea. We acquiesced readily and followed her. We sat down in the space allowed us by her ladies-in-waiting, Westermen all, who were giving not so subtle once overs of our clothing and appearances now that we were properly in the same room.

We sipped the tea and nibbled on cake. I ventured to compliment Cersei on the furnishings of the room. She thanked me.

More silence.

“Where did the idea for your clothing come from?”

Rhea and Delena looked towards me.

“It was all my idea, Your Grace.”

Her stare snapped to me.

“You?”

“Yes. As a little girl, my pinafores had pockets. I found myself quite unwilling to give up pockets as a woman grown,” I patted one of my pockets.

“Pockets.”

Of course she would be skeptical. After all, a Great Lady like her doesn’t carry anything on her own; she has people to fetch and carry for her.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“And your dresses. So… tight.”

“Plain women like us must make do with what we have,” I said, again deadpan.

Now, other women would immediately say that we were not so plain at all and give some compliment to smooth over the self deprecation I demonstrated in a round of reciprocal friendliness. Cersei was not that kind of woman.

“Yes, you are plain, indeed.”

This bitch, here.

I smiled and sipped the tea. Rhea took a delicate nibble of a piece of cake. Delena sat with her cup held in both hands to keep herself from fidgeting.

“So is this what Florents are about now? Exciting base lusts of men as if that will get any of you married?”

Poor Delena flinched like Cersei wanted. However, Rhea and I kept our chins up. After all, none of us have any stage fright whatsoever.

“If base lusts result in lawful matrimony in the eyes of the gods, then it shall be what it shall be. We succeeded with what we had. If we should not get married, then at least, we still have
pockets.”

“How old are you, Selyse Florent?”

“I am nineteen.”

“Yet still unmarried.”

“Just as you say, Your Grace.”

Cersei sipped her tea. If we could get out of this initial sit down with merely her contempt and underestimation, I would count that as a win. Fortunately she was bored and annoyed by our inscrutable Vulcan act faster than the tea cooling or the cakes running out. She dismissed us with a wave of her hand and didn’t even bother insincerely saying that she would invite us again in the future. We curtsied and exited.

It was not until we made it safely into Lysa’s chambers and shut the door behind us that Delena exhaled and collapsed into a chair.

“Oh, was it Cersei?” Lysa whispered.

“She was so cruel!” Delena blurted. “I know Florents are no great beauties but-”

“Shh- Shh!” I put a hand on hers. “She’s got servants to listen in everywhere.”

“Truly!?” Lysa looked back and forth in the currently empty room except for us and the Florent handmaids.

“Well. Maybe not this room in particular,” I stood up. “Though, was this armoire always here?”

“Selyse,” Rhea shook her head, snickering. “There isn’t somebody hiding inside listening to our conversation.”

I winked at Lysa, who smiled, before going over and dramatically opening the door. There was nobody inside, of course.

“Had to check. Now, then. We will not speak about certain persons unless we are safely in the Foxhole.”

Everybody nodded.

“Now,” Rhea looked towards Lysa. “How have you been faring?”

The months ticked by and I was not surprised when Lysa lost her pregnancy. We went to give her comfort, to embrace her while she wept and to wipe her eyes. Afterwards, she made the daily trip to the Foxhole without prompting, away from Cersei’s bullying, finally sure that we all extended our friendship unstintingly.

A selection of the last batch of the experimental tin jars were opened and we celebrated Rhea’s success, as the seals of cork and wax held and the jams, sauerkraut, and various pickled vegetables did not cause any harm to the Flea Bottom smallfolk who came to test the food. Lord Arryn was present when we did the uncorking and spoke with Rhea and I during the impromptu celebratory lunch we held using the uncorked food. He very much agreed that such a thing would be of great advantage to the Royal Fleet.

The next year, Joffrey Baratheon was born. Shortly after that, Rhea married Andar Royce at
Runestone. Us Florents went en masse to Runestone, including Lord and Lady Florent. Lord Arryn was invited and he accepted, bringing Lysa with him. Rhea wanted her friend there and I had quietly suggested to him that a change in scenery would perhaps lift her spirits. He agreed and also told me that he would bring up the subject of the tin jars when he next attended Small Council on our return to King’s Landing.

Alekyne had by then asked Rhea to inform Jeyne and Marsella that he was not going to be seeking either of their hands.

It was during the few days of arrival prior to the wedding and feast that Lord Arryn spoke with Lord Florent privately. To further secure the Baratheon position on the Iron Throne and to rebuke the Tyrells, a match would be made for Lord Stannis of a House from the Reach. Given Florent neutrality during the Rebellion, our prestigious ancestry, and the fact that Lord Arryn personally knew and rather liked me despite my impertinence, he recommended that the lady in question to betroth to Stannis would be me. It had to be me.
Kings Landing: Negotiations & Paperwork

This Small Council, Robert made a rare appearance. Lord Arryn very firmly stated that the subject he wanted to bring up might even be of interest to him. As Lord Arryn had ceased to insist on Robert attend everyday, Robert felt magnanimous for showing up on special request.

“All right. What is it that you needed me to know about?”

Jon gestured and a servant placed a wide mouthed metal jar, sealed with wax, in front of everybody on the Small Council.

“Examine and open these jars.”

The wax was scraped off by fingers or their personal daggers and knives. The jars were corked, with metal lids glued to the cork. It took some prising, but it was simple enough to get the edge of a knife in and to lever the lids up. The contents were found to be pickled vegetables or jams.

The servant came back and laid out forks and spoons.

Jon took a bite of pickle.

Everybody glanced at each other. Following his example, Stannis took a bite of sauerkraut and Robert sampled the jam. The rest of the Small Council followed suit.

“How old would you say this food is?”


Jon looked around the table, inviting guesses.

“The jars have been sealed. It must be to preserve it. A moon, maybe,” Stannis guessed.

“My lords. Your Grace. These foods have been sealed and kept for six moons.”

There were small exclamations of surprise.

“Extraordinary,” Varys tittered.

Pycelle asked immediately to know who was the visionary who came up with such an idea.

“The method has been worked out and perfected by Lord Florent’s younger daughter, Rhea and his niece, Selyse.”

Pycelle sputtered at the names of women.

“Why should it be such a surprise that women, who brew and cook, should uncover new knowledge about foodstuff? They are ladies who do not do such things directly, but they are no strangers in the duties of provisioning a keep,” Jon irritably replied.

“Right, right,” Robert waved his hand. “A very good trick. What of it?”
Stannis grimaced.

Jon repressed a sigh. His exasperated expression prompted Ser Barristan to speak.

“Food that keeps for months at a time would be a valuable boon and advantage for armies, Your Grace.”

“And navies,” Stannis growled.

Finally Robert comprehended and he grinned, slapping the table.

“That is very good, Jon! Hah! You’re right!”

He tapped the side of the jar in front of him.

“Steel?”

“Tin, Your Grace.”

“So they don’t shatter like wine bottles. You can stack them into crates, they don’t shit or need to eat like goats or chickens. Won’t slow down an army on the march. And nobody would die of the runs! Hah!”

“Just so,” Lord Arryn nodded.

“So, we issue a reward to the Florents for this service to the realm, right? These Florent girls. Rhea and Selyse?”

“Lord Florent would be honored to accept on their behalf,” he replied.

“Yes, yes. One thousand gold Dragons, that sound good?”

“Your Grace-”

“Oh, truly, Jon! Think of all the money you have to spend to feed troops and then most of it is inedible shit because of merchants selling you meat about to turn and you pay anyway because you are desperate! I remember how it was on the march! You took what you got! I’m actually saving money by rewarding those Florents for telling you so you can tell me, instead of keeping it a secret for themselves and their men-at-arms!”

Jon sighed, seeing the sense of Robert’s idea, rare as that is, and nodded.

The rest of the Small Council meeting went on as usual, though Robert managed to stay awake because he was spooning jam into his mouth at regular intervals. Afterwards, before Robert could leave, Jon indicated that he wanted to speak privately with Robert and Stannis. Robert made an impatient gesture and sat back down, picking up another jar of jam.

“This final piece of business concerns the Baratheon dynasty directly,” Jon lowered his voice. “To keep the Tyrells off balance with an alliance.”

“You’ve buttock brokered Stannis, you mean,” Robert laughed.

Stannis’ jaw worked.

“It is a sound alliance,” Jon continued. “A House neutral during your Rebellion and immediately pledged fealty afterwards, as well as sufficiently wealthy and with a long known claim to the
Paramountcy of the Reach—"

“Warrior’s balls, Jon, get to the point! Who’s the poor lady who has to live with Stannis’ frown?”

“Selyse Florent,” Jon huffed.

Stannis braced himself for more of Robert’s uncouth howling at his expense.

“... Selyse,” Robert repeated calmly instead, eyebrows raising. “Niece of Lord Florent, you said?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“What’s she look like? I recall I did meet some Florents besides Lord Florent.”

“Tall,” Jon settled on that first. “Hair like… well. It’s brown, but not dark or chestnut. Wet sand, perhaps. And her eyes… pale.”

Stannis thought to himself that if she was comely, Jon would mention it. So she was plain. Of course, why should he expect otherwise.

Robert was thinking.

“Selyse. Selyse. Tall and-” Robert stopped and slapped his hand on the table. “I know! She’s not much in the face and she’s got this snappish little twerp of a little brother who threatened to kill me if I disrespected her or his lady cousins! I remember now!”

Robert laughed.

“I remember! Brandon Stark danced with her and roused her temper by being uncouth and she-”

Robert made a chopping gesture.

“Just took his balls off and danced on them for the insult! Hah!”

Jon was nodding, unsurprised by now that Selyse would respond in such a way.

“Well! Tell the Florents that I, Robert Baratheon, approve and sanction this alliance by marriage of my brother Stannis to this Selyse Florent. Go on, Jon, go on,” he waved Jon out of the chamber.

He put a heavy hand on Stannis’ shoulder, preventing him from leaving immediately.

“Now, Stannis. Do you know the lady?”

Stannis shook Robert’s hand off.

“No.”

“Oh. Then I will tell you about her.”

“I would rather you not.”

“She’s plain,” Robert announced, as if Stannis did not just figure it out himself. “But she moves like, like a courser on the hunt, while on the dance floor. Graceful, with turns like a bird in flight, and I recall that she lasted from the first dance to the last. She also has one of the ripest arses I have ever seen. Just-”

Robert made a cupping and squeezing motion with both of his hands in the air, which caused
Stannis to growl and stand up, shoving Robert.

“How do you know this of her?”

If Robert has ruined her before this has even begun, he’ll-

“Whoa, hold, you- Stop that!” Robert shoved harder as he always did and dumped Stannis back into his chair. “I don’t know your lady like that. She was wearing this spectacular dress back at Harrenhal. Can’t believe I forgot about it. It showed everything-”

“A wanton,” Stannis hissed. “I am matched to a-”

“Her skin was covered up! Practically from neck to toes! It was just sewn so tight that- Well. You’ll see. Can’t you be happy that at least she’s got something nice about her figure since her face is not fair?”

Stannis just glared at Robert.

“I would also, since I am being a good brother who has met the lady in question, tell you to not insult her. If her tongue doesn’t flay you for it, she’s got the one brother who’s foolhardy enough to threaten me if I should insult her. He’s probably gotten bigger by now. So do try to mind your manners around her, won’t you?”

The gall of Robert telling him to mind his manners!

Robert picked up the second jar of jam and grinned.

“She must be sharp to come up with this! I don’t think you’d want a dull, slow, wife, Stannis. You’re dull enough on your own! Hah! I think this marriage will be well. Can’t be worse than mine, after all!”

Robert left, chuckling to himself, already spooning jam into his mouth as he went. Stannis remained in his seat, grinding his teeth. He looked down at the jar of sauerkraut at his place and his jaw stopped moving. After a minute, he took a forkful of the sauerkraut and chewed. It was pungent and sour. Delicious, especially compared to onions and salt fish. More than good enough for sailors putting out to sea. Such freshness after moons would be praised and appreciated deeply. A curiosity came to him, about the kind of minds that would come up with such a thing. Lord Arryn had explained what it was, but not how it came to be. It could not simply be because it was sealed so tightly, could it?

Lord Arryn was considerate of Stannis’ pride enough to include him during the dower negotiations with Lord Florent, who traveled in person from Brightwater Keep. He was distinguished and well dressed, with a smart jacket that Stannis had never seen the like of before. It had pockets from which Lord Florent drew out a notebook. He paged through it.

“I am grateful for the recognition by the King and the awarding of the gold Dragons. We do wish to enter negotiations specifically regarding the tin jarring process.”

Lord Arryn raised his brows.

“This is a dower discussion, but do continue.”

“We wish to be awarded an exclusive contract with the Royal Fleet to provide such tin jarred
foodstuffs. Cost for the acquisition of tin ore, smelting, forging, and manufacture of the jars and lids and costs for acquisition, processing, and preparation of raw foodstuffs will be covered by the price paid by the Crown, as well as an additional twenty percent of such material costs, in order to pay for labor, warehousing, and shipping costs. As well as security. The length of term for this contract is subject to negotiation, but at the minimum we want, shall we say, fifteen years? To be renegotiated at the end.”

“Well,” Lord Arryn frowned. “I am no merchant, my lord. Such terms I cannot say are sound or not.”

“This is a Florent idea. For the greater good of the Realm, yes, but it is ours and it stands to reason that we should benefit from the idea. Furthermore, we are staking our reputation as a House on the safety and efficacy of our tin jarring technique. For control over the quality of the tin jarring, we want to own the factories. We would welcome Crown appointed maesters to inspect the facilities for satisfactory processes, once the Citadel receives and reviews the paper that my Maesters Bryan and Willis will submit on the technique.

Now. The text on how to tin jar preserve food produced will be freely available to other lords to reproduce as they will for their own holdings. I imagine the North will adopt this most quickly. We cannot and will not guarantee the results of any others’ tin jarring. Nor will we be held responsible for any errors in their production. I stipulate this most strongly. This is similar to brewing, after all, only more refined. The next, logical step.”

“This is all very good for negotiating with the Crown,” Stannis said. “This does not have anything to do with a dowry.”

“On the contrary,” Lord Florent flipped a page in his notebook. “As the, shall we say, joint mothers of this idea, the majority of profits from the proceeds of the tin jarring contract will be given to Rhea and Selyse. Rhea was the principal, to her we would distribute thirty five percent. Selyse was her assistant and provided multiple refinements to the finished process and product, based on her extensive research over years of study. To her we judge twenty five percent of the profits would be fair recompense. The rest is for House Florent.

That twenty five percent per annum vested upon Selyse would of course be… available for a husband. She additionally has her own share of other Florent enterprises of her design and discovery per annum. Suffice to say, they are at the thirty five percents, but we shall not discuss them in too great a detail. Industry secrets, you know.”

Lord Florent smiled in a smug way.

“Of course, profit derived from service to the Crown is worth heavy scrutiny. Prior to determining the price the Crown should pay per tin jar, we intend to provide distinct prices for every aspect of production in an itemized list that we will submit to any Crown representatives you care to inspect the list. We will take note of every pound of ore, how many individual jars and lids can be produced by the pound, how many pounds of cork needed, how many laborers it takes to smith it out, how many hours they took to do so, and et cetera. It is of utmost importance to our reputation as a House that we are not seen to be attempting profit above and beyond.”

Lord Arryn had thought that his exposure to Alekyne, Selyse, and Rhea would inure him to the outlandish, almost entirely foreign language employed by the Florents. But this… was strange merchant cant coming out of a lord’s mouth. Shocking.

“You mean to drown us in paperwork,” Stannis scoffed.
“On the contrary,” Lord Florent shook his head. “You will find that my House has learned of the benefits of clarity when it comes to the process of counting coppers. A merchant thought to continue cheating us. Clever Selyse found out and the merchant was suitably punished. We have since then instituted her accounting principles. We will not be cheated again. My brother is a determined hunter of attempts against the Florent funds.

But let us return to the relevant point. Instead of a single lump sum of gold and silver, which Selyse brings as is proper for a Florent maid, she will possess a per annum sum that can only grow as we provide a service to the Crown. It will grow greater as she inevitably comes up with more such valuable ideas, very likely the source of more future service contracts. Each blessing of the Smith that graces my family, we will gladly share with family.”

“And it all begins with this exclusive contract with the Crown to provide tin jarred provisions,” Lord Arryn summed up.

“Precisely. We are all in anticipation. I trust the King, Lord Hand, and Master of Ships would wish implementation within four moons? We need only official approval to begin, as we have been planning this since… the wedding of my daughter Rhea to Ser Andar.”

Lord Arryn looked at Stannis. He was sitting, arms crossed, thinking. He desired the tin jarred provisions for the Royal Fleet. As Master of Ships, it was his duty to make it as strong and effective as possible for the Realm. Obviously, food that guaranteed sailors would not starve on long voyages, prevent crews from being swindled by merchants should they fall short on rations, was incredibly valuable. He would not only be strengthening the Royal Fleet, he himself would be gaining regular, greater income than what he got from the holding of Dragonstone. It made him immediately suspicious, such good fortune, such generosity.

He scowled at Lord Florent.

“Ah,” Lord Florent grinned, unperturbed by the ferocity of Stannis’ expression. “I see you are trying to figure out my angle.”

“My lord?” Lord Arryn asked.

“A saying Selyse invented. Refers to how in melee perhaps the killing stroke does not come from straight in front, but perhaps after a feint, at an angle. To reach a goal by unexpected methods.”

Lord Florent gave Stannis an approving look.

“I have come to appreciate suspicious minds. And let us say, our generosity comes not just because we would be joining our House to the royal family.”

“Then what? What is it that makes you so generous?” Stannis snapped.

“I recall very clearly that Selyse has a favorable opinion about your person, Lord Stannis. Something about how she admires a man with strong eyebrows. Not something I would have thought a thing maidens notice, but,” Lord Florent made an insouciant shrug.

Lord Florent very politely did not bring attention to the flustered blush on Stannis’ face, his frown now from confusion instead of suspicion.

They went over the dowry documents that Lord Florent brought with him, making amendments and deletions as they went. Finally, the business was done and the last page was signed and sealed with wax.
“Lord Stannis. Now that you are to be my good-nephew, I expect that you visit the Foxhole. Selyse is eager to meet you properly. She stipulates that you bring the one you trust the most in the world along with you when you do pay us a visit. When may we expect you?”

“I have duties as Master of Ships,” Stannis growled.

“Undoubtedly. Selyse is not without her own duties as well. She has suggested a lunch or tea, if you do not wish to have a meal.”

“Tea. Tomorrow, then,” Stannis finally said. “And bring somebody I trust the most? Why?”

Lord Florent smiled another privately amused smile.

“Apparently it is not so comfortable for newcomers entering the Foxhole for the first time, my lord. And we do wish for you to be comfortable.”
The next day, Ser Davos Seaworth followed Stannis as they were led by a servant down the streets away from the Red Keep to the Florent manse.

“They call it the Foxhole,” Stannis’s tone was disapproving of such whimsy. “What do you make of this place?”

The outer walls hid the manse behind it. This was an older style, where nobles would mimic the fortifications of their holdings in the countryside with taller walls and thick gates that barred their living quarters from view. Newer manses further away from the smallfolk were exposed on the hills with lower perimeter walls or even no walls at all, to catch any relief the winds could bring for the ever present stink. This perimeter wall was an unbroken expanse of King’s Landing native stone, with a crenellated tower in the center housing the large central entry gate and with the corners reinforced with bastions.

“Can’t see much. Don’t have banners or shields hanging up. Almost like they are hiding in plain sight.”

Stannis grunted at this observation.

They were announced, the gates opened, and they were escorted through. The manse was a plain building, set away from the perimeter wall. It was a three stories, square and stolid, with narrow slit windows on the ground floor and larger windows with solid wood shutters on the upper floors. The building was topped with the typical red clay tiles of King’s Landing. They would find that this square face was concealing a courtyard in the middle, with a central bore well for water.

“Welcome, my lord and ser, to the Foxhole,” Lord Florent was waiting for them in the entry hall. He did not make small talk, leading them immediately across the courtyard to the rearmost wing opposite. Upon entering, they walked up a flight of stairs and turned to go to Selyse’s personal chambers. They were lead into a sitting room where Davos could assume was where ladies could do their sewing and other social activities. The lady obviously had her own bedchamber, hidden from the view of visitors.

“I am pleased to introduce my son, Alekyne and my niece, Selyse.”

The lord and lady stood and bowed and curtsied, respectively. The lady in question was tall, as tall as Stannis. Her eyes brightened obviously upon seeing Stannis, which was surprising. Davos had never seen such an expression directed at Lord Stannis for as long as he had known him. The other thing he noticed and determined to put out of his mind as quickly as possible was that the lady was wearing a shockingly narrow skirt that showed the outline of her hips. Lord Florent took his leave.

Stannis did the service of introducing himself and Davos. Davos was cautiously pleased by the way Selyse and Alekyne met his eyes frankly and with the same courteous expressions. He has come to expect the tightening around the eyes, the narrowing of nostrils, the barely repressed pursing of lips at his presence while at the Red Keep. Upjumped smuggler, crabber’s son, who did he think he was, no matter that he didn’t seek the honors bestowed upon him by Lord Stannis.

They took seats and servants entered with tea and tea snacks.

“I’ll leave you with some pretence of privacy,” Alekyne said, turning his chair to face away from the group, picking up a book and opening it. “I wish for you two to have a productive
He picked up a cup of tea.

Davos suppressed a chuckle at Stannis’s sudden frown at this unexpected piece of behavior.

“My lord,” Selyse spoke up. “I have gifts for you.”

“Why?” Stannis practically barked.

Davos had a lot of practice suppressing his reactions to Stannis’ seemingly gods-cursed ability to say precisely the wrong thing in the rudest manner possible. He looked down at his cup of tea for a moment for composure before looking at Lady Selyse, to see her reaction to this blunt rudeness from Lord Stannis. Fortunately, her face remained serene.

“Gifts are for giving, my lord. It is only logical.”

She smirked, making her plain face merry from a secret joke in one dazzling moment, before she regained her courteous composure from before.

Stannis grunted.

She reached into the sewing basket sitting next to her seat and produced a thin, narrow box and a piece of paper.

“My first gift; an ink-filled pen. It will usually last for writing approximately ten full pages of text before needing to be refilled.”

She took out the pen from the box, uncapped it, drew a series of loops on the paper, before capping it again and placing it back into the box and sliding the box on top of the paper across the table towards Stannis.

“It is the first invention that I may say is totally developed by me,” she finished.

Stannis picked up and examined the pen after uncapping it. The body of the thing was a yellow, perhaps enamelled, with a small black inlay of a stag near the top. He rotated it, looking at the metal nib, before pressing the pen against the paper. He made a few exploratory loops before writing out his name. His eyebrows twitched upward at the ease of the ink flow.

“You invented this?”

“Quills do annoy me very much. They are problems. And I aimed to solve my problems.”

Stannis dropped his gaze, capping the pen and putting it down, back into its box.

“Thank you.”

Selyse smiled at Stannis and Davos sipped his tea, cautiously hopeful about the so far neutral expression now on Stannis’ face.

“Now, my last gifts.”

She took out a book, a small box that could fit in a hand, and another, larger, box. She laid them on the table side by side. Upon opening the larger box, Davos observed a brass object of some kind. He had never seen the like. It was polished, seemed to have a cylindrical part that resembled a far-eye, and a curved section engraved with numbers. The smaller box had a hinged lid and opened to
show a round dial inside with a painted letters and numbers arranged in a circle. He could not read
the title of the book.

“My lord,” Selyse held up the smaller box. “This compass has a needle that will show true north
no matter which way the holder turns.”

She spun the body of the smaller box and the little needle spun and wobbled, stopping at one point.
She spun again and the red painted point returned the same spot.

“This sextant and this book,” she gestured towards the object in the larger box. “Will allow any
captain on the open sea to determine latitude and longitude within thirty minutes.”

Davos was already amazed by the compass. He didn’t quite understand what she meant with her
last statement.

“Latitude and longitude within thirty minutes!? Explain,” Stannis leaned forward.

With Stannis, his excitement could be mistaken for aggression.

Selyse grinned, her teeth white and sharp, before standing and leading them over to a globe. She
pointed out the lines of latitude and longitude as established by maesters over years of study and
observation, and how each intersection marked a location, indicated by degrees of a circle, since
the world was round. She explained that the sextant would be used, with an arm that traveled along
the curved part that counted off degrees of a sixth of a circle, tracking the angle of the sun, the
moon, or other recognizable constellations in comparison to the horizon.

If you knew the date, you knew where the sun or the moon or other constellations would be in
relation to the world and each known location had known angles from the horizon. Using the
sextant to find the angle of a given celestial body on a given date, one opened the book, found the
date, found the celestial body you looked at, the angle you found, and used the numbers in the
tables to calculate the longitude, determining how far east or west one was compared the known
longitude of Old Town, location of the Citadel. For latitude, one only had to find the angle of the
sun during noon. A table listed which line of latitude the sun should be above on that particular
day, indicated by the angle taken.

Selyse was patient, explaining particularly so that Davos could understand and he understood a
little faster than Stannis, with his years of sailing and seeking the constellations at night. She led
them to a window and picked up the sextant, demonstrating its use and allowing them to seek the
sun and the horizon with it, flipping tinted glass shades down so that they would not be injured
pointing the eye-piece at the sun.

“...And so you see, it’s proven. A simple matter of mathematics! If you know where you want to
be, and you know where you were, you can certainly find out where you are!”

“This is… This is wonderful,” Davos exclaimed. “You would no longer have to rely on risky,
unreliable dead reckoning. You no longer have to sail down your westing or easting, to be
intercepted by pirates waiting. You could let the wind or currents take you far out and never fear
being lost!”

“Exactly! With this, nobody can ever truly be lost ever again!”

Stannis was flipping the pages of the book, seeing the rows and rows of numbers, until he closed
the book to look properly at the cover.

Florent and Selyse Florent, with Maester Bryan and Maester Willis. Rhea Florent is not only responsible for the tin jarring?" 

“Yes. I knew after learning about the orbiting celestial bodies and the realities of longitude and latitude that it was only a matter of knowing the angles and putting it all into tables and simplifying the needed calculations so that any captain who knew how to count, how to add and subtract, could find his way. Rhea has such a better facility at numbers. What takes me hours of thinking, she speeds through in a trice. She was instrumental in the calculations and our Maesters did the proofreading.”

“And these tables are accurate?”

“We tested finding the location of Brightwater Keep, the Foxhole, and Runestone. Three locations are not too many, but the theory is sound. I expect the book to be tested extensively on land before use in the open sea.”

Stannis stood, holding the book, wordlessly staring at her.

“Are you pleased, my lord? By my gifts?” she raised her eyebrows.

“Yes,” Stannis swallowed, looking down at the book before looking back up at her. “Yes, I am most pleased.”

Selyse smiled.

“Why?” Stannis didn’t manage to soften his disbelieving tone all the way. “Why do this? Go to all the trouble?”

“I aim to solve problems,” Selyse replied forthrightly. “When there is an opportunity to improve the way things are done, why wouldn’t we expend as much energy as possible to make it so? Nothing is too difficult if there is will and intelligence. And funding.”

Stannis made an inarticulate grumbling noise that could be taken as an affirmative. Davos shifted from discomfort for a moment.

“Let us have some tea before it gets cold,” Selyse mercifully said.

She led them back to the table, where Alekyne was sitting, having put his own book down to appreciate Selyse’s enthusiasm as she explained the logic and methods behind Rhea’s and her work.

“I dare say, if Selyse never gives you another gift again for the rest of her life, these alone would be worth it, wouldn’t it?”

Stannis mutely nodded. Alekyne chuckled.

“Now, Alekyne. You must not think I would just stop there!” Selyse lifted her chin jauntily.

“Yes, Selyse, of course. You and Rhea are to prove between the two of you that the barring of women from the Citadel is complete illogical nonsense and that the entire Maester brotherhood should be ashamed of how they have discounted the mental capacity and wisdom that could be found in the other fifty percent of the population,” Alekyne recited fondly.

“It’s true! Haven’t we taken nautical endeavors to an entirely different level? With the mental capacity of two women!? Take the Stepstones. You could have a tin jar provisioned armada that
can remain at sea for moons, hunting down pirate ships. With every ship sunk, they don’t even need to return to shore; they can just keep on patrolling.

The power projection of the Realm is now increased by an exponential amount. And just as Davos says; you would no longer have to sail north or south to a desired latitude of a known destination and make way east or west, fighting currents and wind just to get to Braavos or any other port in Essos. You can just sail the fastest course and trust that you can make the needed course corrections as you go! Who conceived of it? Us! Women!”

Stannis and Davos sat silent, drinking tea and eating the tea cakes, fascinated.

“And what shall you focus your formidable mind on now, hmm?” Alekyne rubbed his hands together.

“It would rather depend on what my lord husband, Master of Ships, allows,” Selyse demurred.

“I would hear your ideas,” Stannis blurted out.

“Oh. Well, then. Copper sheathing, secured with copper nails, to prevent fouling of hulls. I hypothesize that it would be more effective, not to mention cheaper, to use an alloy of copper and zinc for the purpose. New rigging and sail shape and arrangement, that would allow for sailing closer to the wind than ever before. Masts made not from a single trunk of a tree only, but dovetailed planks secured by bands of iron, like for barrels, and further enforced by coiling ropes all the up the mast shafts, such that you can carry more sail than before. I might as well investigate the ideal hull shape, as well.”

Selyse calmly sipped her tea after this extraordinarily ambitious litany.

“Obviously it would be ruinous to build one ship at a time, experimenting. That’s the purpose of models. We can test multiple different alloys of copper by trusting reputable smiths to smelt the materials and we can simply sink the sample sheets in the Blackwater for moons at a time to observe results. Better than sheathing ships and hoping it all works out. This is just the beginning. Only, Rhea is all the way in Runestone, you see. It is most difficult to correspond in that manner, and I expect I will continue to need her help.”

“Oh, it’s simple, really. Redesign the roads between King’s Landing and Runestone. And develop a better postal system,” Alekyne waved a hand.

“Of course,” Selyse nodded wryly. “I shall work on that concurrently.”

“And don’t forget, you are assisting on my projects. And Imry’s.”

“Well. I did come here to work.”

“Exactly so,” Alekyne grinned. “By the way, Lord Stannis, are you aware that my sister Rhea was recently married?”

Stannis blinked, before nodding.

“Within this last moon turn. To the Royces. It’s really wonderful that Runestone is so famous for bronzework, isn’t it? With the holdings of mines that pull up tons of all that tin. And copper. Tons and tons of it,” Alekyne rubbed his hands together once more. “I expect they shall be glad with us giving them first notice of a need for ores when we begin the contracts with the Royal Fleet.”

“A very fortunate match,” Davos commented, as Stannis was not going to say anything.
“We think so,” Alekyne nodded. “It helps that Ser Andar Royce is a good man. Can’t keep up with Rhea’s fast thinking, but then, we can’t match her either. At the least, he will not stand in our way when we ask her to do her math. Nothing gets in the way of the math.”

“No. Nothing may get in the way of the math,” Selyse declared.

They finished the tea and snacks. They stood after Lady Selyse stood.

“I am very glad that you are pleased by my gifts. Do come again as much as you like. Or, I will be making regular visits to Lady Lysa Arryn in the Red Keep. May I see you there?”

Selyse met Stannis’ eyes full on again, unabashedly eager.

“You may.”

“Excellent. I have much I wish to further discuss with you. And do bring your brother Renly. I wish for all of us to get to know each other as family. I hope that Erren, Omer, and Merrell would like him after meeting him.”

Stannis blinked some more.

“And not the King?”

Selyse raised her eyebrows at the idea.

“There is a distinct lack of wildlife in the Foxhole for him to kill. And we are not so fond of drinking to excess. No, if he should invite us to the Red Keep, we would be glad to accept, but he and Queen Cersei do not have standing invitations from any of us.”

Alekyne leaned in next to Davos.

“She means that all the Florent ladies hate the Queen with the heat of a thousand suns.”

Davos snorted. He had little love for the proud Lannister lioness himself.

“Do not concern yourself with the King or the Queen. I wait for only you,” Selyse continued. “I much prefer you, Lord Stannis.”

And here, her voice rolled low and husky with obvious intent. Davos coughed, feeling very awkward as Stannis’ blinks increased in speed and a blush spread up from his neck. Alekyne thankfully ushered them out of the room, with Davos carrying Stannis’ gifts.

It was not until they got to the courtyard that Alekyne huffed, releasing held back laughter.

“My lord?” Davos asked.

“Seven help us,” Alekyne waved his hand. “Stannis. May I call you Stannis?”

Stannis scowled, but nodded, allowing the familiarity.

“You must meet the rest of the family and always bring Ser Davos. I’m very sure I will not be able to serve as chaperone each and every time. I am not sure I can ever entirely get used to watching Selyse eyefucking you.”

Davos snorted at this new, strangely appropriate word. Stannis ground his teeth.
“She has never, ever, been like this for anybody else before,” Alekyne continued. “I almost thought she thinks of all us men as merely ridiculous obstacles to her solving her scientific projects and goals. She rants long enough about the Maesters ignoring her, you see.”

Alekyne stopped and looked Stannis in the eye.

“You’re different. Not just because of the betrothal. I’m not worried, seeing as your good reputation is what it is. But,” Alekyne smiled that same unsettling sharp grin of Lord Florent. “We will be watching. Imry, most especially.”

Stannis seemed about to snap at Alekyne for the presumption and slight upon his honor, except that it was entirely proper that a maiden lady’s male relatives should be protective. There was also the fact that as friendly as Alekyne was, the Florents had these unsettling pale-eyed, sharp-toothed, expressions that promised all sorts of trouble and that they delighted in causing said trouble. They merely needed an excuse.

“I will behave with utmost propriety,” Stannis finally concedes.

“Excellent. It is gratifying when people are reasonable and honorable,” Alekyne waved farewell to them as the gate opened. “So much less trouble than otherwise.”

As they made their way back to the Red Keep, Davos would look at Stannis occasionally. He was silent, frowning. This didn’t look like a bad mood sort of frown, if he knew Stannis. Seemed like he was deep in thought.

“Tell me your thoughts on the Florents.”

“Friendly folk. Strange. The way they talk, the way they think. But it’s good, useful thinking,” Davos patted the box holding the sextant.

He had the compass open in his other hand, checking to see that the needle stayed pointing north as they took the winding streets.

“They are too obviously cunning,” Stannis growled. “Why should anybody want to give such an impression of untrustworthiness?”

“We entered the Foxhole, my lord,” Davos said reasonably. “They did not take us unawares. They also mean us no mischief or malice. Not with what Lady Selyse gifted you. Great, wonderful gifts.”

“Yes. What do you think of the lady?”

“Lord Florent called her clever. It’s so. More than that, the good she wishes to do for the Royal Fleet and the realm is a dutiful thing. She did not treat me ill upon first speaking with me and that is rare enough that I like such nobles immediately when I meet them.”

“Yes,” Stannis allowed. “She makes good use of her mind. She practices true courtesy, instead of the mere appearance of it in her treatment of you. But what-”

There was more teeth grinding.

“Her manner. Of. Advances- Is not that too forward-”

Davos suppressed a snicker.
“My lord, that is so.”

And Stannis rounded on him, his scowl terrible.

“But,” Davos held up a hand. “She is only like that with you. A man should be glad that his wife would look at him that way. And the highborn do not marry for liking the way smallfolk may.”

“But how can I know that in truth? I only have the word of Robert!”

“And her cousin. But if you think this is some Florent cunning, there is Lord Arryn,” Davos mentioned.

“Explain.”

“We had some conversation, knowing that I follow you to the Foxhole. The ladies Florent are friends with Lady Arryn and visit almost every day. He has said the Lady Selyse is as we found her; clever, lively, and a little shocking with her way once she starts talking about subjects that interest her. He did tell a story about the first time he saw her.”

Stannis was watching him intently now.

“It was at Harrenhal. The first feast’s dance, the Florents came in and he said they were shocking, the ladies in those… tight dresses. All the lords’ heads were turned and all the ladies were all a flutter. After the first dance where the ladies all danced with just their kin, her cousins were all asked to dance except her. Lord Arryn said it was likely because she is so tall, my lord.

The first man not of her kin that asked her to dance was Brandon Stark.”

Stannis nodded; Robert told him of this.

“Lord Arryn could not hear anything, of course. He said he could see that the lady was not enjoying the dance, as Lord Brandon spoke to her. He says he knows now that by the end of the dance, she was giving all the signs that she would have no further conversation. Lord Brandon persisted. Lord Arryn said that she must have finally reached the end of her patience with the young man and then Lord Brandon must have insulted her gravely for it. She then laughed very loudly in his face. Lord Arryn said she bellowed like it was a warcry. Most unladylike behavior.”

Stannis blinked.

“After making a scene with the heir of one Lord Paramount, your brother Robert thought to try his luck and ask her to dance. Must have amused him.”

“He would,” Stannis growled.

“Lord Arryn was curious by now. He walked within hearing as Robert spoke with the lady. He said her brother, I take it was this Imry, told Robert that if he was going to call his sister ugly too, that he could fuck off.”

Davos quirked a smile as Stannis blinked again.

“Bold,” Stannis allowed.

“The dance with your brother went little better, Lord Arryn says. He tried to charm her in his usual way,” Davos continued through Stannis’ renewed scowl. “But she was wise to him and very much still with her back up from Lord Brandon.
A lady unimpressed by two men as was Lord Brandon and Robert is very special. She seems well pleased with the betrothal and well pleased by you. I think that’s well enough to start with, don’t you?”

Stannis’ look was still skeptical. But Lord Arryn was not a man prone to misremembering. Davos could see that a seed of hope was settling into Stannis but the man was not going to help it along at all, too untrusting of everything. As far as Davos was concerned, a lady that was generous and patient, who found Stannis’ abruptness tolerable or even amusing, was far more than could be expected. So it was very fortunate and a very good beginning, indeed. He looked forward to more visits to the Foxhole.
The coming days, they would make way to the Foxhole. At first, it was just for tea, where they would soon meet each and every one of the Florents present, and they would sit and converse. That is, only after Selyse’s brothers were done testing him, which caused Davos to laugh to himself through Stannis’ teeth grinding when they leave the Foxhole afterwards.

Imry is not taller than him, as it turns out, and if Stannis were pressed, he could certainly say that growing up with Robert made him more than capable of holding his own during a scrap. Robert always won when he came back from the Eyrie on his rare visits, but he’d had to work for it once Stannis began growing. Imry may have more male relatives to pit himself against, but Robert was Robert. Big, hard-hitting, a menace once he caught you and put you into a headlock and obnoxiously boastful while beating everybody who came at him. It was demoralizing for everybody else; Stannis would brood and grind his teeth in his room as a boy, consciously tried not destroying his toys in fits of anger, and then throw himself at Robert the next few days, ignoring the tremendous aching in his limbs or his gut from getting punched there one too many times. Imry immediately wanted to spar with him in the training yard and came at him like rabid creature; his strikes were fast with deadly intent and he was not above kicking and attempting tripping maneuvers so much that Stannis had to literally throw him across the yard and use his superior reach to get the spar under his control for a win. Imry could respect him after that, at least.

Erren was less an overt threat, having witnessed Imry’s testing and rationally deciding to come to his own conclusions afterwards. He very politely engaged in conversation, which was perfectly civilized. Except he would ask bizarre questions and challenge Stannis to defend his opinions on such esoteric topics such as: Which is better, cake or pie? Which would you rather fight, a dozen duck-sized horses or a single horse-sized duck? And "I could care less" vs. "I couldn't care less."

On that last topic, Stannis had not known that he had a relevant opinion or that he could reach the levels of frustrated rage that he did and yet not wish to end the argument. Erren calmly goaded him on, merely looking vaguely curious as Stannis’ grip on his chair arms became white knuckled as he insisted they were NOT the same and furthermore, one was more correct than the other! Which meant afterwards that Stannis had the displeasure of looking up occasionally and seeing Erren looking at him with a distressingly contemplative expression, as if he was the odd one. The younger boys were of the habit of staring at him from behind large pieces of furniture or around door corners. When he caught them at it, they would smile at him, before ducking back out of sight. Baffling.

Lady Selyse was voraciously curious. Unlike Erren, she covered useful topics. She inquired as to what Stannis’ goals were for the Royal Fleet, what his ideal would be. She asked about Dragonstone. That made Stannis clam up, but she had been very curious about the architecture, having read up on the history of the place. Davos was able to give a fair description, which carried
the conversation along. It showed how much Stannis was beginning to trust her good intentions because he revealed that it was an affront that Robert took Storm’s End from him.

“Dragonstone is no prize holding, true. But the King’s heir has always been Lord of Dragonstone and it is your right, as grandson of Rhælle Targaryen. Dragonstone inevitably was your family’s holding to claim.”

Davos nodded, seeing the sense of this, while Stannis blinked at her. Davos had thought that Lord Stannis would cease being so very surprised by her statements by now. As it was, he was not sure that very many ladies would appreciate a man’s face going as expressionless as a statue and the blinking like he’d been blind side punched. Fortunately, Lady Selyse seemed to just know that this was Stannis’ expression of surprise and chose not to bring it up.

“There is also the fact that Dragonstone’s resources will be valuable eventually. In preparation, would you grant me permission to investigate Dragonstone after we are married?”

“You plan to exploit whatever you find?”

“If I find what I expect to find, then yes. I will of course explain my reasons to you.”

“I am starting to believe,” Stannis said after a moment of consideration. “That everything of seriousness that you do, you do for the realm.”

The visits became less serious over time and became lunches. Davos loved them; as fine as the spread was in the Red Keep, the Florents were friendly and their food was filling and memorable in a different way. Salads with vinaigrette dressings. Pulled pork on bread with baked beans and coleslaw. Chicken and mushrooms braised in red wine. Barbecue pork baby back ribs with a sweet and spicy brown sauce. Egg and cheese pies made with different vegetables or meats, depending on what was available at the markets. An onion soup with caramelized onions, capped with bread and melted cheese! Davos was sure that Marya would be able to replicate such recipes, if only she could visit herself to learn directly from the cook! (He later learned that they were dishes refined by Selyse! Why, if she weren’t a proper lady and had to cook in the kitchen herself, what a treasure of a wife she would still prove to be!) He watched Stannis and was sure that he held the same opinion; at the first bites there was a loosening of the usual tension in his face, eyes dropping closed with pleasure at the flavors.

Eventually, every morning Renly was escorted to the Foxhole, where he would have lessons with Maester Willis along with the Florent children and then to spend the rest of the day until dinner, playing. Stannis noticed that Renly’s lingering sadness from enduring the siege and subsequent shyness from the uncaring isolation of the Red Keep was swept away by the boisterousness of the Florent boys.

Stannis was not comfortable with children from when he was a child himself, but he could see that the Florents did not tolerate too rough and tumble play. The boys did not just play at knights in battle or King of the Hill; Selyse insisted that they ‘build up cardiovascular strength, dexterity and teamwork’ with a ball game called soccer, they would sit and read, play indoor games like Pictionary, Jenga (You’re going to have steadier hands than that to win! -Shut your mouth, Imry!), Connect Four, Cyvasse, that card game Mere, and traditional games with Florent House Rules.

Come Into My Castle had mutated into something that required slates and chalk, matrices, and point counters, with penalties. Stannis almost preferred the simpler old version where Robert could be depended upon to never allowing Stannis into the Castle when they were children, no matter that he did answer the questions Robert posed correctly. Robert always was a contemptible pain during Come Into My Castle. He was wrong so much of the time, but won because he said so! On
the other hand, Renly was learning heraldry and Houses faster than ever, as the Florent boys, being Florents, would consistently try to trick their way into the Castle by relying on the most obscure trivia about the Houses and abusing double negatives in their answers. He was forced to pay attention during lessons and read up on House histories on his own or else he should always lose.

They would tinker with the safer tools from the Foxhole’s workshop, they would draw, they would practice musical instruments and sing, and they would recreate and conduct simple scientific experiments, and challenge each other to impromptu verse composition, singing out nonsense songs. They had the distressing habit of sneaking about, stalking each other in a strange version of Hide and Seek, ambushing each other and miming hits to the throat or kidneys. Renly was the favorite target of opportunity for weeks until he learned better about the concept of situational awareness. Stannis decided he would not ask about the purpose of that particular game. Davos decided not to reveal to Stannis that the Florents referred to the game as ‘Murder’.

Renly originally tried to put on airs about being Lord of Storm’s End. The Florent boys were very unimpressed, but instead of beating him, as Stannis would expect from his own experience with rougher Stormlander boys, they quickly posed Renly questions about his lands and what it would take to be a good overlord, asking questions that might be asked of him during petitions and if he had any useful opinions or interpretations of law, one after another, until Renly was in shamed tears, unable to answer them, having never thought of such matters before. They did not jeer at him for the weakness, however.

“Lord Renly, you had better pay attention to our lessons, or you’re going to end up killed,” Erren declared. “If you don’t get hustled for everything you are worth.”

“Hustled?” Renly asked, wiping at his eyes.

“Worked over. Conned. Fucked in the arse, and not the good way,” Imry said. “Like Lord Tytos Lannister, before Lord Tywin went ultra-murder on the Reynes and Tarbecks.”

Renly gasped at the profanity.

“Imry, don’t curse,” Omer objected.

“Yeah,” Merrell added.

Imry responded by scat singing a series of profanities that had all the boys laughing.

Davos thought it was heartening, how the Florent boys enfolded Renly into their little group. He was also satisfied with how Stannis was being drawn into the Florent fold also. He was often so ill tempered from a session of Small Council, that to go to lunch at the Foxhole and be surrounded by canny thinkers who were unserious in manner but deadly serious about duty and problem solving was like being brought in to a warm hearth fire after being left out in the cold.

He was scowling and snappish in the first few minutes, but by the end of a working lunch, where one or another of the Florents would discuss developments from the workshop, Renly happily reporting on some new educational facts he learned, Lady Selyse being forthright with her conversation and patient with his mood, and entertained by a good musical performance or two, he was beguiled into his more impassive of expressions, almost smiling at every outlandish yet inspiring statement the Florents made. The Florents eventually coaxed him into joining in on their table games, as their games were quite playable in conversation.

They planned the upcoming wedding together. Stannis had not thought he would have any opinion, one way or another, but Lady Selyse met him one lunch with an entirely new notebook of lists to
go through. She debuted a drink called lemonade for him to sample, saying that she did appreciate lemon water, but that perhaps he might like this also for a festive occasion. She asked for his favorite foods, asked to be allowed to send ravens to the castellan of Storm’s End for coordination purposes. He was gratified to see that she was of a practical mind for the feast. No very extravagant nonsense like roasted swans or peacocks.

“Unlimited garlic cheese bread,” Selyse read off her list. “The Florent onion soup. Salad with raspberry vinaigrette dressing. Chicken in creamed mushroom sauce. Pan fried white fish in brown butter sauce. Pulled pork and beans. Crown roast of lamb. Finish it off with sweetness with cakes and fruit tarts. That is as much variety as I care to have, what say you?”

“That will do well for me.”

“Excellent. Lemonade available throughout, and if Robert must get drunk we will have punch.”

“Punch?”

“One part lime juice, two parts sugar, three parts rum, four parts water.”

“Robert is insisting on a grander affair.”

“Is he? As I doubt he had anything to do with the planning of his wedding, he must needs stay out of the business.”

“He won’t.”

Stannis felt a guilty thrill when Selyse put her pen down, slowly turned so that she was staring right at him and showed her teeth in an unfriendly version of her sharp grin.

“He will. I will make it so.”

“He is the King.”

“Irrelevant. You’ll see.”

Wonderfully, it happened. He did not know what manner of threats Selyse put to Robert, but for the rest of the planning he was blessedly silent. Robert did spend the next time they saw each other in court breaking out into unprompted chuckling, however. Stannis resolved to ignore him; it was worthless to know his thoughts on the matter.

She wanted to know his preferences for the guest list. He had been struck dumb by her consideration when she suggested that Maester Cressen be issued a personal invitation. As it was a royal marriage, it was protocol to have invitations issued for all the Lords Paramount and the most ranking amongst their bannermen. Selyse wanted most of all to celebrate with Melessa and Rhea present with the rest of her family. She and the Florents were most understanding of his distaste for the necessity of more Reachers in the halls of Storm’s End, so they carefully arranged the seating so that he need not look directly at Mace Tyrell if he did not wish to while at the feast. Nobody ever cared about how he would like things arranged, before.

Delena and Alekyne were training up a troupe of musicians and singers to be able to perform a selection of the Florent songs. Selyse is very clear that she wanted no other sorts of mummers at her wedding.

She then made contact with a court tailor of the Red Keep, to have new suits of clothes made for him, in the style of those jackets and trousers the Florent men wore. He protested, saying that he
did not like frivolity.

“Pockets are not at all frivolous,” Selyse replied. “Furthermore, you have not had a suit of clothes appropriate for a feast or more formal court appearances made since Harrenhal. You are not a green youth of seventeen anymore, my lord. You are a grown man.”

She made that husky purring, insinuation laden way of speaking at the last sentence and he was blushing again. He was discomfited and disliked being discomfited. It was too similar to being mocked.

The problem, that he could admit to himself, was that Lady Selyse was prone towards mocking most of the people she knew, even herself. But she did not mock him. She was serious and kind to him, choosing not to fight or take offense when he would say combative things that afterwards, he would wonder why he even said in the first place. He usually scoffed at anybody’s offended sensibilities over what he had always thought of as him valuing the truth. However, Lady Selyse herself was more direct than usual amongst highborn ladies and she moreover had expressed impatience herself about ‘useless emotions’ and ‘illogical nonsense’ and ‘flattering drivel’.

It made him uncomfortable all over again each time he crossed her very generous boundaries and she would bring up his offense in private after the end of a discussion, explaining how and why she disliked what he said and requested that he exercised more care with his words. In this, again, she was forthright. Sometimes, Davos reminded him, a man could do with a scolding.

So if he must admit to himself that she was not mocking him when she… indicated her willing interest in his person, he must accept that it was true.

He had no idea what to do with this information.

Nobody paid attention to him when they could pay attention to Robert, the heir. Nobody liked him, unable to charm or tolerate small talk, who had nothing to say during feasts, who was always suspicious of the intents of others and waiting to be offended, so he chose to ignore niceties from the start. Of course when he first came to court, now a royal and on the Small Council, he was expected to show up at Robert’s innumerable feasts and expected to dance.

With the first few false simpers and giggles, he revolted, maddened by the idea that all these ladies who would not have thought of him at all prior to this were now trying to convince him that they were interested now. He waited for Lord Arryn to pester Robert into arranging a marriage for him, as expected, and washed his hands of bothering to ask any to dance or even have conversation henceforth. He would marry whoever they said he must and father heirs. It was a duty and he could safely relegate it as something to be undertaken and endured because it was proper to do so.

He never thought overmuch on what it would be like to be married. To take a wife. He only knew that it disgusted him that Robert fathered one confirmed bastard so far and probably innumerable others and while betrothed to Lyanna Stark at that, who he claimed to be his great love. He did not let up chasing after wenches or whores after marrying the Queen either. Robert always took oaths and duties so lightly, so negligently. Stannis had no notion how this could be so, when their father was not at all like that, Lord Arryn was a reliable man to work with on Small Council, even Robert’s oh-so-wonderful friend Ned Stark was known for honorable repute (except for the bastard. It’s probably all Robert’s bad influence anyway). He did not have Robert to look up to as a brother and certainly not as a liege.

So he took to ignoring the physical appeals of women, setting out to overcome the base lusts of the body that everybody had and after enduring starvation, it was easier than ever before, for hunger was a more imperative urge than lust. Lust was nothing, nothing to thirst and hunger or the need for
If he had to think on it, he supposed that he expected no surprises about Lady Selyse once it was known that she was plain. What did it matter if she was or not? She was his betrothed, he would not look at others from that moment forward as a point of pride and duty. Disappointment was useless. He only hoped that she would be sensible and tolerable to live with. This was not what happened. Perhaps Robert weighted the dice before he met her by mentioning how a specific region of her figure was notable enough to distract from her face. He had been skeptical of that, too. She put paid to that suspicion very early on the day they met, striding away from him to the globe to explain latitude and longitude to Davos. She was… enticingly lush. Immediately he wondered wildly what it would be like, to grip her there, to pull her up against himself with both hands.

He dismissed such thoughts, disgusted, and tried to focus on her explanation of the sextant. He was able to do so, but as the weeks went on during their betrothal, he found that she was not so plain when her eyes would glint and light up as they spoke of her theories and experiments. There was something engaging with how she gestured so eloquently with fluttering motions of her hands and shoulders when she grew excited. He was used to court ladies who followed after Queen Cersei’s style; a bored and aloof superiority that demonstrated that nothing was truly interesting or new, all jaded sophistication. The Florents were sophisticated, more sophisticated than any Stormlander nobles Stannis knew, but they abhorred boredom. They preferred to think and discuss, to weave conversation, to enjoy good food and drink, to laugh and explore the frontiers of knowledge and invention. That smile or smirk as she spoke made her the center of his attention, her openness in posture towards him, her curiosity focused on him, those moments when she laughed from something he said, as if he was clever in that moment, those all too often instances when she purred and cooed at him with shocking forwardness, left him… thirsty.

He had no one else to speak of such things, certainly not Robert. He did not know what this urge was, this idea that it would be wonderful if he could taste her, to have his lips on her skin. It went beyond kissing and he did not know if it was right, if he could. Could he lick her? Is that something allowed? He then thought of slobbering hound dogs and the distaste he felt whenever he felt the cold press of dog noses to his hands when he was forced to go out hunting. Surely she would feel the same revulsion if he came at her like some beast.

He tried to hide this discomfort, this bewilderment from her. The obviousness of her flirtations was strange and foreign to him. Almost threatening. It was as if she knew things that he did not, was experienced in manners he was not, and yet, he would like to know such things as her. But how could he? He had nowhere and no one to learn such things from; he had no past exploits like Robert! He had thought he was doing well, until one day she made Ser Davos and her cousin Delena step away, just out of earshot and walked so that they were looking out the window, facing away from their observers.

“You are uneasy, my lord. Will speaking of it solve the problem?”

“I do not know. Probably not.”

“Do it anyway,” she almost commanded. “Unless this is a secret business having to do with the security of the realm, within the Small Council. Then of course, I must not hear it.”

“It is not serious as that.”

She waited. Selyse was very patient with him, Stannis found. Almost as well as Davos, who had the sailor’s patience with waiting for tides, with being becalmed, to being delayed by a storm blowing you off course.
“Are you truly a maid?” Stannis finally burst forth.

“I am. No man or woman has copulated with me in this world,” Selyse promptly replied. “And as I come to you a maid, do you come to me, similarly untouched?”

“... Yes,” Stannis hissed. “Do not jest.”

“And what ails you, my lord? I think it is not just this question.”

“The way you look at me.”

“What way? This way?”

And now she’s, as her cousin Alekyne so aptly described, eyefucking him. Embarrassment floods him, he feels his face flushing, intolerable, and a shiver down his spine and a sudden terrible pleasure, readiness, as that shiver seems to settle in his groin. If he ignores it, it might go away in time, but now, he can feel his contrary, traitorous cock coming to attention. It is very fortunate that they are standing at a window and one with a higher ledge, at that.

“It’s the gaze of- of a whore,” Stannis growls at her, unable to soften his words, unable to take back the insult.

He grimaces and looks away, waiting for her to rebuke him, to hate him. He is always ruining things.

“It isn’t, Stannis,” her voice is a low murmur, serious. “Whores must fake it. This is real.”

“You are a maid, what can you know, how can you look-” Stannis can’t go on from the embarrassment, so his jaw clenched shut.

“Are you of the impression that women do not become aroused by looking at men? Was that something a septon told you?”

“No. No, I do not think that. Women giggle and fawn over Robert enough.”

“I’m not the sort of woman who giggles very much at all,” Selyse reasonably pointed out. “So you cannot expect me to be like other women. I’m not much like other women of your acquaintance anyway, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Then the way I look at you is just that. No more, no less.”

“It is just- You look at me.”

He grimaces again from this piece of inarticulate foolishness. Why did he just admit to her that he thinks her a blind fool for looking at him?

“Who told you that you are not handsome?” Selyse’s voice had an edge to it. “Who lied to you?”

Stannis had to look away, out the window.

“All of the women looked only at Robert. I hear what they say. Maiden’s dream, Warrior incarnate, and he beds enough wenches. I am not- I am not like Robert.”

“Do you want to fuck them, these other women?”
Stannis almost reared away from her, from this sudden vulgarity.

“What!?” he hissed, glancing nervously towards Davos and Delena, who were occupied with their own conversation, with Delena showing Davos some of her embroidery work.

“You heard me.”

“No!”

“So you do not want them. You merely desire being desired, perhaps? That is something almost everyone wants.”

Stannis’ scowl showed what he thought of that idea.

“I find your face pleasing,” Selyse continued. “Your eyebrows-”

“I’ve heard,” Stannis interrupted, blushing. “You can’t possibly-”

“Like two ink brushstrokes on fine parchment. Bold. Strong. I like your eyes. Most blue eyes look like the sky. Yours is the deep blue of the sea. I could lose track of time, following the shadows of your cheekbones and your chin. Your lips…”

Here, the tip of her tongue flashes into view for a moment between her own lips and her gaze drops down to his mouth and Stannis feels like he’s being choked, like he can’t breathe from the mortification of desire that hits him. They stand a very correct arms length apart, but it would take nothing at all to step closer, to take hold of her, to pull her in-

“Shall I go on?” Selyse’s voice has dropped into a soft murmur. “Shall I speak of the rest of you? Or shall we wait until we are wed?”

“Yes.”

Selyse tilts her head and belatedly Stannis realizes that he has not actually answered her questions.

“After we are wed,” he clears his throat.

“Very well.”

They stand together, gazing out the window, while Stannis admonishes himself to calm down.

It is later, after he and Ser Davos have left the Foxhole that he realizes.

“I must give Lady Selyse a gift.”

“Aye, Lord Stannis. It would be proper.”

“... What am I going to give her? After she gave me things more valuable than gold!?”

Stannis had shown his gifts to Lord Arryn and Lord Arryn had an emergency Small Council session announced. Robert hadn’t truly understood, not until he paraphrased Lady Selyse: Nobody would ever get lost, ever again. Selyse had gladly revealed the method of manufacture of compasses and the hunt was on in all the Seven Kingdoms for lodestones.

Replicating the sextant was only a matter of materials and educating more craftsmen. The book, though, the precious book was a good copy commissioned from a team of scribes. It would be entirely possible to have new books by royal commission and paid for by the treasury, but Stannis
despaired at the time it would take to produce enough for the Royal Fleet, to say nothing of how long it would take to find and teach literate captains.

Until Selyse smiled again and like some trickster fox spirit from the fanciful tales she told the younger children, including Renly, produced yet another miraculous contraption from her bag of tricks.

“Seals and stamps are endlessly reusable. And I thought, well, letters make the words. Let’s do many little stamps of all the letters and numbers to make the words! But how would you keep them in order and in line with each other? And then of course, I had to figure out a frame to hold them in place, and then how to hold the whole frame for inking, as it’s heavy enough loaded up and then Lord Florent was drinking some Arbor gold and of course I thought: Wine presses! It was only a moment to throw together a prototype.”

In addition to the precious Westerosi Practical Navigator, the Florents were putting together primers and their more simple childhood stories suitable for teaching children and adults how to read and readying them for publication from their own newly established publishing house; Bellflower Press. They were also planning to make inroads in Old Town and the Citadel by reproducing prints of books they most used for reference and their various treatises that espoused their educational and scientific goals.

Davos watched Stannis grind his teeth, from anxiety this time around.

“What might she like, my lord?”

Stannis made a distressed, inarticulate mutter.

“Lady Selyse likes… Knowledge. Discovery. Being correct. She hunts down the unknown, hidden from human ken like nobody I have ever known. She leads that pack of Florent foxes, sniffing out answers to questions that only they have the audacity to think up on the first place! You ask her why, how, and she must know!

I ought to give her an answer. An answer to some question she has not had time to find out yet, to save her the time of seeking it out. But what do I know? I know too little. I can’t give her anything of knowledge.”

“You could give her a book.”

Stannis nodded slowly.

“Yet it is not enough. I already have no practice at giving gifts and for her, this must be special. It must be. It must please her.”

“... Well, my lord, pardon if it is obvious, but I’ve not met a woman yet who doesn’t like a fancy bit of jewelry.”

“Jewelry.”

“Aye. She is always going about with those pretty sapphire flowers of hers. I deduce,” Davos smiled at the new word he learned. “She likes some glitter on her person.”

Stannis thought a mere bauble wouldn’t be nearly enough to express his esteem for her, but Davos had the right of it. Over the next few days, he met with court jewelers to have something made. He had never agonized over jewelry before; obviously earrings were unacceptable for a Florent. That still left necklaces, brooches, bracelets, rings! What sort of metal, what sorts of stones- maddening.
His palms started to sweat when at the earliest opportunity, he presented the box to her. There was a fraught hush between them as she picked it up and opened it.

It was a golden brooch, consisting of a horizontal oval bas relief scene, with a stag’s profile, nose lowered to touch the nose of a fox’s in front of it with curiosity pricked ears. The scene was surrounded by a rim of gold, with the bottom edge embedded with tiny leaves made of emeralds. The rest of the rim was set with many sapphires, indicating a sky. The eyes of both creatures were diamonds.

“Oh, Stannis! Stannis it’s lovely!” Selyse made a surprised, delighted inhale of breath, her eyes going bright and she picked up the brooch while rising from her seat and impulsively embracing him about the shoulders.

Stannis froze, blushing, smelling the scent of her hair and her perfume, having never been so close to her before, a playful mist of citrus bergamot, gardenia, and jasmine. It was really too much that she was so engaging and gladdened by him for some reason and now he finds that she even smells lovely! He swallowed and closed his eyes. She retreated before he could make any motion.

“Thank you ever so!” her exclamations of pleasure were so unstudied that it gave him pleasure to see her so happy.

He was not expecting to feel this way about it, at all. He was so preoccupied with not offending her, not being inadequate, that he did not consider what success would mean or how it would feel.

She was pinning it to the breast of her jacket already.

“Thank you, thank you,” she leaned in again, making him heady again with her perfume, and pressed a raindrop light kiss to his cheek.

One corner of his mouth twitched upward for a moment, despite himself.

Chapter End Notes

Guess who's discovered he's an ass man? Stannis. There is a horrid pun opportunity there, I'm sure.
Stannis was struck by a further impulse to be able to touch her. His previous dislike and hesitancy regarding dancing was overcome. He was not in practice, however, and told her so. She suggested practice sessions prior to lunch and that their lunches could be made simpler and thus shorter so that they would have ample time before he needed to return to his office in the Red Keep. He had not wanted to; the lunches were so tasty and filling. But weighed against entirely proper reasons to hold her hand...

She was a sprite on the dance floor, again as Robert said. He felt too slow, too ungainly on the floor, but she encouraged him. They went through figures, with her cousins playing instruments and singing. Every instance where they would touch hands for the figure gave him a thrill.

“I want to demonstrate a new dance. We made it up,” she announced one day.

“Of course you made up a new dance,” Stannis replied.

“It’s called the Foxtrot,” she continued. “Perhaps it’s just too scandalous for the public. Do give us your opinion after watching.”

She stood with Alekyne and Delena stood with Imry. Erren was on the drums and Omer began capably strumming out chords on the dulcimer. The couples entered into what Stannis could only say was an embrace. The ladies put their left hands on the biceps of the men and the men placed their right hands high on the ladies’ backs, by the shoulder blade and their arms were held away from their bodies. Their other hands were clasped with the arms extended out. The couples stepped out, not matching each other in a pattern, making unusual gliding movements, the men going forward and ladies stepping backwards, all in tandem as they moved across the floor.

Once Stannis ceased being shocked by how closely the couples were embracing in this dance, he could see the artistry and skill in how the matching movements of the two pairs of feet did indeed resemble a trot. He could also see that perhaps this was more difficult than any other dance he knew, as without a set pattern, the woman must trust the man to steer their path as they spun together. The music reached the end of the song and the embraces came apart, the men spinning the women under an arm before coming to a stop.

Davos began clapping and the dancers smiled and took a bow.

“Well?” Selyse walked over, still holding Alekyne’s hand.

“It is very shocking,” Stannis finally said. “I do not think it ought to be danced between first acquaintances at feasts or balls. You stand too close.”

“So you would not learn this dance and dance with me?” Selyse raised an eyebrow.

“I did not say that,” Stannis quickly said. “We are betrothed and know each other after all.”

“Oh,” Alekyne grinned. “Makes all the difference, does it?”

“If you want to dance this at the wedding feast, I… I do not wish to be a spectacle,” Stannis said.

“Don’t you wish to be able to do something Robert can’t do? To be the first at something, have something of your own?” Selyse stepped close. “With me?”
Stannis blinked. And then he slowly nodded.

“More practice it is,” Imry came forward. “And we shall all keep it a secret, for the first dance will be for you two alone, I think. Better. More dramatic.”

So he learned. First with Alekyne showing him the steps the man must take, and then at last he could dance with Selyse, free to hold her, feeling a peculiar elation as he steered her across the floor with her effortlessly trusting and matching his pace. It was not unlike reining a well-trained hunting courser over jumps or changing gaits; the direction he must give with his hands had to be decisive and in time with his wishes.

It seemed like the months of their betrothal passed in an instant. Soon, they were traveling to Storm’s End, prepared already by the many ravens flying back and forth between the castellan, Great-Uncle Ser Harbert, and Lady Selyse. It was bittersweet to see Storm’s End again, knowing that it was not his, but when he looked at Selyse, riding beside him, he did not feel that same bite of bitterness as before.

They took possession of the castle and the guests from the other kingdoms as well as the Stormlords began arriving to see the new would-be Baratheon bride. He showed Selyse around Storm’s End and they walked the parapets together, watching the waves of the sea crashing against the cliffs. He took her out on rides in the surrounding woods, showed her the old watering hole where he learned how to swim, showed her a favorite hill with boulders and caves that served as wonderful childhood hiding places in his memory, and the old secret passages of the castle; he had no doubt her kin would seek out Storms End’s secrets for themselves and moreover, would savor the pleasure of discovery after exploration without his help.

When introduced to various Stormlords, he felt great pride at how she comported herself; gracious, genial, able to put them at ease by adopting a more plain speaking way than the acrobatic wordsmithing favored by her family or the more jaded Houses of court. He did not seek approval, but he felt very gratified indeed of the accepting looks the Stormlords gave him in comparison after they paid respects to King Robert and Queen Cersei; the Westermen entourage were gaining no favors from their haughtiness.

Of course, the entire pack of Florents went to investigate the library as soon as politely possible and turned it upside down. Maester Willis had to calm Maester Jurne down when he saw all the books being taken out of the shelves wholesale and laid out on tables and the floor, making an incomprehensible mess. It said something about the efficiency of the Florent Decimal System that when the books were cross checked with the existing old catalog and the new catalog helpfully copied out by the Florents as they went that the books were reshelved in a matter of hours with far more useful clarity.

Stannis was quietly satisfied with the way all the Florents clustered around him when it came time to greet the Reacher lords who chose to make the trip. He had no pleasure or patience with the sweetly poisoned wordplay of the court, but to watch the Florents play and flatter, poke and insinuate at their fellow Reacher lords was a little humorous.

“Ah, Lord Tyrell!” Lord Florent made his sharp grin, stepping forward and patting overly familiarly at Mace’s shoulders, just as he finished the required greeting to Stannis. “You look so well! Ready for the feast, if I know you!”

“Yes, well- Lord Florent-”

“So good of you to come, I had thought your social calendar was ever so full!”
Hah, Stannis thought to himself. That was daring cheek from Lord Alester; nobody of any importance in King’s Landing issued any attention to House Tyrell. Lord Mace’s attempts to hide his grimace with a friendly smile was poor indeed and so amusing. Lord Florent continued his needling play, mouthing backhanded platitudes with such plausible deniability and geniality that Lord Mace could not respond except with courtesy or the game would be lost; he would be seen as ungracious.

Stannis was less ready when the short, wizened personage of Lady Olenna Tyrell stumped forward. Stannis bowed his head in greeting while the old lady gave him the gimlet eye.

“Never thought I’d attend a wedding for you,” she pronounced. “But the Realm has needs, doesn’t it? Makes even the most unlikely of choices palatable.”

Who did this little cunt think she is-!

“I am most fortunate,” Selyse stepped forward. “That I am to be married to a man as my betrothed.”

“You’re fortunate to be betrothed at all,” Olenna rejoined. “Aren’t you, with that unfortunate nose of yours.”

And here, Stannis has to grip Imry and Erren’s elbows.

“Stannis likes my nose, don’t you?” Selyse turned to him, eyes merry.

Stannis nods immediately, partly because he no longer perceives Selyse as plain; she is now interesting, striking, charming to him and partly because gainsaying Lady Olenna by being contrary sounds very good to him at the moment.

“So you see,” Selyse smiles down at Olenna. “All shall be well in my marriage. It is so neatly managed!”

Olenna’s eyes narrow as she looks back and forth between Selyse and Stannis.

“Managed, you say?” she murmurs. “Hrmph.”

“Very well managed,” Selyse is looking at him again, purring at him again, and it’s distressing and rousing that she is choosing to flaunt her desires so to Lady Olenna.

Lady Olenna makes a nostril pinched expression before shuffling away. Selyse breaks out in merry chuckling, while Imry and Erren go to take their sister’s hands and squeeze them. She is not fazed but they are not so sanguine at the insults.

The Houses Crane, Varner (Selyse’s mother’s House), and Oldflowers come forward and are all eager for a good word with Lord and Lady Florent. The younger Florents including Selyse greet their cousins with cordiality and friendly fondness stemming from multiple childhood visits between their keeps. Lord Alester is glad to see and embrace his sister, Lady Relyne Crane and Alekyne sets to work, schmoozing on his father’s behalf with the cousins. Imry is particularly interested in the Highgarden master-at-arms, Ser Vortimer Crane, and goes to speak to him especially.

Selyse was overjoyed by the presence of her lady cousins Melessa and Rhea. She embraced them and congratulated both on their evident pregnancies. The Round Hall echoed with the sound of their harmonies as they sang together like they did back in Brightwater Keep. Even Robert stayed to enjoy and marvel at their display, impressed. Cersei’s lips were pursed, unhappy that everybody
was praising the talents of the Florent ladies, not liking that for the first time for as long as she
could remember, that nobody was paying much attention to her. It got worse as the rest of the
Florent cousins came together in acapella, making the music stronger, more robust, more layered
with complexity and artistry.

“Low mummer’s arts,” Cersei sniffed. “Hardly fitting for noble behavior.”

“Leave off, woman,” Robert snapped. “I don’t hear you singing as pretty as that. I’d rather hear
you singing instead of talking! Maybe something pleasant would come out of your mouth for
once!”

Cersei stormed off. Robert shrugged to himself.

“You do know that you are very lucky, don’t you?” Robert reached over and poked at Stannis. “A
lady like that Selyse?”

Stannis waited for Robert to say something vulgar. He always said something vulgar.

“I’m complimenting you, you grimacing old man,” Robert finally burst out.

“... Thank you, Robert. I know.”

Under the not so very secret suggestion of Selyse, the male Florents set upon Robert, to keep him
occupied and less likely to be drinking. The younger boys charmingly begged to see the skills of
the Demon of the Trident. Seeing as the Florents kept regular hours and the boys had well
regulated schedules for the training yard with the Florent master-of-arms, Robert was forced to get
up earlier than his usual in the Red Keep to show off. Robert was happy to do so, especially when
Renly joined in, wanting to have some attention from his big brother.

Soon, every visiting lord and knight wanted a chance to test their skills against King Robert and
Ser Barristan. Robert was easily persuaded, willing to be distracted by the praise and camaraderie
his missed during his unfocused tenure as king. Even Stannis joined in when the Florent boys
turned their attention on him. There wasn’t anything quite as entertaining as watching the
Baratheon brothers thrashing each other in the yard, as Stannis was always sure that he never
needed to pull back on how hard he struck against Robert and Robert wasn’t going to let his little
brother best him in front of an audience!

It turns out that Stannis had watched the Florent men at their practice and learned a thing or two.
He could do what Robert and he were used to doing and trained for; going right at each other,
moving for an overpowering strike, so suited to their Baratheon builds. If it were not a stag,
perhaps his House might have adopted the ram for their sigil. There isn’t any artistry with the way
Baratheons and certain other Stormlands Houses fought; a walloping pounding that depended on
sheer strength. But Stannis had run up against Ser Colin Florent, who was capable of overturning
oncomers almost double his size in plate. Leverage, Selyse called it. He could lay Ser Colin out
with a good hit, but if he missed, when he missed, the sly man took hold and used his strength
against him. Stannis would end up on his back on the ground and Ser Colin’s sword would be at
his throat. Maddening. Inspiring.

So Stannis threw himself at Robert, adding his own momentum to Robert’s charge and for one
dazzling bout, managed to get a proper hold and flipped Robert into the air and onto his back with
a great crash. Imry later said it was as if they were jousting without horses and Robert was
unhorsed, so far he did fly. Robert bellowed happily (Stannis was not expecting that) and Stannis
allowed him to get back on his feet.
“You’ll not catch me unawares again!” Robert shouted happily. “Come on!”

They charged at each other and it devolved into a clanking, metal screeching wrestling match, to the amusement of the youngsters and bystanders.

Ser Jaime did not know what to make of the fact that the Florent Fox Pack even made demands on him to spar and show his skill. He had never met boys the like in his youth at Casterly Rock. They had keen eyes and were always asking questions and writing down answers in ever present notebooks. He once glanced at the notebooks and found a bewildering pattern of dots and dashes where the letters should be. Were none of the Florent boys actually able to read their letters? He found out otherwise as all the boys seemed to always have a book with them, carried in little canvas rucksacks slung over their shoulders.

He could not visit Cersei in Storm’s End, because the pale-eyed little pests would always be underfoot. The moment his watch was over, a boy would round the corner and the questions would start up again. For some reason or another, they wanted to know about Casterly Rock. And not about the gold and treasures. No, they asked confounding questions about the other rocks and metals that might be pulled up from the mines, as if he ever knew. They asked about the Lannisport Lannisters and how they managed Lannisport in the name of the Lannisters of Casterly Rock, how did the taxation methods work, who oversaw docking fees and collections, in short they were asking questions that ought not to have interested children at all! They asked about Lann the Clever, which began to make sense as he saw that these young Florents were enamored of a good trick and mischief.

He once mentioned in passing that it was a shame they only had him to talk to, because Tyrion liked reading also. This was a mistake, as it set off a series of questions about what precisely did Tyrion like reading and why? Jaime couldn’t say. The questions became more and more, until Lord Florent approached him one day after he completed a round of sparring against Ser Barristan.

“May we speak, Ser Jaime?”

Jaime didn’t see why not, besides it being a waste of time, but then again, if he was to be chattered at by Florents, a grown one was as good as the boys. He nodded and Lord Florent lead the way to one of the unoccupied chambers of Storm’s End.

“The boys have been gnawing at me with requests to write to your brother Tyrion. It is rare enough that they meet adults who tolerate their curiosity or understand their love of reading. You know how they respond when that habit is mocked, of course?”

Jaime nodded again. It was widely known that Lord Randyll Tarly had scolded one member of the Fox Pack for reading in his presence. That resulted in an ongoing series of messy incidents involving things as varied as having his boots glued onto the ceiling of the chamber assigned to him, to sheep dung snuck into his bed, to buckets of water balanced over doors of rooms he would enter. Not one of the boys were ever caught in the vicinity, but obviously it was the boys. Lord Randyll had stormed and raged at his good-father to punish them accordingly. Lord Florent agreed that they ought to be punished, but he also said that could only happen if they were caught.

Jaime could swear that it was meant to encourage the little pests to be sneakier, faster, more watchful. He did notice that Lord Florent would smile that sharp, amused smile when Lord Tarly’s back was turned.

“They are most enthusiastic about a young person who shares their love of knowledge and reading.
If it suits you, would you write to your lord father, and ask if permission may be granted for the boys to write to your brother and begin a correspondence? Or, Selyse has been convinced to issue an invitation to the wedding for Tyrion especially, except that she does not wish to overstep.”

“I could. That will not mean that my father would respond.”

“I understand,” Lord Florent nodded. “But I best do the right and proper thing and formally ask, before they all get dangerous ideas of smuggling themselves into Casterly Rock just to meet your brother. I have caught them having distressingly detailed conversation with Ser Davos. Can you blame a worried head of House?”

Gods, Jaime could well imagine. He saw how they made a game of getting past guards by distraction or timing changing shifts, while patiently sneaking. All of them were unnervingly light on their feet and more than once he’d been startled by a child less than four feet in height staring solemnly at him from a room he had just left, sure that he was alone before (An especially potent sign to not attempt to be with Cersei here!). In order for them to rig pranks of such frequency on Lord Tarly, they were able to circumvent door locks. He hadn’t seen them get past barred doors yet, but that is not to say they wouldn’t try because of the foolhardiness of children.

“Can you not merely order them to not try?”

“I could. However, I also see the benefit of them befriending a smart, learned boy. I would see them happy.”

“Because he is a Lannister,” Jaime smirked.

Lord Florent made one of his insouciant shrugs.

“I won’t insult your intelligence by denying it. My House has had little to do with yours, good or ill. But when my niece grew and the depth and breadth of her mind was revealed to us and then before I knew it, my own daughter Rhea was similarly blessed by the gods…”

Jaime could tell the pride in Lord Florent’s eyes weren’t mummery.

“I see the value of a powerful mind. I also know it is a lonely thing. They have each other as playmates. They understand what they say and mean with each other, not like the squires of my household knights or stableboys or the like. Does your brother have the same? Would it be so bad, to offer the opportunity for him to meet others who enjoy what he enjoys?”

Jaime wavered. He was still ashamed of his lie to Tyrion and the whole business with Tysha. He had promised himself to make it up to Tyrion, somehow. But nothing came to his mind. Was this it? Was this the opportunity?

“I will write. I will ask my father to allow Tyrion to come attend the wedding so that he may meet all of them.”

“Thank you, Ser Jaime. Very well. We wait for your word.”

The Florents were serious, as instead of a raven, once Jaime finished his letter, they paid for a horse-riding messenger to go to Casterly Rock directly, taking along Jaime’s request and a packet of introduction letters from the Florents. The ink-filled pens they all used allowed for densely packed script on each page and it was not only Lord Florent and the younger Florent boys; Lady Selyse herself wrote a letter, Lord Alekyne wrote a letter, and young Lady Delena wrote a letter. Lord Renly contributed a letter also. Last of all, they packed a copy of the Florent tale, ‘Treasure Island’, as a gift.
Lord Florent’s letter to Tywin must have been the right mix of respectful and reasonable, because the Old Lion himself chose to allow Tyrion on the journey to Storm’s End.

Cersei had been wroth at the idea that the Florents had the audacity to invite Tyrion to the wedding, but Jaime managed to soothe her, saying that they really meant to gain the honor of Father’s presence and of course Father couldn’t leave Tyrion alone by himself at Casterly Rock. It wouldn’t look well.

After the official reception with King Robert to greet Lord Tywin and for Lord Stannis and Lady Selyse to next welcome him to the upcoming wedding, it was on to the fraught first meeting between Tyrion and the Fox Pack after Robert left the room.

Tyrion stepped forward after a gesture from Lord Tywin and bowed. Stannis introduced Lord Renly, as precedent dictated. Lord Florent went next. The Florent Fox Pack arranged themselves with no prompting into a line from oldest to youngest (Except for the married ones; Melessa and Rhea, who were not present). Lord Florent nodded and they introduced themselves one at a time with very correct bows or curtsies. Tyrion waited for them to stare at him because of his misshapen form, but instead, the focus of all their attention was on Lord Tywin.

“You may approach,” Lord Tywin faintly approved of the disciplined manners of the Florents.

They came up to Tyrion, again in a sort of strangely rehearsed manner, arranging themselves from shortest to tallest so that none of them were blocking each other’s view of him.

“How did you like the story? You do like the story, don’t you?” Omer started first.

“Yeah,” Merrell echoed. “Don’t you?”

“I do.”

And they all simultaneously grinned at him. Tyrion could barely hear Lady Selyse muttering to herself something about ‘the shining’.

Tyrion glanced at Lord Tywin, whose foreboding face gave him no clues if this was acceptable or not.

“I’ve never read a tale the like before. Do you know more?” he hopefully asked.

“Yes, my lord,” all of the Florents simultaneously replied.

Lady Selyse made an amused purse of her lips.

“We can tell you all about it,” Alekyne finally took pity and also not wanting to have Tyrion frightened further by the creepy synchronization of replies of the younger Florents. “May we show him the library, Lord Lannister?”

“You may.”

“Thank you, Lord Lannister,” all the Florents from Imry’s age down said at once with utmost politeness.

They filed out in order from oldest to youngest, again making very correct bows or curtsies before leaving the room. Lord Renly left also, after a nod from Lord Stannis. Alekyne made a wave towards Tyrion and he followed. Only Lord Florent and Lady Selyse remained, standing beside her betrothed.
Lord Tywin focused his heavy gaze on Lord Florent, who calmly looked him in the eye.

“I warned them all most strenuously to be on their best behavior while in your presence. I had not expected the effect of all of them obeying me at the same time.”

Lord Tywin said nothing to that.

“I wish to see my daughter and grandson,” he announced.

Lord Stannis pulled a cord to summon a servant who could lead Lord Tywin to the queen’s assigned chambers. Lord Stannis stated that they would take their leave of Lord Tywin, unless he had any further need of them. Lord Tywin did not, so they left the room.

It was only Lord Tywin and Ser Jaime, then.


“Nothing except to meet Tyrion,” Jaime replied. “Lord Florent truly did only approach me after the young ones asked if they could meet him.”

Jaime could tell that his father thought him an easily led fool for the answer.

“The Florents are in no debt themselves. Their House has entered a contract to provide tin jarred provisions for the Royal Fleet. He has arranged good marriages for his daughters. And of course, for his niece. The Baratheons are practically fostering Lord Renly with them. Lord Florent’s son is responsible and dutiful. He practices often enough at the sword and bow and he’s a competent enough rider. He does not drink, gamble, nor go to whorehouses. The younger ones are well mannered, as you see. They would all rather spend time in a library.”

This last sentence he said with a smirking, mystified tone. Lord Tywin ignored this.

“House Florent has made interesting moves since the Rebellion. More than any of the decades before that I remember of them,” Tywin finally says.

And here Jaime knew that they had gained the interest of his father and the interest of his father was just waiting for them to overreach.

“That girl. Delena. How old?”

“Seventeen. I think.”

“Betrothed?”

Jaime shrugged. By now, the servant appeared and they were led to Cersei’s chambers. She met them, curtseying to Lord Tywin and Prince Joffrey was brought forward. Lord Tywin observed him in the wet nurse’s arms and after ascertaining for himself that he was not misshapen like Tyrion, dismissed the wet nurse.

“Tell me about the Florents.”

Cersei complained and mocked. She made sneering remarks about the Florent mode of dress, as they needed to because they were so plain or actually ugly they might as well showcase their big arses, how their hairstyle was such an obvious ploy to hide their humongous ears, how nothing, not even their oh-so-pretty singing and fine music making could make up for their boring ways and
how they were so boring as to stand befriending sad, mopey, mousy Lysa Arryn-

“Enough.”

Really, Jaime thought. What use was this complaining about how the ladies Florent were not eager to act lickspittle to his sweet sister to their father? Cersei ought to know better by now.

“How has Lord Stannis responded to his betrothal to Lady Selyse?”

Cersei opened and closed her mouth.

“I don’t know.”

“I have heard King Robert mention that Lord Stannis was going to the Florent manse in King’s Landing every single day for lunch, often for dinner, and Lord Arryn has been holding private dinners where both the Florents and Lord Stannis have been invited.”

“Finally. Something useful for once from you,” Lord Tywin looked at Jaime. “I expected better from you, Cersei.”

Cersei looked between Lord Tywin and Jaime, her brows furrowed.

“Why-”

“Through his niece, Lord Florent has the ear of the brother to the King, who is on the Small Council. The ladies Florent have befriended Lady Lysa Arryn and now Lord Florent has the ear of the Lord Hand. They have a contract with the Crown. They are fostering the future Lord Paramount of the Stormlands. If and when Lord Arryn finally breeds a son on Lady Lysa, the friendship between the ladies Florent, the trust of the King himself with the fostering of Lord Renly, and the marriage between a Florent daughter to Lord Royce’s heir means that this Lord Paramount of the Vale heir could be fostered in Brightwater Keep. The friendship between his daughter and the ladies Florent may also be a not inconsiderable factor in Lord Hoster Tully’s future decisions for a potential bride for his heir Edmure.”

With each sentence, Lord Tywin began to loom over Cersei. Jaime was blinking, finally realizing all the known maneuvers that the Florents had made. Those roaming, ever watchful pale-eyed pests now seemed much more sinister than before.

“They made no moves during the Rebellion. They allowed the Tyrells enough rope to hang themselves. The Tyrells have been, shall we say, outfoxed. And, it seems, they have outfoxed you. Why must I bear this disappointment?”

Cersei’s gaping was getting really unattractive.

“But-”

“Do you think I care about how sad and boring the wife of the current Lord Hand to the King is? As you have not managed to influence the King on your own-”

“I gave him a son!”

“That infant does not rule. The Lord Hand does and you might have made yourself useful and allowed our House influence within court again by befriending that wife of his, but no, you had to drive her away into the arms of that pack of foxes. Furthermore, you have driven the Florent ladies away. I am sure those large ears of theirs are perfectly capable of hearing your low opinion of all
of them.”

Cersei pouted.

“And now, they court Tyrion.”

“You will never allow him to have Casterly Rock!” Cersei cried out.

Lord Tywin did not answer one way or another, just glaring at Cersei until she shut her mouth again.

“They have removed one Lord Paramount from consideration. They are fostering another. They are friends of another and may gain another fosterage. They may marry one of their own to another. Of course they are going to court us.”

“Then punish them, Father, punish them for moving against us!”

“But are they, Cersei? Have they insulted me? You? Have they insulted you? And don’t say they have by befriending Lady Arryn, since you did not have the ability to get that idea on your own. Being more sensible than you is not actually insulting you.”

Cersei bit her lip. Her informant servants could only report that nothing happened during those sewing sessions with Lady Arryn; nothing but actual sewing or musical entertainment. Gossip was of the desultory sort and only a summing up of what they had heard before. Of her, nothing was said. She knew that if she said so that would only anger her father more, so she shook her head.

“And you,” Lord Tywin rounded on Jaime. “Have they insulted you?”

“Not at all. They address me respectfully as any other of the Kingsguard. The young boys seem to hold me in some esteem. Must be foolish youth. Or Lord Florent has not made it clear what I have done.”

“They are careful to do nothing to anger me. Which shows some sense,” Lord Tywin summed up.

“Tell me. What is the prize the Florents seek?”

Neither of his children said anything. Nobody much cared about the Florents, content to mock the size of their ears.

Lord Tywin closed his eyes for a moment before opening them.

“They have, from the time of Aegon the Conqueror, been mewling about the unfairness of the granting of Lord Paramount of the Reach to the Tyrells. Amongst the many other Houses with better claim. What have these other claimant Houses of the Reach done?”

“I don’t know,” Jaime said.

Lord Tywin’s eyes narrowed.

“They placed this very castle under siege! Think, boy!”

Jaime refused to look away or acknowledge his mistake.

“For the first time that I can think of in history, a single House had the rare, rare opportunity to rise above others by doing nothing. They took it, and then with the gains, climbed higher. How much would it take for King Robert to grant the Florents the Lord Paramountcy of the Reach? Perhaps with allies amongst the other Lords Paramount, hmm? Have allies to petition the King, to convince
him of all the ways they have been more faithful and useful to the realm, better than the Tyrells, who starved his brothers?"

They both remained silent.

“Now, in what way, does this course of action insult, injure, or harm House Lannister?”

He waited.

“It doesn’t…?” Cersei ventured.

“It doesn’t,” Lord Tywin repeated. “I’ve a mind to prefer a fellow Lord Paramount who isn’t a preening fool like that Mace Tyrell. They have shown sense, so far. And that, that does not displease me.”

“So you would ally with them?” Cersei demanded. “Have those obvious schemers become friends with Tyrion?”

“They have yet asked of me nothing,” Lord Tywin replied. “I would wait and see what moves they make. If they continue to not displease me, and even prove useful to me….”

He clasped his hands behind his back.

“A Lannister pays his debts. It would take much to convince me to see them placed as Lords Paramount. They may yet succeed. We shall see.”

Meanwhile, in the library of Storm’s End, Tyrion was seated on a tuffet, answering questions posed to him by the Florents.

“Is the library at Casterly Rock bigger than this one?” asked Omer.

“It is. Three times as big at least.”

All the Florents gasped and oohed.

“How much of it have you read?” demanded Imry.

“Yeah!” added Merrell.

“Over an eighth of it,” Tyrion claimed boldly. “I can read a book in three days. Four days or a week if it is very boring.”

“Then you must know how to read Valyrian?” this time from Delena.

“A little. I’m learning.”

“I’m learning too,” Delena beamed. “I’m going to be able to sing songs in it and know what I’m singing.”

Tyrion got more comfortable as they stayed on the topic of books. They didn’t ask intrusive questions about what it was like to be a dwarf or if he saw things differently with his mismatch colored eyes.

“There’s enough time to share a story before dinner,” Alekyne announced. “What will it be?”
“Curse of the Black Pearl!” Omer cried.

“The Giraffe, and the Pelly and Me!” said Merrell.

“The story of Princess Rapunzel and the Thief Flynn Rider!” said Delena.

“Hound of the Baskervilles!” added Imry.

“Brave Princess Merida,” Renly waved his hand.

“Crooked House!” said Erren.

Tyrion’s mouth opened a little in surprise, having never heard of any of these stories.

“Now, now,” Alekyne laughed at how there was no consensus. “Rock Paper Scissors it, then. Be quick!”

Tyrion watched as they responded by forming a loose circle and began counting down and making various gestures with their hands. Eventually it came down to Curse of the Black Pearl.

“Right then, right then. This is a favorite of mine too. I’m pretty good at the telling,” Alekyne smiled at Tyrion.

Everybody found seats. Alekyne clears his throat and begins, his voice becoming projecting like a mummer’s.

“A ship drifts slowly, so slowly, through a thick white fog in the sea. Standing on deck is a young girl, dressed in a fine gown, of no more then ten and she is singing. Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate’s life me-”

As Alekyne goes on, Tyrion becomes enthralled.

He was not sure of what to expect the last time he was summoned to his father’s solar. He was sure he was in store for another blistering lecture about how he was to cease being such a disappointment to his name. His father informed him that Jaime had written a letter, recommending that Tyrion be allowed to receive letters and begin correspondence with Florents. Tyrion had asked whom in particular.

“Practically every one under the age of twenty-five,” Lord Tywin answered, pushing a stack of sealed letters to the far edge of the desk so that it was within his view. “They also gift you with a book.”

Tyrion swallowed, very curious about the letters and the book.

“Does Jaime say why they want to write to me?”

“It seems that your brother has described you as a great reader. The young Florents seem similarly disposed and were under the impression that you are worth knowing because of it.”

“Oh.”

“The Florents are a respectable House. You may read the letters and keep the book. Jaime assures me that the subject matter is not salacious in nature.”

“Thank you, Father.”
Lord Tywin just looked down at his raven messages and began writing. Tyrion suppressed a sigh to himself and went up to the desk to retrieve the letters and the book.

In the privacy of his personal chambers he was tempted to open the book first. However, it made sense to open the letters. He was confused on why there should be so many separate letters. He opened and unfolded one that was marked Merrell Florent on front.

‘Greetings to Tyrion Lannister. Ser Jaime says that you like reading. I like reading too. I am eleven years old and I am the youngest one. It’s terribly hard to be the youngest because every time I think I discovered something new, everybody else tells me that they knew about it already. It’s dreadfully disappointing, but my Cousin Selyse, who will be marrying the Master of Ships, Lord Stannis Baratheon, says that it doesn’t matter that I’m the youngest, because as long as I am still curious, someday I will have great ideas and then I will build them in our workshop in the Foxhole and it will be my own. Maybe one day I will write a book like Selyse and my other Cousin Rhea. I hope to do so someday. I think it is my greatest wish to have a book in my own name and to see it in a library. Maybe they will read it in the Citadel. What’s your greatest wish? That’s all I have to write today.

Very respectfully, Merrell Florent.

P.S. You’re the first person not related to me I have ever written a letter for.’

“You’re the first person I’ve ever received a letter from not related to me,” Tyrion said after reading.

The subsequent letters were in a similar, though more mature vein, mentioning Jaime and a place they referred to as the Foxhole, though Tyrion was sure that the Florent keep couldn’t possibly be called that. They were so open, so friendly. It was foreign to Tyrion. Nobody had ever spoken to him in such a manner except for Jaime and Ty-

Tyrion crushed his hands to his eyes, fighting the urge to curl up and weep.

“Enough of that,” he muttered to himself.

Once he was in control once more, he picked up the book and looked at the cover.

“Treasure Island. By Selyse Florent.”

Tyrion’s eyebrows rose. The future Lady of Dragonstone was a tale teller? Huh.

He decided to read five pages and see if it suited him or if it was something of vanity and unreadable. He ended up burning a candle all the way down, eager to know the rest of Jim Hawkin’s adventures, wanting to know if they would find the treasure in the end, and what would become of Jim, under the power of the perilous pirate Long Jon Silver.

When he finished the book he hugged it to himself, feeling happiness and satisfaction he had not felt in a long time after reading. During next dinner his father informed him that Lady Selyse had issued an invitation to her upcoming wedding especially for him and Tyrion could barely restrain his enthusiasm to meet the lady who had written such a compelling story and to meet her family. He reread the book and the letters as they traveled to Storm’s End and soon felt like he knew them already, almost.

He was very glad that the initial awkwardness passed quickly after leaving the presence of his father. He could see that their postures ceased to be so rigid and their speech not so studiously enunciated. And now, listening the daring antics of the pirate Captain Jack Sparrow, Tyrion felt for
the first time in a long time that something good and wonderful was happening to him.
So it is finally here. Practically the goal that I have been working for since I was dumped back into ten years old in this crapsack world. My wedding day to Stannis Baratheon.

I woke up and Megga had tea and toast ready for me while we got cracking for the big show. I had my lip freshly waxed, I got my hot soak in the bathtub, and my hair released from the overnight braids and arranged into a proper updo. I would not court criticism by wearing anything that could be construed as a crown, tiara, or diadem. However, I scattered in hair pins that had faceted topaz beads and gold leaf at the ends to catch the candle light each time I turned my head. Soon enough it was time to boost my breasts up and together as much as possible with the short stays in order to get some cleavage action going and pull over the sheerest silk slip over the whole. My smallclothes were as lingerie-like as I could get. I wouldn’t wear any lace on any version of dresses I had, but lace was acceptable as trim for underthings. I had the lace dyed black, which was unheard of, but when I got them on, all the ladies raised their eyebrows at the effect of the black lace over skin and I was sure that once again, I’m setting a new fashion trend.

My dress was worked on for months, no lie. I made another version of my other velvet feast dresses, only this time in a black silk charmeuse, which was costly enough as a rare Essosi import, but I will definitely be able to bust this out again for court appearances later in life, so it was worth it based on amortized cost. The drape and texture was exquisite on the bias, with inset panels beginning just above my knees so that the skirt would flare out Ginger Rogers style while dancing. I added a plunging neckline to my sternum and then came the glamour. On the bodice, I went with faceted topaz beads for most of the fire, intermixed with tinier yellow quartz beads for depth on the sparkle, keeping most of the beading at my neckline and shoulders, running down my long sleeves and then clustering again for showy splashes encircling my wrists so that I wouldn’t require bracelets. As the beading spread over the rest of the dress, I pulled back on the density, so that the beads would not weigh down the draping. I didn’t want it to be heavy; this was more like if Tinkerbell sprinkled her pixie dust with her wand, instead of the classic Las Vegas style mass of rhinestones; I wanted a Bob Mackie level impact in truth. The beading did not form any imagery; I wanted to concentrate more on the ombre effects I can achieve with the different yellows of the topaz and quartz, so that my dress was golden fireworks blasts in the night. All that glitters, All That Jazz.

I relaxed as the rest of the ladies of my family dressed as well.

I spent the next traditional hour or so listening to what the married ladies had to say about the consummation.

“Right, then. Horrify me. Begin.”

“Selyse, be serious,” Mother admonished, smiling.

“Is it not that different from farmyard animals mating? I assume a hands and knees position, right?”
The other ladies laughed despite themselves.

“No! Lie down on your back.”

“Right, right. Pain levels. Flowering? The runs? Getting my moustache ripped off my face?”

Mother shook her head at my impertinence and gave up, resigning herself to drinking tea.

“It was rather like getting kicked. Down there,” Melessa volunteered.

Oh. Poor Melessa.

“Really? Rhea, help me here, that’s just Tarly being a graceless goat, right?”

Rhea made a noncommittal bobbling motion of her head after patting Melessa’s hand sympathetically.

“It’s much better if you kiss for as long as possible. But if he gets impatient, then you have to let him in. Even if you’re not ready,” Rhea finally said. “I find it helps to stall for time by kissing while standing for a time. I shall have to invent more ways to stall that is pleasurable for us both.”

Cripes, did no man know about real foreplay in this whole joint?

Lady Florent and Aunt Rosamund were going to contribute, but-

“I’m sorry Aunts, but not a word,” I hold hold up a hand. “I want to be able to look my uncles in the eye in the future.”

Lady Florent raised an imperious eyebrow while Aunt Rosamund pursed her lips, glancing at each other. Mother chuckled into her tea.

“Well. That may be so,” Lady Florent said. “But let us assure you that we do hope that Lord Stannis is less a battering ram than the likes of Randyll Tarly and has more self control than Ser Andar. One never can tell though. Stormlanders are… a rougher people.”

“I hope,” Aunt Rosamund adds. “That he can appreciate your Florent tendency to… play. There is more than a touch of that vixen Florys about all you young ladies-”

Melessa and Rhea smirk. I frankly can’t wait until I’m in the Married Ladies Club and can give them proper foreplay pointers myself.

“And so,” Lady Florent continues. “You may well manage to get him to enjoy the delay. He’ll not have that idea himself, probably. Not like… your uncles.”

“The winsome ways of Florys the Fox do come through with the men of the family too,” Mother concludes.

Huh. Does that mean she was fond, or even loved my father before he died? Interesting thought.

“Unless it’s Uncle Axell,” Rhea adds.

Everybody wrinkles their nose and laughs.

I already made sure to order Megga to have all available bedrooms that we could possibly end up in prepped with extra bedsheets. If Robert did fuck this up for us, I wasn’t going to do it in his sweaty sheets. Gross. I also made sure that all the female servants on staff as well as Delena
especially had a proper cup of moon tea before the feast. Maester Jurne was scandalized at the bulk order for brewing, but I was very firm. I also loomed over him. He did the deed and I was instantly relaxed prior to the wedding day.

Finally, at noon, it was time. They placed the ridiculously luxe Florent maiden’s cloak on me. The wide collar was real ermine and the furs spread in a snowy white and black tail-tipped expanse from my neck to my elbows at the front. It was fastened closed all the way and obscured my gown. There were long slits cut at the sides of the cloak to allow my arms through for freedom of movement, which was unexpectedly practical. The back was white satin and there was the Florent fox done with glittering faceted topaz, citrine, diamonds, and onyx beaded embroidery prancing in the middle of a circle of sapphire bead flowers. The lining of the cloak was even more ermine. It was so royal. I suppose if I hadn’t ended up here in the first place through my own maneuvering on Uncle Alester, Uncle Alester would’ve clotheslined, bitchslapped, and tripped every other House just to get that betrothal to Stannis anyway; it had been such a long time since the Florents married into a properly dynastic House.

Uncle Alester was waiting for me outside my chambers. The rest of the family went on ahead to the sept.

We walked arm in arm and the crowd hushed as we passed through the door of the sept.

Stannis was standing there, ill at ease and fists clenched, until he turned his head upon hearing the noises in the sept subside. He didn’t smile. My man isn’t going to ever smile easy. But there was a relaxation of the tension of his jaw and a relieved look in his eyes so that was enough. He looked very handsome and that’s not just my say so. With his impeccable posture and the cut of his jacket, he could have stepped out of one of the better productions of War and Peace. He was all in black from jacket to polished leather boots and there was the sheen of gold thread glinting throughout the jacket’s braided cord trim. Golden thread was used again to embroider antler racks at his collar and wrists as well as the outline of stags rampant at the upper arms of the sleeves.

When we reached the septon, Uncle Alester removed my cloak and I serenely ignored the small gasps and murmurs I could hear from the crowd at how much I was slaying with all my glitter. It was more important to see how Stannis reacted. He looked gobsmacked. Twitterpated. Thirsty.

He actually stood there blinking at me, until the septon cleared his throat and helpfully informed him that he may cloak the bride. He put his cloak, cloth-of-gold with that onyx beaded crowned stag, on me and managed to regain enough awareness to say the words after our joined hands were wrapped with the ribbon.

I was already moving as he said that he would seal the vows with a kiss. So what if it was scandalous for a lady to take initiative? I knew what I was doing. I slid my hand onto his shoulder while stepping forward and got our first kiss in while his mouth was still open to say the words and his lips soft for speaking. He inhaled with surprise and I got a little nibble in before stepping back.

Robert hooted from that and Stannis was back to scowling.

Figures.

The crowd cheered as we turned arm and arm to face them.

We walked out of the sept, with me just grinning and grinning.

The feast went well. The food came out piping hot and delicious. Later reports from servants and Imry and Erren say that some guests were put out by the lack of ostentatious display of money in
the form of flashy (and frankly inedible) dishes, considering the relative prestige of the couple in question. On the other hand, the feast was filling and I knew very well that all anybody properly wants to remember about weddings is getting fed well and in a timely manner and having some good drink. There was also the fact that Lord Florent let it be known that I wished for any leftovers to be distributed to the smallfolk of Storm’s End and Stannis was known to be a man of simple (tight-fisted penny-pinching) tastes. Our hospitality was in fact better than expected, given Stannis’ current reputation. Everybody was especially loving the barbecued pulled pork, which was a very new thing along with the rest of my adapted Julia Child recipes. Score.

Multiple toasts were made and we received well-wishers and gifts at our table. When Stannis got very stressed by the proceedings, he would reach for my hand to hold under the table. Robert came over, clapped Stannis on the shoulders multiple times, told him to remember what they talked about beforehand (Stannis grimaced harder after that little comment) and proceeded to compliment me on the punch before returning to his seat.

After the cakes and tarts were passed out and eaten, Alekyne stood up and went to the stage where the band was located.

“First dance as a married couple! Lord Stannis and Lady Selyse! Presenting the newest of new dances, the Foxtrot!”

I stood up and took off the Baratheon cloak and folded it neatly for servants to take away into safe keeping and we walked out, hand in hand.

“Ready?” he asked.

“You know it,” I said, putting my hand to his shoulder.

The song began, with Alekyne doing his crooner best, a slower rendition of ‘Can’t Take My Eyes Off You’. We glided out, turning and turning. Stannis’ expression was still intense, but it was from concentration. His jaw was relaxed and then I realized that he was mouthing the words of the song. We danced and he whispered the song to me and it was just- just wonderfully romantic. I certainly could not have expected such from Stannis; I could not afford illusions of my modern ideas of romantic sentiment when it came to him, from what I knew of him. He was awkward and earnest and therefore sometimes sweet (but no one can mention it, that would just have him snapping his jaws tight and grinding away because grown men aren’t supposed to be sweet!). But this was simply marvelous. I was grinning again and I squeezed his hand and he squeezed mine back.

We came to the end of the song and he twirled me under his arm, finishing with a dip that he had previously scoffed at during practice. By the time he pulled me back upright, there was scattered applause. There were more raised eyebrows than usual, some hands pressed to mouths or chests in consternation, but there were also other interested, intrigued looks. So far, so good, as there wasn’t a mob forming off of condemnation.

Alekyne announced that the next song was for the Foxtrot also. As I expected, my married family members went up to exhibit; Lord and Lady Florent, Ser Colin and Aunt Rosamund. I had wanted Mother to join us also and Alekyne very capably volunteered to stand with her. Imry and Delena were a little disappointed at not being allowed on the floor, but we judged that it would be too scandalous yet and it was already pushing it for unmarried Alekyne to dance.

Even Lord Tarly was moved to go up with Melessa, since she wanted to properly take part in showing off a new Florent invention. Of course, that meant Ser Andar had practiced very assiduously during the weeks prior that they stayed in Storm’s End, determined to show well against Lord Tarly with Rhea. What I was really not expecting was the sedate and usually
conventional Lord Arryn standing up and leading Lysa to the floor also. I raised my eyebrows at Delena, who was still seated at the tables and she winked. I waved at Lysa and she wiggled her fingers at me as they passed to find an open spot on the floor, her cheeks flushed with happiness.

The band struck up ‘I Only Have Eyes For You’. We advised everybody beforehand to circle the perimeter of the floor in the widdershins direction to prevent collision. It proved simple enough for everybody and we all circled the floor, making a graceful enough effect. Having much more practice, Stannis and I incorporated fancier moves, zig zagging, pivots, and Stannis spinning me under his arm. I could tell that he enjoyed how much I trusted him to lead and how I was skillfully following him. Others like Lord and Lady Florent were content with the basic step and rollaways.

After we all stepped off the floor and the bandleader transitioned to the more traditional dances, it seemed like it would be a good night. I ordered Imry and the other younger cousins beforehand to keep Delena occupied and even Renly joined in on the effort. The hopping and skipping required of the traditional dances prevented Melessa, Rhea, and Lysa because of their pregnancies from returning directly to the floor, but I directed the bandleader to make every fifth dance the Foxtrot to accommodate them.

Stannis danced the other traditional dances with me for a time, before wishing to only dance the Foxtrot with me. I had my relatives again for the rest of the night’s dances and even Robert.

“Pretty good show with that foxtrot of yours,” Robert grinned.

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“You make Stannis look good. I never thought I’d see him almost smiling! In public! Hah!”

“As you say, Your Grace.”

“Hah. I’m annoying you. I suppose I’ll shut up about him now, it’s your wedding day!”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“We’re good-kin now! Call me Robert!”

Robert grinned, still cheerful, and waved at Renly as we passed the table where he was sitting.

“Ah, he looks well! Almost a grown man, Renly!”

“He’s ten, Robert.”

Robert laughed at my eyebrow raise. I can’t help my Spock-ish response to his over the top personality and he was not so prideful that he couldn’t take my dry responses to him as humorous. He certainly made more allowances for me than with his brother. It only takes one too many instances of Stannis bristling or snapping at Robert before the two of them start shouting and barking at each other. With me, he actually tried to be more gallant. Given the instances in court where he’d make references to shovels and Reacher gardening habits and winking at Imry, I suppose we have an inside joke about how he will step softly around Florents.

“Tall for it, though!”

“He is, that.”

“He likes you, too,” Robert’s jovial tone was a little more serious. “I’m glad. I’m glad that he likes one good-sister of his. And that pack of Florent boys. Good lads, all of them. He’s much better
now. I’m glad. Very glad.”

“We are glad to know Renly. We all like him very much.” I nodded.

“Good.”

“You can try, with Cersei. I can help.”

“Ah,” Robert looked over towards Cersei, sitting alone and stiff at their table, poking listlessly at a piece of cake with a fork. “She’s a problem, that one.”

“Well. I do solve problems.”

“Hah! How do you solve a problem like Cersei?”

I quirked my brows and smirked.

“With a little help from a King, I believe I can do just about anything.”

“You know, I think I believe you! If you want to take on that sort of problem, why not!”

“Then ask her for the next dance. Start now. I will work with you back in King’s Landing.”

Robert did actually ask Cersei to dance. She cast a suspicious look at him, but seeing as Lord Tywin was obviously watching her, pasted on a smile and stepped out with Robert. I squeezed Stannis’ arm and whispered that I would be braving a conversation with Lord Tywin alone. He hesitated, scowling a little, before nodding. I gird my loins, put on my Proper Lady Face, and venture forth.

“Lord Lannister,” I curtsied.

“Lady Selyse.”

I moved to take the empty seat beside his.

“Thank you for accepting our invitation.”

“May you have a productive marriage, my lady.”

“It is dearly to be wished.”

“I may stay a little longer after this feast, if you wish to speak to me more privately,” he said, cutting to the chase.

“This is well enough, my lord. There’s no privacy in a small party. Nothing is so private as a crowd.”

“Do tell.”

“We have cause to deduce that the Greyjoys have begun with inconveniently troublesome choices. Has piracy been on the rise on the Westerland coasts like for the Reach?”

Of all the potential topics of conversation he thought to have with me, this was not it. He fully turned his head to look at me.
“There may be. I have not received report from the coastal lords to that effect.”

“I suggest increasing the watch and patrols at Lannisport. It is the most valuable target, with an established fleet and gold for plunder. It is only logical.”

“They would not dare directly attack Lannisport,” Lord Tywin actually scoffed.

“Ironmen longships are stealthy and maneuverable. They would just need to wait until most or all of the fleet is at anchor, come in on a foggy or moonless night, torch them all. With no defense from the sea, they can then make landing and attack Lannisport at will. I thought of that. And I’m just a lady landlubber.”

“By what means would you determine that the Ironmen are planning such audacious action?” Lord Tywin’s got that piercing ‘Lie to me and perish’ murder stare down. Marvelous. Fortunately, I’m not a quailing lady. I never was.

“My Uncle Axell has been hired on within the Master of Coin’s office as the Chief Auditor. He has found a notable, not even badly hidden, increase in purchases from House Greyjoy and their bannermen of timber, rope, and canvas from the relevant merchants, who make reports on their earnings for taxation. Now, one could be optimistic and hope that Lord Greyjoy is merely investing in increasing his trading fleet and accumulating wealth that doesn’t require pillaging, murder, and rape, but I think that’s a sucker bet. Are you a gambling man, Lord Tywin?”

Lord Tywin took a sip of lemonade instead of replying.

“Thought not. My lord husband is outfitting the Royal Fleet, but it is clear on the other side of the continent. My family will be speaking with the Redwynes. I needed to speak with you while you are here in person.”

“You. And not your lord husband, Master of Ships.”

“My lord husband is accustomed to issuing orders. I would not have the necessary actions to prevent the destruction of one of the most key harbors of Westeros delayed by him forgetting his courtesies to you, Lord Lannister.”

He made a very subtle incline of his head.

“House Florent has also developed a signalling system that is effective for warning of coastal attacks. We use it within our own holdings. Will you be receptive to a manual for implementation for the Westerlands?”

“Send it to me when ready.”

“Very well. Enjoy the rest of the feast, my lord.”

I stood and curtsied, he inclined his head once more, and I left.

Stannis and I were dancing, when the cry went up for a bedding. I looked up and found Robert standing at the sidelines, after succeeding in getting Cersei to dance three more subsequent dances, wonder of wonders. I made a slashing motion across my neck. A king could order this to stop before it began. Robert shrugged at me, grinning.

Motherfucker.
Stannis’ grip on my hand suddenly became tighter.

I made eye contact with Alekyne and he put his fingers to his mouth and whistled a signal while making his way towards me. The crowd was taking Stannis and I apart and when Stannis was forced to let go, Alekyne got to me without a moment to lose. He caught me as I jumped up at his shoulders, scooping me up into a fireman’s carry. Alekyne stood up quickly and with Imry ahead of him to push an opening, plowed through the crowd, carrying me away, while Uncles Alester, Axell, and Colin ran interference, to the groans and jeers of the men.

We got to the correct chamber and I was already feeling pretty good, seeing as I literally just saw Robert standing next to his wife and certainly not fucking with my cousin Delena, who was dancing with Erren.

“Thank you,” I said as Alekyne bent down so that I could let go. “Can you keep the others away?”

“Of course,” he nodded.

“Good luck,” said Imry, coming over to hug me one last time for the night and they both left.

I start by taking my shoes off, when the door slammed open.

“Geroff!” Stannis barked at the women crowding him.

He might have literally slammed the door back shut on somebody’s face and leaned on the door, as if bracing against a battering ram.

Poor Stannis. None of his buttons were missing, though his jacket was open and I could see that even his trousers placket was undone. That’s Westeros for you. What’s a wedding without a helping of mandatory sexual harassment in the mix?

On the other side of the door, I could hear Imry doing what he did best when in a snappy mood, yelling at everybody to kindly fuck off, thank you. There were still mens’ voices raised with the tired old yelled suggestions about ramming of portcullises and the perennial Reacher favorite: planting the cucumber. Imry’s voice rose in pitch and finally Robert’s boom joined in, urging the crowd to leave us in peace. Finally, the sound of the crowd moved away from the corridor.

I gave Stannis his moment to compose himself, while I worked free the buttons on my dress that I could. When I needed help for the last ones, I turned my back towards him.

“Stannis,” I said. “Help me, please.”

He stepped close and undid my buttons. I thanked him and carefully peeled out of the dress. I gave an entirely unnecessary wiggle to get it over my hips, let the dress drop to the floor, stepped out of it and then bent over, also entirely unnecessarily, before I picked the dress up. I didn’t rush standing back up straight, folding the dress up slowly. I glanced at him and he was staring at my ass through the translucent material of my silk shift.

I left him to take off his shirt, as I flipped the shift up and over my head and let it drop to the floor. I managed to improvise a little burlesque bit by crossing an arm over my breasts as I reached behind me and undid the hooks securing my short stays.
“Get your boots and stockings off,” I waved towards the waiting chair with the boot jack. “I’ll wait.”

He stumbled a little in his hurry. When he finally got his last stocking and trousers off and looked up at me, I did a shimmy and the stays slid down to the floor, while I kept my arm over my breasts. I turned my back to him, and dropped my arm casually, to pick the stays up from the floor (this, by the way, is totally not the way to remove stays. But I wasn’t here to do it efficiently). He was staring at me again as I turn to face him, unshy about my near nudity. I put the stays and shift on a chair on top of my dress and did a slow strut, until I was sitting on the bed, with the covers already turned down. I lift up my legs up one at a time and roll my own stockings down slowly, watching him watching me. I get them off and simply drop them on the floor. He’s still staring, unmoving.

“My lord. Stannis. Do come closer. The business cannot be done with you all the way across the room.”

He made a huffing sound before approaching. He was about to blow out the candle, but I stopped him.

“I would much rather that we can see what we are about to do.”

“... Logical,” he allowed.

This dear, dear man.

I undid the drawstring of my smallclothes and slipped them off. He got his own off and sat with his hands awkwardly placed on his lap, as if he was resisting the impulse to cover himself. It didn’t help at all with hiding his arousal from view.

“Help me with my hairpins?”

We took out the pins together, piling them on the bedside table. He was hesitant, but by the end, he was running his fingers through my hair, looking shy and amazed at being able to do so. I lie back and opened my arms to him.

“Kiss me, Stannis.”

He gets beside me and he does, bending over me. He’s propped himself up on his hands in an uncomfortable posture, as if he can’t bring himself to find out how well I will bear his weight. He’s making these hesitant pecking kisses that make me want to giggle but I know I mustn’t. The man detests the idea of anybody laughing at him. I reach out and he doesn’t shy away when I touch him, feeling out the contours of the muscles on his shoulders and back. I coaxed him into softening up his lips and he doesn’t entirely launch himself off the bed when I licked my tongue into his mouth.

“Selyse!”

“Did I scare you?”

“I’m not scared,” Stannis half scowls at me. “You just licked me! In the mouth.”

“I wanted to know what it was I like. I’ve seen it done.”

“You wanted to know.”

Stannis sighed and closed his eyes.
“You always want to know,” he mutters.

“Well. Yes, my lord,” I couldn’t help the pert tone I took.

He makes another huff, this one the quietly amused kind. So we kiss again, this time with tongue. It’s good and hot, but I know it’s not nearly enough, as he starts shuffling his knees between my own.

“Lick my nipples,” I blurt out.

“What?” he looks scandalised again.

“Touch my nipples,” I use my hands to push my breasts together. “So they feel good.”

“How do you know this?”

And there’s the suspicious inflection in his voice again.

“Because I’ve rubbed a washcloth over them after I grew breasts and I felt what I felt. And then I experimented-”

He mutters ‘of course’ to himself.

“By myself and it’s good.”

I start flicking them with my fingers until they harden. He’s watching me do it, mouth slightly open.

“Come on, Stannis,” I lower my voice.

He goes adorably pie-eyed the way he always does when I pull the Marilyn Voice on him.

He wavers for a few more seconds but once he comes to his decision it’s immediate; he simply drops his head and sucks one nipple into his mouth, while reaching and gripping at my other breast. He’s not that gentle, but I don’t need gentle, I need sensation, and I’m not faking the noises I’m making from what he’s doing. He stays there for a while, until he looks sideways at the nipple he’s pinching and rubbing with his hand and seems to think for a moment before switching off. He looks up at me, faintly surprised, every time he makes me gasp or giggle from the sensations. He lifts off after a few minutes, rubbing and massaging both of my breasts with this amazed expression on his face.

We kiss some more while he touches me and I think I might be ready enough when he starts shuffling his knees again. I open my legs readily and he starts humping at me, dragging against my lower belly. He shifts down and gives a jerking shove-

“Whoa, no, Stannis, wrong hole- poking at the wrong-”

He stops and makes one of his angry, frustrated bark noises before burying his face in the pillow next to mine. He’s distracted by embarrassment, so I get leverage and flip him onto his back.

“What? What, Selyse, don’t-”

“I tolerated some blind poking about just now. It will not do.”

I push myself up so that I can straddle his thighs. He’s got that scandalised look again, but at least he’s not pissy embarrassed now. I reach for him, but the embarrassment has made him soften a tad.
I handle it gently and hesitantly, like I actually am a virgin, and I leaned over to kiss him. He hardens back up, which is encouraging. He doesn’t expect it when I kiss my way down his throat and give his nipple a lick.

“Selyse!”

“Does it feel good?”

He blinks at me.

“I’m trying again,” I warned him, before swirling my tongue on his nipple and giving his cock a stroke at the same time.

He arches with a hiss.

“Good?”

“Ye- Yes.”

I just made Stannis stutter. Hot. I kiss him again. It’s just awesome that he likes it; not every man likes that and if he’s one of them, better for me.

After he’s good and ready from a few minutes more of me making him quiver and twitch, he’s watching me, breathing hard, eyes wide, as I rub the tip of him against me. I get the head in and hold him there. It’s a squeeze and I am entirely unused to it. It’s been over twenty years. So sue me.

Deep breaths. He’s starting to shift his hips.

“Don’t stab me with it. I can do it,” I mutter out, inching my way down.

“Hurry.”

I will not. I can feel resistance as he goes, but he’s not coming to a hard stop. So good so far, and I bear down steadily, rocking and pushing past the resistance.

“Success,” I say, looking at how we are joined. “With no crying, even.”

Stannis is looking too, his color high, again slightly amazed.

“Granted, I do wax my face on the regular. Maybe I’ve got that much higher pain tolerance,” I tap my chin as if in thought.

Stannis makes yet another of his inarticulate growling noises. This particular one means that he’s annoyed and amused at the same time with my statements, and that he also doesn’t appreciate me making him admit that he has a sense of humor. We maneuver so that I’m flipped onto my back again.

“Ready?” he asks.

“Kiss me again.”

He does and I brace myself. He moves in the herky jerky manner of the virgin that he is and it’s definitely not comfortable for me. I focus on petting his hair and his shoulders, deep breathing, and not clenching up too much when he shoves in too hard. I watch as his face gets that blank, intense look as his orgasm builds and how he turns positively ruddy just before he heaves one last time into
me and I feel his cock spasming. He makes a strangled exhale and crushes me against the mattress.

He doesn’t let me hold him for much longer than a few breaths before getting off and dropping on to his back beside me. I feel around underneath the pillow until I find the towel that I told Megga to leave underneath and press it in between my legs.

“Are you hurt?”

“Bearably sore,” I said, as I carefully wipe myself. “Now that the painful part is over and done with, it will only be more enjoyable hence.”

“I need not impose on you too often, my lady.”

I look at him fully with what I suppose is the classic ‘Are you fucking kidding me, illogical human’ look of Vulcans in multiple iterations of Star Trek, complete with single raised eyebrow.

“One squirt in one evening is not enough for the odds of conceiving,” I say. “Shall I bring out my notebook and show you my charted moonblood cycles?”

“Please, no,” Stannis does a huffing not-laugh. “Not the notebook.”

“Do you concede?”

“I concede.”

“Well, then,” I check the towel. Yep, he’s managed to jostle me into bleeding a bit. I keep it tucked underneath me. “Do I have leave to gain one orgasm to equal yours, my lord?”

“What?” he lifts his head fully off the pillow to frown at me.

“You climaxed. Seems fair that I should do so also.”

He’s frowning again, this time the confused version.

“Explain.”

“Stannis, I wish to come, the same as you. It’s really quite simple.”

I looked at him for a few more seconds and his expression doesn’t change.

“Women are capable of release, also. I suspect Maester Cressen couldn’t have known, seeing as he has vows.”

He opens and closes his mouth.

“And I deduce that you know this because you experimented on yourself?” he finally says.

“I’ve got the bloody towel to show you, my lord, if you keep with that tone,” I warned him.

He holds a hand up to stop me from showing him.

“Shall I begin?” I ask.

He nods.

I lie back with my eyes closed and start by massaging my breasts and playing with my nipples. I take my time, letting my mind wander so that I’m just feeling. I concentrate on the knowledge that
Stannis is watching me, that he’s never seen anything like this before, that this is his first exposure to porn. I’m corrupting Stannis Baratheon. I’m rubbing myself now, arching and bracing myself against the mattress, going on automatic.

When I come back down, I turn my head to look at him.

He guiltily lets go of his new hardon and then just as quickly tries to cover it up, awkward about being discovered. I reach out and take his hand.

“Again, Stannis. Let’s do it again, please.”

This time I move fast enough to straddle him first and we make out once again. He’s eager and his movements are easier, less urgent and hasty. He’s still amazed by the permission to touch my breasts. I rock against him and there’s enough slick to have him sighing and moaning. And here, after taking him in, the long legs I have are of definite advantage; I’ve got the leverage and he’s pinned under me and he has to let me set the pace.

It comes back to me; you may be out of practice (cue over 20 years of second virginity) but you don’t really forget. I knew how to dip it low, bring it up slow, circle it around and pop, pop that thing. Stannis has this lovely, slack-jawed, amazed expression through it all and he gradually tenses up, all of him tightening up, his hands scrabbling on the sheets until he comes a second time. Though I don’t get to finish again, it’s great to get to hold him once more while he comes. We’re both now properly exhausted from all the dancing and sex. He pulls the covers over us both and we fall asleep.
Stannis blinks awake and stretches. He feels… more relaxed than he ever has in probably years. There is a sound from the hearth and he looks up to notice a servant studiously ignoring the couple in the bed as they finish sweeping the ashes from last night into a bucket and stoking the fire back up with a fresh log.

He puts his head back down and closes his eyes, waiting until the servant finished their task and exits.

Selyse is still asleep beside him.

He has never seen her so peaceful. Even at her most studiously serene and inscrutable at court, where she must use her trained ladies’ courtesies to approach the likes of Lord Lannister, veritable tour de force of mumming, he knows that her mind was always thinking, her eyes always observing, and she must restrain herself from making the more impertinent of remarks that come to her. There is a spirit to her like the more hotblooded sand steeds of Dorne; she seemed to be constantly fighting at a bit and reins, wanting to run forward, to chase at full power her goals.

He’s watched her, scribbling away in her various notebooks. He was allowed to look through some of her older ones and the mass of text from when she was young, at fourteen or so, changed completely into that Florent Code of dots and dashes, interspersed by mysterious diagrams and sketches. The other Florents jealously guarded their own notebooks, but he has seen some of theirs and it is the same; ideas turned into marching ants on a page, swarming to snatch at knowledge.

He is learning the Code himself. She has not just joined his family; he has joined hers.

He looks at her, gently pushing a tendril of hair that has fallen over her face out of the way and tucking it behind a now exposed ear. Now that he can see it, it is ungainly. But dear to him, because it is her ear and he sighs, shifting closer to her and smelling her perfume.

He had no high hopes about their wedding night.

From Maester Cressen as a youth he learned that the first time for a woman involved blood and pain, that he was to somehow tear through some piece of- of inner barrier made of her own flesh. The idea disgusted him as a boy, having already experienced cuts and abrasions from his time in the training yard; japes of swords and sheaths aside, he had no stomach for cutting a lady from within with the sword of his body. Things got worse as he grew older and the squires and knights were more free with tales of their exploits, reveling in the tears and cries and blood they caused, as if it was any honor to hurt somebody so much weaker than them in recompense for a few kisses and gropes, to sire bastards into the world. Stannis hated them all and could scarcely judge Robert better for his part in behaving so atrociously also.

Robert had pulled him aside a few nights before and they walked the parapets of Storm’s End and Robert mortified him with so called advice. He had resolutely decided to discount everything; how he ought to knead at her breasts like a baker works at dough, how he should tickle and pinch her nipples, how he ought to smack and squeeze her arse a few times because she had the sort of arse perfect for doing so, how he should stick his fingers inside of her and scoop around like one would do for capturing the last bit of honey from a jar.

It turns out, Robert was more right than not. Galling.
He is not too annoyed by the end, because Selyse may have been a maiden; he could see the dirtied towel, shoved off the bed from their exertions, but she was not shy and shrinking like a typical highborn lady. She had the audacity to pleasure herself in his presence and then, to mount and ride him! He would have stopped her, only the fog of satisfaction from his first release must have muddled his mind. He’s glad he did not, because now he knows what he ought to be providing her and how she looked when properly pleased. He is sure that as pleasurable last night was, the marital act would be greatly improved by driving her to such heights by his own effort.

His thoughts have woken all of him up and he’s annoyed anew by the fact that he’s rubbing himself upon her hip like some sort of ill-mannered dog humping at legs.

“Stannis,” Selyse says.

He freezes and resolutely meets her gaze.

“Stannis,” her voice rolls low in the way that has always driven him mad. “Stannis.”

She reaches for him so unhesitatingly and kisses him. There is that moment of surprise, even though they are married, even though she has shown in act and deed that she has desired him from the first. Eventually, she takes one of his hands and guides it to a breast. He watches her, as she sighs and arches into his touch and he struggles to tamp down his lust to a manageable level. He wants to start, wants to couple with her, but this, seeing her coming undone, seeing how she responds, this isn’t at all mentioned by anybody. Well. Robert did have a few words about the fun of playing with a woman first, a way to cajole your way in, but he’s not like Robert! Robert can’t appreciate this. This is worth it on its own. And this was just for him. He sucks a nipple into his mouth and she hisses a little and twitches away from him. Too hard? He backs off, running his tongue over it more gently and that she likes better, from her sighs.

She kicks the covers away and makes a simply delightful wiggle of her hips, turning her back towards him and gives him a free view of her nude arse.

“Touch me there,” she murmurs. “I know you’ve been waiting.”

He does, cupping and squeezing and it’s just as thrilling from the taboo of it as touching her breasts. He grips and parts her and he can see some pale traces of his seed that has leaked out of her and he is aroused all over again by seeing the proof of what they have done.

“Want to do it while you look at it?” Selyse asks, looking at him from over her shoulder, eyefucking him.

It takes him a second to figure out what she means and he licks his lips, hesitant and excited by the idea.

“It isn’t proper,” he feels like his must state this out of propriety.

“What we do together as a husband and wife is no concern of anybody else,” she scoffs and moves to get on all fours. “Come on, husband. Let’s find out if this pleases you.”

Well. He’s learned by now that she’s just as stubborn as him, though more courteous about it, and she does make a perfectly logical argument about people needing to mind their own business... so... He gets up on his knees, to look at her, absentlly squeezing his cock. She is spectacular. There is strength in her limbs, her legs are honed and strong, with the lean, graceful muscles of a courser or sighthound. Underneath the softness of her skin is power and as he reaches out to touch her
haunches again, she leans into him, welcoming. He slips his fingers in after rubbing at her folds, as Robert suggested, and carefully makes a scooping motion.


He does so, becoming more confident when he hears no signs of pain from her, enjoying the slick softness. He gets between her knees and rubs his tip along her folds, imitating her actions from last night. He’s unsure if he would harm her again, though the second time didn’t renew her bleeding. He eases in, the pleasing tightness making his breath short. He grips her arse, parting her so that he can watch as he disappears into her, as she takes him. He’s never imagined this. In the past, he has only wondered at touching her arse. Not this, not ever this. It’s better than anything he could have thought of.

Not too fast, he admonishes himself. He wants to watch, to properly enjoy.

He withdraws until he’s nearly all the way out and it’s tantalizing how he feels and sees that she’s gripping at him. He pushes back in and he hears a gust of breath from her.

“Good?”

“Yes,” she replies.

“I’m going to smack you,” he announces before he loses nerve from the ridiculousness of the statement. “On the arse.”

“Stannis,” her voice takes on that playful low naughtiness that he loves. “Really?”

He does, a little fearful of striking her too hard, but as luck has it, she makes a breathy little cry that is not at all indicative of real hurt, makes a little flinch that squeezes him deliciously, and the sight of her buttock reddening afterwards is piquant.

He starts up a rhythm then, steady as he could make it, smacking her when the inclination takes him, and it’s good. All too soon he has to leave off, gripping her by the hips and and driving into her, goaded on by her enthusiastic cries with each thrust. He finishes, putting all of his weight on her and she wobbles a bit on the mattress. He disengages with an apology, exhaustion causing him to fall back onto the bed and she smiles and embraces him, tucking her head in at his shoulder. The sensation of her, all of her, bare and warm and sweet smelling against his skin is yet another lovely thing.

“We really must get up,” Stannis finally says, once his breathing has evened out.

“Or, we could have trays sent up. Breakfast in bed.”

“I think it’s past breakfast,” Stannis squints at the shadows caused from the window shutters.

“Then brunch.”

“Brunch?”

“Between breakfast and lunch. Brunch.”

Her fingers are toying with his foreskin. He can’t possibly become hard again? So quickly? Oh, never mind, his cock seems to have other ideas.

“Very well,” he says as she leans to kiss him.
Outside, Robert stepped into the training yard.

He wasn’t as drunk as he expected to get; the lemonade was surprisingly appealing to drink. Furthermore, after that not at all amusing bedding because of Lady Selyse’s surprisingly circumspect Florent kinfolk (he hadn’t expected so many women to brave Stannis’ scowl for a last chance at groping at him, but apparently Lady Selyse’s interest in him made him interesting to other ladies in turn. And Robert can charitably suppose that Stannis was as well built as could be expected of a proper Baratheon. Of course the braver ladies would want to get one last free feel!)), he was set upon by the younger Florents and Renly and now Tyrion Lannister, wanting to hear his stories about the Rebellion. He obliged the children until they were all yawning and when they were ushered away by the Florent adults, supposed that last night was as good as any to visit Cersei in her chambers. Perhaps he could give more advice to Stannis afterwards. He would certainly need it!

He woke up late, as was usual after a good feasting, and after a meal in his chambers, went to the train. He’d been enjoying the sport lately. Wouldn’t want to look bad in front of the young lads, after all. Certainly only Ser Barristan or Ser Jaime could properly keep up with him. The rest… Robert sighed and sneered to himself. What was he thinking? Ser Boros on the Kingsguard! He must have been truly in his cups when he named him! He supposed he ought to beat the rest of that sorry lot until they were in some semblance of proper ability. To think that they should be the first protection to himself, when he was so much better than them! Well. No use crying over spilt milk.

Ser Barristan was following after him.

There was nobody in the main yard, which Robert expected, but he did hear the thwunk of an arrow hitting a target at the target range. He decided to see who it was.

Alekyne Florent was there and Robert stood politely waiting while he took aim. That shot hit the mark also.

“Good day,” Robert called out.

“Your Grace,” Alekyne bowed.

“Good shot.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“I think I shall decree that the Florents must refer to me as Robert, as you are good-kin,” Robert grinned.

“As you say, Your Grace.”

The calmness displayed by Alekyne, with his faintly raised eyebrow, was so reminiscent of Lady Selyse that Robert laughed.

“Well! Has my brother, either of them, made an appearance?”

“Renly is in morning lessons with my cousins,” Alekyne replied. “Lord Stannis is still in bed.”

“Ah? In bed? Or in bed?” Robert waggled his eyebrows at the last, hoping to jest Alekyne into some response from the innuendo regarding his lady cousin.
“Lord Stannis has successfully copulated with my cousin Selyse three times so far,” Alekyne replied, deadpan. “We will not know the final count until they decide to stop and show up in public.”

Robert opened and closed his mouth. Alekyne stood, expressionless. Serene.

“HAH!” Robert bellowed. “A good jape, a good jape!”

“I’m not laughing, Your Grace.”

“That’s what makes it funnier!”

Alekyne did not shrug, though it was a near thing.

“Wait,” Robert stopped laughing and stood, seriously looking at Alekyne. “It’s not a jape?”

“We have sources.”

“We? Who’s this we?”

“Are you ordering me to inform you, Your Grace?” Alekyne turned to fully face him.

Robert was starting to get that bewildered feeling he often got around Lady Selyse.

“By order of your King,” Robert tried on a whim.

“Imry and I have established a useful, temporary arrangement with certain lower level servants of Storm’s End, specifically those who change chamber pots and sweep hearth ashes, Your Grace.

As we have not been arrested by the Storm’s End guards or otherwise confronted by Storm’s End authorities such as yourself or Lord Stannis, it is clear that there is no protocol established to prevent the suborning of staff by outside entities. This security flaw must be rectified prior to Lord Renly assuming control over Storm’s End.

We have also discovered at least three agents of your Master of Whispers. They have been left on staff without revealing their cover, as they may be placed there under prior orders of the Crown and we would not wish to interfere with the affairs of the realm without authorization.

Will that be all, Your Grace?”

Robert stood, gaping at Alekyne after this extraordinary recitation.

“Why have you bribed the servants?” Ser Barristan spoke up, very stern.

Alekyne looked at Ser Barristan and then looked at Robert, his pale eyes much too innocent, given the conspiracy he just confessed.

“Answer him,” Robert said.

“To find out if we can.”

Gods, the cheek! The sheer nerve! Like a proverbial fox in the henhouse! Robert hysterically thought.

“Why would you need to know that?” he demanded.
“To prevent similar security vulnerabilities in regards to Brightwater Keep and the Foxhole. Obviously.”

“Why?”

“If you do not know the reason, it means that our security measures are working.”

“My lord, you are sounding very suspicious,” Ser Barristan’s tone was low and dangerous. “Give a suitable answer to your King!”

“Others might stand to profit from ideas like Rhea and Selyse’s tin jarring or sextant and navigation book. Why should any of us make it easy for others to steal from us?”

“Ah,” Robert finally nodded. “I see. I see. Still, try not to be so shifty, eh?”

Alekyne inclined his head.

“As you recommend, Your Grace.”

Robert regarded Alekyne. He was sure that he was being laughed at behind those very calm pale eyes. Hmm.

“Three times, eh? Good for Stannis! Didn’t think he would take to it! What was the third time like?”

“Specify.”

“Specify what?”

“Specify what you want to know, Your Grace.”

So now he uses a stalling tactic, Robert thought. Hah.

“What did Stannis do? And how long did it last?”

“He mounted her from behind while she was on her hands and knees. From first thrust to spending he took approximately nine minutes.”

“Huh,” Robert considered. Maybe the fellow was lying? Not a blush or glare, even though he was being rudely intrusive about the privacy of his lady cousin. “From behind? Hah! Didn’t think he’d convince her to do it like that! Nine minutes?”

“Approximately.”

“Didn’t last too long, did he?” Robert smugly declared.

Alekyne raised an eyebrow all the way up before responding. Robert had a bare moment of regret; Florents were very dangerous conversational partners, he was finding.

“Your Grace, I recommend you cease trying to gain an emotional reaction from me. Our informants observe for the purpose of monitoring my cousin’s health should she experience undue discomfort. Furthermore, you should not be putting on any airs about the subject of endurance during activities abed. That is not a trail you would wish to follow.”

“... Have you been spying on me?” Robert finally concluded. “You’ve been spying on your King!”
“And Queen,” Ser Barristan contributed with a pained expression on his face.

“We did not specify whom the servants should observe, only that couples should be watched. After all, we don’t want the servants to report to another spymaster that we are particularly interested in one person or another. That would implicate us needlessly and open us to betrayal. Best to cast a wide net and sort out the fish after.”

Both Robert and Ser Barristan look at each other in surprise. Neither of them had ever heard of such a thing, conducted in such a manner.

“I disapprove strongly of your methods,” Ser Barristan said. “But admit that it is impressive, nonetheless.”

“If you weren’t so tall and muscular, I’d say you were Varys,” Robert snorted. “Who taught you such spycraft?”

It was here that Alekyne genuinely hesitated.

“By order of your King,” Robert emphasized.

“Selyse,” Alekyne reluctantly said. “Mostly.”

“Hah!” Robert rocked back from his laugh. “I don’t know why I should expect otherwise!”

“What do you mean by mostly?” Ser Barristan asked.

“Our ideas come from group effort. Selyse poses problems to solve and all of us give ideas simultaneously. We debate and modify ideas as a group through strenuous arguing and questioning. At least two of us act as counter arguers, trying to find the flaws to the solutions. In the case of intelligence gathering it is a true group effort. None of us want our ideas or inventions stolen.”

“Huh,” Robert responded.

“Will that be all, Your Grace?”

“What would Selyse do to you, if she should find out that you were spying on her?”

Surely she would be wroth and then mayhem and destruction would ensue! Lady Selyse wasn’t a screeching harridan like Cersei; she was a far more impressive, dangerous kind of lady who kept her voice soft and low and who could promise severe trouble if Robert should step out of line. Rather like his memories of his own lady mother, come to think of it!

“Congratulate me and Imry for successfully conducting our mission. And recommend improved security protocols to be put into place to prevent such repeats of breached security. Of course.”

“She wouldn’t care that you know about her private habits?”

“She will soon live with Lord Stannis in the Red Keep, unless she can convince him to move in with us in the Foxhole. There is no privacy for anybody within the Red Keep. She knows and expects this. It is only logical.”

Robert didn’t tend to think on how Lord Varys knew everything about everybody. But it was unavoidable here because a Florent took the time to point it out. Eh, Robert shrugged to himself. He didn’t have anything noteworthy to hide. He wasn’t going to be embarrassed about visiting his
wife! Even made things more exciting, thinking that somebody might be watching, in fact! Hah!

“You Florents are a strange lot,” Robert finally said.

“As you say, Your Grace.”

“I’ll be going now,” Robert declared. “Need to get some training in. Too long speaking to you and your clever ways. Could get a headache.”

“That would be unfortunate, Your Grace.”

“Hah!” Robert said one last time before leaving.

He could tell cheek when he heard it. But he was going to allow it, because this Alekyne fellow was so interesting. Very interesting. And potentially useful, besides. He wasn’t sure how, not yet. But he could see the sense in having a smart fellow like that about. You need the right tool for the job, his father once said, showing him how a skinning knife for hunting had a different shape than a regular dagger for personal protection. A blunt hammer like himself was good for some things. A sharp dagger like Alekyne was good for others. See, Stannis? He could use metaphors!

Later, he went to find the other person in charge of the plan, this Imry Florent. Robert was told that Imry had left Storm’s End already, likely ahead of his family party to either the Foxhole or Brightwater Keep. Robert thought nothing of it and soon forgot he wanted to speak to the young man at all.
Casterly Rock: Hopeful Thoughts

Storm’s End emptied gradually in dribs and drabs. Tyrion returned to Casterly Rock with dozens of new books gifted to him by the Florents, most of them his most favorite new tales. He opened one, fascinated by the quality of printed text. He was holding Fantastic Mr. Fox, which was an old favorite from the collective childhoods of the young Florents and therefore the first printed after enough copies of The Westerosi Practical Navigator were produced for Royal Fleet use. Copies of the Practical Navigator were still being printed, for sale to private ship owners and captains.

Prior to this, only Maester Creylan or his own father seemed to have the facility for deep thinking. And of course, Father never said more than needed to him and Maester Creylan had duties. Jaime tried, but he was always going to prefer Cersei’s company to his own, though Tyrion could not account for it. Meeting the Florents was a revelation.

He sat in on their morning lessons with Maester Willis, and found that unlike his cousins back in Casterly Rock, who were bored and fidgety, the younger Florents were focused. Each question posed resulted in a flurry of hands being raised. Merrell, just eleven, could stand up and recite his twelve times multiplication tables. Tyrion could think of none of his cousins who knew that. He himself knew about multiplication, but he surely did not memorize up to twelve.

Additionally, Maester Willis would pose some questions about historical events and a lively debate would occur about why some choice by past kings, generals, or Lord Hands was successful or not, or even what it meant to be successful. A rousing argument that involved Erren and Omer about whether or not King Aegon V’s children were ungrateful little shits, given the instability of the realm caused by their refusal to marry by arrangement almost made Tyrion fear that they would come to blows. At the end of the shouting, the two sat down, calm as you please, much to his surprise. Maester Willis asked the rest who they thought made the most convincing argument and the rest of the Florents would make their opinions known. Even Delena could make her arguments clearly and was no shrinking flower when others attention were upon her.

Maester Willis would tuck his hands in his sleeves and smiled fondly at the enthusiasm of his charges and would not say one way or another if an interpretation was correct; only when an interpretation was very wrong based on known historical fact would he intervene and advise them to do more research. Speculation he could not judge, though he did say that they must guard themselves from spurious or salacious assumptions. Their argumentation was further refined by the writing of reports and Tyrion was informed that they also had to make citations. He certainly didn’t know what citations even were! Tyrion thought this was very interesting and made research more meaningful.

Lord Tywin would never allow such vigorous debate about anything. There was either the right way or the wrong way, and things were right only as he would do them. No more, no less.

The breadth and depth of thinking that Tyrion found from the Florents was amazing. If it was interesting enough sitting in with the children, sitting in on the older cousins in a temporary workshop; Alekyne, Melessa, Rhea, Selyse and Imry was an adventure. They would often make bursts of inspired exclamations while dash-dotting away (he begged the young Florents to give him the code, and promised on his life and honor as a Lannister to never ever reveal it to anybody else ever, not even Jaime, and in fact to burn the code key after memorizing it) interrupting and finishing each other’s sentences.

Once, he was able to watch the older Florents concentrating on a notebook of Melessa Tarly’s, which listed ideas on how to better the entire process of processing cotton and wool. It made sense
since the area of the Reach encompassing Florent and Tarly holdings were satisfactory for cotton growing. Tyrion found out that the Florents had already perfected a device that separated the seeds from the cotton fibers very quickly using a system of rollers with wire teeth. This was back when Selyse was sixteen!

It was a hand cranked assembly, until the great walker Selyse suggested the addition of a pulley system and gears powered by a treadmill, as a human could walk for hours with ease and not continuously move their arms with the same duration. A year after that, they connected a waterwheel to the assembly. Fifty pound bales of cotton were produced in Brightwater Keep and Horn Hill each day, the so called ‘cotton gins’ strenuously guarded and they were making very good money indeed, with just the raw bales being sold within the Reach or even for export.

It was the work of a moment for the Florents to build off of the cotton gin, making rotating drums with varying lengths and densities of wire teeth suitable for carding cotton or wool. They were so successful that the smallfolk spinners could not keep up, though they were producing and earning more than ever before. Melessa had been thinking about the problem for a number of years, though she was being stymied by Lord Randyll’s scolding and bellyaching for spending too much time out of her days by sitting and thinking. All of the Florents had scoffed at that; after all, was not Melessa’s dowry hefty precisely because of the cotton gin and carding drum? She ought to be free to just sit and ruminate if she wished!

Tyrion watched as the Florents hovered around a spinning wheel, watching as Melessa spun.

“Tension has to be maintained on the roving, but one must concentrate on pinching with your fingers and turning the wheel at the same time.”

“Put in another spindle just for the rovings?”

“Still need to pinch it-”

“Clamp it-”

“Rollers?”

“Could work. Like the carding drums.”

So he watched as they used a wooden dowel to quickly mock together a spindle for a roving and opened up a small chest full of wooden gears and cogwheels, axels, turning handles, and other mysterious pieces and workings that he had previously seen the younger Florents accustomed to playing with. They spent some time arranging some gears and then they set together a frame using various clamps and lengths of cord. Additional dowels were fixed to the gears, the gears turned to see if there was enough tension. There was not, so they adjusted by finding thicker or thinner dowels from a box of dowels. Finally, a fairly ugly setup was clamped to a chair and they did a test run.

After some fits and starts, they managed so that it was possible to turn the spinning wheel and the roving was drawn with tension onto the spindle, with the dowels holding the roving steady. They had to adjust by moving the chair and the tension dowels around until the bobbin would accept the roving.

“Eh. Works.”

“Needs to be better.”

“Right. But tension on the roving, solved.”
“It’s easier, but not faster. The spindle’s going the same speed.”

“Increasing speed increases risk of breakages.”

“Must the spindle be horizontal?” Imry finally asked.

They all stopped to stare at the spindle.

“Because drop spindles are vertical, so-”

Alekyne and Selyse immediately began tipping the entire spinning wheel sideways, and there was much bumping and swearing, until the wheel could spin freely, with Rhea and Imry holding the frame of the spinning wheel steady. They readjusted the tension apparatus on the chair and spun the wheel. The roving was feeding onto the bobbin.

“One wheel. Multiple spindles arranged in a row,” Melessa breathed.

“How many do you think we can associate with one wheel?” Alekyne asked.

“With just two we would be doubling output,” Selyse mentioned.

“Triple it.”

“Quadruple it!” cried Imry.

“We. Have. Total. Thread Domination!” Selyse cried out, her fists thrust into the air with victory.

All the Florents bounced in place with their hands in the air and cheered and Tyrion joined in, swept away by the excitement. The adult Florents were all ushered into the workspace to take in the undoubtedly incomprehensible mess of gears, cord, and tipped over spinning wheel that was the latest project prototype. Once it was explained, all of them cheered and clapped and congratulated the experimenters. It was clear to Tyrion that a spirit of inquiry was rewarded and that a freedom to explore and make mistakes in the name of progress was gladly extended to the younger Florents. He envied that very much.

The Florents busied themselves with sketching and writing out the mechanics of their prototype. Alekyne brought in the dedicated carpenter and metalsmith that he brought with him from the Foxhole as part of his household staff and they got to work; it took perhaps two days before they had six (Six! Amazing!) spindles driven by gears and cogs spinning away. It took even less time for Melessa and Selyse to modify a loom with a new part to improve weaving speed. They named it the Flying Shuttle and it took very little time at all for an experienced weaver of Storm’s End to learn the rhythm for making the shuttle shoot excitingly from one end of the loom to the other, laying out the weft at speeds never seen before. In the end, another horse-riding messenger was dispatched to Brightwater Keep with both of the plans for the spinning frame and the flying shuttle, to be put into immediate construction and production at the Florent and Tarly cotton and wool mills. Selyse wanted many bolts of cloth immediately, for some reason of her own, to be prepared and shipped to the Foxhole.

Their enthusiasm is not to say that they did not value propriety outside of their workshop. He noticed that when they appeared in the dining hall amongst company such as his father, they sat straight, used their tableware very correctly, never chewed with their mouths open, not even young Merrell, and were in the habit of using their napkins mid meal to keep their chins clean. Their accents which betrayed nobility became more clear, more enunciated and they used flowery turns of phrase with comfortable alacrity. Lady Selyse was a completely different person; more remote and serene, her hands consciously clasped on her lap. They were a secretive lot when it came to
their experimenting and their freewheeling ways of thought. They were selective about their openness. When they extended that same openness to him in a few short days and moreover, always included him in their conversations and experimenting, he felt quite special. They may want something from him, but that was because they valued him. Tyrion. For his mind, not his last name. He found Jaime within the first few days after properly meeting the Florents and thanked him profusely for it.

It is not just the obvious affectionate behavior of the younger Florents amongst each other. The older Florent brothers are more sedate, somewhat more conventional, but Tyrion can clearly observe that they actually like each other. Which is something of a feat, as Ser Axell Florent is so unlikeable as a person. He is prone to cutting statements, his tone of voice is unmoderated gruffness, and there is a touch of disrespect in his address that is not leavened with amusing cheekiness or any grace, tact, or charm, as demonstrated by his nephews. Yet Lord Florent and Ser Colin are fond of their brother and can be found in company together in the evenings, discussing matters of the Reach, King’s Landing and court in low voices. Additionally, he was fond in turn of his nieces and nephews, though Selyse was his clear favorite. There was a softening of his expression on his homely face whenever Selyse spoke to him.

For all that Axell is difficult to converse with, he was canny enough to extract truth from obfuscation and they all value his intelligence and commitment to sleuthing. Tyrion found it interesting enough to listen to him speak on his duties and work for the Master of Coins. It seems that the most favored penalty for cheating on taxes was a punishing fine first and then escalating to garnishing of income and then finally a total confiscation of material goods and property up to getting sent to the Wall. There were certain Crownsland Lords who claimed unruly bannermen. And it was true; tax collectors disappeared after making their way into Crackclaw Point. The older Florents didn’t mind Tyrion overhearing their discussions about empowering the Master of Coin and the attached Office of Taxation with detachments of knights or other men-at-arms to protect collectors employed by the Crown proper instead of the hapless hired on tax farmers of Lords who were still grudgingly bending the knee to the Baratheon dynasty and were being slow about giving what was rightfully owed as the least of their duties to the King.

Ser Axell was sure that he was gaining enough influence with the Master of Coin and the in place bureaucracy to convince the man to come forward with such action plans during Small Council. Which meant of course, Lord Florent would make this known to Alekyne and Selyse, so that Lord Stannis would be brought in (those were lords sworn to Dragonstone directly, after all) and for all of them to put the matter to Lord Arryn. Between the Master of Coin, Lord Stannis, and Lord Jon, it would take very little at all for a plan of the Florents to be ratified into action by the King. This was all very neatly done, Tyrion thought. And with so much less rancor than watching his own Father’s whipcracking orders at uncles Tygett and Gerion, while poor Kevan wrung his hands and tried to placate everybody and succeeding at neither.

Tyrion supposed that it was odd from his point of view that the Florents were so eager about collecting taxes. On the other hand, with one of their own installed within the bureaucracy and making himself indispensable, perhaps they were angling for the seat of Master of Coin. That made perfect sense. And perhaps, further seats or honors, even Hand of the King, as Lord Arryn was elderly. Which made it curious indeed that they allowed his presence. Surely they would suspect that he would report them to his father? Surely they wouldn’t want a rival House to know so well their plans? On the other hand, the younger Florents had witnessed the way his own sister insulted him, and how his father had nothing to say to him. Even held him in contempt. It was left unsaid that his own father would ask of no report from him and he would volunteer no words either. Imry and Erren had asked him innocently what Lord Tywin was like as a father, as they did not have one of their own and to his shame, he flushed and his eyes teared up just thinking of all the indignities heaped upon him and they now knew it was a sore subject.
To his surprise, Imry and Erren embraced him, as easily as they embraced their sister and cousins.

“We’re sorry we even mentioned—”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing,” Tyrion quickly wiped at his eyes. “Nothing. Father is—”

Cruel, cruel, cruel! But he must not say the words, he’s a Lannister, they aren’t, nobody must know. He watched as Imry and Erren stepped back and twitched their eyebrows at each other in silent communion. How he wished he was as close with any kin as they were! Even Jaime took Cersei’s side over him!

“Lord Tywin is most formidable,” Imry finally said, his diplomatic statement bland and true.

Tyrion nodded then, glad that they were conscientious enough to not say more than the obvious, given what they now knew.

The youngest Florents were less diplomatic. Omer placidly informed Tyrion that he was very pleased that Tyrion wasn’t a stuck up prig like the rest of the ubiquitous pack of lesser Lannisters that made up the usual retinue surrounding Lord Tywin when he traveled. Merrell piped up with a single Yeah, (he was most monosyllabic and some might have thought him simple, with his tendency to stare unnervingly at you with his pale eyes and nearly mute ways around people not his kin or Maesters) and Tyrion laughed. They enjoyed sneaking past the Lannister guards to find him in his assigned chambers and sharing stolen tarts and cookies from the Storm’s End kitchens.

It wasn’t until reading Fantastic Mr. Fox that Tyrion understood why they would bother with childish thievery; (he was accustomed to giving orders to servants for snacks at any hour of the day, and they obeyed, having become used to Aunt Genna’s own love of sweets) it kept them on their toes, it kept them sharp, it was very simply a Florent sort of thing to do. Father would definitely disapprove of such antics, of glorifying thievery! Tyrion found that Omer and Merrell were quite the troublemakers and that they were greatly aided by their sister Delena, of all people. For as Lord Randyll raged and stormed from the pranking, not a person thought to suspect her. And it was she who distracted guards with pretty words and gentle conversation, who gave warning if they neared, while the two of them wreaked havoc in Lord Randyll’s rooms. Tyrion had laughed uproariously at the retellings of their exploits. He’s asked Jaime about it and Jaime confirmed that the younger Florents at large really were as troublesome as that and that Lord Florent did the bare minimum to placate the irate Lord Tarly.

Lord Florent is so genial that one could be tempted to underestimate him as a lord. Yet he held dominion over his holdings no less capably as he ought. In fact, he might even be more fearsome than expected. Tyrion asked the household knights and men-at-arms of the Florent retinue and Alekyne was frank about revealing what he knew from his own lessons about managing a holding. It is known that to be caught poaching or committing banditry in Lord Randyll Tarly’s lands resulted in a quick death. To be caught within Florent borders?

Those alive were absorbed into the dungeons, where they were not tortured by rack or lash, but darkness, isolation, starvation, sleep deprivation. They were needed to be coherent before rounds of intense questioning. The Florent gaolers were literate and courteous, and unrelenting with their interrogations, learning well from the Florents’ love of tricky word games such as ‘Two Truths and a Lie’. Lord Florent was ever sure that bandits worked in bands and it would do well to root them out, branch and stem. Bandit dens were scoured clean with extreme prejudice. From there, he would have them sent to the Wall. If they were so eager to take up arms, Lord Florent was said to wryly note, then they can do so in service to the Seven Kingdoms and where they can regret leaving the Reach forever. It wasn’t as if gainful employment was not available on his lands if they properly presented themselves to Brightwater Keep, after all.
As a consequence, the Florent household knights were more skilled than one would expect with lassoing and throwing nets, of tracking and capturing men alive, and the Florent hunting hounds were excellent scent trackers. Alekyne revealed that breeding the hounds was Lord Florent’s primary hobby after reading Selyse and Maester Bryan’s genetics treatises. The Florent hounds were friendly beasts, certainly much less threatening than the hunting hounds of Casterly Rock; those dogs Tyrion avoided because they were so large compared to himself and prone to staring at him as if they wanted to eat him and always snarling at that. These dogs were long-eared, droopy faced, sleepy eyed, and prodigious droolers.

Tyrion was taken out on a hunt to see how a brace of those hounds worked. He had never seen hounds the like; they ambled in a perhaps ungainly manner, and yet they were intent, their noses to the ground. They wore harnesses (curious!) and were kept on lead and the hunting party followed after the kennel master. Once they got to a game trail, they were directed to some deer hoofprints. They circled and set off, intent, pulling at the leads attached to their harnesses. Silent. It was clear that Lord Florent had no patience with baying packs of hounds that flushed quarry well ahead of the hunting party. They followed for miles, until the hounds finally did bay, causing the deer to scatter from their hiding places in the brush and the lords shot off their arrows. One doe was downed cleanly and another ran off, injured. The hounds were led to the blood and let off the leads; they loped off, baying from the fresh trail. They were certainly not the fastest, but as Tyrion and the others followed, it was clear that the dogs were unerring. In the end, they found the wounded doe and struck it down. The dogs did not have to be beaten back from the carcass, being so obedient; they merely walked about, licking at the blood. King Robert was impressed by the tracking ability and the dedication of the hounds, though he himself preferred just the kind of hunting Lord Florent did not; the sort that called for more galloping, yelling, and a noisier pack of hounds. The other lords felt the same.

Tyrion watched Lord Florent shrug carelessly, unconcerned with the opinions of the others. He knew what he wanted with his dogs. And Tyrion knew too. They were manhunners. If you thought you could cross water and lose them, you were wrong. They would just cross to the other side and run back and forth intently until they found the trail again. If you thought to circle, to switch back, to run along the tops of walls and fences, to confuse the trail by going into muck and dung, you were wrong. His dogs could find trails three days old, Lord Florent quietly boasted. His dogs weren’t bred unless they could find a mouse in a little wooden box within an acre field. He required dogs that could track unstoppably and accurately, who would surprise and tire out fugitives, so that they could be captured. Alive. Lord Randyll Tarly issued death. His own lord father issued death. Lord Alester issued life at the Wall. He preferred long term despair and regret for those who dared infringe on the peace of his lands.

The kind of lord who would seek such breed characteristics from mere dogs for such purpose was formidable indeed, Tyrion thought. More so because Lord Alester was daring everyone to mistake his smiles for the weakness akin to Tyrion’s own grandfather Lord Tytos. Poor Lord Tytos didn’t have the stomach for such things; Lord Alester was of different stuff. Lord Florent would be smiling that warm, friendly smile, while consigning people to ruin. He didn’t demand fear. Lord Alester would much prefer the finer things in life; good food and drink, conversations in front of a warm hearth, cosseting his dogs, making his wife blush with a look. Yet Tyrion supposed if anybody thought him a soft Reacher lord would have all their lives to regret their foolhardiness in testing the craftiness and decisiveness of the Florents at the Wall. There was something unsettling about somebody who didn’t seek, yet gained something so effortlessly.

He looked forward to beginning a correspondence with all the Florents. He resolved to look at the library of Casterly Rock with new eyes, and to have it recategorized according to the Florent Decimal System. The Florents were so generous and eager to receive letters from him that they gifted him with a shiny new red ink-filled pen. There was a gold lion head embossed at the top
half. To make sure that his father could not possibly feel slighted, they gifted a red pen to him also, but with a larger embossed gold lion rampant.

Tyrion decided that after sorting out the Casterly Rock library he ought to start a project of his own. He wasn’t sure if he would invent something or discover the truth behind some natural phenomena. Lady Selyse said that what was most important when it comes to innovation was a curious mind and dissatisfaction with the realities of daily life. He should just write down all his questions and musings, no matter what and regularly reread his notebook. He was going to start a notebook of his own. Lady Selyse also said that he was sure to look well in a smart new jacket with suitable pockets to hold his notebook and pen. Yet another project; having a new jacket made to his specifications.

For the first time in his life he would be busy. He had goals; he just didn’t know what they were yet. He was very thankful. Soon he will be so busy, he would certainly not have time to think on Ty-. Her. And he’ll not have time to indulge in his impulses to drink or use whores. Why, his father might even approve! Well. Perhaps not. His luck wasn’t that great. He couldn’t expect anything so good from his own father. Best think on the possibilities for discoveries!
Stannis could not quite account for how Selyse was champing at the bit to visit Dragonstone. He personally thought that the island was unlovely and grim, and with a foul stench that was only barely less noxious than King’s Landing. Perhaps because the permanent miasma wasn’t from human and animal dung, but rising inexplicably from the the hot vents that dotted the island. He thinks it stinks like rot. Rotting eggs, that’s it. There is something intrinsically foul about the place and he cannot fathom why the ancient, pioneer Targaryens (who could have made landfall anywhere, truly) came to the place and thought: here is where we will live. Here, above all other places, we desire to first claim as home in Westeros. Perhaps the madness of Targaryens was first hinted at by their ridiculous choice. The Baratheon household made their way on the Fury, retrofitted during the yearlong duration of their betrothal.

Shipbuilding improvements involved Davos and other captains that he trusted to form a committee of advisors, and yet more scholars from Old Town to coordinate with Lady Rhea Royce, moving to fill her own workshop in Runestone. Maester Bryan busily recruited for Brightwater Keep’s and the Foxhole’s workshops, seeking out those persons who could not successfully absorb the breadth of knowledge required to forge a complete chain, yet who demonstrated the aptitude to earn multiple links for Mathematics and Engineering.

The brass alloy tested by Maester Willis at the direction of Selyse proved workable and the Fury’s hull was sheathed in it. Also as Selyse hypothesized, it was possible to construct taller masts than could be found naturally with a single tree trunk. They made interlocking staves and bound them with iron rings similar to barrel making, and strengthened the shaft of the mast further by tightly wrapping coils of rope over the whole. This increased strength was crucial to allowing for a greater number of square sails on each mast.

After making models and prototypes and testing out a better jib sail layout on a new bowsprit, as well as triangular sail alternative to the traditional lateen sail, which Selyse inexplicably called a Bermuda sail, to serve as the fore-and-aft sail on the mizzenmast, the Fury was now faster and more maneuverable. The gains from the sails allowed for fewer oars required, which meant fewer dedicated rowers. Selyse was conservative and recommended using one-third fewer in number to test. If they could reduce it to one-half the number and maintain battle readiness, it would be quite the win. The Fury could then better serve as a troop transport, with more archers or hand-to-hand combatants suited for boarding or landing maneuvers.

After the Fury, all the other ships of the Royal Fleet were being retrofitted and a shipyard was developing at the mouth of the Wendwater river. House Wendwater was happy to gain a new source of income in the form of leasing the land for Royal Fleet use and the booming new town forming to benefit and house the workers.

Selyse informed Stannis that with the help of Lord Arryn, Robert enthusiastically grasped the merit of spending his time improving the martial capabilities of the Gold Cloaks and the training up of men for the establishment of the Royal Marines. He was also tasked with holding twice a moon training sessions with King’s Landing levies; in exchange for a hearty meal, able bodied men were taught the basics of combat and crossbow usage. The very keen-eyed were trained on the handling of bows. Once every sevenday, it was unofficially known in King’s Landing to be a day dedicated to the Warrior, where men and boys would have permission to practice at the training yards of the Marines and Gold Cloaks, supplemented by a bowl of hearty stew and bread and watered ale afterwards. Women were encouraged to earn their bowls of stew, bread, and watered ale by attending classes taught by septas and healers on how to bind wounds and care for the sick, to
make poultices and brew healing draughts, to sit and hear from midwives on advanced care during pregnancy and the care of infants and the importance of brushing teeth and washing hands and taking baths if possible. Robert was never going to have the endurance and patience to sit through petitions; he was a doer, not much of a thinker. Selyse convinced Lord Arryn to encourage Robert with his strengths instead of bemoaning his weaknesses. His strength was his martial abilities and his charisma; when he rode up and down the streets of King’s Landing, waving and laughing and tossing coppers while criers announced that the King Needs You to Join the Royal Marines! or the King Needs Honest Strong Men for the Gold Cloaks! men clamoured and joined up enough for there to be a waiting list.

There was plenty of room within the Gold Cloaks for recruits after the ever efficient Ser Axell Florent and his cadre of auditors were set on the internal workings of the Gold Cloaks. Janos Slynt was found to be corrupt early and consigned to the Wall. Robert was aghast at the hastiness, until Selyse convinced him that perhaps they ought to follow the example of the Brothers of the Night’s Watch and have the men themselves vote on leadership from a selection of experienced men who should at least be capable of lasting longer than a few minutes against himself, Ser Barristan, and Ser Jaime in single combat. Robert liked the sound of that immensely. He set about with a harsh schedule of tournament style eliminations until he found the top five veterans of the Gold Cloaks suitable. It also helped to wash out the individuals who only joined the Gold Cloaks for the regular salary while having no proper ability to fight. Axell Florent had already flushed out those with ruinous habits of gambling, drink, or whoring, who were most prone towards accepting bribes. They were sent on to the Wall. The people of King’s Landing praised the good king, who was clearing their city of corruption.

Lord Arryn, armed with notebooks made by Lord Alester, Alekyne, Selyse, and Imry, ordered the new Commander of the City Watch to revamp the policing skills of the Gold Cloaks. They would demonstrate proper crime prevention and investigation instead of simply chasing down thieves. They were to have regular beat routes, to familiarize themselves with the denizens of their beats, to be able to interview witnesses without rudeness, to be firm yet polite, and to be knowledgeable about the most common crimes enough to enforce the King’s peace. They would strive to live up to new ethical principles of serving and protecting the public if King’s Landing by swearing new oaths upon successfully completing training. Individuals who wished for advancement were being taught how to read and write at a proper Watch Academy and to familiarize themselves with with more esoteric laws and deductive, forensic detective work, such as the importance of leaving crime scenes untampered with, the idea that fingerprints could prove an individual’s identity, and to actually start recording and organizing dossiers into a database on known underworld personages as well as the value of cultivating a network of informants ranging from indigent beggars who could be bought for the price of a loaf of bread, to street urchins, to observant little old ladies who sat looking out of windows. And to improve their effectiveness when chasing down criminals, the Gold Cloaks came to own some of Lord Florent’s specially trained hounds. The most persistent of street toughs should be given over to wandering Brothers of the Night’s Watch when at least three warnings to seek paying work were ignored.

And there definitely was work; the Florents have leveraged their own funds, Baratheon funds, and a generous amount from the Crown treasury in the development of a plot of land along the Blackwater Rush to build a waterwheel-powered steel mill and a facility to make charcoal for the steel mill using huge cast iron retorts, forming the Royal Steelworks. The heat for creating the charcoal would be fueled by methane provided by a series of biogas digesters on another plot of land, safely further away. The finest blacksmith from the Street of Steel, one Tobho Mott, has been hired to oversee production and refining of the best steel ever seen in Westeros. There were the Royal Marines to be outfitted, along with better equipment for the Gold Cloaks, and even work begun for the Brothers of the Night’s Watch.
There was a sudden new need for workers and carters to collect the waste, from dung to vegetable refuse, of King’s Landing by the barrel-full and wagon load to feed the biogas digesters, workers to monitor the biogas digesters and fill and transport the gas tanks and teams of coppicers with license to enter the King’s Wood to harvest wood to feed the charcoal production, and carters hired by rival fullers, dyers, and tanners wanting to copy the Florent idea of collecting barrels of urine from King’s Landing and replacing full barrels with empty ones. Criers were sent out for an entire moons, encouraging people to use the barrels. Furthermore, the Gold Cloaks were told to collect a copper fine should they catch anybody pissing against walls if there were available barrels within a five minute walk away. Which of course meant a boom in business for cooper. Innkeeps and pubkeeps were too happy to be paid to set up barrels with funnels inside their establishments for the use of men, as well as curtained off areas for the privacy of women customers. The barrels for women were built more squat so that they may sit on them. Some tradespeople set up their barrels at street corners or alongside market streets, with wooden partitions for the privacy of both sexes. Soon, after a series of altercations after some tradespeople tried to unscrupulously collect barrels owned by the Florents, the barrels became painted with identifying marks according to their owners. Florent barrels came stamped with a paw print pattern.

The Dragonpit was opened and workers were busily retrofitting it to serve as barracks and training ground for the Royal Marines and Gold Cloaks. Robert was having the time of his life, bellowing encouragement as both Marine and Gold Cloak recruits struggled to shimmy up ropes to ring the bell waiting for them at the top as well as other Florent-designed obstacle courses, as they jogged in armor while chanting, as they learned to properly form shield walls and march in unison, as they took swan dives into the Blackwater after learning how to swim, to properly prepare them for conflicts at sea. He was sparring every day and matching the men in numbers of push-ups, chin ups, sit ups, and burpees. So. Many. Burpees. Stannis thinks that Robert likes the exercise because of the ridiculous name; Selyse referred to it as such and Robert inaugurated the first set he ever completed with a robust belch. The name stuck.

A standing Royal Army was an increase in the Crown’s power too far for the Lords Paramount to agree with, but an elite group of fighting foot who could be quickly deployed with the Royal Fleet was unobjectionable. It simply made sense that the sailors and rowers should stay with the ships for blockading and the Royal Marines would be capable of making landings as well as a defense against pirates. It would also serve to bring the Baratheon brothers to better accord with a common goal, not that Selyse mentioned that. Selyse was patient. In a few more years, there will be experienced Gold Cloaks and Royal Marines enough to peel away to form a proper Royal Guard (not Army). They could wait until the dynasty was more secure, with more trust from the various Lords Paramount.

As the orders were issued so that the sails were furled and the Fury slowed and the orders were given for the oarsmen to begin docking maneuvers, a gust of wind off Dragonstone hit them.

Selyse took a deep breath of the stench.

“You know what that smell is, Stannis?”

“... Intolerable?”

Selyse made a low, satisfied chuckle.

“Power. The stench of sulfur is power. This island will have mines more valuable than Casterly Rock’s.”

Stannis’s frown was the skeptical version.
“You will see,” Selyse’s chin lifted confidently. “Rock and dragonglass is all Dragonstone yields, you told me. We must discover what sort of rocks. A rock is not just a rock. Especially the rocks born of volcano and sea.”

Stannis glanced at Maester Cressen, who gave an enthusiastic nod. He would be leading the experiments and prospecting program. He would not be personally scrambling up hillsides and wielding the pickaxe; that would be the toil of the dozen scholars hired on from Old Town, ones with multiple links for Metallurgy and Engineering. Maester Cressen personally told him one evening that he was most eager to see the results of reducing material inside crucibles with high temperature flames that came not from wood, but fueled by gas. And alarmingly, when Stannis inquired as to what “gas” was, Maester Cressen stated ‘Oh, just flammable air.’ in an offhand manner. He was not reassured when he went to Selyse who, in her very deadpan manner, claimed he would be familiar with gas in the form of farts. He didn’t grind his teeth, but it was close. The humor of his wife was just too baffling some days.

“Wave, Stannis,” she murmured, as the gangplank was lowered. “Give the folks who stood for hours waiting for us a payoff.”

Stannis grimaced but did so to a roar of cheering from the crowd. Selyse raised her hand and waved in a most odd manner; her elbow almost level with her shoulder, her hand slightly cupped, her wrist nearly stiff, with her forearm swaying from side to side.

“I forgot to teach you this,” she murmured as they walked down, with her still waving. “I shall do so before we must appear in public next time. The royal parade wave. Keeps your hand and arm from cramping up awfully.”

“Why?”

The very idea of having to endure a parade was almost enough to get his teeth grinding again.

“Applause, my Stanny Blue Eyes. We must make them love us. With love, we win and keep Dragonstone’s people.”

She kissed him on the cheek before he could protest the ridiculous pet name she had spontaneously sprung on him and the idea that the love of the peasantry mattered so much. He was their liege, they owed him their allegiance. It was their duty. Yet the crowd cheered anew with this show of affection. When they stepped down to the pier, their honor guard ushered the crowds back and Stannis was set to begin the ascent directly to the castle, but Selyse’s viselike grip on his arm halted him.

He grumbled, but stood as Selyse turned to address the crowd. She gave her wide, white-toothed grin and she cooed as a small girl broke the lines to give her a posy of mountain flowers.

“Oh, how lovely! Thank you, dear, thank you!”

She stood back up, holding the posy and her strong voice carried.

“People of Dragonstone, thank you for making me feel most welcome!”

The crowd cheered again.

“You all must be famished, waiting out here for so long for our arrival! Since we are here, let us have a meal, together! Break bread with us, people of Dragonstone! Let us have some rest and repast!”
“Selyse!” Stannis grimaced, his dread of feasts rising up. Feasts were wasteful. Feasts tortured him.

“It’s been arranged, Stannis. Trust me.”

Her expression was firm and yet, understanding. Stannis took a breath. He was not married to a frivolous woman.

They made their way to the central square of Dragonstone Village, where the staff from the castle were able to quickly set up long boards on top of barrels and crates to form benches for seating. Tin jars of jams, sauerkraut, pickled vegetables and cold cuts were also readied and loaves of bread were ready to be sliced, all from the castle kitchens. Watered ale was also available for drinking. The people found seats easily enough and the castle staff moved through with trays of bread and a choice of spreads. There were happy expressions from the first bite. It was too simple to be called a proper feast, and Davos thought that perhaps Lady Selyse preferred it that way.

Davos was sitting with two bread slices in his hands; one topped with sauerkraut and sliced sausage and one topped with jam, taking a bite from one or the other, watching as Selyse led Stannis through the crowd. She was holding her sauerkraut, pickles, and sliced meat between two slices of bread in her left hand and waving or offering her hand in greeting to any smallfolk who approached. Stannis was clearly uncomfortable with the informality, and occupied himself by eating his own bread bundled meal. Between demure bites of her bread bundle, (Davos thought here was a convenient and new thing. Sure to be widely adopted; a new fashion on eating) she smiled and chatted, holding an informal court and hearing petitions.

After an hour passed and most everybody had their fill, Lady Selyse announced that the Lord of Dragonstone had largesse to bestow. Women would receive gifts from herself and her handmaidens. Stannis (but Davos and his trusted men, really) would be distributing gifts to the men. The crowd became curious and eager. Davos was not sure himself what he would be handing out.

Lady Selyse’s generosity made quite the impression. The women gasped as they opened the first few canvas sacks. Inside were seven yards of cotton and seven yards of wool, spools of thread, and steel sewing needles and sewing scissors. Davos knew that as rare as sheep were on the entire island, getting fabric from the mainland made the costs very dear, to say nothing of getting metal needles such that they made do with fish bone needles. The men also received yardage of cotton and wool cloth, but also, spools of cotton cording, suitable for making into new fishing nets, and shiny new steel knives, with blades suitable for scaling and filleting. There were many murmurs of approval and cries of ‘Bless you, Lord and Lady of Dragonstone!’

Lady Selyse smiled and nodded and occasionally waved with each approbation. Every so often, she had to nudge Stannis into following suit, which caused more appreciative cries from the villagers.

It was not until they finally took their leave and the household began making their way up the stone steps leading into the castle proper that Stannis finally spoke up.

“You are perhaps too generous, my lady.”

“Not when cotton and wool stuffs from the Florent mills allow me to acquire the bounty at much less than merchant markup, my lord. It is difficult enough for the smallfolk to scratch out a living on this rock. They will make practical use of our gifts.”

“... From your mills? I thought your family mills only clean and prepare wool and cotton for spinning.”
“The mills did only do so. And now, we spin and weave. Rest assured, Florent wealth will grow greater as we take over the cloth trade. Prices of wool and cotton goods will drop from greater supply from our mills, and a number of spinners and weavers will be out of work, but our tin jarring factory needs workers and now that we have permission from the King to set up urine collection in King’s Landing, we will have barrels and barrels of the stuff for both wool fulling and dying mordant and helping to reduce the stink of King’s Landing! Win win!”

The next few days, Selyse and Erren marched inexorably through Dragonstone castle taking their own particular inventory. Selyse planned to embark on a renovation of the castle itself to make it more suitable for habitation. Erren had notes from Selyse, Alekyne, and Imry about how to make Dragonstone more secure against incursions from spies. Maester Cressen had already set his team of scholars to reorganize and catalog the Dragonstone library. Selyse ordered him to particularly search for any records having to do with the Night’s Watch and Northern lore. And possibly dragonlore. But the Night’s Watch and Northern lore was higher priority.

“Cranberries?” Selyse was surveying Aegon’s Garden.

“Yes, m’lady,” said the head gardener. “Been grown here since before Aegon’s Conquest.”

“What’s preventing this crop being grown on the rest of the island? They seem to be thriving.”

“The Dragon Lords wanted this for their own personal use, m’lady.”

“Well, that stops now. Let it be known that you will gather and distribute seeds for those who wish to try growing them. If we should have some fruit in addition to fish without needing to import, how fortunate we will be! Should we have a bumper crop, we will turn them into jam for tin jarring. The farmers will be fairly compensated for their crop. Make it so.”

The head gardener smiled at this and bowed as they left the garden.

Stannis was present to witness Selyse coo and murmur over the tremendous veins of dragonglass in the lower levels within Dragonstone as if she was surrounded by rubies or emeralds.

“Tons and tons of it! Spectacular,” she cried.

Erren shrugged when Stannis looked at him in question. Nobody knew why Selyse was so obsessed with dragonglass. Later Erren’s curiosity would be further piqued when Selyse told him to seek out any Dragonstone folk who still knew the old ways of working dragonglass into blades and arrowheads. Erren went out into the fishing village and found one elderly fisherman still skilled in the art. He presented a knife that he made years ago, still sharp despite repeated use for gutting fish.

“Some hard years, when we couldn’t afford steel or if a knife gets lost overboard into the sea, we made do with making dragonglass knives,” said the obvious dragonseed with proper platinum blond hair, who answered to Saelor. “You want more, m’lady?”

“Much more. I wish for both knives, spearheads, and arrowheads to be produced and for you to begin teaching whoever wishes to learn the art. I will pay one Star by the quiverful of arrows and by the pound of knives and spearheads. Let people know. And before you start, do let any interested apprentices know that we will be providing eye protection-”

Erren stepped forward with a box filled with glass lensed goggles.
“So that they will not be blinded by flying shards. I want proper edges on those knives and arrowheads. Will you do it, Saelor?” Selyse asked.

Saelor picked up a pair of goggles, touched by the care that Lady Selyse demonstrated for smallfolk laborers. And a Star was good pay for a day’s work. And here, he could earn his suppers not by rowing his stiff limbs out into the open sea in the early morning chills, but by the hearth of his son. How could he not take this chance?

“Aye, m’lady. You’ll have all the arrows and knives you need.”

Selyse told him that there would be raw dragonglass in barrels made available outside the castle gate. Finished works should be brought to the same castle gate for payment.

“Why are you paying for knives and arrowheads made out of dragonglass?” Erren finally asked as they left.

“There will be a need for them, Erren. Not today. Not next year. Years from now. And I want them to equip the armies that will use them.”

Erren scratched his nose, thinking.

“Is something going to happen to the iron in the world?”

Selyse smiled at his quick thinking.

“Not that I know of. I do wish to be prepared with blades that are not of steel when there is a need. You will see the sense of it in the coming years. Trust me.”

Erren nodded, still curious, but satisfied.

Erren was left in charge of the workers building out the biogas digesters within Dragonstone castle grounds and located a safe distance from the fishing village. Maester Bryan and Selyse first succeeded in making a fully working system after an initial prototype that trapped gas within a pig bladder when she was sixteen back at Brightwater Keep.

It was disgusting in a fascinating way to Erren when he first learned about the set up, how poop was rendered by earthworms inside an enclosed space into compost and it formed gas that was collected into a small cylindrical steel tank that Selyse warned most strenuously to not be tampered with without supervision. When the tank was full (judging by weight), it would be wheeled into the most dangerous workshop, one that was a good distance away from Brightwater Keep itself in a separate stone building, and connected to a device that Selyse dubbed the Bryans Burner, after Maester Bryan.

A valve was turned, a moment of hissing noise, and with a few sparks from a striker, there was flame! With a few adjustments, the bright red flame was turned into a hotter blue flame and Maester Bryan was breathless with giddy joy that was quite out of character for a man of his age. That resulted in so many experiments, with crucibles set on tripods over the flame, as myriad substances were tossed in and melted down to observe the results.

Selyse warned everybody very strenuously that should the entire tank of gas take to flame, it would cause a mighty explosion, perhaps like wildfire. Of course they took precautions, as they were not stupid. Eventually, they were so used to the Bryans Burner that Delena dared to make toast by holding a slice of bread over it on a metal skewer. Selyse did find that amusing and Alekyne convinced her to allow the smithing of a perforated copper pipe set within a steel box on legs and a grill positioned over it, suitable for attaching to the gas tank.
“And now we’re cooking with gas!” Selyse whimsically exclaimed that day.

Erren remembered the fascination he had as the entire family crowded around the gas grill, watching as slabs of steak and links of sausage cooked and slices of bread toasted. The head cook was quite amazed at the speed of one of her iron skillets heating up and they had grilled fish ready in a trice. They had a very exciting meal, not because of exotic spices or meat, but because of the method of cooking. The grill was moved to be closer to the kitchen with a new tank made for it and after the head cook and all her assistants were trained and used to the idea of cooking with gas, their smaller family meals were cooked in this manner. Of course, the big kitchen hearths were still used for roasting whole pigs, and the like during feasts, but everybody liked the ease of the gas grill. Erren thought it a sorry thing that they could not risk such a setup in the Foxhole, being in the middle of King’s Landing. But, who knows? Perhaps the Florents could benefit monetarily from it; it was just a matter of time.

Erren could work out very easily why Selyse wanted biogas digesters set up; there were a few pitiful trees remaining on the island except the pines of Aegon’s Garden and the Dragonstone smallfolk spent dearly for firewood shipped in from the mainland. With the village all contributing their daily waste into the digester, they would be able to cook without such costs and the farmers would be able to fertilize their fields as well as with the compost! The question would be how quickly the smallfolk would adopt cooking with gas. After all, it is dangerous if the gas were to be ignited by a stray spark.

Selyse wanted Erren to stay for a time on Dragonstone, after she and Stannis must leave to return to his duties as Master of Ships in King’s Landing, to teach the smallfolk the benefits of cooking with gas and to all contribute their daily waste into the digester. It made sense to him. He would also get to observe Maester Cressen’s experiments with all the different rocks that his scholars would be bringing in from around the island. That more than made up for the probably tedious task of trying to communicate with ignorant smallfolk.

Erren supposed he would miss the Foxhole; he was too excited about exploring Dragonstone for homesickness to set in yet. He expected he would feel sad about it soon enough; he missed Brightwater Keep terribly the first moons after moving to the Foxhole. And his mother! Why, he didn’t know when the next they will meet. But here, he would be a project lead, ahead of Imry! What an opportunity, not to mention the different merchants and peoples he will meet who anchor at Dragonstone to have their cargo checked prior to making way to King’s Landing. Additionally, a training ground and barracks for the Royal Marines were being built and they would provide ample opportunity to keep his fighting skills sharp. He certainly will not be bored, not at all!

It is also here, in isolated Dragonstone, that a truly top secret Florent project was to be undertaken. Essentially, they would be using their knowledge of chemistry to develop a substance with the explosive power of wildfire, but controllable. Obviously such power would destabilize the Seven Kingdoms if it were released widely. There were many hours of debate within the Foxhole on the matter. Selyse had not breathed a word of this until their departure for Storm’s End for her wedding. Beyond the philosophical questions about the morality of creating something that seemed only useful for destruction, Selyse stated that they perhaps would not necessarily need the substance, but if there was a great enough risk to the realm, then she would do what was necessary to protect life. Erren was just old enough to know the secret, along with Delena.

This was a heavy responsibility. Erren did not know what Selyse was so afraid of, what made her so paranoid (but not mad! Surely she wasn’t mad!) but he trusted and loved his sister so he set out to succeed.
King's Landing: And Now For Something Completely Different

Chapter Notes

Warning: Robert Baratheon is a demented sex pig, wallowing happily in a mud of depravity. He was a great scoffer about Duty, but seeing as Stannis is manfully going about said Marital Duties with a will, and Baratheons Have Issues, it is now a time of great tribulation for Cersei.

Megga of Brightwater Keep is embroidering a handkerchief. She thinks that it is a funny, lucky thing that it would suit either the Lord or Lady of Dragonstone to receive the monogrammed SB handkerchief. Lady Selyse has always had indifferent skills when it came to embroidery. Not that it mattered with her cleverness, her creativity at dressmaking sewing, and her skills in music and dance. Megga knows from years of trailing after Lady Selyse that she simply doesn’t have the time or mind to do any sort of embroidery.

It would not do, however, for the court to see her or Lord Stannis with plain handkerchiefs. The tiniest aspect of a noble’s appearance sends a message to the critical eyes of the court and as often as Selyse scoffs at these shallow signs of rank, she understands the need to maintain appearances. So Megga embroiders the two letters, SB, in a fine calligraphic style. It is light work and it pleases her. She will have a stack ready for their use by the end of the day.

She thinks as she works and wonders what her dead mother would say about her rising to the position of handmaid to a princess! Well. Perhaps not exactly; Lady Selyse is royal by marriage and nobody calls Lord Stannis prince, but surely he is one because he’s brother to the King. Megga doesn’t know about such things; the rules of nobility are different here in the Crownlands than in the Reach. The old Gardener Kings had Princes and Princesses of the Blood for members of the royal family. She cannot recall if the Targaryens had such titles. And perhaps King Robert has done away with such. Who can say? She is not so important that she is informed on such matters. She keeps her opinions to herself.

She ties off a knot and snips the end of her thread.

Megga does not like the Red Keep. For as grand as it is, it is so big that she must travel down servants’ passages for a very long time to go where she needs and they are full of tight twisting stairs because of how tall the Red Keep is. The halls and walls are full of spies.

Lady Selyse warned all of the Florent staff that the Lannisters and all courtiers have their own informants, to say nothing of the creatures that work for the Master of Whispers. It disgusted Megga, the idea of poor orphans with their tongues cut out, forced to sneak around stealing secrets for the eunuch. They only speak freely to each other in the Foxhole. Otherwise they say only the most mundane of things; requesting hearth fires and meals and to have tea and snacks brought up.

She is sitting outside of Lord Stannis’ office, in a little alcove built for a waiting servant; out of sight but not out of earshot should a call be made. Soon it will be lunch and Lady Selyse has always been generous enough to allow her to eat with her when she makes these visits to the Red Keep. The thought of going down all those flights of servants’ stairs just to eat leftovers from last evening in the kitchens is not at all appetizing, no matter how richly King Robert likes his table set.
She looks up just in time to observe a new castle guard moving into his place across the hall. She returns her concentration to a new handkerchief in her frame, beginning to trace out the letters with her wax pencil, when she hears Lord Stannis’ distinct, deep, barking cry coming from behind the office door.

To her astonishment, this particular guard springs into action and she barely manages to tug him away from trying the door latch.

“Get off, woman!” and Megga is roughly shoved to the floor.

“You mustn’t disturb the Lord and Lady!” she hisses. Oh, she’s bruised, she knows it, the rude beast!

The guard reaches for the latch again, when Lord Stannis cries out once more and it’s mortifyingly clear:

“YES- FUCK-! Fuck, Selyse- Yes, like that-”

The guard’s face colors and it serves him right. Megga gathers herself off the floor and with as much cold hauteur as she has ever seen from Lady Selyse, brushes past him to sit back in her alcove. The guard (was he new? She can’t tell a thing with their helmets on) hastily returns to his spot.

Well, the last laugh is hers, because she knows Lord and Lady Baratheon by now. And she is proven right because not fifteen minutes later, Lord Stannis is crying out again. Megga has no idea what Lady Selyse is doing to him. Only when at the Red Keep, does she do this to Lord Stannis. Lord Stannis, whose grim face and scowl has always frightened Megga a little, becomes a howling, pleading thing, who curses and groans with desperate, uninhibited pleasure. Megga glances up when Lord Stannis sings out a third time after another interval of silence and nearly laughs at the disbelieving widening of the guard’s eyes. She quickly looks down. Best not let that man catch her eye; she’s heard rumors enough about the dangers of servants in the larger keeps and castles being accosted by lusty men and here there is only her and him in the hallway.

They listen to Lord Stannis alone one more time before they hear Lady Selyse herself, their voices joining together in an unrestrained frenzy. It is here that Megga bites her lip at the horror in the guard’s expression. Lady Selyse has such strong lungs and her voice was trained for carrying power since she was a child after all. This is how she has deduced that Lady Selyse does something to Lord Stannis, something that does not involve her privy parts at all, because when they do couple the normal way, neither of them are particularly quiet. Megga wonders what it is and perhaps will work up the nerve to ask some day. Perhaps if she should ever get married. It seems a powerful thing, to make even a man as grim as Lord Stannis beg.

It sounds like Lord Stannis spends and then it is only Lady Selyse now, crying out her pleasure. Megga is sure that he uses his fingers on Lady Selyse; Lady Selyse has privately praised his generosity in bed. Megga sighs. Lady Selyse is lucky to have such an attentive husband.

Lady Selyse lets out one last robust cry and it is silent.

Megga puts her embroidery frame away in her sewing basket and stands. She calmly waits, staring at the now cowed guard. The couple will be quick about making themselves presentable; Lady Selyse places just enough and no more buttons and hooks into her dresses than absolutely necessary.

“Perhaps you should ask the guard you relieve who was last seen entering the room,” she softly
suggests. “To prevent any future embarrassments.”

The guard hastily nods and the door of Lord Stannis’ office swings open. Lord and Lady Baratheon step through the door and Megga critically surveys Lady Selyse’s hair. It is fortunate that she favors a style where being tousled is no great flaw, for it is mussed. Other than that, the both of them give no sign of what they were just doing. Well. Selyse’s cheeks have a bloom and the crinkles that are usually between Lord Stannis’ brows are absent.

They both stride down the hall, heading for lunch with Lord Arryn and Megga falls into step behind them.

She doesn’t know why Lady Selyse (and surely it is Lady Selyse’s idea only. Lord Stannis seems to be a very private sort normally and not at all prone to boasting) wants it known that they engage in so much sex during the day hours in the Red Keep. The obviousness of it doesn’t seem like Lady Selyse’s style of hustle. But it is clear that if some of the lords and ladies do not know, it is because they do not gossip and that is impossible in the Red Keep, as everybody gossips. Certainly by the end of that guard’s shift more servants will know.

Queen Cersei is holding lunch alone in her apartments. It gives her no satisfaction to hear nothing new of court gossip from the likes of the Stokeworths. She broods over her father’s chastising and over the fact that Jaime is not here with her. Ever since Lord Arryn and Lord Stannis have convinced Robert that as he is best at war and therefore his best duty as king is to train the fighting strength of the Royal Marines and Gold Cloaks and King’s Landing levies, he has been down in the training yards of the Red Keep or the Dragonpit. He has taken Ser Barristan and Jaime with him every day, because he needs the best of the best to help him train the recruits. The other Kingsguard are scheduled to guard him and her by rotation. This means that though he is away from her during the day, she has no happiness because Jaime is also away from her.

She complained to Jaime about it; surely he would understand! And the infuriating fool actually liked that the oaf king kept them apart! He liked that the king was taking his duties seriously and that he relied upon Jaime! Baffling! Well. Of course he would be needed because Jaime is the best in the whole of Westeros, but surely you didn’t need the best for mere levies!

It does not help that she must endure Robert’s attentions every night now. She is sure this is the fault of Lord and Lady Baratheon. She has heard from the servants and even the odd courtier who had some reason or another to pass by the Master of Ships’ office. Ever since getting married, boring, grim, unfriendly, rude Lord Stannis has been rutting his wife in his office. There is no earthly reason for him to do so besides some sort of perversion; they don’t even live in the Red Keep! Lord Stannis lives with the Florents in the Florent manse and even Lord Renly has moved there, making his fosterage official. Every day he arrives in time for Small Council in the morning, he shuts himself inside his office if Robert hasn’t managed to harange him into showing up for sparring in the Red Keep’s training yard, and then Lady Selyse shows up just before lunch and they fuck.

Cersei is sure that it must be because of years of pent up lusts because if she’s ever seen a resentful virgin of a man, it’s Lord Stannis. Even a plain woman as Lady Selyse suffices and judging by what her servants reports, Lady Selyse is willing to endure his lust and to even incite them. Cersei wants to hate both of them for doing it so that everybody in court knows. Robert knows. And yet. As her Westermen ladies say, giggling all the while amongst themselves, the dumb cows, Lady Selyse was not being anything except an especially dutiful wife. Dutiful, Cersei scoffs to herself. Most husbands don’t demand their marital rights during the day, in a place where ANYBODY
could overhear their animalistic noises! And given the way she sounds- it is not hard- No-! Cersei winces. Difficult- yes, don’t think about hard anything! It is not difficult for Lady Selyse to endure her husband’s attentions. Perhaps she is mumming the enjoyment, like a trained whore. And yet. Who would have thought that Lord Stannis, such a stern, rigid- Cersei is annoyed at herself and this sudden deluge of inappropriate words flooding her mind and picks up a plate and heaves it against a far wall, just to hear the smash.

No thoughts. No thoughts, no japes about anything hard, rigid, length, endurance, no, no, no-! She reaches for her wine cup but stops herself in time; when she is in her cups, the thoughts get worse. There are too many who gossip and report all sorts of things on the abilities of the younger Baratheon brother, given the uncouth squealing of the big-nosed, big-arsed Lady Selyse! Why, the boring cow was nearly mute every time she was in court! Dull! Not an expression on her wooden face! Ugh, now she’s picturing both of their stupid expressionless faces while copulating. Cersei makes a desperate, choking giggle, imagining Lord Stannis’ scowl while he’s balls deep in Lady Selyse, her face unsmiling like a doll, while both howled and grunted like farm animals. She’s too sober for this! How DARE they make her think about them!

For all she knows, Robert has asked Lord Varys to spy on them and tell him everything, because when before he would heave himself carelessly on top of her while drunk, he now goes about the business with concentration, a task he must do to gain a win, while entirely sober, against his suddenly virile brother.

He’s so strong that he can flip her every which way and arrange her to his liking. He doesn’t invade herstraight away anymore. He takes his time, which is the worst, because she had not known that he was skilled at the bedsport siege. That first night after the wedding at Storm’s End, his big hands kneaded her like dough or clay, massaging her back and buttocks until her skin tingled and when he finally reached her breasts, he grinned at her flush and how she stubbornly stifled her cries while he played with her nipples. He made lewd remarks about how pleasing her breasts are, how they fill his hands, how he likes the expression she makes when he jiggles them. She was shocked by his talking about it at all and in her shock, was overcome by sensation and the long neglect from Jaime (why didn’t he visit her at Storm’s End!? Surely he wasn’t that frightened of Father’s presence!) into coupling with him.

His new fixation on her breasts is such that he has introduced a new humiliation to their activities since returning to King’s Landing. He gets sweet scented oils and coats her breasts while massaging and rubbing at her nipples. He sat with his legs spread, presenting his hardness at her and she must kneel between his legs. She is made to cup her breasts around him and to rub herself on him, giving him pleasure with the press between her breasts. Cersei thinks she much prefers the times where she is made to take him into her mouth. Then, she doesn’t have to look at him or look at it. This way, it is unavoidable. Either she looks at him and has to watch his insultingly satisfied expression, or she must look down and watch the vulgarity of her breasts being used, of his cock sliding in and out between her cleavage obscenely. And he doesn’t leave off with flicking and pinching her nipples either, so she cannot distract herself. She did not expect a man with such ungainly big paws for hands to be so deft!

He worked at her and the scent of his musk made her heady. She ached between her legs, her traitorous quim wanted to be filled after all the attention to her breasts. Something in her expression must betray her, because she’s hauled up, with him making room by sitting further back on the bed. She straddled his lap and he was suckling and nibbling at her nipples. She could not stifle her cries as he teased her entrance with the tip of his cock.

“You want my stiff cock up inside you, don’t you?” he asked in that nasty way that he does when aroused.
“No! Shut your mouth!” Cersei cried, mortified. Why did he have to say such things!?

“Hah!”

He grinned infuriatingly and continued to suckle. He gripped one of her buttocks with one hand and the other went down the front and he rubbed alongside her most sensitive place. That time, she’s so aroused that she climaxes from his fingers alone. When she did, she barely had a chance to catch her breath before he gripped her, smoothly plunging into her. She’s so wet that she moaned from it, the relief of being filled. He’s so strong; he arranged her knees over his shoulders so that she must hang onto his biceps or she should fall, getting no purchase on the bed with her legs. He held her in place as if she weighs nothing while he bounced her up and down his cock. Sometimes, she is grudgingly impressed by his strength when he stands and fucks her like that, not even needing a wall to support her. He is such a big, meaty beast of a man.

Were his attentions to her breasts the worst? No, this must be the worst, Cersei thought. She cannot go limp like when she is on her back and let her mind drift. She must work to stay upright as if on a galloping horse, which clenches her insides against his plunging action, making her moan despite herself from the intense feeling.

She closed her eyes in exasperation as he roared out his pleasure, feeling the spurting motions of his spending. He doesn’t pull out. He held her in place, returning to suckling at her nipples as he waited for his cock to gradually slip out on its own. That merely gives him a pause; he was not done.

Her knees over his shoulders made it easy; he only has to lie back, still trapping her with his arms and now sweaty, to slide her up, bringing her quim to his face.

Cersei wanted to scramble away, to be done with it, but she also needed to come. He gripped her, keeping her close as he greedily licked and kissed her down there and she could not stop her moans. She gasped and bit back curses, grinding on him. She was unconscious of her abandonment; she’s cupping and rubbing at her nipples, desperate for sensation. Robert hums to himself in satisfaction as he watches her do so from between her legs. When she does come, it’s with a yipping hiccup of sound.

She had no strength left as Robert arranged her onto her back. She was not expecting this kind of endurance, used as she is to Robert immediately succumbing to drunken stupors. But this clearheaded Robert is the Demon of the Trident, the man who won three battles in a day. He has energy to spare, even after a day of training. He didn’t crush her under his weight. He gripped her hips to hold her place and gave her inexorable deep strokes of maddening steady rhythm, like the bellows of a smithy. It’s too much.

“Admit it, my lusty lioness. Admit that you like how I do you with my cock!”

“Ne- Neveeeerrrr!”

“Hah!”

Her supreme annoyance at his stupid barking laugh caused her to attempt to rear up and slap him.

“Oh, you want to do battle?” Robert grinned after taking her hit with nary a flinch; she has ended up hurting her hand against his stupid hard head.

Cersei could not comprehend how prepared Robert is, how perverted. He bears down on her with his weight to pin her totally and reaches towards one of the posts of the headboard. A waiting
length of soft cord is there and before she can even comprehend what it is he’s doing, he’s tied her hands together and forced her arms above her head, anchored by the bedpost.

“What- Untie me! Untie me this instant, I am the Queen!”

“Yes, Queen of big tits and wet cunt!” Robert grinned.

Cersei nearly shrieks when Robert bent down, pressed his face between her breasts and made a sloppy raspberry. Somehow he’s not bent on finishing, he’s bent on torment. He lies there, not moving, while he goes back to suckling and making raspberries on her breasts. Cersei loses energy struggling against the cord, making indignant noises with each slurp and nibble on her nipples.

“Argh, you stupid, idiot, lump-”

“Tsk tsk! That’s King Stupid Idiot Lump to you, my lady!”

Cersei abandons all decorum and shrieks at Robert.

“Hah!”

He lifted his weight off of her, but with his broad body still pinning her on one leg, and she could do nothing as he hiked up her free knee up, spreading her.

“There’s a greedy cunt,” Robert laughs and he plunged his fingers in, expertly plying her in ways that causes her whole body to jerk. “I love ’em!”

Cersei cried out from the building pleasure, she cried out from frustration and aggravation, she cried out from the new humiliation of being tied up. Robert is satisfied that she can’t speak words anymore and works her to a new climax and yet another shortly after with his fingers and tongue, chuckling as she wailed her pleasure. She’s incoherent when he returns and he laughs at how she moans at his slow push of his cock back inside. He resumes that slow, even pace and she mindlessly coos softly with his rhythm like a dove. He’s fucked her stupid. She’ll remember to be mad at him for it later.

He finished and untied her.

“I’ll remember this!” she managed to mutter.

“I should hope so, my lady!” Robert still had the energy to laugh.

It has been like this ever since. Sometimes he doesn’t open his stupid mouth too much and Cersei allows herself to be robustly seduced. Sometimes, he purposefully incites her with his words and she is roused into hitting him, to which he responds with tying her down and subjecting her to purposeful teasings and punishments; some evenings he even spansks her arse, which she truly loathes to admit excites her. Cersei doesn’t want to admit it, but Robert is an exciting fuck. A long lasting fuck. A driven fuck. She always had to sneak around with Jaime before, to stifle her cries, to fear being discovered. Now that Robert has a form of competition with his brother, he wants to show that he is the top, the king, by fucking his queen every night.

She supposes she can tolerate it. She still hates his stupid, idiot ways, of course. His stupid laugh. But she’ll tolerate his cock. She sighs, and bites into a slice of roast duck. Is this what Father wants? Perhaps if she can get Robert satiated enough, she can start to direct him in ways that favor the goals of the Lannisters? But what can they be? Father doesn’t write to tell her anything. Nothing that the Lord Hand is doing seems to be anything except thanklessly reasonable and the same goes for everybody else on the Small Council. Pycelle hasn’t said that there is anything he is
reporting to Father either. She doesn’t want to befriend Lady Arryn or Lady Baratheon! So there! She is the Queen, why should she! They ought to be trying to befriend her!
Somewhere in the Westerlands: A Lone Seeking

Chapter Notes

Warning: unsympathetic retelling of the story of Tyrion and Tysha. Also, yet another miscarriage for Lysa.

Imry adjusts the close-fitting leather cap that made Lady Lysa laugh behind her hand and say made him look like a member of House Frey. He didn’t mind; it hid his ears very well indeed, as well as making his face more forgettable. It crossed at a very unflattering angle over his forehead, with a half-assed flappy short brim sewn on the front to keep the sun out of his eyes. What’s more, one of the chin straps was longer than the other, giving him a sad, hangdog lopsided effect. Perfect. It’s been a number of moons since he’s left Storm’s End. He’s climbed up the tree where he has tied his mule and he’s checking the map he has of the Westerlands. He’s done his time in Lannisport, mumming being a mummer and having fun besides in succeeding.

He sang while drumming, and when he needs to preserve his voice he’s not bad on the flute. All those years playing and singing at Brightwater Keep has paid off; he gets enough coppers most days to afford inn rooms. He’s different; his hands are deft enough for spins and juggles of his drumsticks mid-beat, he alternates with beats on the ground, he uses a taller one-sided drum that he can tilt with his feet in order to adjust the tone, he can coax out varied rhythms that practically nobody except for family have heard before. He is very glad that Selyse took the time to help him refine his performance for the road and busking. Of course, he has silvers sewn into the hem of his roughspun jerkin, but that’s for emergencies. He’s moved methodically through Lannisport, from pub to inn, from tavern to winesink, singing a few songs to quick enough approval of the owners, and earning enough from the other patrons to pay for meals and drinks that he nurses very carefully while watching and asking questions. He even manages to get some odd jobs, singing with a few other mummers at a few private parties held by one wealthy merchant or another.

The real mummers complimented him on his voice and his steady rhythm on the drums. They say if he were to join up with a troupe he could very well make a name for himself, and afford brighter clothes, suitable for entering the halls of lords.

He finds out which pubs are preferred by Lannister guards. Here he must be most careful and he cannot afford to arouse suspicion. He visits often enough to be familiar, to establish a shallow sense of trust in his harmlessness and that he is suitably amusing to have around. He can sing any song anybody wishes to hear, he can tell a good jape also, and he always remembers to keep his accent broad and drawling, to hide his cut glass noble Reacher accent.

Patiently, patiently, he gets invited to drink with them and he bows and nods most gratefully each time. He acts awed around them, asking innocent questions of what it was like to serve such a great lord as Lord Lannister, how wonderful their shiny swords and armor are. He whispers with wide eyes that he is sure that he doesn’t have the stomach to do the brave and awful things they must be ordered to do; have any of them been there that day that the song of Rains of Castamere was born?

His ridiculous flattery works and he is frankly amazed by how loose-lipped the guards are after drinks and a round of bootlicking. It really is as Selyse said; everybody else didn’t know about operational security. Not like us. They laugh and slap his back, they boast that yes, one or another
were there that day, oh no, you’re much too young, ’twas I who was there, not you-

They spend hours regaling him with tales of what they did and saw the day the Houses Reyne and Tarbeck were destroyed root and stem. He acts overawed by it all and asks what else have they done? What has been memorable to them, in all their years of duty? Some personal service to House Lannister, perhaps? Why, he could not even think of what he himself, so humble and good for nothing except singing, could do to serve such a Lord.

“It’s not all killing, boy,” one of the guards say.

“Aye, aye, sometimes you just knock heads and throw unruly drunks out of inns and taverns.”

“But if you more a lover than a fighter, Lord Lannister has uses for a man like that too!”

They laugh at his curious, confused expression.

“Must have been wanting to teach the Little Lion how to go about it, or summat, yeah?” yet another guard mentioned. “That night with the whore?”

“Yes, yes, the whore! Tell him the story! You’ll not hear the like again and it was a great night!”

And they tell him the terrible story. They laugh about how practically a troop of them were ordered to some cottage near the shore and to show the Little Lion one after another how to properly fuck a woman, using a whore that Lord Lannister had brought for the purpose. It goes to show how efficient, how masterly Lord Tywin was, to not want his son totally ignorant of such things, even though he was a dwarf. They praised Lord Tywin’s generosity, for they were handed one silver each before they took their turns, and they very correctly put their silvers into the whore’s hand when they were finished. Why, she was alright for a bit of skirt herself, young like the young lord and well enough for sport, for all that she just laid there not making a sound. After this very practical demonstration, Lord Tywin pushed his son forward and they very respectfully waited for the young man to take his turn. Why, Lord Tywin put a gold coin into Tyrion Lannister’s hand for the whore’s final payment! A wonderful, generous man, is Lord Tywin!

Imry did not grit his teeth, chanting silently to himself that emotion was dangerous to his mission. He must feel his rage and disgust later; useless emotion gets one killed in the now. He nodded and smiled and agreed that Lord Tywin was certainly very generous, so very generous. Would- would they happen to know where this whore was? Did she work for any particular madam or procurer or was she a lone street walker? He thought he might like a go himself, since their story was so inspiring.

They all roundly agreed that none of them had ever seen her again in any of the whorehouses within Lannisport. Nor had any of them seen her loitering about street corners or the piers alone. Perhaps she operated out of that cottage? They could give him directions.

He’s followed the coast and did find the cottage, precisely as they say, which lucky is as lucky does. He did not find that girl there. There was a crofter family there, though, and after singing a few more songs and giving them some coppers, they were willing to tell him that they do recall that a girl used to live there alone, but she has since moved on.

He rolls up his map and climbs down from the tree. He mounts the mule and makes his way down the road. Apparently there is a nameless village across a bridge that he can find and he’ll try asking around there.

He does not reach his destination unaccosted. A pair of bandits, judging that a lone mummer
wearing nothing more threatening than trios of ribbon bows on his shirt sleeves and a drum slung over his shoulder looked a fair target. They sprung up from the hedges on either side of the path, one of them grabbing hold the mule’s reins. The mule reared but was held fast.

“Your valuables or your life, lad!” the second cried, brandishing a sword with the top third of the blade broken off.

The one holding the mule’s reins has a better sword and Imry couldn’t reach for the cudgel hanging off his belt faster than the man could stab him.

“We’re taking the mule too! Get down!”

Imry held his hands up after dismounting.

The bandit with the broken sword lowers it to step closer, reaching out to grab at the coin pouch on Imry’s belt.

He was definitely not expecting Imry to surge forward, grabbing the bandit’s shoulder with his right hand, and driving his empty left hand forward toward his throat.

There is a wet sound when a blade sprang out from Imry’s sleeve, impaling the bandit cleanly.

The second bandit managed to try attacking Imry, but the surprise was on Imry’s side; he shoved the first bandit’s body at the second one, distracting him for a few precious seconds, snatched the broken sword from the first bandit, parried and made a clean slice to the juncture of that man’s neck and shoulder with the blade at his left hand. The man dropped after making a terrible cry.

Imry stood, breathing hard.

He’s just killed his first men.

Their blood is somehow very red, more red than he remembers the blood of livestock being butchered back in Brightwater Keep or the blood of prey bagged on hunts in their woods. On the other hand, there wasn’t very much of it. Fattened calves and hogs for slaughter had buckets and buckets of blood compared to these two dead criminal unfortunates. They didn’t even stink of offal too much, not like the powerful stench of Brightwater Keep’s slaughterhouse. Imry is glad that Uncle Colin insisted on him and Erren assisting the butchers during their squiring to get them used to the smell and look of blood and guts. The looks frozen on the mens’ faces by death are terrible to look upon. Imry shakes his head. No time for that.

He kneels and wipes the hidden blade on the shirt of the first bandit. He stands back up and flicks his left hand up. The steel ring on his finger tugs on the wire that runs to the cam on the hardware that triggers the inner springs and the blade retracts into hidden position.

He’ll feel excited about the blade working in field conditions later. He has to hide the bodies. He drags them away from the road by their armpits (Imry thought it very suspicious that Selyse was able to casually advise him and Erren on the most convenient way to manhandle dead bodies) and uses the sword to chop their heads off. He gets the bodies under some shrubs and takes the utility spade he kept in one of the saddle bags to hurriedly dig small holes for the heads under another shrub further away on the opposite side of the path. He would rather bury all of them, but he doesn’t want to be caught lingering. He checks himself; there are luckily no blood stains. He kicks the dirt around where they stopped him and mounts up, having his mule turn a few circles to further muddy the evidence with hoof prints. He decides he can barter the swords, rusty as they are, later, and secures them to the saddle.
He rides on.

If there is no inn in the upcoming village, he’ll just have to find a friendly crofter who doesn’t mind him sleeping in the barn for a few coppers.

Imry starts to whistle a tune as he approaches the bridge.

Inside the Small Council chamber, Stannis straightens the edge of his stack of papers. He has popped his head in on Robert’s office and he has seen that Robert is present. Robert cannot show up every single day. However, he does show up every other, which is a great improvement. Furthermore, he shows up because he must let Lord Arryn know how well the Gold Cloak and Marine recruits are doing.

Selyse has told him that however much the idea insults him, when Lord Steffon died, Robert transferred the bulk of his filial respect and love to Lord Arryn. She says that it is likely that much of Robert’s shirking of responsibility has come from him quickly seeking out another father figure in the unknowing ignorant manner of a duckling imprinting on something not its true mother. Stannis had scoffed at that, until Selyse fixed him with a terrible, knowing, sympathetic stare, and taking his hand, softly asked if he had not done the same with Maester Cressen.

It was really unsettling, how observant his wife was.

Robert did not do the writing of most of his reports. He needed staff for that. However, he did not wave away the minutiae this time. Each recruit had his own file, as recommended by Alekyne and Selyse’s notes. Each recruit had weekly weigh ins, weekly records of how many sit ups, push ups, chin ups, and burpees he could complete within a time limit. They all had to run 3 miles in under 30 minutes. The Marine recruits who could not adapt to this regimen were allowed to transfer into the Gold Cloaks, if they wished. Exceptional Gold Cloak recruits were allowed to transfer into the Marines if they wished for more potential glory and a higher salary.

Selyse found that when the staff organized the progress of the recruits into bar charts, line charts, and pie charts, that Robert was most excited and attentive. Columns of numbers overwhelmed him. So they did, even making a large poster to chart the number of recruits who could pass the physical fitness testing. Robert would stand in front of the poster and chortle to himself as he saw the line inching upward every week. Stannis was eager for the recruits to be promoted into the regulars and for platoons to be assigned to individual ships in the Fleet; they needed to secure the coasts against pirates.

The rest of the Small Council saw the effectiveness of communicating to Robert with visual charts and the Master of Coin was able to show that Robert definitely could not feast or throw so many tourneys if he wanted to pay for the salaries of the Marines and Gold Cloaks, along with weapons and armor. Robert saw the charts, nodded in comprehension, joked that he had no time for such things since he was so busy whipping the recruits into shape, and then asked about the progress with said weapons and armor.

And here, Robert was again being reasonable as Ser Barristan and Lord Arryn put in their advice. They made discussion about balancing combat effectiveness and cost, with needing to bear the differences that came from exposure to the sea and salt, and potentially getting dumped overboard into water.

For that last consideration, Selyse had ideas (of course) and quickly came up with a cotton jerkin that was covered entirely with narrow compartments filled with cork. There was even a wide collar
that was basically a pouch, stuffed tightly with pieces of cork, to better ensure that a person’s head stayed above water. Davos cheerfully put it on to test over a steel breastplate, jumping overboard with a rope tied around his waist. He didn’t sink like a stone, but he only barely managed to keep his head above the surface, before he needed to be pulled out. The cork float jacket was perfectly adequate on Davos when he was wearing regular clothes. Stannis reported that in the case of the Marines they simply cannot use plate armor. They weren’t insane like certain Ironmen.

For the Marines they settled on cloth gambesons stuffed with cork and brigandines. Helmets, gorgets, vambraces and greaves would be made out of steel. Production was also ordered of cork float jackets for all the current sailors and rowers. The amounts of cotton and wool coming out of the Florent mills made this very cost effective. It was very fortunate that the Reach had plenty of mature cork oak groves on holdings besides the Florents such as Crane, Oldflowers and Varner; the groves usually provided additional income from House Redwyne during their bottling cycles. Said Houses were very glad that Lord Alester let them know ahead of time that the Crown would have need of their cork in addition to the tin jarring interests. The Marines would be issued a combat knife and cutlass. In the case of landing operations, they were trained to use shield and halberd. All of them were capable of operating the scorpions of the Royal Fleet as well as crossbows. Each ship would also have specialized detachments of archers. The Gold Cloaks’ armories were inventoried and worn out armor and weapons were sent out to be smelted and reforged.

This Small Council session, Robert was quite proud to announce that the first hundred of Royal Marines were ready. Fifty each were ready to be deployed onto the Fury and King Robert’s Hammer, if it suits Stannis. He would have another two hundred in perhaps two weeks, as these hundred were the best. Stannis thanked Robert formally and the matter was closed.

Lord Arryn reported that a network of semaphore signal towers along the Westerlands coast was authorized by Lord Tywin and that a main line of towers from Lannisport to King’s Landing along the Gold Road has been completed. This in addition to the line coming from Old Town to King’s Landing along the Rose Road, with towers being set up along the Reach coasts. Lord Hoster Tully was still being a recalcitrant skeptic about the benefits of the semaphore system; he and Lady Lysa were going to write more letters.

Ser Barristan reported that Ser Boros was injured again from yet another mandated training session at the Dragonpit.

“Gods, what use is he?” Robert cried out, banging his fist on the table. “What am I to do with the slow lump? And the rest of them?”

“No other injuries, Your Grace.”

“Of course not,” Robert huffed.

He stood up and went over to the wooden treadmill that Selyse recommended he set up in the Small Council chamber. Many eyebrows were raised the first time they saw it, but Robert saw the sense of anything that would keep him awake; he surely wouldn’t go to sleep while walking. He stepped on and set a brisk pace.

Pycelle reported that the Royal Library was finally reorganized to the Florent Decimal System, though he did mutter that he did not see the point of it. Stannis sniffed derisively to himself at that. (Soon, the Florents would infiltrate the Royal Library and start making off with the information they needed. Should Pycelle protest, well, King Robert says his good-kin have license to access the library freely. Hah.) The Master of Coin reported that the treasury was holding steady, with greater income from agricultural exports from the Crownlands; the biogas digesters were already paying for themselves with the dramatically better yields from the compost produced, the four-field
system, and Alekyne Florent’s seed drills and horse-drawn harvesters, sold on to the Crownsland lords for their smallfolk farmers. Lord Arryn added that Alekyne Florent was making progress with his project developing a threshing machine. The Master of Laws reported on the progress of establishing the Small Claims Court of King’s Landing, which would reduce the amount of petitions to the Lord Hand (and therefore Robert when he did sit for petitions) having to do with landlord disputes, merchants’ disputes, and the like.

“Well. What about you, Varys? Anything about the Ironmen threat?”

“Lord Greyjoy does build ships, Your Grace. But when or if he chooses to make use of them…” Varys held up open palms in a shrug. “My birds hear no plans.”

“Perhaps it is still possible to avert conflict,” Lord Arryn said. “Send an envoy to Lord Balon, see if he can be convinced to be reasonable.”

“A fair warning? Why not. He probably won’t listen. Didn’t even show up at my coronation! Sent in a raven written by his maester to pledge fealty and you ought to see the mess he made of his signature! That illiterate pirate thinks himself tough enough to rise against me! Me!”

Robert waved a fist in the air.

“Well, I do want to see him try! I’ll smash him like I smashed Rhaegar! Hah!”

“Nonetheless,” Lord Arryn tried.

“Right, right. Pick who you want, possibly people you don’t mind losing. He might think to kill them and send us their heads in boxes as his first opening move. Hah! Send Ser Boros as part of the envoy! Representative of my Royal Presence, what say you?”

“Your Grace,” Ser Barristan sighed.

“What? ’Twas a jape! Though, if that frees up a space on the Kingsguard for somebody competent…”

“As you say, Your Grace,” Ser Barristan reluctantly agreed.

“Well, I think he ought to go,” Robert jutted his jaw stubbornly. “He survives, then he at least manages one service to the Crown and one line under his name in the White Book. He doesn’t make it? No skin off my nose. By the order of your King it is.”

Lord Arryn sighed and made a note.

“Stannis? Your turn.”

“Almost all captains, first mates, and navigators are fully educated on the use of the sextant and book, Your Grace.”

“Almost? It’s been moons. Why the delay?”

Stannis blinked, but didn’t scowl.

“Davos is still learning how to read and write, Your Grace.”

“Huh. Does this mean that everybody except Davos can do it? That he has a navigator already that can find the way?”
“Yes.”

“Well, don’t scare me like that, man! I thought if the Ironmen struck tomorrow, we’d be fucked because our fleet would be slowed at the Stepstones!”

Stannis acknowledged that he ought to have been more clear, and then went down the progress report of the retrofitting of the fleet.

“Good, good, sounds good. We’ll be ready for those Ironmen bastards. Any further news?”

Stannis folded his hands over his papers.

“Yes. Lady Selyse is with child.”

Robert whooped and practically leapt over the handrail of his treadmill to rush over and start slapping Stannis’ back. Stannis tolerated this while the rest of the Small Council made well wishes. After the rest of the Small Council exited the chamber, Robert clapped his hands.

“Family dinner, here in the Red Keep to celebrate, what do you say? Bring Renly too!”

Stannis allowed that it was acceptable.

He had been encouraged to say yes occasionally to Robert by Selyse, so that he would be kept happy with small requests instead of ramping up to unreasonable kingly demands and orders by their mutual stubbornness. A dinner (not a feast!) was reasonable.

“How far along?”

“Perhaps four moons.”

“... Still vulnerable. Keeping it quiet until she shows, eh?”

“Yes. Especially since Lady Arryn…”

Robert nodded and they stood awkwardly silent; Lady Arryn lost the pregnancy that she had so happily had during Stannis and Selyse’s wedding.

“Well,” Robert cleared his throat. “See you all at dinner, Stannis.”

“We will be there,” Stannis paused. “Robert.”

Robert gave him another hard, affectionate thump on his shoulder, beaming. Selyse said that it was necessary to keep Robert well disposed towards them by being so much more pleasing than Queen Cersei and the Westermen contingent at court. That it was possible with as little as some informality. Stannis supposed it was so.

He had not expected to be comfortable with the cheerful duplicity of the Florents when it came to court dealings, but he supposed once again that though they preferred to be clear and straightforward with him and liked him for his own bluntness, it delighted them to be underhanded, that it gave them some sort of pleasure to play with others to get their way, whereas he was impatient. Well, given that him simply telling Robert what he wanted never resulted in him getting what he wanted in the past, when subtlety as practiced by the Florents got him the results he wanted, he supposed it was the result that mattered, not the technique, no matter how uncomfortable it made him.
After the dinner celebrating her pregnancy, Selyse informed Stannis that she will not be joining him for lunch the next day. This will be a lunch with Robert. Stannis nods. Ever since their marriage in Storm’s End, Selyse has been having these private conversations with Robert every two weeks, with only Megga, whom she trusts totally, and Ser Barristan, who has his oaths as a Kingsguard, as witnesses. They speak in the true privacy of the middle of the Red Keep’s godswood, sitting on chairs brought out by servants and eating bread bundles. Megga and Ser Barristan are within earshot, but not in direct line of sight.

The first few lunches, she asked about Lord Steffon and Lady Cassana. She asked Robert about what he remembers of them and asked if he had ever told Renly about them. He is startled by the realization that Renly can’t know the things that Stannis and he do about their parents. That he has never taken the time to comfort the boy. Did he expect Stannis to do it? Back when he frowned all the time? How was that fair? How was Stannis capable of such a task? For even Selyse is not unwilling to admit that Stannis is so often uncomfortable that conversing with him was a dratted chore in court and council. To have Stannis speak on their parents, an emotional topic- why, Robert could predict no good outcome of that.

She encourages him to take the time to tell Renly what he knows. He is glad to do so.

The next times after, she asks him about his fostering in the Eyrie, about what he thinks about Lord Jon Arryn. He is enthusiastic, recounting the fun of his squiring, making friends with Ned, and the hunts he had in the Vale. She asks if he thought Lord Jon is happy with him. Proud of him. He admits that probably not at all in the beginning of his reign. But now that he has a project in the form of training the Royal Marines and the Gold Cloaks and the King’s Landing levies, he feels more awake and alive than he ever has after being crowned King. He knows why he wakes up in the morning, he says. By training these men, he’s doing something to please the Warrior and is protecting the Realm.

She asks him about Stannis and Renly for their next conversations. He remembers that he never understood why Stannis wouldn’t just let things go or admit that Robert would win every time during their boyhood scuffles. He didn’t understand how every time he brought up his wins and laughed about it with the squires, it only made Stannis more angry, more hateful. Selyse pointed out that both of them had the fury, but whereas he stormed and shouted and threw things and punched people immediately before subsiding just as quickly to japing and laughter, Stannis had learned to retreat, to be silent in his room, to grind his teeth and think on the injustice of it. And when he had enough from an insult too many, he would explode when Robert least expected it, having forgotten that Stannis was angry in the first place, repeatedly blind to Stannis’ way of hiding his temper until he could not as a boy and they were brawling all over again with one wrong word, a look askance, or an ill-timed smile. One wouldn’t expect it now, but a younger Stannis was very liberal with gutshots (since he once screamed that it was useless to aim for Robert’s stupid thick head and expect any improvement) and had a kick like a mule.

“I’m frankly amazed the two of you survived boyhood, with your stories of shoving each other down hills and stairways and off horses,” Selyse dryly observed. “Though, given the times Imry and Erren have slammed onto the ground after losing their grips on Brightwater Keep’s walls, perhaps boys will always be testing how bouncy their bones are in youth.”

Robert laughed and shrugged. He agreed that as the two of them were grown men, they ought to work together with less shouting.
“I would, but he says the worst things in the worst way. I know I’m not the swiftest but when he sneers like I’m an idiot well— I lose my head,” Robert admits. “So I’m a boy all over again and I want to headlock him until he cries.”

“Do work on that, Robert. I am doing the same with Stannis.”

Robert is comfortable enough to complain about how Stannis is so inflexible.

“Sometimes ill fortune happens. He doesn’t believe it should be so! Well, it does, so there, you just… well you can’t do much, can you? You let it go, I think. Forget about it. He never forgets!”

“He’s not like you, Robert.”

“Is it that simple?” Robert snorts.

“Well. I have a theory that perhaps this is yet another way that the death of your parents has wrought you two differently as men. You enjoy uncertainty and you seek excitement. You hunt, you drink. You want sensation to distract you from your sorrows. Stannis doesn’t want excitement. He wants the safety that he lost as a young boy. Of parents who were well and happy and can do no wrong and are the strongest people in the world of a child. What is safety? Control. Stannis exercises control because when he has control, he is safe. You go on attack. He will build his walls and ramparts. I dare say, you could not have asked for anybody better to hold off a siege with his ways. Perhaps it’s the Estermont showing in him stronger than you. A tougher shell and wanting to pull inside when disturbed and waiting until it is safe to come back out again. Slower to forgive. A turtle-ish sort of way.”

Robert sat, eyebrows raised.

“Huh. That makes sense. I don’t know if it’s true, but it sounds about right.”

“Truthy?” Selyse made a wry grin.

“Hah! Yes! Truthy!”

“And Renly?”

“I definitely do not know him so well as I should,” Robert said. “He’s so young! I don’t know what to do with a young boy like that! That’s why I’m glad he has friends with your cousins and brothers. I’m assuming he’s been affected by Father and Mother dying too. You tell Stannis that we ought to have more dinners in the Red Keep. I’ll ask Renly about his studies then, right? And train him if he likes, once he gets strong enough. Perhaps he’ll find he suits a hammer like me!”

“Good idea, Robert.”

She asked about Ned Stark, his brother by choice. He laughed when he recounted all the fun they had together and how he was mystified at first by Ned’s exotic Northern ways. He remembered trying to figure out if Ned’s oddness was because he was a Northman or because he was shy or what. They thrashed each other in the training yard and Robert offered him his hand and it was a simple as that; their friendship started and Robert never thought anything could come between them.

“But you do not speak of him now, do you? What happened?”

It took fits and starts, Robert huffing and pacing, and finally he laboriously recounted the moment in the Throne Room, where he laughed in a fugue of hatred upon seeing the corpses of the royal
children.

“Ned could not stand it, of course. Good, honorable Ned. Of course not! We yelled at each other and I only thought- I just thought that I was getting something back from Rhaegar. He took from me, so see how now he’s lost something of his own! I didn’t- I didn’t care that it was innocent children. I was mad. It’s what it is, you know. Fury, mad, madness. And then I said to Ned he ought to think on it as I, because he lost his own father and Brandon- But- Ned, he went stark- Hah-white and then red and he started to scream at me- So I screamed back-”

Robert banged his fist down on the arm of his chair.

“I don’t know what to do!”

“You could write him a letter.”

Robert wrinkled his nose.

“You could say exactly what you just said to me. That you were not thinking and that it is the truth. That you know that he has the right of it. That you value your friendship too much to have it die with an argument that came from the heat of your anger. That you know that it was a cruel thing to do and that in your fury, you showed him an ugly side of yourself that you beg forgiveness for. You are better than that, Robert.”

Robert nodded.

“Still. Can’t make up for what happened to the children.”

“No,” Selyse agreed. “And perhaps you may be destroyed by Lord Tywin’s choice. Why should you let that happen?”

“Huh. How do you reckon?”

“The Martells hate Lord Tywin. That is clear. But they may also hate you, because it is your power to do justice in their name, and you have not yet. You are the King. You do have the power to order Lord Tywin to give over Ser Gregor and Ser Armory to the Martells.”

Robert hemmed and drummed his fingers.

“Lord Tywin won’t like that.”

“No. There is no way to come out of this without angering one or the other of the Great Houses. Yet you must do this, precisely because you are King. Lord Tywin waited quite some time before declaring for you, remember. The children might have become hostages, given over to the Faith for the Princess and then the Wall for Prince Aegon. Oberyn Martell is spitting mad and he’s not called the Red Viper for nothing. The Targaryens have taken from them too, Robert. I was there in Harrenhal that day. That day when it all started. Don’t you remember how all the Dornish reacted when Elia was passed over?”

Robert grunted.

“They have lost in one blow a beloved sister, nephew, and niece. Even now, they must plot against Lord Tywin. Even now, they must hate you for standing aside. We cannot afford unrest and civil war within the realm, Robert. Don’t you agree?”

“I do. But still. Ordering Lord Tywin about is a quick way to gain his hatred, King or not. I know
and you know how powerful he is. That dratted song reminds all of us.”

“All true. One would have to plan pretty carefully. Yet he is still a Lord Paramount sworn to you, the King, and for all that you owe him for the peace by marrying Cersei, he owes you for any future unrest from the Dornish, a constant threat to your dynasty. They ever say Lannisters pay their debts. And of course, it wouldn’t be easy to bring down the Mountain.”

“I probably could.”

“Please don’t try.”

“Hah!”

Robert had not thought these talks with Lady Selyse would be so interesting when it came to ruling. He must admit, he had not paid so much attention to Jon’s lessons about being a Lord Paramount. So it was something of a shock that a Lady knew quite so much about the business of ruling. But he knows better than to dismiss Selyse; she may be the smartest of the younger Florents. Lord Florent seems as canny as their sigil; he will not allow his House to be caught unaware by untimely deaths. Should he and Alekyne fall, Imry and all the other young Florents are well versed on how to protect their House’s holdings. This education was extended to the womenfolk of that House and Robert heard tell that as their House was founded by a woman, Florys the Fox, it simply was their way. Robert must admit that he is like Stannis in that he doesn’t have patience with the underhanded ways of court. He can admit that he hasn’t a guileful bone in his body. Yet he has the ability to notice how Selyse has drawn out the Crownsland lords sworn to Dragonstone directly in court, how she and her kin have sniffed out any dissent and troublemaking, have pinned them down into place through their guile, with evidence, not just hearsay, and had them helpless while Stannis remorselessly came down upon them like a hammer. If Targaryen loyalists weren’t going to accept the honorable negotiations of good Jon Arryn, well, let them be savaged by the Florents and subject to the slim mercies of his brother. Hah!

Jon had cautioned him about being too readily amenable to the suggestions of the Florents; after all, however nicely worded and however flattering they were, they looked to their own interests. Robert scoffed to himself; as Alekyne and any number of Florents are wont to say, it was only logical. But they were good folk, Robert felt. He’d rather trust them than the likes of Lord Tywin Lannister. He could trust in how Stannis was being less of a stubborn arse, how Renly was smiling again. He can trust in that the Florents took the time to explain things so that he could understand, while making sure that he didn’t feel stupid while doing it.

Not even Jon managed that. But Selyse was right, when she asked him; What would be the Big Audacious Boast of his dynasty? Why, that the Baratheons are Better than Targaryens! Robert could definitely understand that! He could trust that Jon and the Florents weren’t about to let him run off half-cocked as King and that a better age, a Baratheon Golden Age, would follow that would put the efforts of King Jaehaerys to shade. Robert liked the sound of that!

He was prepared to laugh at Stannis during the betrothal; Stannis never listened to him about anything and Lady Selyse was shaping up to be a real harridan, no matter how suitable her House, from his memories of her back at Harrenhal. And yet, Stannis returned to court after betrothal negotiations and formally meeting her not scowling more, not sulking more, not… unhappy. It made him curious and even more after trying to find out what Stannis thought of his betrothed; that resulted in Stannis becoming as ruffled as a cat with its tail pulled and telling him to mind his own business. Robert wouldn’t have persisted if the man wasn’t blushing!

And lo and behold, the next time the two of them were in public at court, there were the two of them, tall and correct and with Stannis stone faced. One would think nothing at all changed for
Stannis. And yet, he stared at her, he stood a little too close, and Selyse would look back at him just as intently and occasionally she would smile at something Stannis said and Stannis looked... amazed. It simply tickled Robert! Why, he could barely believe it when he first noticed an instance of Stannis being prickly and snappish and Selyse managing to soothe him into ceasing his teeth grinding in court with a few softly spoken words and a touch to his elbow.

Robert never thought overly much about what Stannis was like around women. He’d invited him, once, to go with him to a brothel, a brotherly thing to share when Stannis had his sixteenth nameday. Well. He’d lied about where they were going and then had to drag him along like a mule. Ned shook his head the one time he tried the same invitation in the past, in the Vale, and solemnly stood in the brothel parlor like a guard, politely discouraging any advances. It wasn’t fun, but he was able to accept that apparently Ned wanted to remain a virgin, as baffling as that was. At least they were able to go out drinking, later. But, Stannis. Once the scantily dressed women on offer lined up for inspection, Stannis’ face puckered as if he’d shoved an entire lemon into his mouth and galloped right out of the place like a spooked horse. Robert tried to stop him, but he was a fast bugger when he was affronted. Baffling! Why, the place he took them to was a better quality than Robert’s usual, with whores that had all their teeth, even!

Perhaps he’s like Ned and needs the trappings of proper courting, Robert then thought, but it was not so. Ned was shy, but he managed to dance during feasts. One could tell when a woman turned Ned’s head; the tragically lovely Ashara Dayne was only the most celebrated beauty who Ned sighed after. Robert had chuckled and poked at Ned for his subtle, easily overlooked contemplations of fair Vale maidens in their youth. At the next available feast when Robert visited from the Vale, Robert had especially invited over some comely Vale lasses for Stannis, some who were rumored to be game for sport; knights’ daughters who wouldn’t be too fussed over a single tumble in the night, though you had to flatter and flirt and dance with them first. Stannis wouldn’t ask them to dance, he certainly wouldn’t talk to them, and when one of the girls boldly put her hand on his while leaning forward to let him look at her teats, Stannis almost jumped backward as if he were burnt! He glared at everybody as if they were coming at him with knives drawn and started grinding his teeth. In public. At a feast. Robert despaired over his ridiculous brother and led the nicely teated knight’s daughter off for dancing and fucked her under a table later when everybody was deeply in their cups, hidden by the table cloth. He gave up after that; if Stannis wanted to be such a bore, it was no skin off his nose. He had Ned and all his other friends anyway!

When Robert noticed Stannis glancing at Selyse’s very nice arse once or twice, he was gladdened because it proved that his brother was not actually made out of stone. Yet when he mentioned it in private, for once able to share an opinion about women with Stannis, Stannis turned on him like a jealous dog over a bone. Robert gamely allowed Stannis to pummel him for a few seconds, warning off the White Cloaks with a look, but was surprised when Stannis would not let up, not like the usual when they had a little scuffle. He was serious. He wasn’t going to retreat; he had the idea that Robert would actually take something that he had just discovered that he wanted for himself and he would. Not. Tolerate. It!

Robert felt for the first time that Stannis was capable of murdering him in a blind rage. Over the love of a woman. Robert was thrilled! Stannis wasn’t a cold fish, really! He just had to be motivated! Robert luckily didn’t laugh while he maneuvered to get Stannis into a headlock. Robert may be a slow learner but even he got that to laugh at Stannis in the middle of the fight just gives him more motivation to beat your face in. They flailed around on the floor (very undignified for a King and a member of Small Council) until Robert had him pinned. Stannis was reduced to cursing at him and Robert was further thrilled by the fact that his brother knew profanity. Creative profanity, even! He was even a tinge insulted about being called a Motherfucker. The Florents were good for Stannis, indeed!
It took the better part of an hour before he could let go without Stannis immediately trying to throttle him. Finally Robert realized that he could only let go after promising that he wasn’t going to even look at Lady Selyse.

Honestly. She was small-teated and sharp tongued with a sharper mind. And though he’s smart enough to not say that she’s plain out loud (her brothers were menaces) she was simply that. Plain. He knew when he was outmatched and she was distinctly disinterested. She certainly didn’t treat him as anything but… well a little brother, Robert imagined. He had observed how she fussied over her own brothers and that she had adopted the same manners towards him. Robert had never been treated in such a manner before; almost motherly, but not quite due to their closeness in age. He supposed he liked it enough to not wish to change things at all! It wasn’t as if Cersei would take any time or consideration to remind him to eat his vegetables or to dilute his wine with fruit juices for his health! Besides the present danger his own jealous brother presented to him, he suspected if he did manage to compromise Lady Selyse’s honor, her male kin would assassinate him. And get away with it. Unless said lady got around to killing him herself. Lady Selyse has made certain dry observations about the size of the Red Keep’s chandeliers that Robert cannot say for certain are jests.

And Renly! Robert can see him finding fast friendships with Omer and Merrell as strong as his friendship with Ned. They jested and ran about with their young boys’ games and he was happy, Robert can tell. When he sits to speak with him about their parents, Renly is easier to speak to than Stannis. The mysterious differences between himself and Stannis, what Selyse called the stronger Estermont in Stannis, does not seem to be in Renly. Renly didn’t stand to the side like a judgemental wet cat in a crowd while at court. Renly smiled and bowed and the Florents trained him with better courtesies suited for court. Jon liked how Renly was turning out, so why should Robert worry? Even Stannis approved, so surely it was well!

There was nobody who could outdo him in battle, Robert reckoned, in war. Good old Jon was wise, experienced, and honorable; the perfect Hand. But to be at his back, to make sure that Lord Tywin didn’t overstep and flank him, Robert reckoned he could do worse than trust the trickiest folk he had ever met. They treated the tiresome rigmarole of court like a game and were quick to warn him of other lords trying to con him. Well, his pride was stung, but Alekyne was so frank and kind, Robert couldn’t stay mad, of course. Let the other lords try to con him, when he had the Florents on his side, hah!

Robert finally promised that he would write that letter to Ned. And furthermore, after he finished, because he felt he ought to with all his generous heart, he added a convoy of gifts for Winterfell. Crates full of empty tin jars and lids with the book on how to go about preserving. Bolts of good milled wool and cotton cloth. A seed drill and a harvester with instructions and plans for the building of more. When Alekyne got around to making a working thresher, he’ll have one built and shipped up too. He added books; story books for the children, a text on double entry bookkeeping, the manual explaining the semaphore warning towers system, a book on how to set up biogas digesters with instructions for a gas grill, a waterwheel powered steel mill, and charcoal production with iron retorts. For speed, they go by ship, along with one of the scholars of Brightwater Keep, to explain the new technologies to Ned and his Maester, heading to White Harbor.

He then, after consulting with the Small Council, gave the order to improve the condition of the King’s Road. He wants to be able to visit Ned in the future, perhaps, and he doesn’t trust long voyages by ship. He thinks to himself that in this way Stannis is braver than he, for he still distrusts the sea after the death of his parents. Stannis defies the sea and in fact has taken his position of Master of Ships as if to say he is now Master of the Sea also. By ordering this, he unleashed the years of note taking and research conducted by the Florents and Maester Bryan for the engineering of roads. They took their experience from improving the roads within Florent holdings and sized it
up for kingdom scale. The Small Council had to add a Master of Engineering, who was in charge of the teams of surveyors, engineers, workers, and guards for the workers.

This latest conversation would be the most fraught that Selyse had ever attempted.

“Robert, tell me about Lyanna Stark.”

He isn’t as surprised as she expected. Perhaps he’s canny enough to notice that he’s been asked about the important people in his life, the ones he loves. In the end, who else is left on that list, but Lyanna Stark?

So he describes her, how he was first interested by Ned’s description of her. He built up this romantic idea of the Northern Woman, a woman who was tough enough to outlast winters, who could fight with shield and sword, who was no nonsense and strong enough to keep up with him. He liked Southron women just fine, but he certainly had no patience with courtly manners and poets and songs and the like. Rather like Stannis, actually. Hah, yet another thing they had in common besides beastly tempers! He decides that any sister of good old Ned would be good enough for him and writes with a betrothal offer to her father.

He has an opportunity to meet her formally at one of Ned’s nameday feasts held in the Eyrie and he is enchanted. She was beautiful, so very beautiful and she is exactly as Ned described; she rode like she was born to ride and looked him in the eye instead of acting demure. He invites her hunting and to his joy she accepts readily. They match pace easily and every jump he takes she takes also; she is fearless. They spend a blissful week hunting and hawking. When she must leave to go back to Winterfell, he is sure that he has never felt more yearning. He starts to write her letters, having no talent at it before, he actually starts to worry about his rough ways and the stumbling of his words, but Ned assures him that he is doing well.

And finally, he winds up with his dances with her in Harrenhal. He looks at Selyse and gives her a wan smile; surely with her steel trap of a mind, she remembers too. It was the last time he would ever see Lyanna. Before Rhaegar stole her. He takes deep breaths; he knows that Selyse has no patience should he begin ranting.

“Robert,” Selyse finally, slowly says. “It has been years. And yet, I sense that you have not finished mourning her.”

“No,” Robert huffs. “I have not. She is the only woman I will ever love.”

“Of course. But you have also not had a chance to bid her a final farewell.”

“Why should I?”

Selyse pauses.

“I think that perhaps because your parents were taken from you so early, so suddenly, and then the same thing happening with your betrothed, that you do not know how to let go.”

Robert snorts.

“I know she’s dead! I go my days not thinking about it, and then sometimes I’m riding my horse and I remember riding in the woods with her and it hurts me all over again! I’ll never forget!”

“I’m not saying you should forget. But this pain, this hurt, this does you no good, Robert. You need to let go. You said so yourself once. You didn’t understand how Stannis can brood and remember to stoke his anger the way he does. And yet, you cling to your sadness. You do the same
thing, with different emotions. If you took the time to say goodbye, you could begin to heal. Do not forget her. But let your sadness go.”

Robert’s fists clenched and his jaw jutted, just like Stannis’ did before a teeth grinding. But finally, he nodded.

“Now, then. Shall we try? Will you say your final farewell to Lyanna? Do it, so that you have no unspoken words left for her ears?”

“Very well,” Robert growled.

“Close your eyes.”

Robert did.

“When was the last time you saw her?”

“Harrenhal.”

“Then let it not be Harrenhal. Think back. Back to the Eyrie. The woods. Is she on horseback?”

“Yes. Yes, she has to be.”

“She has her traveling cloak on? Her saddlebags packed?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember everything of her?”

“Yes.”

“Now. You cannot go with her on this journey. Tell her what you never had a chance to before. Tell her how much you love her. Give her all your love for her journey. Can you do that?”

Selyse is not sure if it would work. But a great dam has burst and Robert starts to talk, a rapid disjointed pleading to not go. He praises Lyanna, he mentions all the hunting and hawking, the letters-

He bursts into tears and makes big ugly sobs in the middle of this, his chest heaving and his hands scrubbing at his eyes like a child.

He laments having never kissed her, how he treasured the times he was allowed to hold her hand while dancing, how he was so happy to sit beside her during the feasting at the Eyrie. He confesses how he was going to try to grow Winter Roses for her in a garden in Storm’s End no matter that Cressen said they wouldn’t grow, how he would be glad to name a son Eddard after her favorite brother, and Brandon and Benjen besides, and that he will never forget her, no, he will miss her all his days.

He trailed off, sniffling.

“Robert?”

“What.”

“Will you say farewell?”
Robert makes a shaky breath and waves one hand, eyes still closed.

“What do you see?”

“She’s going. She’s going. She’s kicked her horse to a gallop and she looks—She looks beautiful and happy and—”

He sobs anew.

“Farewell,” he gasps. “Farewell my love!”

Selyse reaches out and tentatively pats Robert’s hand. He grips her hand with both of his and squeezes once, hard enough to make her wince, before he opens his eyes.

“Well,” he clears his throat loudly, pulling his handkerchief from his sleeve and wiping at his eyes and nose. “Well.”

Selyse glances at Megga and Ser Barristan. She’s not unaffected herself; she hadn’t been expecting Robert to react like that, but his sorrow was as explosive as his anger. She has to wipe her eyes. Megga has crumpled her own handkerchief to her face, making ugly snorting noises. Ser Barristan has a very severe frown of discomfort and sympathy from witnessing the King’s crying.

They sit for a time and don’t say a word.

“I think I feel better,” Robert finally says.

“Do you?”

Robert makes a bobbling motion of his head.

“I just wonder what I should do when I feel sad again.”

Instead of drinking, of course.

“You could visit this godswood. I think she would have liked the Red Keep’s godswood.”

“... Yes, she would. It’s not a proper godswood though. Hasn’t got a weirwood. Ned said that was the most important part and it’s missing. He was unhappy about how the Eyrie’s godswood isn’t right too.”

“... Perhaps you could plant a seedling from the weirwood in Storm’s End? Dedicate it to her?”

Robert nods decisively this time.

“Good idea. Good idea. I’ll make the order.”

He sighs and blows his nose.

“I don’t think I want to talk about anybody else,” Robert says.

“One more thing, though. How are you getting on with Cersei?”

Robert laughs and makes a comical exaggerated leer.

“You said I should pay attention to her because she craves attention like a mummer craves applause. Well, I can stand her best while bedding her, if you excuse my crudeness! And that is
going very well! Hah!”

Selyse tilted her head with approval. It was a difficult undertaking, attempting to get the better of Cersei; woman was obsessed with her brother and unhinged from the start. From the time she murdered Melara Hetherspoon. Fortunately (or unfortunately) Robert Baratheon loved a challenge. He was a hunter at heart. And once he was convinced (by Selyse’s adroit shitstirring) that Cersei was interesting quarry, the equivalent of big game in a skirt, it was on like Donkey Kong. She wasn’t nice. In fact, she’s a lousy, vile, bitch. But when Selyse told Robert to consider what it meant to be a daughter of Lord Tywin Lannister, dread homicidal maniac, ender of Houses, drinker of wine out of cups made from the skulls of his enemies, Robert got the implication Selyse aimed for. With a father like Lord Tywin, how could his wife be anything except a whirlwind of pride and ill temper? He could not hope that she would turn out better. She could only be managed and endured. Robert now took Cersei’s temper tantrums and insults as a regular occurrence like bad weather. All it took was a change in perspective; was he or wasn’t he a Stormlands man? Wasn’t he of a people who had heightened emotions and rampant stubbornness and lived their days con fuoco? Cersei may be more sharp-tongued than a usual Stormlands woman, but she couldn’t howl and storm any harder than one! Hah!

“She’s at a fine gale and drizzle this day!” he’d cheerfully joke at Stannis during a dinner, waggling his eyebrows.

He’d guffaw at Stannis’ inevitable uncomfortable grimace.

How prudish his brother was, when everybody knew he and Selyse were like a pair of alley cats in heat! Hah!

He would pester Cersei like an overly enthusiastic golden retriever, give her over the top compliments to placate her vanity, tickle her until she screeched, all on top of having a robust sex life. He had ideas, most nobility did, of what it meant to have a wife. And what it meant to have a mistress. Stannis, of all people, was the one to broach the groundbreaking idea that he was perfectly satisfied with Selyse as a wife whom he treated like how he imagined other men treated a mistress. What he meant was being more demonstrative with affection and enjoying each other’s company. What Robert took that to mean was that he ought to be kinkier with Cersei.

Given Robert’s propensity for overshare, Stannis was glad that Selyse was willing to sit through Robert’s talking on the subject. He was unaffected about the idea of his brother discussing his sex life with Selyse; he saw the benefits of a royal couple not at each others’ throats in public. He also trusted in Selyse. She simply was unimpressed by his brother. She simply was satisfied with their marriage. He was good enough for her.


“Have you given any thought to why she may be unhappy with you, like I asked weeks ago?”

Robert cleared his throat.

“I think I… when we married. During the bedding. I. Uh. I was in my cups and now I know I was hating it all, hating that I was marrying her instead of-”

Robert stopped. He huffed.

“I called her Lyanna.”
“Oh, Robert.”

“I know,” Robert looked down. “I made her hate me. Stupid Idiot Lump, like she calls me.”

“Has there been more, Robert?”

“I, uh. I haven’t been kind. Or gentle with her. When I past bedded her while drunk. She told me so and I don’t want to admit it, so she smashed her drinking horn in my face.”

Robert opened his mouth and pointed at a chipped tooth.

“That. I let her hit me without trying to duck because I knew I was in the wrong and then I just went off whoring. Never apologized or anything.”

“You should. And not right before you bed her, either. Apologize for your drinking and shaming her in front of the court. She did not marry you expecting such treatment and she is a daughter of a Great House. You owe her that. You haven’t been getting too drunk, I’ve noticed.”

Robert nodded.

“I wouldn’t go into battle drunk. And this marriage to that woman is like a battle. So I need to keep a clearer head. I’ll be better at the business of being her husband. Got to keep old Tywin off my back. She didn’t want to marry me, either. She was for Rhaegar, you know?”

“It was no secret, Lord Tywin’s ambitions.”

“Well. Guess that fucker Rhaeger fucked me over one other way by making me kill him so I’d have to marry the woman he might’ve married. Hah!”

“You said it.”

“Good talk. Well. I’ll be going now.”

“Have a good day, Your Grace.”

Robert nodded, stood up and strode off with Ser Barristan.

“My lady?”

“Yes, Megga?”

“That was so sad!”

Selyse stares in the direction that the King and Ser Barristan went, her pale eyes calm. And thinking.

“It is. That was very sad. Let’s get back to the Foxhole, shall we?”
That evening, when they retire to their chamber, (they don’t keep separate chambers, though there is room enough in the Foxhole. Stannis wants to stay close to his wife and he is more than willing to take an unconventional stance on a matter that absolutely nobody else had any business knowing about openly) Stannis only manages to shrug his jacket off before Selyse is on him, kissing him deeply, her hands grasping him tightly.

“I reckon I love you,” she says, pulling back.

“You reckon?” Stannis raises an eyebrow.

“Well. It’s an emotion. I’m not that good with them, you’ve noticed.”

“Well, then,” Stannis kisses her, his tone gaining a droll shade. “I reckon. That I love you too.”

Selyse grins in the bright happy way of hers and they tumble backwards onto the bed.

“Want what you missed from lunch?” she murmurs.

“Yes.”

They undress all the way and he lies on his back, with her rubbing and rocking on top of him as they kiss. She works her way down as Stannis puts his hands through the waiting loops of cord that are secured to the posts of the headboard, hidden under the pillow. She licks long wet stripes up and down his cock and he turns his head to the side, trying to bury his moans. He can’t believe he’d actually argued against it the first time she suggested. It was entirely shocking; he’d heard that it was something whores did and she was his lady wife! But Selyse was a vixen in all the right ways and he really couldn’t maintain his perfunctory resistance (he was curious!) with the way she licked her lips and kissed and nipped her way downwards, catching him unprepared that first time, still half-thinking that it was one of her deadpan jests. She slides the cockhead in and starts slavering and slurping. It’s obscene. He shouldn’t like to watch but he does from the corner of his eye. He fights against the impulse as usual but he really can’t hold against her determined sucking.

“Selyse- Yes- Fuck-!”

He wants to be quiet. It’s ridiculous, but ever since they’ve started in his office, he finds that it’s somehow better, more freeing, more honest (and he does prefer honesty) to let her know how pleased he is when she pleases him. So he says the first things on his mind, before he has time to be embarrassed and as she always encourages him by being even more enthusiastic when he gives voice to his pleasure, he’s become undone and unencumbered by concerns of being noisy.

His cock gives a warning twitch and she lifts off, denying him. He yells from the frustration of it, hips pumping in the air, before he falls back onto the mattress. He swallows, licking his lips, silent again as she puts her hand on him. After all that rapid bobbing and sucking from before, to have her finally touch him again is its own pleasure. She keeps her hand almost still, her thumb leisurely circling his cockhead, spreading the leaking precome into his skin. He hisses with appreciation when she leans forward and slowly laps at his nipples. She doesn’t speed up and it’s not enough, not- He can’t stop his thighs from shaking, his hips jerking in an attempt for more and she only loosens her grip until she’s barely holding him.

He breathes deep and forces his hips still.
The moment he does, she begins jerking him off, building up speed just as he likes it-

“I’m going- I’m going to come-”

She lets go again.

Stannis snarls at her, straining at the ropes holding him down, his body arching with frustration.

She waits, until he is still again. She licks and sucks him slowly this time, and when he can’t help crying out again, she lets go.

They have more time, unlike for lunch. She can kiss wherever she likes, she can draw out sensation with scratches of her nails, the petting and massaging of her palms, with licks and nibbles of her teeth at his throat, his nipples, his hips, she can ignore his hardness or she can grip it and suck and bob, making him cry out, making him yell and howl. Once, he thought he wouldn’t be like other men, he’d keep his mouth shut during marital duties, he wouldn’t be some grunting animal. He didn’t know the pleasure from the rare moments of touching himself would pale in comparison to Selyse’s play.

His body is shaking without his say so and he rides a crest of pleasure. He craves this part, this curious sensation of spending, only he hasn’t, really. He really had no idea his body was capable of such a thing. She waits out his quaking.

“You look so good like that,” she cooed. “My handsome lusty Stanny Blue Eyes.”

Stannis can’t help smiling at her.

She taps his arm and that is the signal that allows him to free his hands from underneath the pillow and pull her to him, flipping her over, kissing her. He strokes his fingers into her, he loves feeling how wet she is, and works her further open for him before sliding in. He can’t go slow, not after she works him up so much, and they crash into each other, gasping and groaning, her hands stinging scratches down his back. He yells out one last time when that bolt of pleasure strikes him after the denial and it’s stronger, the built up explosion that comes from holding off and it’s like it took the top of his head off and he’s floating outside of his body, looking down on himself.

He withdraws and slips down so that he can lick and stroke at her with his fingers until she comes too, her strong thighs flexing around him.

They rest, lying where they have fallen, with Stannis’ head resting on one of her thighs. He sleepily regards her quim from his angle and thinks that there just might be something to the tales of men going to war over exceptionally beautiful women. As his head clears, he concludes they are still idiots. But he understands the impulse. He shakes himself and moves so that he is properly lying next to Selyse.

“What did you speak of during lunch?” he asks.

“Robert’s memories of Lyanna Stark.”

“Ah.”

Stannis’ lip curled with undiluted disdain.

“Well, now,” Selyse pets his arm.

“I still think he’s been an idiot,” Stannis declares. “He takes duty and vows too lightly and I don’t
think he actually loved her so much at all, with the way he’s fornicated his way through the Vale and the Stormlands.”

“People like Robert can manage to feel,” Selyse encircles the air with her hands. “While at the same time thinking that sex is outside—” she makes another, separate circle in the air. “Of emotion. It is merely a physical sensation and not the same as love.”

“That’s wrong,” Stannis replies. “What’s the use of falling in love if people will not be constant? I would never knowingly, willingly, go against my vows to you. And I love you, at that. Duty is not easy, most of the time, but it is so easy, to stay true to you.”

Selyse tilts her head as she looks at Stannis, a smile quirking at her lips.

“I’m so lucky to be with somebody like you,” she finally says.

Stannis ducks his head down against a pillow, momentarily unable to meet her gaze, overwhelmed by the welling up of feelings.

It’s true, though. For him, the idea that anybody else, some bed slave trained at the most prestigious whorehouse in Lys, for example, could make him feel as good as Selyse is an impossibility. Perhaps they could handle his cock and play such games, but he doesn’t want them—He wants Selyse. He trusts her. She never laughs at him, she doesn’t look at him as second-best. He is the best, in her eyes, and that’s something no common whore can possibly do. They could compliment him, he’s heard that is something one can demand of whores, that they lie to you (Why. Just. Why) but it’s so much better from Selyse. It’s real. Why would he ever go from the sublimity of being with Selyse to some stranger? Selyse can explain all she likes, but Stannis isn’t sorry that he simply doesn’t understand this aspect of Robert and other people.

Selyse kisses his cheek, before they moved to get under the covers. Stannis has become very accustomed to this; their legs entangled, her head propped on his shoulder. He has his hands at her buttocks. He was quite embarrassed about his lack of control over the matter, yet he could not help himself; it was just so pleasing to be free to hold her there, to squeeze every so often. She reciprocated of course. He didn’t mind her self-satisfied chuckles as she reached over with one hand and squeezed him back. Why should he? Sometimes, if they kept up with the touching, the spark would reignite and they would couple again. He liked that immensely.

“Are you very sure that Lord Greyjoy will rebel?”

“We have a saying in Brightwater Keep. Follow the money.”

Stannis was silent for a time.

“Why is it that Varys cannot give better intelligence?”

“The Ironmen are very insular. There could be any number of indigents that can be bought if they have debts or very fallen into drink or gambling, but if they are in so desperate straits, then you cannot expect that they are trusted by other Ironmen or that they can be placed to usefully pick up talk of plans. So the easiest way of infiltrating is out. The same distrust of outsiders makes the planting of agents similarly difficult. And then there is Varys’ usual agents being particularly vulnerable.”


“Yes. I expect the Iron Islands are not a place where the sight of children freely running and playing in the streets is common. They would still be too conspicuous.”
“Despite that, you do not trust Varys.”

“He’s got his own angle.”

“And what would that be?”

“Not entirely sure yet. We’ll see how the dice falls. If he’s truly a pragmatic idealist about good governance, he may stay. If he’s actually an opportunistic agent of Essosi pretenders—”

“Blackfyres, really?”

“Everybody wants to rule the world,” Selyse sings to him.

“Except you.”

“Can you imagine my face stamped on coins? Ghastly.”

Stannis nuzzles her nose in a fit of sentiment.

“A fine, distinctive profile.”

“Look at you, using flattery,” Selyse looks surprised and pleased.

He is not graceful with his words, they both know it. But every so often, he manages and she is gratifyingly receptive.

“So we wait on the Ironmen to prove your prediction.”

“Yes. The more time they give us, the more power we can bring to bear and when we do, we must not falter.”

“You insist on Balon Greyjoy’s death.”

“I say you don’t give chances for dumb fuckers to get back up and stab you in the back. A fleet of what, a hundred, against the rest of the Seven Kingdoms? That’s being so dumb it’s almost impressive. Can’t let the audacious moron live. Robert is actually prone towards mercy. Doesn’t want to emulate Lord Lannister. It’s admirable of him, actually. But not with backstabbing assholes like Balon Greyjoy. We’ll sort things out after the fight, see to the surviving Greyjoys.”

Stannis raises an eyebrow; these bouts of profanity from his wife are disconcerting, but he has heard worse from her brothers and male cousins in the yard. He assumes Lord Florent has been lax on the matter and that of course his lady wife would pick up vulgarity as an amusement. So long as she maintains decorum in public (and she strenuously does) he will not move to correct her.

“You don’t think any of them are fit to rule.”

“Not if they want to go back to piracy. If there’s none fit, have Lord Harlaw rule. He’s reasonable, of good repute and even literate.”

Stannis nodded, before settling fully back into his pillow.

“Shall you inform Robert of this decision of state, or shall I?”

“I think we need to have Lord Arryn have first round with him before I enter the arena.”

“Very well. Sleep well.”
“Sleep well.”

During the subsequent moons, Stannis would hear during dinners in the Foxhole that the Florent goal to form a wool and cotton monopoly was now a reality, due to the implementation of the spinning frame and flying shuttle. Ambitious dyers were leasing land close to the mills to build and set up dyeworks and paying fees to access the barrels of urine from King’s Landing for use as mordants. Already, gingham and striped fabrics were coming out of the Florent mills. Lord Florent had the cash to begin expanding his mills and the speed at which his mills were processing cotton and wool were such that subsidiary businesses could be spun off from the raw cotton; the papermakers of Old Town were free to experiment on pulp mixes of cotton, producing finer sheets of paper at greater amounts.

Lord Florent spoke with Stannis and Renly, suggesting that Storm’s End would benefit from its own wool mills, since sheep were raised in abundance by the Stormlanders. Renly, though just eleven years old, listened seriously, wanting to be responsible as a Lord, impressed by Lord Florent and Alekyne. He depended on Stannis’ advice on the matter, though it made perfect sense to him. The Foxhole needed money to pay for the rounds of experiments and research. The Florents got a lot of money from their mills. So he ought to have some mills of his own. He also ought to have better quality roads so that the wool trade could prosper on his behalf. His smallfolk farmers ought to have better yields by being able to borrow farming equipment owned by Storm’s End itself that Alekyne developed, or for some of his vassals to buy and own outright. With less need for farmhands, extra smallfolk could be hired on at the mills. He spoke of it to Stannis, after listening in on the discussions that Imry and Alekyne had in the Foxhole. When Stannis nodded in approval, it made Renly very proud indeed, because it was so difficult to have Stannis approve of anything.

He still occasionally had nightmares of the food running all the way out during the Siege, of Ser Davos failing to sail in, and of Stannis resorting to ordering everybody to eat of manflesh, like those cannibals you heard of on Skagos. He once thought to himself that he hated Stannis for being so pigheaded stubborn, after all, they were noble, weren’t they, they’d be ransomed if only Stannis would surrender. But after he met the Florents and he heard them spin the tale of Fantastic Mr. Fox, he resolved to never, not ever, surrender, not if he could help it. The Fox Family would not be rooted out of their home, they were besieged and they dug in, they endured, and yes, it was by Mr. Fox’s cunning that they survived, but Renly did not forget that Mr. and Mrs. Fox would have killed the Little Foxes themselves out of mercy as last resort than to let their poor cubs be slaughtered by the Farmers. Renly had been shocked by the idea, but of course, wild animals did not hold to fearing kinslaying, did they? So in the end, Stannis was just as good as the Fox Family and really, Renly was lucky that he was as stubborn as that. It was just a pity that they couldn’t have somehow dug some tunnels out from under Storm’s End and brought mischief to the Tyrells back then, as the Foxes would have done.

Only now did Renly comprehend how lenient Robert was and why Stannis hated the Tyrells so; even the Florents agreed that Lord Mace ought to have paid somehow, one of his many sons sent to the Wall, at the least! Renly will show him, he’d show every other Lord Paramount that he was worthy. He was of blood with the Storm Kings of old and he’ll not have anybody underestimating him for being a third son. Not some comfortable, fat, fool, who had not even the gumption to attack a castle outright. Renly got the idea that Stannis would not have minded so much dying from catapult fire; at least it was proper combat. Robert thought so too. Renly supposed it was the correct way of it. If you aimed to win by arms, then use those arms, don’t just sit about!

There was no question that Alekyne was a strong heir to Brightwater Keep. And yet, as shown by Imry and Erren’s own father’s death by riding accident or what happened to Robert’s friend Ned
Stark, who could tell what might happen in the future. Imry and Erren were being taught Brightwater Keep’s business just in case. Renly thinks that in the end it was a lucky thing that his parents managed to have him at all before dying. Houses rise and fall by their children. He wrinkles his nose, considering that he must wed and father children. Best not think about it yet. He’s still young. He’ll have time.

He knew now from hearing Stannis and Selyse’s conversations that she was just as well an administrator and that Melessa Tarly ran Horn Hill and Horn Hill’s mills while Lord Tarly spent his days training his men-at-arms and knights or patrolling his land’s borders. The Florents believed that every noble ought to have the education to rise to the duty of overseeing a holding, just in case. The same would happen with Omer and Merrell, though the older Florents thought they were still young, yet. Renly didn’t have that luxury; he would have to take the reins at sixteen! And not just Storm’s End, he was Lord Paramount; other lords would come to him to make ruling on their disputes with each other and such things! He worried about being ready, though he was a little reassured that he would always have the good advice of the Florents and Stannis. Even Lord Arryn, though Renly was a little tongue-tied around the very important Lord Hand. He knows by now that he would have no good advice from Robert! He’s seen how Lord Arryn and Stannis and even Selyse have to prod him around like a stubborn ox. Stannis agreed to write to Great-Uncle Harbert to work with the staff the Florents would send over to oversee the construction of new mills and improving the roads on Storm’s End land and the training up of Storm’s End smallfolk for the work.

Renly even sat down with Stannis to read Great-Uncle Harbert’s raven messages about the state of Storm’s End’s treasury and other concerns. It shocked him to find out that the Florents had over four times the entire income of Storm’s End and they were a vassal House. Is the entire Stormlands so… so poor? Stannis mentioned that wealth wasn’t the sole worth of any House, which may be true, but Renly knew that money paid for all sorts of things. The Stormlands is rightly proud of the might of their knights, but how much better they could be, with better, more expensive breeds of horse, better steel for their armor and weapons, better everything? If only they could afford it!

Renly asked if the Florents were as rich as the Tyrells. Stannis frowned and shrugged. So Renly went to ask Alekyne. And Alekyne went to ask his Uncle Axell who worked under the Master of Coin. Alekyne told Renly to swear never to tell anybody, not even Stannis this, because the doings of the Royal Treasury were realm secrets, but of course, Florents loved to find out secrets. Renly clasped his hands over his mouth and nodded. Alekyne leaned down and whispered to him that the Florents would catch up to the Tyrells in less than ten years.

Ten years seems like such a long time to him; why that was almost his entire life so far! But Alekyne laughed and said that the Tyrells had been richer than the Florents since being rewarded High Garden by King Aegon I. And that was over two hundred years ago! And they only started to really get more money because of Selyse’s ideas from when she was fourteen. Renly frowned, intimidated by the thought that he might never get any wonderful ideas like Selyse or Rhea or Melessa or Alekyne or Imry. Even Erren was going to discover something; it was only a matter of time with his own workshop on Dragonstone! Renly was starting to regret that he never minded Maester Cressen’s lessons as he should, if he was going to be left behind like that! Or, Renly bit his lip, perhaps Baratheons weren’t meant to keep up with people like Florents, who were so crafty and creative, who asked impossible questions and yet managed to find so-called impossible answers? Was he just too… slow? It was a momentarily suffocating feeling.

Alekyne patted his shoulder reassuringly and said that perhaps he might or might not. But he was smart enough to know to put any good ideas to use instead of being a stubborn doubter like Lord Hoster Tully, wasn’t he? Renly straightened and nodded his head firmly. Then, Alekyne continued, as long as he tried his best to make things better and didn’t abuse his smallfolk, didn’t force his vassals to go against their honor while at the same time not allowing them to run roughshod over
him, and wasn’t a violent madman asshole, like King Aerys or even a plain asshole like Lord Tarly, he was sure to be a good Lord Paramount. Renly laughed and agreed that he wasn’t going to be the asshole.

His happy, carefree days of playing ended when just as Selyse predicted, the Iron Islands declared war. Lord Balon Greyjoy turned away the royal envoy sent by Lord Arryn. They raided the coast of the Riverlands with impunity because Lord Hoster Tully did not have the ability to order his coastal vassals to put up semaphore towers the way Lord Tywin Lannister could. Upon the first signals from Banefort of a raid, Lord Tywin was ready. Westerlands knights were already told in advance that should they see any signal towers messaging with signs of being attacked, they could mass and take any Ironmen pirates they wished with impunity. Freeriders were patrolling already up and down the coast and the Ironmen raiding parties who dared the Westerlands coast found themselves expected, ambushed, and their ships burned while beached. It was imperative that no news reach Pyke of these failed raids.
Iron Islands: Handling the Greyjoy Rebellion

Ravens and semaphore messages sped onward to King’s Landing. Robert immediately ordered banners to be raised and began marching with a contingent of five hundred Gold Cloaks, picking up Crownlands banners as he went on the Gold Road, planning to rendezvous at Lannisport. Stannis set sail immediately, taking the Royal Fleet with him. Renly was sorely afraid, as both his brothers were gone and not only that, but Alekyne, Ser Colin Florent, and even Erren were going to battle. Nobody had heard from Imry for moons and he was probably making way to muster at Old Town or Lannisport if he was in a place that had criers who could repeat and spread raven messages of emergency. Kind Ser Davos was gone as well!

He had no choice but to stay in the Foxhole, sitting with Selyse and the ladies and trying to distract himself with studies or reading. She was obviously pregnant now and looked fit to burst. It was almost as bad as the siege, though he was definitely not starving. What if his brothers died? What if Selyse died giving birth? Everything was uncertain and awful. Omer and Merrell were most comforting companions during this time; they would go all together to hide underneath a bed in one of the bed chambers, crammed in tightly like peas in a pod, holding hands. For they worried over their father and all their older kin, of course. Maester Willis was a little exasperated about having to seek them out instead of being able to expect them showing up in a timely fashion in the classroom, but he was a good, sympathetic man, and did not scold them for making him investigate any number of beds every morning after breakfasts by poking about underneath with a broom.

In the meantime, Lord Tywin sprang another trap on the Iron Fleet. Though the Lannister fleet was anchored at Lannisport, the crews were ordered to remain berthed onboard and to maintain watch; captains were to arrange shifts where no more than one quarter of the crew were ashore at any time, starting from Lord Tywin’s return from the Master of Ships’ wedding. There was grumbling of course, but nobody would gainsay Lord Lannister. When Victarion Greyjoy tossed the first torch onto Lord Tywin’s flagship, it was doused quickly while horns sounded. Bells began ringing from Lannisport. Victarion’s ship was quickly targeted by archers and scorpions. The formerly quiescent ships of the Lannister fleet raised anchor and began a counterattack. The raiders who were sent to attack Lannisport directly were engaged by the city guard. Luckier, cannier captains of the Iron Fleet were able to slip out of Lannisport. The same could not be said of Victarion, who took a scorpion bolt to the chest.

The attack on Seaguard went just as badly. Lord Mallister successfully repelled the Ironmen reavers and sent off ravens, and coastal Northern Houses were already mustering, alerted by their own system of semaphore towers. Lord Stark got early enough warning that by the time a raven arrived from King’s Landing, he and his banners were well ready to set out.

Stannis made unprecedented time, his fleet doubling the Dornish peninsula and joining up with the Redwyne fleet and Old Town warships weeks ahead of them expecting him. He saw that it was reasonable and necessary to have a war meeting to discuss the plan of attack with the new captains. While docked at Old Town, he is glad to see Imry along with Florent men-at-arms. Erren quickly goes to greet his brother, who has browned from being out in the sun traveling and has also grown a moustache and beard. Stannis acknowledges Imry’s bow with a nod but cannot speak with him at the moment; Lord Redwyne is at his side, introducing various captains and other lordlings.

He has seen the raised eyebrows and heard the impressed whistles of the other captains when they properly see the ships of the Royal Fleet at anchor; gleaming brass at the hulls, with many masts flying more sail. They needed fewer rowers and in the locations of the empty oar holes, a scorpion has been emplaced, near doubling effective power at range of each ship. He and the Royal Fleet
captains field questions about their top speeds and how well they tack to the wind; all their answers cause more impressed looks and murmurs.

It becomes clear the Royal Fleet will be the tip of the spear; their improved speed and maneuverability will allow them to sight Ironmen ships first and engage. The older ships forming the Reach’s armada will come from behind and prevent them from retreating. It is proven as they make their way to Lannisport, with the older ships following the coast and with the Royal Fleet swinging out into the open sea, forming a pincer capable of catching any ironmen raider ships they find.

By the time the Lannister fleet meets them near the Feastfires peninsula with Lord Tywin on his flagship, Stannis is confident that his captains know what’s what. They can use signaling flags to good effect, they are familiar with how fast they can go in relation so each other, and they can pin a smaller raider ship between their broadsides before letting fly with volleys of scorpion bolts and arrows. Otherwise, to the jeering, roaring cheers of the crews, they can merely run the raiders asunder with ramming force, aided by the power of the wind.

The Iron Fleet makes its last stand at Fair Isle and Stannis could ask for no better performance of his fleet. They raced ahead and doubled Fair Isle from the north and trapped them while the Redwyne and Lannister fleets came to bear from the south. He knew that the smartest thing to do would be to run from such an unequal fight but Ironmen were foolhardy in their bravery and only the oldest of captains, who did not reach their age by mistaking idiocy for valor, were able to save their ships and crew by throwing up flags of surrender. The rest were torn apart by bolt and arrow or crushed by the larger Royal Fleet ships. This included Euron Greyjoy, who had managed to escape from Lannisport’s failed attack but whose luck ran out when multiple captains of the Royal Fleet sighted the Silence’s sails and gave chase, knowing that it was a Greyjoy flagship. They ran the Silence asunder.

The bulk of the fleet holds at Fair Isle while Stannis and some Royal Fleet ships return to Lannisport, escorting the surrendered Ironmen ships. There, they resupply the projectiles and receive King Robert and Lord Eddard Stark and all the rest of the fighting foot and knights mustered. The Ironmen captured are held prisoner within Casterly Rock, including Aeron Greyjoy.

From there the Royal Fleet splits off to their separate target objectives. Stannis is for Great Wyk. Ser Barristan to Old Wyk. Robert and Lord Stark are for Pyke directly. The Lannister and Redwyne fleet may pick and choose which targets they like, except for Harlaw island. Lord Rodrik Harlaw’s more civilized, reasonable reputation is well known; he was sent a raven for an offer of parley from Lannisport and he replied that he is willing and waiting.

When they make landing at Pebbleton, the Royal Marines do Stannis proud; they form up quickly into shield walls, alert to potential attacks. The Florent forces do the same and Stannis thinks to himself; of course the Florents would have tested out the training and maneuvers they recommended that Robert use for the formation of the Royal Marines on their own men-at-arms. He sees Ser Colin Florent on his horse, joined by Imry and Erren on their own mounts, and they ride out ahead with the rest of the knights to challenge any Ironmen calvary (such as they manage to scrounge up) and serve as advance scouts. Alekyne remains with him to give orders to the Florent foot.

Stannis orders the horns sounded. He much prefers not having to slaughter smallfolk, especially since many must be thralls. They march and it is clear that Lord Balon was a fool who must have incited all fighting age men on his bid for rebellion, because scouts report that ever since the Fury dropped anchor and the troops were ferried to make landing, all that has happened are smallfolk barricading themselves inside their hovels or running to the hills. Stannis orders the horns to sound
They encounter a pathetic number of three dozen or so of House Merlyn bannermen arrayed at Pebbleton Tower’s gate. He sees wooden peg legs and some have hooks instead of hands; old raiders who are no longer able-bodied seamen. Stannis has the Marine shield wall stop well out of the archer range of the Tower itself and they face off. Stannis shouts through the bullhorn.

There can be no question about who leads the forces arrayed against Lord Merlyn; Stannis is wearing a new set of steel plate armor from the Royal Steelworks. His helm is antlered like Robert’s, but whereas Robert’s newest helm now incorporated a crown along with a 12 point rack, the antlers on his were a more modest and practical 8 point rack. That was in addition to the unmissable yellow tabard with rearing black stag.

“Lord Merlyn! You have the choice to surrender or be overrun! Here you face the Royal Marines under the command of I, Stannis Baratheon, Lord of Dragonstone and Master of Ships! Choose wisely!”

“Two to one says we won’t get a parley,” Alekyne mutters to himself.

“Look at them,” Stannis growls, incredulous. “Look at my Marines!”

“Pirates,” Alekyne says in a singsong voice, as if Stannis should gain some meaning from it.

He’s proven right when instead of any proper response from Pebbleton Tower, the Ironmen’s own horns sounded. The Merlyn bannermen begin howling and charge at them, axes and hooks raised.

Alekyne was ready with the strangest (is that metal? Steel? With wheels?) bow Stannis has ever seen and shouts out to Florent archers to loose while he smoothly shoots down the one Ironman leading the charge. They only have time for one volley before the remaining few pirates crash into the Royal Marine shield wall. They get stabbed down by the halberds quickly. Cleanly. The shield wall reforms and backs up to their prior starting position.

Stannis orders the horns sounded again, a sharp double blast.

“Knock knock, motherfucker,” Alekyne snickers to himself.

Lord Merlyn himself looks over the parapet of one of the turrets like a very worried gopher. Stannis was about to shout through the bullhorn at him, but he pops out of sight again.

Within a reasonable amount of time before Stannis is pissed off enough to order the battering ram into position, the gates of Pebbleton Tower open.

Lord Merlyn walks out by himself, bearing a flag of surrender, which was probably originally a bedsheet to begin with, hastily tied to a broom. He makes a pitiful, brave figure.

Stannis rides up to him.

“Lord Baratheon.”

“Lord Merlyn.”

“... Pebbleton Tower is yours.”

Stannis makes a forward gesture with one hand to his Royal Marines and a detachment from the shield wall marches forward through the gates to take possession.
“If ravens were sent to the other keeps of Great Wyk, will they surrender?”

Lord Merlyn makes a tired gust of breath.

“We are Ironborn, my lord.”

“You didn’t want to do it, but the Lord Reaper commanded, correct?” Alekyne piped up, having ridden up behind Stannis.

“Aye,” Lord Merlyn says.

Stannis made an impatient glance at Alekyne, who had his notebook out and was writing.

“How many are staunch supporters of the Greyjoys on Great Wyk?” Stannis demanded.

“Half on one hand the Goodbrothers, half on the other,” Lord Merlyn replied. “The Sparr was eager. And nobody knows one way or another about The Farwynd. I don’t expect The Greyjoy expected him or his kin to show up. It doesn’t matter what we think. You’ll have to fight for all the keeps you wish to take. T’wouldn’t be right to give up without a fight.”

Stannis agrees that it was only to be expected. Stannis orders Lord Merlyn to go aboard the Fury and to wait, under guard.

They march, hitting all the keeps along the way. The daily jogging regime recommended by the Florents as part of the Marine training proves effective; they go for miles without lagging. Hammerhorn proves to be a place where the Royal Marines are properly blooded after a march, as Lord Goodbrother is savvy and wealthy enough to order a proper force to garrison his keep and with enough iron from his mines to have some actual iron and steel armor and weapons for them. It is here that the knights made proper work of the garrison forces, breaking them with lance and sword, trampling them down with their mounts, before the Marines went on the move in tight formation, stabbing away with perfect efficiency and discipline. Stannis was occasionally distracted by the sight of Alekyne’s curious wheeled bow; it did seem that his arrows flew farther and more true. He must ask about it, later. Lord Sparr’s garrison was as pitiful as Lord Merlyn’s though no less stubborn and prone to attacking first. Lord Farwynd’s keep of Sealskin Point’s gates were left wide open. That alone was suspicious enough to prevent them from entering. As they saw no longships in the harbor either, it was taken that the Lord had fled to sea. Possibly to his kin on Lonely Light.

He’s safe there, as even the captured Ironmen lords say that there’s no point in pursuit all the way to Lonely Light, where they would find nothing but a spit of rock and strange folk affected by sea madness. Seal-fuckers, they said in low, mocking tones.

They take all the Lords off Great Wyk and make for Pyke, before, as all the Florents advised Stannis, Robert can make a dumb mistake and displayed mercy. They hurry and succeed in dropping anchor in the smoking remains of Lordsport, taking their hostages ashore with them and march just in time to see that the curtain wall of Pyke has been breached and with men already streaming in. One entire tower of Pyke has collapsed from siege engine barrage and there is a large plume of dust and debris rising up from the bluff where it stood. It was a perfectly good view for further demoralizing the lords of Great Wyk. It was decided that they should stand ready should the main Baratheon forces through the curtain wall need additional support.

A squire rides up to Stannis, to inform him that as he’s present, to bring up who he thinks he ought to the Great Hall of the Great Keep of Pyke, where they have captured Lord Balon Greyjoy alive. As nobody knows how Robert will decide, the hostages are left under guard and Stannis and the
Florents make their way in.

They see Lord Balon Greyjoy standing with his hands tied. Robert is standing in front of the Seastone Chair. Beside him stands Ser Jaime and Lord Stark and he seems the same as he ever was. After his talks with Selyse, Stannis is not prone towards ill thought towards Eddard Stark any longer, only a persistent question as to why Robert should like him, with a reputation for dourness, over himself so much in their youth. What did Ned have that he did not?

“My Master of Ships!” Robert boomed out in his serious, King’s Speechy Voice, as he’s called it. Lord Balon turns to sneer at him.

“Your Grace. Great Wyk is yours. I have captured all the Lords on the island and have brought them here, for your judgment.”

Robert nodded.

“So you see,” he speaks to Lord Balon. “Here is the man who crushed your Iron Fleet at Fair Isle. As I am the King who trained the Royal Marines and Gold Cloaks who have breached your walls and took you in your own Keep. You thought—”

Robert jabs his finger at Lord Balon.

“To pillage and plunder loyal subjects of the realm! You thought to attack a Lord Paramount, Warden of the West! You thought to make yourself a king! Hah!”

Robert stands up and strides forward, snatching the driftwood crown from Balon’s head, dropping it to the floor and stomping on it, snapping it to pieces with a loud crack.

“You declared yourself king! You rebelled yourself, Usurper!” Lord Balon snarled.

“It has been said: When you come for the king, you best not miss! Wise words, indeed! I smashed Rhaegar down and I wasn’t going to miss my swing when it came to Aerys himself! You? You missed your shot so badly, it’s not even in the same field.”

Robert made a sharp gesture, slicing his hand past one of his ears, while making an exaggerated whooshing sound between pursed lips. He walked around Lord Balon, still holding his warhammer.

“I have also been told, Robert Baratheon, not every problem can be solved by hitting it with your hammer! Well, that’s true. A hammer is not the right tool for every job.”

Robert finished the circle and stopped in front of Lord Balon.

“Not known for quick thinking, us Baratheons. But here it is: It’s not called the executioner’s sword for nothing. And that is the reward for high treason.”

He holds his hand out towards Ned.

“Lord Stark? The King wishes to borrow your weapon.”

Lord Stark hesitated for a moment before drawing out Ice.

“Your Grace,” he steps forward, to hold it out hilt first to Robert, who hands over his hammer.

“You all in this room are witness,” Robert steps away, testing the weight and balance of Ice with both hands. “For the crime of high treason, I, Robert of House Baratheon, First of My Name, King
of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, sentence you to die.”

And Robert swung. As large as Ice was, it was still much lighter than Robert was used to with his hammer. He was also used to aiming at the largest areas of mass with the heavy head of his hammer. The blade cleaved through the back of Balon’s head and detached Balon’s jaw bone entirely. The two pieces of his head bounced in different directions and his body tumbled over.

“Damn. He lowered his head at the last second,” Robert huffed.

He handed Lord Stark the sword back and got his hammer. He ordered some men to collect Balon’s head to show to the hostage Ironmen Lords. The body was consigned to whatever death rites the Ironmen practiced. Ravens announcing the execution were sent off.

They rested for one night before clearing out and sailing for Harlaw, taking Alannys Greyjoy and her surviving children, Yara and Theon, and the hostage Lords.
Lord Rodrik Harlaw is waiting for them on the shore, with plates of bread and salt ready. As they may stay for a number of days discussing what’s to be done with the Iron Islands, Stannis tells the captains of the Royal Fleet that were with him on Great Wyk to set out on patrol and inform the Redwyne and Lannister fleet and other associated warships, but to especially seek out Lord Tywin Lannister’s flagship to inform him as quickly as possible, that Pyke has fallen, Lord Balon has lost his head, and they are to return to their home ports after capturing needed lords for leverage in negotiations. Important hostages were to be held all together within Casterly Rock’s dungeons, their fates to be determined. As the King has plans for the Iron Islands, it is strongly ordered that further destruction of keeps and slaughter cease once surrender is clearly obtained. However, Stannis doesn’t have much hope on that; given Lord Lannister’s ways, he would expect Blacktyde, Orkmont, or Saltcliffe to be scoured, whichever one was unlucky enough to be chosen by Lord Lannister to vent his rage. His forces have too much experience from the Reynes and Tarbecks. The Greyjoy Rebellion is over. King Robert is to stay at Harlaw until such a time as what action to take about the Iron Islands are decided upon. Lord Tywin Lannister is invited as a Lord Paramount with grievances to the discussions regarding the future of the Iron Islands and to make his presence on Harlaw if he wishes.

Lord Harlaw’s sister is given her old chambers and her children are allowed to stay with her. Poor Lanny has silent tears dripping constantly and she clutches at her remaining children, rocking and moaning. Rodrik swallows as he leaves her chambers and makes way to the Great Hall to take his place at the high seat. His sons. His two strong, poor boys. Lost to him in the Drowned God’s Halls. It wasn’t right, for children to pass before parents. He passes his hand over his eyes before straightening his shoulders and raising his chin and passing through the door. He must be strong for this. Harlaw House and Island depends upon him, the High Lord Captain.

King Robert of course has his place of honor at Rodrik’s right hand. On Rodrik’s left is Lord Stark, as a Lord Paramount. To King Robert’s own right is space for Lord Lannister should he arrive. Lord Stannis is on Lord Stark’s left, across from King Robert as Master of Ships and then the rest of their table is filled, to Rodrik’s curiosity, with Florents. All of them. Rodrik also blinks when all of them and Lord Stannis take out notebooks and writing implements the likes of which he has never seen before. Thick metal styluses? But where are the ink pots? Curious.

“Right, then,” Robert says. “The meeting for What The Fuck Was Balon Greyjoy’s Problem has begun.”

“Your Grace,” Stannis growls.

“We’ll come up with a more dignified name for the historians later. But the question still stands. What was Balon Greyjoy’s problem? His father wasn’t a dumb cunt like that, last I knew,” Robert addressed Rodrik.

“Lord Quellon’s surviving sons believed in the Old Way, Your Grace.”

“What’s that?”

“The Iron Price. All things worth having are only worth having so long as they were taken by raiding and reaving. Lord Quellon wanted nothing to do with it. His sons saw him as weak. During
your Rebellion, I heard tell Lord Quellon was unwilling to sail for any side, seeing as we never had much to do with greenlander business. His sons told him to raid so as not to lose out on plunder. He lost his life for the ambitions of his sons."

“There a difference between the Old Way and piracy?” Robert asked.

“No,” Rodrik shook his head. “Ironborn who stood to gain under Balon’s leadership and with more than a little greed have decided that it is a thing that is in our blood. And not the practice of desperate sailors who have no useful purpose otherwise.”

“Now.” Robert scratches his chin. “I am of a mind to think that since I took off Balon’s head, this business is done and finished. But that is not so, as this pack of very knowledgeable fellows will tell you. So. I will let them say their piece.”

Robert then, to Rodrik and Lord Stark’s confusion, gets up from his chair and starts to walk a circuit around the room.

“Pay me no mind. I think and listen best on my feet.”

Rodrik looks at everybody else, confused at the irregularity. Lord Stannis’ expression is unsurprised and uninterested. The Florents similarly take no notice. Ser Jaime stands, consciously expressionless as usual while on duty.

Alekyne Florent introduces himself to Lord Rodrik before beginning.

“First of all, what would you say is the most pressing cause of piracy conducted by the Ironmen; customs and traditions or lack of resources? Do the Iron Islands suffer very often from famine, plagues, or other disasters?”

“Ironborn endure such ill fortunes and then they go reaving. The Islands make for precarious living and bad years force such action. A few do have the hot blood needed to reave for no reason. Mad killers who fear nobody and have nothing to lose, aye. That might be bred into certain family lines. I have not made a study of it. As of late, many Priests of the Drowned God have tried to gain favor from Lord Balon by preaching that to return to the Old Way is to return to greater favor from the Drowned God and that in turn means the rise of a stronger, better Iron Islands.”

“The ‘History of the Ironborn’ states that farming and mining is scorned as work fit only the lowest classes, the thralls. Is this true or outsider’s tales?”

“True for most. Maester Haereg is a respectable historian. I have found his account true to the stories I have heard from the better loretellers on these Islands.”

“So how do you maintain your holdings, Lord Harlaw?”

“Trade voyages,” Lord Harlaw replied easily, “and fishing. The mines. Harlaw is also the only island with fodder enough for breeding pit ponies. They are not fit for knights nor racing, but they are steady in temperament, strong for their size, surefooted, and hardy. They fetch good prices and if a winter is very harsh, they are not bad for eating.”

“What are the numbers of the bivalve colonies of the Iron Islands?”

“For food, you mean? I suppose when people get desperate enough Ironborn have resorted to eating those. I do not like such things myself. Chewy like tendon.”

“Not just food. Though for that, they are best with different preparation methods besides just
boiling them. No, we suggest-"

Imry took out a box from his knapsack and passed it to Alekyne, who slid it over to Rodrik.

“A new industry specializing in desirable crafted goods that can only be got from the sea.”

Rodrik opened the box and there were examples of cameo carvings made out of mussel shells, mother of pearl earrings, necklaces, hair combs, and bracelets. As well as a string of pearls.

“Hmm,” Rodrik said, turning a larger cameo over to examine the back and how it is clear that it was made out of shell. “That can be possible. Make use of the shell and the meat. Makes sense. But would it be worth the trouble to trade?”

Robert stopped one of his circuits.

“If Queen Cersei, Lady Baratheon, and Lady Arryn show up in court decked out in seashell jewelry, you’ll have demand enough! Every lady wants to be in fashion.”

“And the pearls? I do not know that we have the oysters that yield pearls.”

“Then for the sake of the Iron Islands, the call for a hunt for pearl oyster colonies should be announced,” Alekyne suggested. “If there are oysters that produce pearls and you find out precisely what kinds, something surpassingly rare and therefore valuable will be of your holdings.”

Rodrik nodded.

“We do also believe- no. We know. We know that one can farm pearls.”

Rodrik blinked.

“Do you?”

Alekyne nodded eagerly.

“We’ve cut open pearls and examined them under magnifying glass lenses. It is clear that pearls are formed because sand or some other foreign debris gets stuck within the oyster and the response is to coat it with the natural substance that gives the pearl its luster. My cousin, Erren—”

Here, Erren stood and made a bow, grinning.

“Has found oysters on the island of Dragonstone and been jamming as varied objects as sand grains, glass beads, and pieces of other oyster shells into specimens to test. And here—”

Alekyne pulls out a different string of pearls from a pocket, smaller and some unattractively unevenly lumpy, but clearly pearls.

“Are some of the examples from just one year’s growth. Should one leave these farmed pearl oysters be, it is clear that larger, finer pearls fit for jewelry would be produced.”

He passes it to Rodrik. They watch as he turns the pearls over in his hand, feeling the smoothness of the pearls. He puts them to his teeth to test.

“Aye. Farmed pearls,” Rodrik looks up, quietly amazed. “What a time to be alive.”

“Do you believe that farming the creatures of the sea, like these bivalves, will be accepted by other Ironmen more than farming the land?”
Rodrik rubbed his chin. He could see how these Florents have been cleverly accommodating to the beliefs of the Ironborn. He also knew that they didn’t have to be; like King Robert, they could have washed their hands and left after the slaughter, left the Iron Islands to starve for another year or longer without fit men to bring back coin and goods from trading voyages and with fishing boats sorely short handed.

“It can be argued. Aye, I can certainly argue about the bounty of the Drowned God and how we’d be fools to ignore such gifts from the sea.”

“Excellent,” Alekyne grinned. “We can certainly assist in sending over craftsmen we trained in working with shells to you so that you can immediately begin training carvers for all the islands. As you have lost men… We would advise that the steady hands of women from sewing be encouraged to learn how to work the shells also.”

“Reasonable.”

“Now we may consider further inland-”

“Lord Tywin Lannister!” a guard announced.

“Well, he certainly hauled ass,” Erren muttered to himself, while Ser Colin shushed him.

Everybody stood to greet Lord Tywin as he walked into the room.

“Lord Tywin,” Robert grinned. “Had good hunting?”

“As well as can be expected,” Lord Tywin replied, taking the seat that Robert indicated for him.

“You did not wait.”

Everybody took their seats, except for Robert. Robert smiled benignly, taking the brunt of Tywin’s displeasure over not holding up proceedings to wait for him. It was his prerogative as King to make it so and absolutely nobody was going to get him on his back foot over it.

“We figured out that Balon Greyjoy was a greedy cunt,” Robert ticked off his fingers. “Lord Harlaw has confirmed that piracy is practiced because the Ironmen are a desperate, starving folk, though some are also greedy cunts themselves. I’ll ignore the greedy cunts for the nonce and think on the desperate folk. These islands are bare; no good for farming. No meat or game enough to feed people. For the greater peace of the realm, the Florents have suggested and Lord Harlaw has agreed, that other sources of food and a new industry to produce valuable goods for trade be started and adopted by order of Lord Harlaw.”

“I do not recall agreeing to issuing an order nor that I could be obeyed. I said I may make arguments to the other lords,” Rodrik objected.

“I get ahead of myself,” Robert held up his hands, chuckling. “I have been advised that you, Lord Harlaw has confirmed that piracy is practiced because the Ironmen are a desperate, starving folk, though some are also greedy cunts themselves. I’ll ignore the greedy cunts for the nonce and think on the desperate folk. These islands are bare; no good for farming. No meat or game enough to feed people. For the greater peace of the realm, the Florents have suggested and Lord Harlaw has agreed, that other sources of food and a new industry to produce valuable goods for trade be started and adopted by order of Lord Harlaw.”

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“Aye,” Rodrik bowed his head. “I take on this responsibility and duty.”

“There,” Robert clapped Rodrik on the shoulder before continuing his circuit of the room. “We’ve caught up to what Lord Tywin has missed. Alekyne, go on.”

“We were about to discuss the state of the iron mines. Lord Harlaw, the practice of keeping thralls
must end. In order to get thralls, they must be stolen from their lands. That must stop. Same thing with the taking of Salt Wives. Is that not reasonable?”

“I had not expected any demand otherwise,” Rodrik replied. “Will an order be made to return those who wish to the mainland?”

“We order it so,” Robert said as he walked past.

“That will cause unrest,” Rodrik warned.

“Which is why a rotating presence of the Royal Marines will be garrisoned at the Iron Islands,” Stannis said. “To maintain order and the King’s peace. Lands on key islands will be confiscated and placed directly under the Crown’s jurisdiction and governance for forts, barracks, and supply depots.”

Rodrik knew that the Iron Island lords will especially resent this, but they had made their decision to rebel, and this was the beginning of the price to be paid for their folly, so he nodded.

“Lord Lannister, it is here where we hope to have more of your involvement,” Alekyne respectfully addressed Tywin. “Is it fair to say that House Lannister are the best experts on mining in all of Westeros? With the best knowledge about the methods of pulling up more and better ore from mines, the best knowledge on how to prevent collapses and the like?”

“For thousands of years,” Lord Tywin replied.

Alekyne nodded to Robert, who spoke up.

“How would you respond to the idea of oversight over the mining operations of the Iron Islands? To have first pick of new veins opened, to have first pick of the ores produced? For a time period of perhaps up to fifty, but not less than ten years?”

“What of the existing mines?”

“As recompense for the attack on Lannisport, you would get the lion’s share of the proceeds from the sale of ores from those existing mines you improve, hah! The lords will get the rest of the proceeds from their holdings as they can traditionally expect, unless they get sent to the Wall. Now what say you to that?”

Rodrik could not avoid the slow swing of Lord Tywin’s head and the gleam of victory in his gaze.

“Acceptable.”

Here Rodrik felt a sinking in his heart, for now the Old Lion had his claws in the Iron Islands and he also knows that he was wroth over the audacity of attacking Lannisport. He will not do unto all of us what he did to the Reynes and Tarbecks, Rodrik desperately reassures himself. He has the mines to think of. He must preserve us, if he is to have us yield our iron. He must.

The Florents continued scribbling into their notebooks. Robert nodded at Alekyne to continue.

“The reputation of Ironmen as the great sailors of Westeros is not a false one. Lord Harlaw, you stated that you maintain your holdings through trade voyages, fishing, mining, and breeding of a specialized breed of pony. You will also institute new industries that will exclusively benefit the Iron Islands by producing desirable goods for trading. We would also offer you the ability to make trading the best choice of opportunity for the Iron Islands in another way.”
Here, Imry and Erren opened yet another, larger box that they brought in with them. They opened it and carefully took out a model ship and placed it in front of Lord Rodrik.

“I trust you have observed the Fury and the King Robert’s Hammer at dock?”

“Aye,” Rodrik was turning the model, leaning in to inspect it.

“Without the need to be crewed by fighting foot and with no dedicated rowers, these new trading ships will be the key to the Iron Islands’ recovery from Lord Balon’s bad decisions.”

Alekyne proceeded to lay out the advantages of these new ships who would practically fly, claiming an unprecedented 15 knots or better by wind alone using their taller masts with greater spread of sail. The model was narrow in hull and coolly elegant.

“I cannot believe such a ship can do what you claim it does,” Rodrik’s voice was flat. “She’ll capsize first hour out of port, her masts will shatter from the amount of sail.”

Left unsaid was the idea that no landlubbing greenlanders could properly build a ship.

“Her foremothers are the Fury and all the ships retrofitted for the Royal Fleet,” Alekyne replied. “The draft is deep and she’ll heel instead of capsizing. Ask the captains and crew that we have captured and are holding in Casterly Rock for what happened at Fair Isle. Our ships are faster, with half the number of rowers. That’s just with as much sail as we can safely retrofit to the broader and shallower builds of war galleys. With a ship built from the keel up for speed…”

Alekyne gestured emphatically at the model ship.

“Crewed properly and with good captains who know their business, this kind of ship will outrun storms and bring profits by carrying passengers, mail, spices, silk, and tea.”

“She’s not armed,” Rodrik reluctantly argued. “A sitting duck.”

“She’ll outrun everything else they can make in Essos. The most dangerous pirates were Ironmen. Now that Ironmen are to crew these ships, nobody can touch them. It is right that the sailors should defend the ships with axe and cutlass. The Royal Fleet is also vested in protecting the trading ships of the Seven Kingdoms, as well! The Royal Fleet will keep the trade lanes guarded!”

Rodrik sighed, turning the model, counting the extravagant spread of sail, up to five square sails on a single mast, with three masts.

“A beautiful dream, spun with pretty words. But the cost. It took five years after Balon ordered the building of the Iron Fleet for the warships to be completed. It’s now almost all sunk into the sea. We haven’t the ability to-” Rodrik pushed the model away. “Even with your ideas for seashell jewelry and farming for pearls, which would take years.”

“And that,” Alekyne spread his hands. “Is what the establishment of the Iron Islands Trading Company is for. Iron Island Houses would not need to individually attempt to build and crew these ships. Each ship can be built by pooled funds and the amount of profit is to be divided by proportion to the Houses, less the share for captain and crew.”

Rodrik was weakening. He shifted in his seat and put his fingers to his moustache.

“And to further reassure you that we trust in the design of these ships and the assumption of such risks, House Florent wishes to invest in each ship and cargo. Until your seashell and pearling industries become established, you can load up with cotton and wool goods produced by Florent
holdings for trade in Essos.”

“House Baratheon will invest also,” Lord Stannis added. “At least, House Baratheon of Dragonstone and Storm’s End.”

“Hah. You think I don’t want in on this?” Robert called from across the room. “House Baratheon of King’s Landing will invest!”

“And House Tarly,” Imry piped up.

“And House Royce,” added Ser Colin. “Rhea has written.”

“Even House Arryn; Lady Lysa has been nagging Lord Jon about not being so reluctant about trade!” Erren raised his hand.

“Ned! Ned, you must join in!” Robert punched Ned’s arm after going to him with quick strides. “Afford to buy more glass panels to expand your glass houses. After all, Winter is Coming!”

Lord Stark blinked, not expecting to have much say.

“Well…”

“I will invest,” Lord Tywin said. “The Royal Fleet left the Redwyne and Lannister fleets behind. I saw how they maneuvered and their speed. My captains assured me that they have never seen ships so fleet. We need only build one ship of this kind to start, correct? Then we will see.”

“The proof will be in the pudding,” Alekyne nodded. “We do our utmost to not disappoint. One trade voyage, Essos and back.”

“The other Iron Island Lords must decide,” Rodrik finally said.

“I’m sure I can convince them,” Alekyne grinned.

“I’m sure you will, silver tongued as you are,” Rodrik replied. “When would this first ship begin construction?”

“After select Houses across the realm send a reply by raven to King’s Landing on how much they wish to invest and the resulting shares of cost of build out have been tallied to ensure fair deposition of profits from the maiden voyage? Immediately. All the required timber, canvas, rope, brass, and sundries are on standby at the Royal Shipyard on the Wendwater.”

“So soon?” Rodrik nearly reared back. “You’ve stockpiled an entire ship’s materials, waiting? You must be very sure that the Lords of the Iron Islands would say yes.”

Alekyne and the Florents all made varying insouciant shrugs and frankly shifty tilts of their heads.

“As the Iron Fleet would be decimated-” Alekyne began.

“There really isn’t any better choice is there-” Ser Colin added.

“If you all wanted to survive-” Erren put in.

“And avoid the Wall-” Imry quipped.

“You knew. You all knew what Balon was planning- How? For how long?” Rodrik’s voice rose, aghast.
“I was warned to expect an attack at Lannisport during the wedding feast of Lord and Lady Baratheon. Two years ago,” Lord Tywin stared at Rodrik with relish.

“We knew properly at least a year before that,” Erren piped up again, helpfully. “Merchants reporting taxes paid on the profits on timber, rope, canvas, and the usual shipbuilding materials sold to the Iron Islands, with writs of receipt from Pyke and all the major Iron Islands Houses. Even you, Lord Harlaw.”

Rodrik put a hand to his mouth, unconsciously trying to hide his gaping.

“Three years. Drowned God’s BALLS. The Royal Fleet’s improved ships, the speed of response—”

“I set sail on the day of the Lannisport attack,” Stannis said.

“And made it here, in less than a moon!?” Rodrik reared back. “From King’s Landing? You weren’t already patrolling by the Arbor?”

“Dragonstone.”

“Not a ship lost at the Stepstones or Shipbreaker Bay?”

“We went east of Tarth,” Stannis replied, starting to enjoy Rodrik’s goggling. “I admit it was risky to sail at night through the Stepstones, but I’ve had two years to chart out a course beforehand when the inevitable attack came.”

“Sailed at night!?”

Stannis made his own insouciant shrug.

“Drowned God’s big salty balls!” Rodrik closed his eyes, knocking his head backward into his high seat. “That’s some sailing.”

“Now think about what it would be like to build out a ship that does 15 knots to Essos,” Alekyne said. “With an experienced Royal Fleet navigator and the best charts from Royal Fleet use, for that particular ship!”

“... Best not,” Erren whispered to Imry. “His cock can get only so much more erect.”

Ser Colin elbowed Erren.

“House Stark will invest,” Ned finally said.

He did not understand half of all that nautical jargon, but watching Lord Harlaw’s overawed response to Lord Stannis’ replies was good enough for him. He didn’t trust Lord Lannister’s honor, but he did trust that the Old Lion knew what he was about when it came to gaining gold. And Robert was right; Winter is Coming. He ought to think on improving Winterfell’s glass houses.

Chapter End Notes

Hello all!

I've made some Pinterest Boards to help visualize. I've also finally decided that if Lord
Alester is Vincent Cassel-like, then Axell managed to grow into looking like a more or less 40 year old Gérard Depardieu by the time he was 20. Womp womp. Ser Colin is Micheal Wincott circa the 90's. I found him quite compelling in the "Three Musketeers" with Micheal Sheen, as Rochefort.

So: the Florent women are Gibson Girl from the necks up and a mash-up of 30's slinky to 50's vintage dresses and Chanel suit jackets from the neck down, with floor-length skirts. Broad skirts are worn only for riding and sport such as soccer (I haven't mentioned that the Florent ladies do play soccer). I would say that hats are up to individual taste; Selyse doesn't really go for the giant wedding cake-like picture hats that require so much anchoring with hatpins. She does enjoy veiling, though, as the fabric does soften her facial features. She's also more prone to a top hat shape with her hats because she embraces her height. The older Florent ladies like hats on the scale of Dowager Duchess Grantham from Downton Abbey. Lysa Arryn, on the other hand, LOVES cake-y broad hats and will cram as many fabric flowers and ribbons as possible; a more romantic sensibility. Between all of them, a fashion for millinery is also springing up in King's Landing.

The younger Florent men have taken after Captain Jack Sparrow; they care about a good hat too. Imry goes around with a French Cavalier model when he's not incognito. Alekyne rotates through that as well as top hats. Jackets are still colorfully (ASOIAF nobles do love their color) Napoleonic military in look, though there's a slow inclusion of plainer Regency styled jackets being added into their rotation; heavier embroidery and cording for capital-C Court appearances and less embellishment for going out hunting, other sport, or at-home wear. Pockets for everybody.

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When Ned Stark entered the dining hall for dinner, there was only Robert and his brother Stannis, with Ser Jaime. Lord Tywin was already assured by Lord Harlaw and Alekyne Florent that the terms of House Lannister’s new controlling interest in the Iron Island’s mining operations would be laid out clearly in written form. Lord Harlaw agreed to wait until Kevan Lannister and other representatives of Lannister interests could come to the table for negotiations with the various Iron Island lords with significant mine holdings, which also meant waiting for the hostages within Casterly Rock’s dungeons to be sorted out and transported, either back to the Iron Islands or sent to the Wall. Lord Tywin himself set sail for Lannisport with his fleet.

Alekyne spent even longer with Lord Harlaw talking to the hostage Lords, selling them on the ideas of House Florent for a better future for the Iron Islands. As the most major of Iron Islands Houses were of Pyke, Harlaw, and Greater Wyk, if he could convince them, practically all of the Iron Islands would be joining in on change.

“Is it just us?” Ned finally asked, taking a seat. The servants begin ladling out a fish stew. “Are the Florents still in talks with the Iron Island lords? Shouldn't you be there, Robert?”

“I am not useful during such talks,” Robert said, tearing off hunks of black bread to dip into the stew. “I hit things with my hammer and yell at people to shut up if they start getting rowdy so that the clearer, cleverer heads can speak. They respect Lord Harlaw here; I wasn’t going to undermine him in front of the other Iron Island lords.”

Robert looked up and snorted at Ned’s disappointed look.

“Ned, don’t look at me like that. I did sit through the planning meetings on how to improve Iron Islander lives before Greyjoy made his move so that they all don’t start getting dumb ideas of more piracy and rebellion five, ten years from now. I have been made to understand that ruling takes more attention that I’ve had before, if I don’t want more rebellion. I have smart people working for me and Jon trusts them. And I also have Stannis to double check and tell me if I’m being an idiot.”

Stannis grunted in agreement, slowly sipping on the stew. Ned supposed if Stannis was so quiescent that what Robert said must be true. Otherwise there’d be teeth-grinding and vehement protests about Robert exaggerating or shirking his duties.

“Then where are the Florents now?” Ned asked.

“All of them have invaded the Book Tower and Lord Rodrik is now their guide and hostage,” Stannis replied. “If you properly met the lot of them, you’d understand. We’ll likely not see any of them until the hour we set sail back.”

“Hah! Great readers, all of them. And better, they think! That ship idea is all theirs!”

“They seem very knowledgeable,” Ned nodded.

“Ned,” Robert put down his spoon. “Am I forgiven? For being a cruel, angry cunt?”

“Yes,” Ned said simply, smiling a little at Robert.

Robert beamed back and reached over to grip Ned’s shoulder; it wouldn’t do to slap it as usual while Ned was holding a spoon of hot stew that could spill everywhere.
“Good! And while I’m at it, Ser Jaime!”

“Your Grace?”

Ser Jaime was also eating, Robert having decided that as he fought hard and well during the breaching of the Pyke’s wall that he ought not be required to be on duty this dinner. Ser Mandon was on guard at this meal.

“When I named you Kingslayer. That was cruel of me to jape about it when I was, as I said to Greyjoy, going to go about killing Aerys myself and perhaps facing you on the way.”

“... As you say, Your Grace,” Jaime said after a surprised blink.

Ned took a sip of frankly poor ale in a bid to hide the expression of disapproval he knew was on his face.

“And here,” Stannis looked up. “Is as good a time as any to ask. Why did you do it?”

Jaime started to shrug, but Robert and Stannis were both staring at him.

“I’m going to say it; by the order of your King, explain by what reasons you chose to kill King Aerys,” Robert’s voice was no longer jovial.

Ned was watching them, leaning back in his seat, arms crossed.

“He said to burn them all, traitors and city alike, during the Sack,” Jaime finally said. “He ordered Rossart and all the Alchemists to set off the wildfire caches in the city and burn down King’s Landing with wildfire. It was to be Summerhall come again, only bigger. So I killed Rossart. And then I killed Aerys.”

“What!?” Robert bellowed. “He was going to do what with wildfire!?”

“Where were the wildfire caches?” Stannis cried out. “Where!?”

Ned could say nothing, gaping at the idea of a Summerhall explosion, but in the middle of King’s Landing.


“The Red Keep!” Stannis nearly launched himself out of his seat.

“The DRAGONPIT!? Where the Royal Marines train and barrack!?” Robert bellowed again.

“What’s all the shouting about?” Ser Colin Florent poked his head in; he was passing to pick up some food to bring back to the Book Tower.

“Wildfire! Wildfire caches in the Red Keep and the Dragonpit!” Robert stood up and waved his arms. “The Mad King was going to burn us all!”

“... And another theory proven right,” Ser Colin muttered, not very shocked at all. “Most unfortunate.”

“Another theory?” Stannis hissed. “You Florents knew and hid this from us!?”

“I’ll bring Alekyne to explain, shall I?” Ser Colin made a vague gesture at the door.
“You’d better,” Stannis growled.

“In the meantime, do calm down and order up more food. Plans need to be made,” Ser Colin bowed and made an about turn right out the door.

“Calm down, he says,” Robert stood up and began to pace. “Calm down!”

Stannis took some deep breaths before reaching over and snatched up Robert’s ale and began to chug it, to Robert’s laughing.

More food was brought up and all the Florents arrived, clearly having run back from the Book Tower. They quickly asked if Lord Harlaw was to know about the issue at hand. Stannis shook his head and a servant was dispatched to inform Lord Harlaw that issues of the Realm were being discussed in his dining hall and he was advised to not disturb the King. All bystanding servants were ordered to clear out. If Lord Harlaw wanted dinner, he’d have to have it in his private quarters.

“You are going to tell us why you didn’t tell anybody about your theories about wildfire in King’s Landing!” Robert banged on the table with his fist.

Alekyne, Imry, and Erren exchanged glances.

“She was right? Whoa,” Erren finally said.

“It was Selyse? It was Selyse,” Stannis muttered. Robert grabbed his drinking horn back out of Stannis’ hand to refill with ale. “It’s always Selyse. Seven Hells.”

“Selyse had wondered. While a little drunk, and not at all seriously,” Alekyne quickly explained. “What happened to the wildfire that we had heard Aerys used for his executions. We do know that the production of wildfire, from the clues we got from the books we had access to, results in vats of the stuff. None of us had ever seen it, nor did we know how much is needed to kill people with—”

“A gallon works for a full grown man,” Jaime interrupted, shuddering. “More burns faster and ends their misery. He liked it when they screamed longer, so he used fewer amounts each time.”

“So she concluded that there must be some left. Somewhere. In King’s Landing. She was hoping that King Robert would have the pyromancers questioned, imprisoned, or otherwise punished for their complicity in the atrocities committed against the people by King Aerys, including the murders of Lord Rickard Stark and Brandon Stark.”

Ned shifted in his seat, but kept his silence.

“So, is there more wildfire left in King’s Landing?” Alekyne raised his eyebrows in question.

After Jaime was made to repeat what he knew, the Florents turned all of their interrogative skills on him, led by Imry. Where Robert or Stannis would have bellowed or barked, respectively, Imry used a quiet, curious, sympathetic tone, friendly and easy. Jaime suspected it was an act, but he had to admit, after his experiences being questioned by his own father, it was refreshing to speak to somebody who actually listened all the way through his sentences without assumptions.

“King Aerys was going to kill millions of unknowing, innocent people. What a cunt,” Erren exclaimed once Jaime finished. “I knew he had it coming!”

Robert laughed.
“Must I regret knightng you, young man?” Ser Colin scolded him.

“I apologize for my uncouth words,” Erren replied. “But the point still stands. Selyse always said that Ser Jaime had to have the most serious, desperate, of reasons to break his vows as a Kingsguard. He didn’t do the honorable thing, but he did the right thing. The difficult choice. His strength of will and will to action is very admirable given the circumstances.”

Jaime looked very surprised at this piece of eloquence and even colored from being the point of focus of such a speech.

“Vows ought not be broken on purpose,” Lord Stark disagreed. “Or else what is the purpose of vows if they can be ignored?”

“Orders that result in the death and suffering of others without cause such as self defense are an abuse of power. Vows to a liege lord are also taken with the understanding that as obedience is given, a liege must not cause his subjects to act dishonorably in the name of obedience. We are not slaves,” Erren was becoming flushed from emotion. “A liege pledges to ask of no service that brings dishonor. You cannot have one without the other. The legitimacy of authority comes from the consent of the governed, not from threats of torture or summary executions. Ser Jaime did right to value the lives of millions of smallfolk over the life of a Mad King bent on killing everybody.”

Imry put a hand on Erren’s forearm and Erren subsided.

“Plan of action, then,” Alekyne flipped to a fresh page in his notebook. “Arrest all pyromancers for questioning.”

It was like a signal, as all the Florents present also opened their notebooks and began dash-dott ing furiously while calling out their ideas.

“Remove or disable the wildfire caches.”

“Concurrent disposal must be done at night.”

“Because that stuff catches fire in sunlight.”

“What bullshit! Must reduce panicking from the cityfolk.”

“Must establish containment and evacuation procedures ahead of attempts to dispose.”

“Can we sink wildfire for temporary storage in the Blackwater?”

“Unknown until pyromancers are questioned.”

“Must have them followed first prior to arrests to find out all current members of the guild.”

“Master of Whispers? Master of Whispers.”

Ned and Jaime looked at Robert and Stannis, befuddled by this noisy process of brainstorming. Robert was sitting with his arms crossed, grinning. Stannis was also scribbling out his own ideas, but disinclined to voice his thoughts out loud, still used to having to keep his counsel.

Sheets of paper were pulled out of Florent knapsacks and the Florents and Stannis wrote out their ideas in script after tearing the papers into smaller strips. They debated while arranging the various strips of paper into order, before a clear plan of action emerged from the whole. The Florents and Stannis stood silently after the last strip of paper was arranged in place and reread the plan, eyes
searching.

“Your Grace? Lord Stark and Ser Jaime? Cross-check, please,” Alekyne, the Florents and Stannis stepped away from their end of the table to eat the food brought up.

They walked around the table to read the plan right side up. It was the fastest, most detailed plan for action that Ned had ever seen put together and there were even strips with question marks for the facts they did not know the answers for and then strips of paper with lists of questions in order to get the answers they needed.

“You want me to move the court to an encampment on the tourney grounds?” Robert’s eyebrows rose.

“We certainly can’t have the King present when searching for and then disposing of the wildfire within the Red Keep,” Stannis explained. “All of the Royal Family and Small Council, all persons of the Red Keep, must be evacuated.”

“Gods, Cersei is going to have a fit,” Robert shook his head. “Well. Sensible. I see the Gates, Dragonpit, Great Sept, and then Red Keep is to be investigated and cleared, in that order?”

“Innumerable people pass through the Gates each day. Clearing them first allows for greater ease of evacuation for the larger locations.”

Robert nodded.

“Well. I don’t see anything missed. Ned? Ser Jaime?”

Both of them shook their heads.

“Right, then. Begin the plan immediately. Have a raven sent to Lord Varys to begin finding all the pyromancers. After full confirmation of their identities, have them arrested by the Gold Cloaks. Lord Varys may question them for what they know, as listed here in the plan.”

Erren bowed and left to do so.

“I’m curious,” Alekyne said, after the plan was recopied onto sheets of paper.

Stannis looked up sharply. He’s learned by now that a curious Florent is a thing of alarming potential.

“Why didn’t you tell anybody else about the wildfire conspiracy as the true reason for killing King Aerys?”

Ser Jaime’s face immediately assumed his smirk but Alekyne’s pale-eyed gaze was without judgement. Just very interested.

“I thought that by killing Rossart that the issue was finished.”

“I might just believe that you do not know that wildfire ages like wine and gets more potent in storage,” Alekyne replied. “But I do not believe that is the entire reason.”

“Ser Jaime, by order of your King, give the man the real answer,” Robert rumbled.

“Him,” Ser Jaime jabbed his finger at Lord Stark. “Sneering at me, looking at me as if I hadn’t just saved everybody! By what right does a mere wolf judge a lion? I-”
“You had an emotional reaction and chose spite over logic. Most unfortunate,” Alekyne interrupted.

Robert had to put an arm out to stop Ned from snapping at Ser Jaime.

“Peace, peace,” Ser Colin holds up his hands. “What’s done is done. We know the truth now and the wildfire will be fully removed as a threat to life.”

“You need to get better at thinking ahead,” Imry suggests.

Imry grinned cheekily at Jaime’s glare from the impertinence.

“Well. Now I’m truly glad that I can depend upon you and Ser Barristan,” Robert clapped Jaime on the shoulder.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Jaime finally said. This was all too befuddling.
Robert was all too happy to gossip about the Florents as they waited for Ser Barristan to arrive from Old Wyk before setting off back to Lannisport over breakfast the next day. Ned did agree that they seemed to be the smartest (but not necessarily the wisest. Well. Ser Colin, being the eldest present, seemed a very sensible man) fellows he had ever met.

“The women of that family are sharp too! Why, Stannis’ wife Selyse is the leader of the pack, hah!”

Ned quietly listened as Robert went on, describing a woman wise beyond her years, wry and nimble of mind. She was like no other woman Robert had met before and wonder of wonders, suiting to Stannis and the two of them were a love match! Robert guffawed. Marriage was good for Stannis; keeps him so much more relaxed, Robert waggled his eyebrows at Ned. Ned promptly replied that he was certainly not interested in accounts of Stannis’ marital activities and Robert hooted and slapped his shoulder hard enough to make Ned wobble. That’s Robert Baratheon for you; he handed out grevious wounds when enraged and when very pleased, liable to leave you with bruises about the arms and shoulders and your ears ringing from the boom of his laughter. Ned rolled his shoulder. Funny, he hadn’t thought he’d forget the sensation of being Robert’s friend, but he must have. He’s glad that they are managing to overcome their past quarrel; Robert was never good at apologizing and the letter and gifts from King’s Landing were unexpected and welcome.

Ned did not have much occasion to see or speak with Stannis in the past. He only knew very well that Stannis disapproved of Robert about everything; their characters were so opposite in stamp. He also had an air of constantly wounded dignity around Robert, which Robert could not resist constantly poking at. Upon meeting him now, fitted out in proper armor and used to issuing commands to be obeyed at war, he could sense a different air about the man. Firstly, there seemed to be a sort of calm acceptance between the two brothers that Ned had never witnessed before. Robert did, Ned had to admit, have a habit of making needling, offhanded remarks at Stannis that might be interpreted in the worst ways. Stannis always did, and his expression would darken like incoming storm clouds in the Stormlands before setting his teeth to grinding and if he could not escape Robert’s presence, would respond with clipped, sharp insults and curls of his lip that resulted in the both of them brawling. Ned always felt uncomfortable around Robert and Stannis in the same room because of how they behaved as brothers; he certainly was never hurt so casually, so often, by Brandon. Why, Robert wasn’t like that with him in the first place; it baffled him that he should be so towards Stannis. Now, Robert had somehow learned to curb his tongue and Stannis was more likely to twitch a single eyebrow up instead of grinding his teeth at Robert’s japing.

Ned was surprised to find that the gifts that Robert had sent all the way to White Harbor and safely arrived at Winterfell were Florent works.

“All of it? The seed drill, harvester, tin jars, cloth, books, all of it?”

“We Dare With Craft,” Robert tapped the side of his nose. “Maybe they should be less daring with their cheek, but I’m all for their crafts and works!”

“That’s wondrous.”

“That they are. I’m very pleased by them joining the family, working for the betterment of the realm. Why, they are so interesting, I’m more interested in ruling! They don’t nag, they don’t look at me like I’m a dumb lug. Of course I’m slower than them, but they work with me. Not against me. It is very well!”
Ned was therefore predisposed, especially after seeing how they planned to rid King’s Landing of wildfire and grudgingly after the revelation and arguing for Ser Jaime’s honor after all, to see them as allies. Ser Colin and his nephews Ser Imry and Ser Erren were on the King Robert’s Hammer with them. Alekyne was on the Fury with Stannis. Robert was of the opinion that keeping the younger Florents apart would prevent them from driving everybody else mad during the voyage with their ways.

Ned was unsure as to what that might be besides impertinence.

The King Robert’s Hammer was a large galley. But a large galley proved to be too small, when he found out that the Florents considered him the most interesting person on the entire ship. They would not address him first; they held to very correct courtly manners and respected him as a Lord Paramount with the prerogative to initiate conversations. But as Robert privately laughed to him, a cat may look at a king, and foxes seemed to stare more than plain look.

He confronted Ser Colin, who seemed the most reasonable, on why they should stare at him so.

“I am not part of the innermost circle of the family,” Ser Colin smoothly replied. “I am, unfortunately, a little too old for that. I may know a few tricks yet, but it is for the young ones.”

“Surely you must know something.”

“I know that my niece Selyse has been very concerned about the state of the Night’s Watch, for as long as she has been aware of its existence.”

“The Night’s Watch?”

“Yes, my lord. The Starks have ruled over the North for thousands of years. Are you not also concerned?”

Ned shifted uncomfortably.

“The wildlings have not been more troublesome than usual. My brother Benjen would have informed me of otherwise.”

“Ah. You have family at the Wall? Good. There is nothing you can rely upon so much as family.”

“What does your Selyse want with the Night’s Watch?”

“More eyes. More… proactive stance towards their duty, perhaps. We were not surprised by the Greyjoys. Perhaps you see the sense in the North being more prepared for what lies beyond the Wall?”

“You cannot convince wildlings to make peace through new industries and trade like what was just done with the Ironmen,” Ned objected.

“Has anybody tried?”

Ned’s brow crinkled with confusion.

“I do not know.”

“Hmm,” Ser Colin smiled. “Well. Now here is a question that I see that any one of my nephews and nieces would be most interested in finding the answer to. For the ongoing peace and prosperity of the Realm.”
Ned frowned. Was this a Southron flowery way to broach a demand of him?

“The young ones are eager. Industrious. Too prone towards daring and then asking for forgiveness afterwards. After the success of all their planning in regards to the Iron Islands, they will not rest. I predict that they will turn their attention either on Dorne or the North. Or both. They wish to do good. Are you very opposed to their ideas? Do new ways… frighten you?”

Ned considered this Southron knight of a very strange House.

“It is wise to be wary.”

“Of course,” Ser Colin nods. “House Stark did not survive as long as it has by taking undue risks. You prepare. You store up. You arm up. Winter is Coming.”

Ned nods back.

“Then the only thing I can say is that no matter how alarming my nephews are, you must believe that everything they do, they do because they believe in bettering the lives of the living.”

What an odd thing to say.

“Try not to panic,” Ser Colin continued. “After they say something very shocking to you.”

“If you know what they would say, why not say it now?” Ned was impatient with games.

“I do not know what they may say. I only know that they enjoy shocking people with what they know. Proud of their own cleverness, my lord. I mean to warn you because it will not do to have a Lord Paramount gaping like a fish in public.”

Ned had cause to rue his scoffing at this when he chose to confront the first Florent nephew he saw.

“Uncle Colin’s been blabbing,” Ser Imry sighed. “He has no sense of the dramatic.”

“So you do have something that you want of me.”

“... I see that you are too obvious about your interrogating,” Imry replied critically. “Well. Come with me, if you please, my lord. You order me to tell. I obey. But not here.”

They end up going up the rigging of the largest mast. It is possibly the most terrifying thing Ned has ever done. The view of the sea and the feel of the cold wind is bracing, though.

“Are you secure in your seat, my lord?” Ser Imry asked.

They are sitting on a spar, with rope looped around their legs and waists.

“I am.”

“And you realize that there is nobody about, except us, who can hear what we speak of?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. So, Lord Stark, how fares your nephew?”

Cold, like an icicle dropping on top of his head stabs through him.
“I have no nephew!” he cries out, but it’s too late, too false even to his ears.

Ser Imry stares at him.

“Try not to panic,” Ser Imry finally says.

Ned grimaces, trying to keep his roiling stomach under control.

“Robert-”

“Is not to know. We do not forget about the other royal children.”

“How-”

“Simple matter of mathematics. Checked with Lord Arryn and the King on the troop movements during the Rebellion. You appeared at King’s Landing with a babe and my uncle Lord Florent saw him. He’s a father three times over and saw the rest of us as babes ourselves. He knows the look of infants. T’weren’t a proper newborn. You had no time to father one. And so, we wondered, why should any man care for a babe not his own? What reason could there be? Besides family? Duty? Fostering? Vows? Any of these? None of these?”

Imry shrugged.

“Many theories. No answers. And of the potential answers once we all considered all the choices, the… consequences. Consequences are very dire, indeed.”

Ned nods.

“It’s so,” he said so softly, the words are almost drowned by the wind.

“That boy is the son of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark.”

“. . . Yes.”

“Who else knows for sure of this fact?”

“Lord Howland Reed.”

“He hides safely in the Neck. What you have done so far will work for a little while to keep the boy safe. But you need more. More help.”

“And House Florent wishes to help?” Ned’s lip curled.

“We’ve helped already by keeping the secrets of House Stark.”

Ned had no choice but to acknowledge that this was true. It would be all too easy, with one of their own married to Lord Stannis, to reveal the truth to Robert. The question would be what their price would be to keep the secret. He had no doubt that as they were not a pack of idiots, the price would be high. He shuddered at the thought.

“Name the price then, for your House’s continued silence,” Ned swallowed. “Or must I speak with Lord Florent?”

“You need not speak with Uncle,” Imry shook his head. “You only need to promise to do what you may as Lord Paramount of the North to smooth the way with the rest of the North when House Florent has need of it.”
“What does House Florent need of the North?”

“Cooperation, when the time comes,” Imry said and Ned found it disgustingly cryptic.

“For what?” Ned frowned.

Imry looked at him with those pale eyes and Ned had a wild thought that this must be what Lord Bolton might look like if he ever smiled, one side of his mouth quirked up into a mysterious, self-satisfied smirk.

“Mutual benefit. We would not ask for what we would not also give. And we have so much to give,” Imry finally said.

Why, Ned thought to himself. Why is this House so generous? There is something strange here, as if the Florents were the opposites of Lannisters; where a Lannister always pays his debts, do Florents always try to get you indebted to them? Tricky, tricky.

“Do you know why Rhaegar did it?” Imry asked.

Ned was confused by this change in subject.

“What?”

“Do you know why Rhaegar went off with your sister? Do you seriously believe that he was just another dumb man, who was being led around by his prick?”

“Why does that matter?”

“It matters because we now know after going through Prince Rhaegar’s personal writings in Dragonstone, and at the same time, we do not know who else knows of Prince Rhaegar’s personal writings. His chambers were left abandoned, unguarded, with any number of servants and spies given the opportunity to seek out secrets. These unknown people may have cause to look for his son. To look for a son. Do you see?”

Ned swallowed, the enormity of the dangers to Jon seemingly doubling in an instant.

“Tell me.”

“What are the words of your House, my lord?”

“Winter is Coming.”

“Prince Rhaegar’s House words?”

“Fire and Blood.”

“These two ideas,” Imry gestured with his hands. “Inspired him. He was haunted by a prophecy. Prophecies are tricky, dangerous things. He thought that his line joined with the blood of the Kings of Winter, would create a… warrior. A savior for the Seven Kingdoms.”

“Madness. A savior from what? What can he possibly-”

“The Long Night come again.”

“... What nonsense!”
Imry nodded.

“Just so. The prophecy required a prince, whose song is of ice and fire. Rhaegar, with his royal prerogative, saw himself as duty bound to fulfill this prophecy and breed a savior of the world.”


“The fact of the matter is that any number of people believe in such prophecies. Who want a savior. Who would seek a prince to lead them.”

“Then I will turn them away.”

“My lord,” Imry shook his head. “It would only take one such person, holding some scroll or letter with Rheagar’s seal and signature mentioning Lyanna and confronting your Jon Snow. He would be enticed. A hidden prince! How romantic. How heroic. How easy to be turned astray.”

“Then what would the Florents do, if you are all so clever!?”

“You can have your wife not hate him, for a start, my lord.”

“... What?”

“Lady Catelyn writes to Lady Lysa, who is a friend of my lady cousins and my sister. She reads those letters out loud to them. Atrocious lack of discretion, but as it was us Florents in the know and not anybody else... But I digress. Lady Catelyn would shed no tears for the death of a bastard she believes shames her. But a nephew? A Tully would fiercely protect a nephew.”

“You and I do not know if she can be trusted in such a matter,” Ned grudgingly said. “It is dangerous.”

“Well. He need not be nephew by Lyanna Stark. There are your brothers. Benjen would be a much less threatening choice than Brandon. Brandon was heir. Benjen is sworn to the Wall. Even better a choice. Do you not agree?”

Ned chewed his lip, thinking.

“That might work. Except that I brought him up from the south and Benjen has not-”

“Has he? Really? Not ever been assigned to follow a Wandering Crow on their regular trips to the south as part of training? Not ever at risk for having his head turned by comely shepherdess or milk maid along the way? What does Lady Catelyn know of the traditions of the Night’s Watch?”

“... Clever.”

“Inform Benjen. I assume he loved Lyanna too? Would he keep the secret for her sake?”

“Yes,” Ned said fiercely. “He loves Jon too, as one of the family.”

“Then it is done.”

Ned nodded. Until he had another thought.

“What shall I tell Catelyn about why I lied in the first place? What am I to do about how everybody thinks that he is my bastard now? It is common knowledge and cannot be changed
without raising suspicion."

"... Only she and Benjen would need to know your changed lie; no one else. As to why? You wanted to shield Benjen. You made a huge mistake trying to cover for his mistake, seeing as he is a Black Brother. You were overwrought with grief over Lyanna’s death and had too much to drink. You lost your mind the moment you held the baby, holding one more kin of yours after losing so many in so short a time! Apologize very much, give her some jewelry, and say that you were a stupid lump of a man who is unworthy of shining her shoes and kiss her a lot and roll around with her in bed. Choose one or all of the above."

"Think up all of that just now, did you?" Ned snorted.

"I’m not the married man, you are. One would think you’d know the rules of engagement, by now, when it comes to an angry wife," Imry made a cheeky flash of his teeth.

Ned blinked disapprovingly, but sighed in defeat.

"You must now prepare the boy."

"More Florent cleverness?"

"If you fail to plan, you plan to fail," Imry said in a singsong voice.

Ned impatiently gestures at Imry to continue.

"The prophecy was Essosi. You must have him learn Valyrian so that he cannot be caught unawares or tricked by those who think to hide their words by speaking in tongues he has never heard of. He must be taught how to fight and fight well to defend himself. As your nephew, you must let him know you might give him a holdfast in the North, so that he takes no interest in the South. Have him learn what it takes to be a lord who must give orders to men. And lastly, you must teach him some… cunning. So that he does not blindly follow the flatteries of those who wish to use him for their own ends."

"I am not sure I can teach him the very last," Ned finally says.

"At least you know what you lack," Imry said sympathetically. "Perhaps in this I can help."

"What? Are you suggesting you enter into service with me, as Master of Cunning, Lies, and Cunning Lies?"

"Now that’s a job," Imry laughed appreciatively. "No, my lord. With your permission, we Florents would send along a selection of the books where there are tales of doublecrossing, trickery, and con artistry that will most definitely offend your sense of honor. But it will also perhaps save your nephew's skin."

"You have books for instructing youth in doublecrossing, trickery, and con artistry?" Ned’s brow crinkled skeptically.

"Yes. Now do you want all of them at once, or do you want them doled out gradually on his namedays? We can start him off with child friendly tales and increase in complexity as he ages. Would you like a list of the books in order of difficulty?"

Meanwhile, Erren was sitting on a barrel on the deck, with Ser Colin standing beside him. They were both looking upward, observing Imry and Ned.
“I still think it’s too soon. Selyse says Lord Stark is as unlike cunning and cleverness as can be. This will end in death and destruction, I say.”

“She’ll have to get used to you two having other ideas,” Ser Colin shrugged. “You’re both grown men, though you two do not act like it. Knights of the realm. Worthy of deciding how you go about your missions after receiving them.”

Erren nodded.

“Will you go directly back to Dragonstone?” Ser Colin finally asked.

“We all had thought to visit with Tyrion Lannister.”

“Ah? Do you have an invitation to Casterly Rock?”

“Who says anything about the Rock? He’ll meet us at Lannisport.”

“Ah.”
Casterly Rock: Dancing in the Lions' Den

King Robert felt that a feast for the returning victors of the Greyjoy Rebellion was the least he could do. He wanted a tourney, but knew that he had to be economical; after all, the ships of the Iron Islands Trading Company have not been built yet and the treasury would need the funds for the enterprise. That was on top of the municipal work improving the King’s Road, training to replace the Gold Cloaks and Royal Marines who had died in battle, the paying out of widows or dependents’ pensions, and who knows what in King’s Landing to take care of the wildfire business. The brave men deserved lauding and felicitations and they were going to get it.

Stannis grumbled and muttered and ground his teeth, as usual.

“What is your objection this time?” Robert tried to be calm. Be calm. Be calm. Don’t call him a lousy little shit out to spoil all your fun. Lady Selyse would come for him if he did.

Stannis made an abrupt, frankly painful looking jerk of his head at him; he wasn’t sneering, yet.

“What is your objection this time?” Robert tried to be calm. Be calm. Be calm. Don’t call him a lousy little shit out to spoil all your fun. Lady Selyse would come for him if he did.

“Use your words,” Robert said, just as Selyse would.

That made Stannis’ eyes bug out for a moment of affronted pique before he exhaled, ruefully annoyed at Robert using one of Selyse’s coaxing techniques against him.

“We need to get back to King’s Landing. The wildfire—”

“Will be taken care of after all the pyromancers are rounded up. We don’t know how long that will take.”

“The tourney grounds need to be prepared for Red Keep evacuation—”

“Jon will take care of that.”

“I need to be with Selyse! I don’t know how she is, what if she’s in labor as we speak! What if she’s—lost—”

“Oh, no, whoa there,” Robert clapped a hand on Stannis’ shoulder and shook him firmly. “Don’t think like that. Stannis. Steady on.”

“What would you know! You went hunting when Cersei was bleeding and screaming for a day and more! You don’t know anything!” Stannis rounded on him and Robert had to quickly bat away a fist coming towards his face.

It was not in Stannis’ capacities to explain in any form or fashion that as Selyse’s midsection waxed like the moon, carrying a new life within her, he was astounded and worried more than he ever did before in his life. Selyse would cluck with satisfaction like an expectant hen brooding, and take his hand to place over the bulge and he felt movement, foreign and strange underneath his palm. Alive. Other lords may be vaguely concerned only with getting a proper, healthy heir. Stannis could only dread the idea of Selyse dying by childbirth. If she should perish, he was sure that he would never be happy again. A freezing sensation would form in his gut at the thought, so like that upwell of terror he felt long ago, watching his parents’ ship break apart in the bay. He would go on, he supposed. He didn’t think he would waste away without her after surviving things like the siege. He knew loss. But he also knew he would be hollowed out and any good, happy feelings he had would be snuffed out. Don’t die, he wished, even as he concentrated on battle in the Iron Islands. I’m not myself without you.
“You know what?” Robert looked at him critically, noting the high color of Stannis truly failing to control his temper. In a minute that Baratheon temper would reach unstoppable levels. He knew the signs. “Either you calm down like your wife would want you to, or I throw you around a training yard until you can’t stand up. What will it be?”

“The yard, then,” Stannis snarled, after taking futile deep breaths. “I don’t want to think!”

Robert gladly went through long bouts of sparring and grappling with Stannis. It turned out that beating the worry out of him was just the thing to have him quiet, if not polite or at all good company, for the feasting. It also helped that Robert reminded him that as Master of Ships it was his duty to be present for the sake of the Royal Navy captains, crew, and marines who expected to be acknowledged for their service. Stannis looked like he was going to muster up enough energy to try throttling him for that bit of cheek, but merely ground his teeth for a moment and nodded sharply. There. Hah.

In the meantime, the Florents found Tyrion waiting for them in Lannisport as expected. Tyrion was almost afraid that they would shame him by picking him up like a child to embrace, judging from their puppylike enthusiasm on seeing him in person for the first time in years, but instead, they extended their hands out to clasp his in greeting. Much more dignified. He led them to a friendly tavern and got seated towards the back, around a corner, for privacy.

“Why, Imry! You’ve grown yourself some very dashing and impressive moustaches!” Tyrion joked.

“Thank you,” Imry tilted his head. “I had a beard too, but I thought it was a bit much. So I shaved it off.”

“Quite right, quite right, you do need to allow the rest of us some chance of being distinguished,” Tyrion replied.

“Why don’t you start?” asked Erren immediately. “You would look well with moustaches of your own.”

“Ought I?”

“Tyrion, you’re not a child, though you will stay the stature of one,” Erren’s tone was serious. “I think growing a moustache will make people take you more seriously. You’re a man now. That’s just my opinion, of course. I wouldn’t presume to tell a Lannister what to do.”

Tyrion was struck by how much they were his friends. In the past years, he was receiving and writing letters to all the Florents at a rate of one or more a week. The short raven suitable notes were all well and good, but they also exchanged longer letters that required messengers to deliver. He was fairly sure that if he were anybody but a Lannister, he’d be severely punished for the cost of messengers alone. As it was, in their letters they told him not only of their experiments, but gossiped about King’s Landing and the doings of the Small Council, as far as they could get from Lord Stannis or Lord Arryn during dinners. Hilariously, Selyse and Delena had all sorts of asides about Cersei and their continued encounters with her in court. They had very little to report of Jaime himself except that he was present or not with King Robert in court or training.

He probably knew more about the plans and methods of the Royal Fleet and the Small Council in preparation for the Greyjoy Rebellion than even his father! Since he was never asked about the contents of his letters, he kept his source of knowledge a secret.

“We don’t have much time,” Alekyne said. “We’ll tell you all about the fighting and sailing, shall
“Yes, do tell me everything!” Tyrion nodded.

“Wait, wait, we have to tell him about Ser Jaime!” Erren interrupted.

“Jaime?”

“Oh,” Alekyne nodded. “Ser Jaime! Yes, I might as well. And then when Robert chooses to surprise everybody including your father, you’ll not be surprised too!”

Tyrion had much rather preferred to hear about the sea battles, but if it was about Jaime, that sounded good too.

By the end of the explanation of the wildfire conspiracy, Tyrion had his hands over his eyes.

“Jaime, Jaime, why didn’t he tell anybody!” Tyrion moaned in annoyance. “He’s saved King’s Landing! He’s a hero!”

“... I recommended that he learn better about decision making,” Imry shrugged. “I think he wants to kill me for saying so.”

“Well, he shan’t because I’ll say so too!” Tyrion nodded decisively. “Today!”

It was then that the Florents were free to recount the battles of the Greyjoy Rebellion, the incredible speed in which the Royal Fleet doubled the peninsula of Dorne and out sailed the best captains of the Redwyne and Lannister fleets, and sank practically all the Ironmen ships they encountered. The battle at Fair Isle was too exciting and Alekyne’s long practice at telling a good story was put to good use.

They shared tankards of the tavern’s ale and Tyrion felt quite good.

“I must ask,” Imry said quietly. “Has your father remained... cruel in his treatment of you? Your lab work must seem very strange.”

Tyrion huffed.

“Father doesn’t understand at all. I don’t know that I’ve done anything worthwhile-” at this the younger Florents protested, saying that his letters to them about his experiments were more than worthy. “But he’s left me alone since I spend all my time in my lab instead of ‘bringing shame to the name of Lannister with my drinking and whoring’.”

“Well, I approve, because alcohol poisons the liver and the mind over time. You’ve got too good a mind to drown,” Alekyne patted his shoulder.

“But what about the whores?” Tyrion leered at him.

“Possible spies, thieves, or assassins. Or you’ll catch a pox. Best be cautious,” Alekyne replied reasonably. “People like us have actual secrets we must guard.”

“... They may also be victims,” Imry said quietly. “Sold by drunkard fathers or kin to pay off debts. Young widows. Tricked into thinking they were being hired for honest jobs and pressed into the work by procurers. Or plain starving and making a living how they may.”

“You’re strangely sympathetic about whores,” Tyrion raised his eyebrows.
“A lot would turn to honest work if they could,” Erren shrugged. “We employ some past whores at our mills and factories and tin jarring teams at Brightwater Keep. And we’ve asked them about their pasts. That’s how we know.”

Tyrion took a drink, thinking on the matter.

“Well. I suppose that’s so,” he finally said. “But you’ll not see Father being seen doing things as trying to save the whores of the world.”

“Will you be paying us a visit?” Alekyne tried changing the subject. “To the Foxhole?”

“I might as well,” Tyrion said. “Father forbid me from going to tour the Free Cities with Uncle Gerion.”

He took another drink of ale.

“He’s put me in charge of the cisterns, drains, and sewers of Casterly Rock. Said that if I was so clever, I should figure it out.”

Tyrion ruefully expected the resulting eyebrow dancing of the Florents at each other at the news.

“That’s shitty of him,” Erren finally said. Tyrion snickered.

“He may have intended it as a slight, but I think that’s a good project,” Ser Colin finally spoke up.

“Really?” Tyrion crinkled his nose.

“Truly. King’s Landing is greatly improved by the ideas of my nieces and nephews. What’s more, we’re making money off of the waste. Urine and dung, both. People may laugh, but I say there’s something sweet about Florents turning shit into gold. Which is more possible than turning lead into gold.”

“I don’t know that Father would be impressed if I did turn shit into gold. We have enough gold as it is, you see.”

“Despite that. I liked you well enough from the letters you sent to my children. I like you more now that I’ve met you in person. It is a sorry thing that your father cannot see the value in a smart, polite, well spoken son.”

Tyrion blinked.

“... But I’m a dwarf.”

Ser Colin looked uncomfortably towards his nephews. They would know better ways of speaking on the matter.

“Selyse once said that it is like dwarfs are humans who happen to be ponies if we were horses. There’s nothing wrong with ponies. So there’s nothing wrong with dwarfs,” Erren said. “And if I hear anybody saying so, I’ll beat them up and take their money.”

Tyrion laughed.

A Lannister servant found them and informed them that their presence was required for the feast.

“Well, the show is on,” Imry stood. “Best not miss the coming amusements.”
Tyrion tried to inform his father about the truth of Jaime’s actions during the Sack. He didn’t even get a word in; he was very curtly informed to take his seat, be still, and to not embarrass the House by getting drunk. Tyrion sighed. He looked across the hall wistfully to where the Florents were seated with the Reacher lords who participated in putting down the Greyjoy Rebellion; mostly Redwynees and Hightowers and other coastal Houses.

Alekyne was very tolerantly fielding the attentions of various Redwynee and Hightower maidens. It was known that Bronze Yohn had wanted to catch Alekyne as a good-son, but happily settled for gaining Rhea as good-daughter. The tons of tin and copper ingots being sent on to King’s Landing or Brightwater Keep for the Florent backed industries were proof of prudence of such schemes. Tyrion knew from Imry and Erren’s letters that his sisters and Selyse had inadvertently set Alekyne on an impossible path; he would probably wish to marry a woman with some talent for thinking. Most unfortunately it seemed that only his own family produced such women so far. Imry wrote wryly of Alekyne making small talk at court or any number of Reach tourneys and feasts, trying to change the subject to something of meatier interest and would find simpering and wide eyed agreement of all his opinions. He would contradict his opinions midway and watch as these same ladies would all nod their heads and agree, not having any idea of what he said.

At this rate, Imry wrote, I think he’s willing to take any lady who knows her numbers, truly knows her numbers, and is not like to let Brightwater Keep’s accounts become a mess from swindling. He’ll have to rely on Florents for conversation and sharing of his ideas. He doesn’t like the idea, of course. That seems terribly lonely.

King Robert stood and made a rousing speech about the bravery of the sailors and fighting foot who fought and won against the Iron Islanders. Everybody cheered as he named the different bannermen who participated.

“Now, good subjects of the Seven Kingdoms, good, loyal subjects! Do we punish the Iron Islanders after this? Do we punish the bannermen who had no choice but to follow the orders of their greedy cunt of a liege lord? Do we?”

There were some confused murmurs from that. Nobody dared answer one way or another.

“No!” Robert bellowed. “We do not! The Ironmen are good sailors and good sailors obey their captains. Lord Balon Greyjoy was a bad captain! He foundered them against the might of the Royal Fleet!”

Roars came from the captains of the Royal Fleet from this.

“My lords, when they proclaim that I am King of the Seven Kingdoms, I do not wish to gainsay that. The Iron Islands have been ignored and left out of the fold. I mean to bring them in and the skill of their good sailing men will now do good for the realm! A bright future will be built, with trading ships that will be manned and captained by the best sailors of the Seven Kingdoms!”

Few cheers came from that, but Robert went on, changing course. He called upon Jorah Mormont and Jacelyn Bywater, knighting them to the greater applause and cheers from the crowds.

“And finally. Ser Jaime! Come here, man!”

Tyrion hazarded looking at his father. He immediately turned his head back to the proceedings; Lord Tywin’s countenance looked murderous.

“Ser Jaime has been wronged by me. I admit it. The King has made a mistake!”
The crowd was silent, confused.

“Ser Jaime has sacrificed his oath, and honor, and duty to the Mad King for the cause of higher, truer oaths. His first oaths, Knight’s Oaths. For he bravely and justly protected the young and the innocent and lives of women and men. Here, today, I declare that Ser Jaime Lannister is a knight among knights. For he, not for fame or glory, saved the innocent lives of King’s Landing from death by wildfire!”

Tyrion was free to absorb the cries of surprise and questioning from the crowd. He dare not look at his father.

King Robert launched into a stirring retelling about the murdering treachery of the Mad King giving orders for wildfire to be left in various places within King’s Landing. He laid out how after unjustly and cruelly murdering a Lord Paramount and his heir, he was not satisfied, wanting to bring destruction and death to innocents who had done no wrong.

“It was then, when the Mad King gave the order to Burn Them All, that Ser Jaime made the choice! A difficult choice! A righteous choice! The lives of the many, over the life of a madman, a monster! He slew the Mad King and saved us all!”

If there was one thing King Robert knew how to do, was inspire a crowd. They cheered loudest this time around, with cries of Ser Jaime! Ser Jaime! Knight Among Knights!

Tyrion did not look at his father. Perhaps he was pleased that now after this, surely Jaime would no longer be known as Kingslayer or Oathbreaker. Or was he furious that Jaime kept the reason behind his actions a secret, causing the stain on his reputation in the first place, no matter the revelation of truth afterwards? Gods, he needed a drink.

The feast itself was less than pleasurable because of this uncertainty. As fine a spread as produced by his cousins, Tyrion found he could only pick at his plate. Would Father require his presence for the inevitable confrontation with Jaime? He hoped not. Which meant that he probably would end up in the same room while Father tore into Jaime. What a mess.

It turned out that his predictions were correct. They were ordered into a private room within one of the Lannisport Lannisters’ manses. The door shut, guards marched away. Silence. And then the deadly quiet rumble that passed for Tywin’s roar came into play. Why keep his rage directed at one son when two would do?

“Has this been nothing but some joke for you?” Tywin’s voice whiplashed out at Jaime. “Did you enjoy the lowering of your name when in truth you deserved-”

“I did not do it for glory,” Jaime foolishly interrupted him.

“Do. Not-!” Tywin’s finger thrust into the air at Jaime’s face.

Tyrion was pretty sure he didn’t manage to hide his wince.

“From the first day, the first hour-! Why did you tell NO ONE of this-?”

“I had an emotional reaction and chose spite instead of reason,” Jaime quickly replied.

Tyrion gaped.

“You still DARE joke-”
“Father, do not do what they did on that day and assume that everything I do is a joke. We all know it is not so,” Jaime tried again, with a firmer tone.

They stared at each other, until Tywin gestured, allowing Jaime to continue.

“I felt nothing but righteousness after doing the deed. But I had hours to wait for somebody to come to the throne room. I panicked. I panicked, Father. I could only think that I would be condemned because after all, I did break my vow. So I resolved to face it with levity. It was stupid of me.”

“I trust that you are not hiding any more heroic acts from public knowledge?” Tywin finally said.

“I am not. Everything worth knowing has been announced.”

Tywin sat in silence some more, making them stand and wait for his judgement. Tyrion, of course, was developing an itch at the back of his neck that he was most definitely not going to scratch because if you don’t move, maybe Tywin won’t see you. Especially since he was that much shorter, to better escape notice.

The lies you tell yourself to make living bearable, Tyrion scoffed to himself.

“Your lamentable oversight has been corrected. How did the King come to know of the truth?”

“King Robert was moved to apologize to Lord Stark for being in the wrong in some argument between them, I know not what. He was moved, having obtained forgiveness from Lord Stark, to attempt to make amends to me for naming me Kingslayer. Lord Stannis then asked me why I did it. So I was made to answer by order of the King.”

“And none of them suspected?”

“Considering the panic from my confession about the wildfire conspiracy, no.”

“So by chance, if King Robert had not been in a mood to make amends and if Lord Stannis was not present to be curious, you would have kept silent on the matter?”

“Yes.”

And here, Tywin did not have to do anything, just stare at Jaime. The brothers were well used to the ‘You Disappoint Me and All the Worthwhile Lannisters Who Ever Came Before You’ stare.

“This wildfire conspiracy. Explain it and what is being done about it.”

Jaime did. Tyrion found it interesting enough to relax a little as he listened.

“The Lord Hand will be overseeing the removal of the wildfire caches. The King will not?”

“He admits that as he solves most problems by hitting them with his hammer that wiser, calmer heads should prevail in this matter.”

Tyrian observed as Tywin’s head tilted slightly, considering this choice by the King. He knew that Father would mock King Robert to Uncle Kevan occasionally in private as a loudmouthed fool, only barely less oafish than Mace Tyrell and only one to fear because of his undeniable ability as an unstoppable killer when in battle. This news that the King was aware of his own shortcomings and furthermore, not so proud or foolish as to ignore his weaknesses was an interesting, unexpected sign of character.
“This plan addressing the wildfire. It is the creation of the Florents?”

And here, Tyrion felt a thrill of fear go down his spine at the speculative change in his father’s expression.

“And Lord Stannis.”

“The Florents are proving to be such a very useful House,” Tywin finally said.

Might be a good thing in Father’s opinion, Tyrion thought. Might be very bad. He can’t tell this time from Father’s tone alone and that is most distressing.

“You mean their ideas for the betterment of the Iron Islands and the formation of the Iron Islands Trading Company?” Jaime asked.

“They do have an unexpected facility for industry and trade,” Tywin sniffed. Dismissively. “The King has been inspired, perhaps by this recent farce of a rebellion, to begin trying to have Dorne positively disposed towards his rule. He has asked me to give over Ser Gregor and Ser Armory to the Martells.”

“Will you do it?” Jaime asked.

“What would you do?” Tywin looked at him, testing.

“I would?”

“Why.”

Jaime shrugged.

Tywin’s nostrils flared in annoyance at his stupidity for a moment.

“You. What say you?” he directed his attention to Tyrion, who straightened.

“I would, Father.”

Tywin gestured that he should proceed.

“Politically, it does make sense that King Robert attempt to appease the Dornish in order to solidify his rule. I would do so because accommodating the King in this small matter will make him and the Small Council better disposed towards me for future endeavors.

The Small Council didn’t need to give over mining rights to House Lannister. King Robert could’ve had the rights remained to the Crown. Some could say that the destruction of the Iron Fleet at Fair Isle is enough recompense for the attack on Lannisport, to say nothing of warning you two years beforehand.

With early news of the Trading Company, you have a chance to invest in more shares earlier. That means greater risk, yes, but also greater profit. I would also bet that the Florents would continue with their profitable ideas and if they do not keep such ideas to themselves, it would be beneficial to have the Small Council and King well disposed to us such that early pick continues to be given to us for future investments.”

“You focus very much on profit.”

“You can buy any number of competent killers who can obey orders. You have hundreds of
knights at your command, Father. Ideas like the Trading Company and the fastest trade ships ever built in Westeros or the world don’t come every day. To say nothing of mining rights like you just gained from the foolish mistakes of another Lord Paramount. You have ever taught us to take advantage of the mistakes of others to our benefit.”

Tywin nodded his head after a few minutes. Huh. He’s gotten a nod from his father. A day of surprises.

“What has been revealed to you with those letters you receive from the young Florents?”

“The youngest speak of their lessons. Erren writes of his experiments on Dragonstone. Imry writes of his observations while traveling. Alekyne has been writing of the goings on within King’s Landing. Lady Selyse writes occasionally about Royal Fleet matters and court gossip.”

“Very trusting of them,” Tywin sneered.

“Not really, Father. They write that they are doing experiments but not what they are precisely doing. Saying that one has plans doesn’t really surprise. Everybody is planning something. I believe I only receive news of what they are sure to accomplish. In all other ways, they have disciplined discretion. Lord Florent has taught them well.”

At no point is he going to reveal that they chatter in a friendly manner to him over the letters, full of hilarious riddles, jokes, and sarcastic opinions.

“Nonetheless. Your continued association with them is useful.”

Left unsaid is that they keep him occupied in his lab instead of shaming the House. Tyrion is very sure that his father thinks that he is not actually doing anything worthwhile. Well. He’s not too sure himself if he’s doing anything worthwhile. But there is a very quick way to address that.

“Father, on the subject of associating with Florents.”

Tywin makes a nod, so that he is allowed to continue.

“As they are here in Lannisport, am I permitted to show the Florents my lab?”

Tywin did not answer for a few seconds. Which was a good sign, as he was always immediate with his refusals.

“What is it that they want to see?”

Nothing you’d understand, Tyrion thought.

“I’ve described my equipment and set up. I commissioned some of the best glassmakers with your permission, remember? Or at least, Uncle Kevan approved the expenditures. They want to see my beakers.”

Tyrion did not notice Jaime mouthing ‘what the Seven Hells is a beaker?’ to himself.

“You may. They may not stay overlong.”

“Thank you, Father.”

The Florents accept the invitation immediately. Lord Stannis was in a tear to go immediately after the feast and not even King Robert could convince him to stay overnight in Lannisport. He departed immediately along with Ser Davos with just enough guards and retinue to keep him safe
on the Gold Road. Tyrion was curious to see that none of the Florents expressed the same amount of worry.

“Of course we worry,” Imry said immediately. “We all love Selyse. But he’s IN love with her. That makes all the difference.”

Tyrion’s eyebrows raised. He hadn’t thought somebody as foreboding on first impression, like his own father, could be in love.

They had no compunctions about gossiping about Lord Stannis and Lady Selyse. They remembered very clearly how she really was something of an eager puppy those first days of their betrothal and Tyrion could almost see it, Stannis standing tall and awkward as she bounded at him and blinded him with science. How they all had doubts about how it would turn out as he truly was rude, ill-tempered, and scorned the finer social graces.

“We like him now,” Alekyne said. “He’s a good leader, he cares about results and not flattery, and he understands and values doing things correctly and thoroughly in order to achieve his goals. But in the beginning?”

“Madness, I thought,” Erren said. “I thought; why is Selyse being wasted on some grumbling, scowling grump? The man doesn’t laugh. Well. I’ve never observed so and Omer and Merrell have been watching him and they don’t report so, either.”

“How does it work, then?” Tyrion asked.

“She finds him funny. And he’s a really good fu-”

Imry’s hand was viper quick when he slapped the back of Erren’s head. Erren hissed and rubbed his head, but did not continue, readily accepting Imry’s silent rebuke for his carelessness.

“Finds him funny?” Tyrion hazarded, choosing to ignore Erren’s scandalous implication.

“Truly. Now, Lord Stannis isn’t some wit, but he’s made some spectacularly good insults in private when referring to those he most dislikes in court.”

“Get him going and he’s savage,” Imry nodded, grinning. “She is most amused by his statements of opinion on others.”

“He’s not an idiot, either.”

“So we learned to appreciate and like Lord Stannis. She didn’t have to learn. She just… wanted him. Probably immediately, strange to think as that is.”

“Harrenhal,” Imry said. “She noticed him as early as that.”

“Really?” Erren asked, as he was not there and too young, besides.

“Mmmhmm,” Imry nods. “Looked at him for a very long time through the far-eye when we were sitting in the tourney stands and Melessa and Rhea were teasing her about saying that she liked his eyebrows for days after.”

“That’s a thing women notice?” Erren asked, sounding a little worried.

“That’s a thing Selyse notices,” Alekyne shrugged.

“I think it’s misdirection,” Imry said. “I think she really means his eyes, but of course she couldn’t
just say so in front of Uncle Alester or Melessa and Rhea. Wouldn’t be proper for a lady to say, though I don’t know why. It’s not like women are blind, after all.”

“Oh,” Erren said.

“Obviously,” Imry waved a hand. “She does call him Stanny Blue Eyes, after all.”

“Stanny Blue Eyes,” Tyrion repeated, incredulous.

All of the Florents turned to look at him simultaneously. Their expressions remained friendly. And yet at the same time, Tyrion was very sure that the message that should he reveal this to anybody else, he would die in a horrible manner, was being drilled into his head. He really must learn how to achieve that. Not just anybody can learn Tywin’s special murder stare, not even him, his son.

“Well. Here is my lab!” Tyrion trotted ahead to push the door open.

His lab was located in the old castle proper of Casterly Rock; the ancient Casterly construction on top, where it would not be too much of a disaster should one of his experiments go awry and cause explosions. (Not that he was daring enough to mess about with such projects. That’s for Erren on Dragonstone. No, he was going to titrate his way to knowledge, thanks) The hike downwards into the Rock itself to where the modern living apartments are located were so strenuous for him that he had his chambers moved to the Casterly castle section. It also helped that Maester Creylan’s ravenry was also located in the upper section, so he could regularly check for Florent raven messages first thing in the morning.

He had taken over the entirety of one of the halls for a capacious laboratory. Within the long interior, he had long tables built to accommodate his height. Closest to the door is a table where he regularly takes his meals. On this table he drops off any equipment that he allows the servants to touch and then clean up. At no point is anybody outside of himself and Maester Creylan to touch anything beyond the table.

It turns out that the Florents do actually want to see his beakers. They were very impressed by the quality of the glass in his lab and they are especially impressed by the work done to produce his glass retorts.

As of now, he hasn't accomplished anything more than testing the various metals and ores that were continually being pulled out of the active Casterly Rock mines. He had a few samples of metal set aside. All he knew was that they were definitely Not-Gold, Not-Iron, Not-Tin, and Not-Silver. He was speaking with Erren, who was most experienced with testing of unknown materials, while Alekyne, Imry, and Ser Colin wandered within the wider lab, looking at his books, drawings, and records of his experiments.

“Tyrion?” Alekyne called out. “What’s this?”

Tyrion looked up.

“Oh. That’s just a clock, so that I know how long I’ve been working. Maester Creylan gets concerned that I don’t sleep enough.”

Alekyne and Imry were staring very intently at an assemblage of gears and cogwheels within a frame hung upon the wall, with weights and a steadily swinging pendulum.

“So it’s the nineteenth hour?” Imry pointed to a crossbow bolt affixed to a gear in front of a circular panel with 24 hours listed.
And twenty five minutes, as you can see with this panel. I joined up more gears to show seconds also so that I know if a gear’s stuck or not,” Tyrion pointed to two other circular panels; one had a much faster spinning bolt.

“... You’ve made a 24 hour clock.”

“... Yes?” Tyrion looked up at the Florents, raising his eyebrows. “Surely you built one of your own.”

“No!” Imry cried out, excited. “Tyrion, this is brilliant! You’re brilliant!”

“Do tell us how this works,” Alekyne nodded. “You’ve come up with something entirely new!”

While Tyrion was explaining, the minute bolt reached 30 minutes and a little hammer swung and hit a bell.

Tyrion almost laughed at how the Florents’ mouths dropped open.

“You’ve added a bell to alert you to the time!? Excellent!” Erren cried out.

“Is it really so special?” Tyrion asked, hopeful.

“Yes!” all of the Florents cried.

“The precision needed!”

“Using weights and a pendulum to keep the gears moving!”

“If you could design more, I’d pay for one! It’s overcast so much on Dragonstone I lose track of time all the time,” Erren nodded vigorously.

“We definitely need one at the Foxhole,” Alekyne added. “Or more!”

Tyrion was happy to design with them, as they carefully brought the clock down off the wall so that they could properly see the assembly from all sides. They measured the gears, drew diagrams, and stayed very excited. Ser Colin did not join them, happy to sit and watch his nephews in their element. They stayed for no more than a fortnight, where Tyrion showed them around Casterly Rock. Of course, they invaded the library and enthusiastically flipped through books that they had merely heard the titles of in other books.

They had to sit through dinners with Lord Tywin himself and the other adult Lannisters. There were some poorly hidden sneers when Ser Imry and Ser Erren were first announced, as they were considered full young to be knighted and neither having shown at all at any tourneys. On the other hand, Tyrion now knew that Ser Colin placed more importance on actual experience in combat and properly killing enemies; hence his decision. Tyrion knew after speaking with Ser Colin that he was fully confident that Imry and Erren were capable of understanding the importance of taking the Knight’s Oath seriously and the maturity to make moral decisions in addition to them fighting well during the Greyjoy Rebellion. Tyrion had wondered at why Alekyne was not similarly knighted despite making a good showing during the taking of Great Wyk. Alekyne had not seemed to mind, so Tyrion put it out of his mind.

Tyrion certainly never had cause to feel embarrassment with his friends. The Florents displayed grace and table manners that were trained for appearances at court, except that Tyrion was willing to suspect that not even Cersei showed so well. Furthermore, they all were able to tell the stories of their involvement in the fighting during the Greyjoy Rebellion very well, which won the interest
and approval of the men. Certainly they did not imbibe too much wine over the course of the meal, which is to his father’s approval.

In fact, they treated the served wine in what Tyrion supposed was a particularly Reacher sort of way; casual and yet intimidating because of how each glass commanded their full attention. They didn’t drink to merely keep their mouths wet between bites. In this, they were even more sophisticated than the Lannisters and other Westermen present. They picked up their wineglasses after the first pour, made neat little swirls with efficient wrist movement and raised the glasses to their noses, sniffing, their eyes dropping closed. Of course, they smiled from their first impressions, because unacceptable vintages would never grace Lord Tywin Lannister’s table, and they took measured sips. They kept the wine on their tongues, not swallowing immediately, making soft hummings of pleasure afterwards, their eyebrows raising at each other. Their quiet judgement was enough to make even the most secure Lannisters present anxious for their approval. Tyrion chuckled to himself; if they thought a few Florents raised and educated on good Reach wines were suddenly intimidating, how much more would a proper Redwyne upset them! Uncle Gerion cheerfully inquired as to what it was they were humming about and they all replied with enthusiasm about what they tasted; warmth and fruits as cherry and plum, dark earth, oak, and even smoke. Smoke! Tyrion took a sip from his glass, curious as to whether or not they were jesting, having never heard of such a thing before. Why, there was something smoky, now that he was thinking of it! Interesting!

One of the ladies, after taking a more measured sip, asked if that meant that there were cherries and plums in the wine itself. The Florents’ eyebrows raised all at once, but they were gracious enough when they responded in the negative. It was all in the grapes, the sunlight and the particular patch of earth and water they were given, changed like magic as they were pressed and squeezed and aged in their barrels, growing mysteriously rich over the years with flavors that tripped one after another over the tongue if only one took the time to taste. Nobody knows yet how it was possible for a grape to mum at the flavor of cherries and plums all at once. But how fortunate that it was so, yes?

They also won the attention of the women by being much more knowledgeable than expected about the latest styles of the court. It seemed that Cersei did not trouble herself to maintain correspondence with any of her lady cousins and certainly the Lannister ladies of the Rock would not stoop to ask outright after the letters received by the relatives of Cersei’s Westermen ladies-in-waiting.

“There are two competing modes of dress at court,” Aleyke explained. “Those who follow Queen Cersei, as expected. And those who follow after Lady Arryn and my cousin, Lady Selyse Baratheon. I expect that you would wish to follow your cousin?”

Tyrion was amused by the wavering of his lady cousins. For the talk of the Rock after Lord and Lady Baratheon’s wedding was all about her wedding dress and the similarly daringly tight cuts of the other Florent ladies’ dresses and how scandalous their new dance was. What’s more, nobody knew anybody who knew how to do the Foxtrot; it piqued their interest that this dance was rumored fashionable amongst the Reacher set of King’s Landing as well as the most influential of Valemen. It would not do for the leading family of the Westerlands to be behind on such fashionable matters!

“That depends,” Marielle Lannister replied. “On which kind of dress causes a man to take notice, my lord.”

“Ah,” Imry nodded. “Well. There is no question that Selyse is wise in the ways of dress in that way. She is wont to say: Less is more.”
“Less is more?” all of the Lannister ladies looked confused indeed.

Tyrion snickered into his cup. What a thing to say to any Lannister of the Rock! Why do less, when excess suits them so well?


“Simple matter of mathematics,” Erren muttered to Tyrion, who grinned.

Tyrion supposed that the value of the Florent jacket would be lost on his cousins, seeing as they had no cause at all to value a good set of pockets, unlike himself. There were snickers at his new jackets when he first started wearing them, no mistake. But he could see very clearly how the impeccable jackets of the Florents, on Florents, were inspiring all sorts of obvious giggles and gazes that were starting to exasperate his uncles and male cousins.

That was in addition to the novelty and charm of speaking with young fellows like sophisticated Alekyne, dashing Ser Imry, and witty Ser Erren, about such subjects such as fashion, music, and poetry when most young lords cared only for hunting, hawking, or jousting (which were polite for dinner. The other subjects of interest such as gambling, drinking, and whoring were definitely not brought up in polite society). Tyrion found it hilarious that the sly advice of Alekyne and the young Florent men recommending less fabric and therefore the tightening of skirts was being more or less ignored as superfluous ladies talk.

And then bold Marielle asked that the Florents demonstrate and teach the Foxtrot to them. Tyrion looked with alarm at his father, but Alekyne gracefully asked Aunt Genna if she approved. Aunt Genna must have been feeling mischievous and amused by Tywin’s barely hidden suspicious disapproval of such goings on, because she parried with inquiring as to whom Alekyne would choose to teach and demonstrate the dance with first.

“Why you, august Lady Genna Lannister of Casterly Rock. Far be it for me to ignore precedence!”

Aunt Genna’s eyes narrowed, taking Alekyne’s measure. Tyrion raised his eyebrows; he understood that Alekyne definitely did not want to encourage any of his lady cousins at this juncture, but had not thought he would choose this route.

Aunt Genna stood up and grandly sailed forth, her bulk moving with the assurance of a war galley on the sea, ignoring the discomfited mutterings of her husband Emmon. Alekyne and Erren stood up and moved to a clear space within the dining hall. Erren stood beside Genna and showed her the ladies’ steps while Alekyne slowly demonstrated the mens’ steps. Tyrion watched as his lady cousins all pursed their lips and pouted when Alekyne reached out with assurance and took Aunt Genna’s hand and placed his left hand just underneath her shoulder blade while she put her hand upon his shoulder. Tyrion wasn’t expecting Aunt Genna’s rumbling giggle, but he didn’t miss the shifting of his uncles watching.

Alekyne and Erren were correctly polite as they guided Aunt Genna through the steps. She did not coquettishly pretend clumsiness or inability to follow instructions; she was perfectly well a dancer and court ornament in her day. Alekyne guided her up the hall.

“Imry!” he called out. “Rhythm, please!”

Imry nodded and instead of clapping out a beat as everybody expected, took up two soup spoons in one hand and began beating out a rhythm with them. Tyrion grinned at his skill and he noticed that everybody raised their eyebrows at this unexpected talent. The clink of the spoons rang out clearly
in the hall and Alekyne and Aunt Genna were gliding together back down the hall, doing pivots and rollaways, to her evident delight. When they got to the end, Alekyne and Erren switched off and Aunt Genna went up and down with Erren.

Tyrion smiled, seeing that his Aunt was enjoying herself and that the dance suited her very much; she had ceased dancing as she grew fat, knowing that the sight of her attempting to skip and hop would be seen as shamefully ridiculous. Here, she was graceful again. When they came back down the hall, Erren slowed enough to spin her under his arm and Imry ended the rhythm. Erren and Alekyne bowed and Aunt Genna curtsied with aplomb and enough people were giving applause that Tyrion felt confident enough to join in.

That evening after that particular dinner was the most fun Tyrion had in a long while. Uncle Gerion of course stood up to learn this new dance, knowing that it would tweak his eldest brother’s nose and where Gerion went on such matters, Tygett went too. The two brothers danced with their sister in turn and they looked very well doing so.

Tygett’s wife was quickly persuaded to learn and from there, more and more of the married couples stood up to learn. After an hour, Uncle Gerion learned enough to want to indulge his unhappily sitting out maiden nieces and cousins. Alekyne cannily stayed teaching the married Lannister ladies while Ser Colin very gallantly stood up with Tyrion’s single female relatives to teach them. Eventually Erren was led by Aunt Genna to one or another of these single cousins; as a second son of a third son, he was certainly in much less danger of entanglement.

Imry remained at his seat, beating out a rhythm and singing songs suitable for the foxtrot. Tyrion went to sit next to him, clapping along. Eventually, he must have had enough drink to not feel too embarrassed when Alekyne offered to teach him how to do the dance. Tyrion protested at first; surely he was ill-suited for any dance with his too short legs. He was never taught any of the traditional dances as a consequence; the idea of him trying to keep up with skipping and chassé steps was too ridiculous. At feasts, he ate and he drank. That’s just what he was allowed to do. And of course, Father would never countenance ridiculousness in a Lannister. But Aunt Genna, indomitable and great, very firmly nearly picked him up from his chair to go through the steps.

He gamely followed the instructions and clasped both of Aunt Genna’s hands with his own. He couldn’t put a hand on her waist or hip; that was surely unseemly. He didn’t expect much as he stepped forth, trying to do as Alekyne advised and steer Aunt Genna. But… they weren’t doing awfully. Aunt Genna was a good dancer and kept her steps brief to match his stride and paid attention to his hands pushing and pulling. Huh. They were dancing!

He tried pushing with both hands and they succeeded in a rollaway. He tried again and they did it again, each letting go and spinning and meeting each other again to the beat, holding hands again.

“I’m dancing!” Tyrion exclaimed, laughing.

“I knew you could do anything you put your mind to!” Aunt Genna laughingly beamed down at him.

They made a full circle of the dining hall and Aunt Genna was forced to sit down, fanning herself and flushed from the exercise. Tyrion sat down too, next to her.

“I like these Florents,” Aunt Genna said. “Such fun, amusing fellows! Mayhap I should speak with your father and try for catching one of them for your cousins! What do you think?”

Tyrion imagined any of his friends joining him in his lab and allowed himself that dream of fun and discovery and laughter for a few seconds. But only a few seconds; he knew that the idea of any
of them being chained to the Rock and beholden to his father’s disapproval would be disastrous. Unless it was Alekyne; as heir, he could conceivably be safe at Brightwater Keep. But Alekyne could hardly want someone like Lord Tywin as good-kin. The gold of the Lannister mines lose their luster when weighed against the influence of the Old Lion.

“I think Father is wary,” Tyrion tilted his chin significantly. “Of their impertinence and newfangled ways. If they are scheming for position in the Reach as everybody says and thinks—”

“He would not want to do anything to clearly show support or sanction as a marriage joining our Houses. Bah. What inconvenience!” Aunt Genna muttered to herself. “That Alekyne ought to be snapped up, the sooner the better! He’s so charming, so eloquent! He dances so well! One practically forgets his ears when he smiles at you. And such a smile!”

“I suspect Father would say that they smile too much,” Tyrion patted Aunt Genna’s arm.

“No less dangerous for it,” Aunt Genna lowered her voice. “Men always think scowls and frowns show power. But the most dangerous are the smiling ones, who charm and make you at ease. That’s when they stick the knife in your back, when you least expect. They feel like dangerous men. Are they, dear nephew? Am I right, or am I right?”

Tyrion thought back on the letters he received, of jokes about Selyse’s rules for social engagement: Be polite. Be professional. Have a plan to kill every single person you ever meet. He thought on Alekyne’s work with his steel wheeled bow, how once he perfected it, he was going to make crossbows equally deadly. He thought on Imry, who had fast hands deft for drumming and playing the flute, which also meant that he was faster than a famed Dornish viper with a dagger. He thought on Erren, so skilled with chemicals and therefore, poisons. They all had silent gaits, were plain faced when they weren’t smiling, could assume accents at will, and were comfortable conversing with high born and smallfolk alike. They stood out or blended in, as they chose. They were so obviously harmless at first glance, unless one knew them. Like himself, a friend, and then they revealed just enough to become… worrisomely disconcerting. He had never met lordlings the like.

“You are right,” Tyrion nodded. “What will you do, Aunt Genna?”

“I shall do nothing,” Aunt Genna said. “It is surely none of my business. But do be careful of having such for friends. They are exciting, no doubt. But if they turn upon your father—”

“They are not so foolish!” Tyrion urgently whispered. “Don’t say such a thing!”

“Yes, that would be crazy, wouldn’t it,” Aunt Genna picked up an abandoned glass of wine off the table and took a drink. “Crazy like a fox.”
Renly sat in Stannis’ lap, hugging him very hard. He was surely too old for such hugs normally, but as Stannis was looking terrifying and grinding his teeth louder than usual, Renly thought it best. At the least, Stannis would have to actually work to pry him off before charging at the door of Selyse’s birthing chamber.

Selyse gave Renly a tour during the Greyjoy Rebellion. He knew by now that it soothed Selyse to talk and have somebody listening to her as she explained something or another. She spoke of finding the most experienced midwife out of Fleabottom; for if such a woman could successfully guide poor smallfolk women and prevent them from perishing of birthing bed fever in the dirty hovels of Pisswater Bend, surely she would be successful in the scrupulously clean environs of the Foxhole. And clean was the byword for her birthing chamber. Renly was sure that it would always smell slightly of vinegar and soap.

The pregnancy was also a good time, in Selyse’s opinion, to give the sex education presentation. Renly, Omer, and Merrell were trapped in the classroom along with Delena while Selyse drew mortifying diagrams on the chalkboard. Renly’s pride kept him from squirming too much, though he blushed awfully while Delena asked follow up questions. He did so envy how Omer was not one to blush. Merrell wasn’t disinterested, but he was young enough to find it all something that had very little to do with him personally and it made Renly blush even more to hear him repeating ‘vagina’ or ‘glans’ under his breath after Selyse wrote the proper labels on her diagrams. He could not help it; for logically, that diagram of the male member must be... based off of his own brother. He did not know how Selyse could be so dispassionate and teacher-ly about the subject. He did wish he had her sort of poise.

There is no proper bed within the birthing chamber. Selyse was adamant that she’ll not have some mattress filled with unclean feathers. There is a metal contraption, which Renly thinks looks like a most uncomfortable interpretation of a chair or bed, bolted against one wall, with rails. There was only a cotton sheets covering it, giving it no padding at all, really. There is a table with stacks of very clean cloths for the blood.

They were waiting now. Stannis arrived back at the Foxhole very unexpectedly indeed, changing horses along the Gold Road, set on being by her side, for ill or otherwise. Renly saw them in the Foxhole courtyard, with him embracing her so tightly about the shoulders, standing to her side so that he would not be in the way of her bulging belly, and her holding on to him just as tightly, kissing with abandon. Renly wrinkled his nose at the memory of such an open display. It was a little embarrassing; certainly he’d never seen such demonstrative behavior among any couples when he lived at Storm’s End. It wasn’t really a Stormlander way. Reachers were more flirtatious and courtly, Renly had learned, giving hand kisses and the like and everybody was ready with a compliment on a moment’s notice.

He didn’t think Stannis would approve and that he’d dismiss it with a sniff about frivolity and dishonesty. But with Selyse it was completely different. It couldn’t be helped because his brother and his wife were the rarest of highborn couples; in love and somehow between the two of them ravenous lovers. Renly thought that as embarrassing as that was, it was a better thing than Robert and Cersei’s marriage, at least. He wasn’t stupid and he’d learned properly from Omer and Merrell how to be quiet and to take advantage of their currently short heights to keep observations; his eldest brother quarreled so much with his wife when Renly first stayed at the Red Keep that it frightened him in the beginning.
Stannis admonished Selyse most strongly upon his return about her walking about during the advanced stage of her pregnancy, but she scoffed at him and told him that different women had different pregnancies. Renly had overhead from the other women within the Foxhole that Selyse was unusually robust during her pregnancy. She had the morning sickness, yes, but she also consumed boiled eggs, hard cheeses, lean meats, all sorts of pickled vegetables, and fish voraciously in addition to her usual dark salad greens, which fueled her energies. She kept up her walking, taking circuits within the Foxhole itself with a slower pace.

She commissioned a new cradle and a new kind of chair, with legs attached to what looked like bows; a rocking chair. Renly had never seen the like. It was rather fun to sit and rock in it and the furniture maker was sure that there would be others who would like such a chair if other examples were made.

Stannis had no more than two days to calm down before he was grinding his teeth with worry again and Renly was acting as a human weight on his lap; Selyse’s labor pains began at lunch this day.

“Oh. Ow. Motherfucker,” her fork halting in midair.

Such was Selyse’s response, not even a cry of pain really. Renly thought it a little anticlimactic.

She had stood up and very firmly called out instructions; Maester Willis and Midwife Alys were to prep for the birthing room. Her mother, Lady Samantha, and her aunt Rosamund, and Cousin Delena may be present if they chose. Of course they chose. Her handmaid Megga would also be present if she chose. Of course she chose. Selyse looked back and grasped Stannis’ hand once and then walked away from him, escorted by Megga for the birthing chamber.

The silence from behind the shut door was unnerving. Renly heard tell there would be screaming. Shouldn’t there be screaming?

“It’ll be hours yet,” Ser Davos said from where he was sitting next to them.

“No?” Renly asked.

“Aye. Best distract yourself while you wait.”

Well. Ser Davos would know; he was a father many times over. And the experience was shown by Davos whittling away at a block of wood.

Renly lifted his head from Stannis’ shoulder to look at Stannis.

“Want to play a game of Mere?”

“... No.”

“Would you like for me to read you a story?” Renly finally asked.

Stannis finally nodded and Renly ran off to his chambers to retrieve a stack of books. He came back with Omer and Merrell. They were solemnly lurking in the hallway, interested in the event of the birth and also concerned for their cousin. Renly started off by reading James and the Giant Peach. His voice became dry and servants were called to give him a pitcher of lemon water so that he could continue. He follows up with Princess Mononoke, Brave Princess Merida, Prince Bambi, the Lion King, Frozen, Martin the Warrior, and is in the middle of Fantastic Mr. Fox when they hear Selyse cry out loud enough to hear from behind the door.

Stannis leaps up and there is no way he can be distracted now.
The door opens and Megga pokes her head out.

“She’s wanting you, my lord,” she urgently says. “Do scrub in vinegar and change into the smocks. Hurry.”

One of the midwife’s apprentices comes out with a pitcher and wash basin of vinegar. Davos helps Stannis out of his jacket and shirt. The apprentice quickly wets a washcloth in the vinegar and starts vigorously scrubbing on Stannis’ exposed skin as he dunks his hands into the vinegar and starts washing his hands.

Renly stands, wrinkling his nose at the smell, fear tightening in his gut.

Stannis dons a clean smock and rushes in. Davos stays back, but the door is left ajar and nobody seems to be aware as Renly, Omer, and Merrell line up and poke their heads in to watch.

Selyse is in a smock of her own and standing in the middle of the room, her legs and bottom bare. Renly had not expected that.

“Selyse! What are you doing standing!” Stannis barks at her.

“Shut the fuck up, I’ll stand because I feel like it!” Selyse growls at him and makes a terrible grimace. “Fuck! There’s another contraction!”

She reaches for Stannis and he goes to her, holding her up while she clutches at his shoulders and leans on him, and Renly can see her taking measured deep breaths.

The midwife is crouched along with Maester Willis, staring up at Selyse between her legs and it’s the oddest thing.

“Give me the dilation!” Selyse cries out.

Renly gaped when the midwife reached out and put her fingers in there! And then the midwife guided Maester Willis’ hand and he put his fingers in there!

“Not yet, milady!” Midwife Alys replies.

Selyse huffs and nods.

“What’s going on?” Stannis says. “Is something wrong?”

Selyse shakes her head.

“I must not push until the opening is wide enough for the baby’s head. I push too soon, I will tear.”

“Lie down,” Stannis tries again.

“No, I need the baby to move down from gravity, I need-”

Selyse groans.

“Dilation!” she demands for another check again.

“Same!”

“Shit-”
Selyse’s mother is standing behind Stannis, holding one of Selyse’s hands, making nonsense comforting noises.

“My strong Selyse, you are doing so well, my good girl, my strong girl-”

“Water!” Selyse cries out and her cousin Delena stands ready with a cup for her to sip from.

She huffs through more contractions. They wait.

“My lady, dilation at four inches,” Maester Willis actually has a measuring rod in his hand, looking fascinated and queasy. This is the first time he’s witnessed a birth from all his training at the Citadel.

“Finally-” Selyse groans.

“What-” Stannis says.

“Shut up and breathe with me!”

Selyse shifts her stance, planting her feet firmly and gives out a great shout.

Renly felt terribly ill and his heart feels like it could burst out of his chest as Selyse yells and whimpers. Her sounds don’t stop and her agony terrifies him.

“Lie down!” Stannis tries again, tries to move.

“FUCK YOU!” Selyse howls. “I DO WHAT I WANT!”

“Breathe! Breathe!” her aunt and mother chant. “Breathe!”

“I see the head!” calls out Midwife Alys. “Push, milady, push!”

“Head!?” Selyse wails.

“Head!” Alys and Willis respond.

“Gods, it’s purple!” Delena cries out from where she has circled around to see.

“That’s normal!” Alys quickly says at Stannis’ dreadful look.

“Push!”

“Breathe!”

Selyse screams again, bracing her forehead against Stannis’ shoulder.

“Push, milady, push!”

Renly can’t see anything else really with all the adults crowding around.

“MOTHERFUCKER!” Selyse howls.

Her legs shake and she seems about to topple, if it were not for Stannis holding her up. Selyse struggles for words and eventually, they are kneeling together on the floor, the metal chair-bed ignored all together.

“Selyse!” Stannis urgently says to her, at a loss to say something more useful. “Selyse!”
“Shoulders now, milady!” Alys calls out. “Shoulders! Once more, milady! Push! Push!”

A thin wail pierces the air and Renly nearly vomits. It can cry while coming out!? Nobody told him of this!

Selyse huffs and puffs and screams.

“Catch it!” Maester Willis nervously commands. “It’s coming, it’s coming!”

He needn’t have called out so; Alys has both hands cupped somewhere between Selyse’s thighs, blocked from Renly’s view.

“Breathe!”

“Push!”

“Oh, milady!” Alys cheers. “Oh, milady!”

Alys rises from her crouch and there is a bloody shape in her hands.

Selyse finally allows herself to be guided to the metal chair-bed as the most important part has passed. Midwife Alys, Maester Wilis and the apprentices bustle about, calling out the instructions for the cord to be tied off and cut, to wait for the afterbirth to pass, to wipe down the crying baby.

“My lord,” Maester Willis pronounces, after Alys wraps the baby securely in clean swaddling. “You have a son.”

Selyse reaches out to hold the baby and she has nothing to say, grinning and grinning.

Stannis blinks at the small, wrinkled face peeping out of the blanket and laughs. He collapses to sit on a chair next to Selyse and laughs and laughs, desperately relieved. Selyse looks at him, her eyes bright and Stannis’ sudden loss of tension is such that all he can do is lean over and butt his head against her shoulder, his guffaws becoming huffs of breath.

Renly has never heard the like before. He didn’t think Stannis was able to laugh.

Selyse’s mother was wiping relieved tears from her face, leaning over the other side and kissed Selyse on her forehead. Her aunt did the same.

Eventually, the people notice that he and Omer and Merrell are at the door and they are allowed in along with Davos to properly see the baby.

They arrange themselves next to where Selyse is resting, holding and murmuring to the baby.

“What is his name?” Renly finally asks.

“Yeah,” says Merrell.

“I like Armand,” Selyse softly said.

Renly looked at Stannis, hopefully.

“Armand Baratheon,” Stannis murmurs, trying the name out loud. “Yes. Let him be named that.”

“Hello, Armand,” Renly bounces on the balls of his feet, happy. “I’m your Uncle Renly!”
A flurry of ravens get sent off with the news and in a few days, Midwife Alys assures Selyse she is strong enough to receive visitors, so long as she remains in bed. Lady Arryn arrives quickly, laughing with watery eyes from Selyse’s success. She cooed over the baby and Selyse softly suggests that perhaps when Lysa is pregnant again that she could give her the notes she made during her own pregnancy. It is all in the hands of the gods, but maybe- And Lysa nodded immediately.

It is now, in privacy, that Lysa asks about potential consequences from a too large dose of moontea. Selyse has years of controlling her expression to use as she carefully asks for the details. Lysa reveals her feelings for one Petyr Baelish and the circumstances of her first pregnancy.

“I thought- I thought if I told Father he would allow us to wed-”

“My dear, life is not a song,” Selyse’s voice is soft with sympathy. “Your father- I am most sorry to say, is- a real hard asshole-”

Lysa laughs through her fresh tears over the memory.

“I did not think I would be happy. Catelyn is Lady of Winterfell like she always wanted, with a young husband, a mother of the heir and more besides!”

Lysa wipes her eyes.

“Queen Cersei was cruel and mocking and though Lord Arryn is a kind, honorable man-”

“He has gray hair and his breath was stank,” Selyse finishes.

Lysa giggles at her shocking frankness, used to it by now.

“He is much better now,” Lysa says. “After you got Lord Stannis to advise him to use a toothbrush and make changes to his diet. And I do care for him much more. And I am so glad that I have met you and your family!”

Selyse’s own mother and aunt have taken Lysa under their wings and as Lysa had only the barest of memories of her own mother, she hungrily received their caring and love, following their lead. They are more traditional than the daring Selyse and the young Florents, which was comforting. But at the same time, she has learned that they had little use for the romantic and soft notions of songs and poetry that she and Catelyn overindulged in with Lord Hoster’s permission.

For though the young Florents have composed and perform all sorts of pretty love songs, their stories are more grisly, more full of betrayals, lies, backstabblings, even kinslaying in the case of stories like the Lion King. Lysa feels like it might have done her some good if there were stories of the like at Riverrun; she feels like she ought to have expected her own father to care more for the gains to House Tully by marrying her off to House Arryn than to a poor lordly House as Baelish.

She also realises that Petyr is not as special as she once thought. She has sat with Selyse, Rhea, and Delena in the past with the Royce girls and they frankly gossiped and discussed the men they fancied while visiting the Foxhole. While the Royce girls gushed at Alekyne’s seat on a horse and the flex of his arms during archery practice, the Florent girls would exchange amused, faintly mocking glances. She knows now that the Royce girls did not show themselves well by failing to note that Alekyne had tried to engage with them with riddles or storytelling, with games playing that sought to look for some mathematical ability or cleverness. She remembers well that unlike in Riverrun, where her Father cared only for skill at arms such as displayed by Uncle Brynden and
how the household knights and squires and Edmure all laughed at Petyr’s lack of skill at arms, that the Florents had no such thoughts. It is proven by how the young Florent men have turned out.

All the young Florent men were witty, clever, cunning in turn as well as having beautiful singing voices. Lysa has allowed herself to secretly treasure the flutter in her heart when she watched Alekyne strut and croon through his songs, dreaming that he was singing about her. To her. It was not to be, of course. Alekyne is honorable and though he may kiss her hand in greeting he certainly never went beyond that. He would certainly never shame her, let alone himself, or their respective Houses. She admires that about the Florents; they value family as well as any Tully. She also knows that as kind as Alekyne is, she is not so nimble of mind or so educated that they would suit. She cannot argue and debate like the Florent ladies. She knows now that Petyr is just one of a certain type of man that you could find in Westeros if you tried. What’s more, none of the Florent men were dismissive of her; they always chose her to play with them on their team for Pictionary and they were always happy to play Meeple with her. She knows now that Petyr was merely tolerant of her presence so long as Catelyn was near too.

She has even almost forgotten the sting of Petyr calling her Cat that night she gave him her maidenhead. Selyse had gasped on her behalf, indignant at his behavior when she told her what happened. She had not thought it noteworthy, but Selyse had clutched her hand and said she deserves a man who would not call her another woman’s name. And for it to be her sister! How awful, Selyse sympathetically said. Why, Selyse is quite sure that Petyr was toying with her affections and perhaps even laughing at her love of him! Lysa had not thought of it like that, but now that she has, she sees the sense of it. If he truly loved her, Selyse pointed out, he ought to have approached her father first and spoke to him of betrothal himself! Even if he was a minor lord, he ought to have been willing to go through the expected protocol. In fact, he had the temerity to write her a letter, asking for a good word from her to Jon about a position within the Vale! The nerve of that man, he certainly never wrote a letter to her before and everybody knew she would be in King’s Landing with her husband! How dare he claim to treasure their friendship and past together in Riverrun. Friendship, indeed! User, player, just like Selyse said! Well, she’s done being a dupe, first him, her father, she’ll never, never-!

That letter was thrown into the hearth fire with no reply.

Lysa knows that Selyse knows what it is like to be overlooked. Lysa comes to her conclusion that Selyse has cultivated her singing, musicality with instruments, and skill at dance precisely because she is so much plainer than her lady cousins. And obviously, her fashion for tight skirts was to attract attention away from her large Florent ears and small bust! Lysa envies the self-possession and stubbornness that Selyse must have had as a little girl to refuse to allow her cousins to outshine her. She didn’t have that spiritedness herself, so she is very glad that Selyse has befriended her and encourages her so much. Why, she cares so much more than Catelyn ever did! Catelyn only cared about big, handsome, cruel Brandon Stark! Catelyn only cared about being Lady of Winterfell! Catelyn was the beauty of the family! Catelyn, Catelyn, Catelyn! How she is sick of dear, beautiful, lovely Catelyn!

Ever since Lord Stannis has so usefully, with his graceless bluntness, informed her husband on how to be much more pleasing in presence to her, she can see how good a husband he is. Jon is not her ideal husband; for he cannot make her sigh over his appearance with his age. But they kiss more and it is pleasing. He has wonderful manners and he certainly never shouts at her. He has learned how to be a good husband to his first wives and she reaps the benefits of his experience in the matter. She has seen how King Robert and Queen Cersei are disrespectful of each other in public and it is a disgrace she is glad is not her lot. She likes that he dances the foxtrot with her; as the gliding movements are easy for a man of his age. It is romantic. Why, he even compliments her. Certainly, he has more skill at it than poor Lord Stannis, who has no graceful manners and
words. She is glad that Selyse is so in love and suiting with Lord Stannis, for a man like that terrifies Lysa and more than once Selyse has had to scold him for causing her to burst into nervous tears with one of his rude statements. Selyse is so kind to her.

In the end, Lysa is prompted to seek out the expertise of Midwife Alys. She changes her diet from the usual too rich fare of the Red Keep, she stops drinking much alcohol in favor of boiled teas and tisanes, and she starts exercising with Selyse. The poses on the floor that the Florent ladies practice in the privacy of their chambers were embarrassing at first, but Lysa cannot deny the mounting strength of her midsection that came from those repetitive leg lifts. Anything at all might help. Selyse and Midwife Alys have even quietly told her that perhaps unfortunately that Lord Arryn’s own seed might be at fault; she is his third wife after all and if he could not father living children on those previous ladies during his prime, the pattern must not be ignored. Lysa’s worries ease from this. Of course, why hadn’t she thought of that? She would try for an heir with all her might, but if her husband’s seed was no good in the first place, it didn’t matter how fertile the soil was.

She laughs to herself when Lord and Lady Baratheon formally present their son to court and Queen Cersei has the condescension to give advice to Lady Selyse on how to be a mother! She is sure that Prince Joffrey’s neverending tantrums and screams of No-! in response to everything is the sign of a spoiled brat. Perhaps Lord and Lady Baratheon do not want blind obedience from their children (unlike her own father, Lysa bitterly thinks) but for sure she knows that screaming unreasonable behavior will not be tolerated. Why, dear, sweet little Merrell as the youngest Florent gives a glimpse of the skills the Florents have in raising sons! To say nothing of how well Alekyne the heir turned out or Imry and Erren!

Lady Melessa Tarly was overjoyed at the news of Selyse’s successful delivery and made the journey to the Foxhole herself, bringing her son Samwell and daughter Talla with her. Lysa is glad to reacquaint herself with this Florent cousin and make much of the Tarly children.

Samwell had cowered behind his mother’s skirt upon seeing Lord Stannis, despite the fact that he wasn’t frowning on purpose. Lord Stannis was not aloof, however, having become used to the Florent boys and having a younger brother besides; he knelt down to reintroduce himself and Samwell came out to make a bow. Samwell was a chubby, shy little boy, who still sucked his thumb and was overwhelmed by the attention of the Fox Pack. They drew him out with stories, knock knock jokes, and nonsense songs and he began to laugh and shortly afterwards trailed after them in play, despite crying occasionally when he tripped and fell on his face. Merrell took to Samwell quite immediately, finally having somebody younger than him about that he could impress and very kindly waited out Sam’s tears and always held his hand out to him and comforted him with hugs. It quite melted Lysa’s heart to see.

Melessa frankly recounted her fights with Lord Tarly about Samwell to Selyse and the other women in the sewing room. When he bellowed at her about so called coddling, she tried to be a gracious, courteous lady in response at first, but in the end she confessed that she had taken her lung power from following Selyse’s habit of jogging up and down bailey towers and keeping up her singing practice to good use and bellowed back like a fishwife, to his shock.

“I always said he deserved no less,” Selyse muttered as she ran through scales on her dulcimer. “Old goat.”

Melessa was firmly resistant to Randyll’s ideas that taking the time to read to Samwell in the evenings and singing to him was coddling. She also exerted her control over the servants of Horn Hill by having any number of servants constantly aware of Sam’s whereabouts whenever he was
taken out of the nursery. She always did think that Selyse, Imry, and Erren were much too apt to be
sensationaly paranoiac after inventing the Assassin’s Creed stories, but she was no fool; trust but
verify.

She had to drop everything and rush to Sam’s rescue from his father’s foolishness; that time when
he threw her poor boy into the pond! Why, she had to jump in after her son, risking her skirts
sinking her down! But anger gave her strength and she fetched Sam up. Her fury was ice cold then;
no fishwife bellowing. Randyll had blustered, but Melessa silently thrust her hand at his face and
disdainfully flicked it, dismissing him and his protests about her interference. He stomped off when
Melessa refused to leave first, cradling Sam close.

That evening when he retired to his chambers, he woke up in the middle of the night in terror by
the sight of Melessa standing at the foot of his bed, her face baleful in the moonlight. He was sure
that he had locked the door before going to sleep.

“You must think,” Melessa’s tone was sickly sweet. “That only the Florent boys can get past locks.
Didn’t you, dearest, darling, husband?”

He sputtered.

“Don’t make me truly angry, Randyll. You’ll not have a chance to scream. Savvy?”

She put her rusty sneaking skills to use and more than once in the subsequent days Randyll Tarly
yelped in fear as his wife would appear at his shoulder at odd intervals during the day no matter
where he was in the keep, an implacable, angry ghost. Watching him.

It was absolutely ridiculous that he wanted to push Sam past his abilities as a six year old little boy!
Why, she does have younger male cousins, after all! She remembers how they were! She argued
with Randyll about it, resolutely wearing him down; was he truly going to question her methods,
given how well Alekyne turned out? Given how well Imry and Erren, Omer and Merrell are
showing? Did he want his own son to be as ignorant as those hill tribes of the Vale!? How was he
to manage the mills without knowing his mathematics!? Did he wish for the wealth of Horn Hill, a
boon of her dowry, to be pissed and swindled away? Did he!?

Lord Randyll Tarly was most displeased and terrified in equal measure. He was entirely
unprepared for the ferocity of his wife in her anger or her arguing. For Melessa Tarly was normally
a relentlessly cheerful woman; she did not trouble herself to trouble him to be more civil than his
usual wont and did not attempt anysuch chiding or nagging that he had expected to endure upon
entering the married state. It was one of the reasons why he had put off getting married for so long;
so many of his fellow lords told him often enough that though marriage was of course essential to
Houses, it was often an ill upon former bachelors. He had become entirely dependent and
accustomed to the efficient running of Horn Hill and the graciousness of his lady wife. He had
even, in his limited capacity for the softer emotions, become fond of her. He had thought that the
troubling, troublesome tendencies of the male Florents were somehow moderated by her being a
woman. He was sorely incorrect and he had not a single diplomatic bone in his body that would
suggest apologizing first.

So he spent the next few days uneasy and chagrined at the absence of Melessa’s formerly ready
smiles to him, missing her sweet songs after dinners, and how she barred him from her chambers in
the evenings. Yet he was stubborn in his insistence that he had not done anything wrong with his
treatment of his son!

And then, Melessa changed the rules of their marriage again. She reached back for the tactics of
Florys the Fox, the tales that the Florent women passed on to each other and not necessarily to the
Melessa also confessed that she dared take Selyse’s advice and tricked Lord Randyll with dares on the results of a game of Mere; he was to obey all her commands for one night, on his honor. He only saw a chance to interact with her while she smiled at him again. He thought that her seemingly good mood was a sign of smoothing things over. She then ruthlessly unleashed all her learned skills from the innumerable games she played while still a maid and beat him fairly. All the ladies, even Selyse, shrieked with laughter when Melessa revealed that she made him apologize and demanded that he submit to her for punishment. He turned red at her trickery and Melessa thought he would dismiss her and stomp away, but he scrunched his face up like Samwell did after a rebuke and mumbled an apology. Here, she is triumphant; he needs her. He’s lost without her. He will not admit so out loud, but words are wind. That he stays is all she needed. Subsequently she trussed him up with cords and set upon his bare buttocks with a riding crop. Lysa was most shocked when Melessa declared that she then told Lord Randyll that she would not release him until he succeeded in satisfying her with his mouth. He cursed at her for that, but she whipped his buttocks some more and he did it.

“Really? He did it? He licked up your custard pie?” Selyse quirked her brow saucily.

“Custard pie!” Delena shrieked, laughing.

“I made him get on his knees. So there,” Melessa said proudly. “Took him long enough.”

“Whoo, girl,” Selyse drawled. “He must be so mad. How are you still alive and kicking?”

“Apparently an old warhorse like my husband takes to the whip. He was most roused,” Melessa quirked her eyebrow significantly. “He had miles to go, so I rode him until he was in a lather.”

Selyse snickered. Lysa was blushing at the idea of it all; it was so exciting, so shocking.

“Ah, so the man likes some pain in bed, does he? Figures,” Selyse said sagely. “He let you do it again?”

“Hmmm,” Melessa made one of those shifty looks that was so charming from the Florent men. “He’s suddenly very enthusiastic about playing games of Mere after dinner.”

They cackled at that.

“Selyse, you must share something too. A tale for a tale, like you’ve always said. I know you worry about Stannis’ need for privacy, but is there not anything you may say…”

“I did not need a horsewhip to have him enjoying some custard pie,” Selyse grinned.

All the Florent ladies whooped while Lysa giggled nervously.

When they had to gather for dinner altogether next, Lysa rued her redheaded complexion; she blushed most obviously every time she had to look at Lord Stannis.

Melessa was very occupied running Horn Hill, the cotton and wool mills of Horn Hill, and coordinating with the Florent canning teams working on packaging up Horn Hill’s produce for export and the Royal Fleet; she worried that Sam was truly being neglected rather than coddled; there were no boys like the Florent boys at Horn Hill and no matter how many repetitions of their childhood stories or attempts to have him follow her as she made her rounds, Sam could not be seen hanging off her skirts all the time. The men of Horn Hill who he would be lord over did not respect such a sight; she was astute enough to discern the reality of it.
There was no good solution except that everybody agreed that Sam would do much better at the Foxhole for a time.

Already, he was enjoying his lessons with Maester Willis and because of Merrell and Omer’s friendliness he was also for the first time taking an interest in outdoor games. Unlike the variants of King of the Hill or hitting each other with sticks that were the traditional boys’ games, Omer and Merrell enjoyed games like soccer one on one. Merrell spent hours teaching Sam to do a credible dribble. Without the fear of getting shoved, hit, or punched, Sam was willing to spend afternoons running about to chase the ball and attempting to make goals. When it was his turn to be goalie, he was already no longer bursting into tears from the impact of the straw-stuffed leather ball to his body. He liked it so well that Uncle Alekyne gifted him with his very own stitched leather ball, dyed in his House colors of red and green. As he was younger, his lessons ended earlier than Omer or Merrell. He spent his free time alone practicing, kicking and bouncing the ball off walls, dribbling up and down hallways, while singing new Florent songs to himself.

His smiling Uncle Alekyne and Cousin Imry impressed him very much. For though they trained with arms in the yard and his mother insisted that he spend some time watching, they were not at all frightening, unlike his father. Imry taught him how to properly fall and tumble so that he could rise back on his feet quickly from being shoved or hit during roughhousing. Alekyne showed him how to properly make a fist and throw a punch, while Imry held up his leather ball and Sam gamely punched at the leather. They never mocked him for missing the first few times or how weakly he did it. They assured him that they were all not so skilled in the beginning and that he had plenty of time to learn. He was a Tarly.

He was at first unhappy with what that could possibly mean. He was no strong hunter. However, Uncle Alekyne showed him his special steel wheeled bow and how fun it was to shoot at targets. He even let Sam try pulling at the string, amazed at how he could not even get it to budge. They made a little wooden bow for him in the workshop of the Foxhole and Sam was encouraged to learn how to shoot. Omer and Merrell knew how to do so already. It was yet another thing for him to join in on; they were always so ready to cheer him on that he had no embarrassment over his arrows falling short the first times. After a time, he hit the center of the target and they cheered so loudly that he blushed and laughed at their ridiculousness.

Lord Renly was friendly as well; joining in with soccer or table games and Sam trusted him almost immediately for Omer and Merrell were friends with him first. Sam thought well of Lord Stannis. He had thought Lord Stannis would be mean like Father, but it was not so. He only looked very stern because his face was just like that. Lord Stannis complimented him on his advanced vocabulary for a boy his age and Sam puffed up at that. Lord Stannis went about with a mysterious folio filled with papers and was often taking notes in his notebook like the Florents. He read by a hearth fire in the evenings, and he was very important; Master of Ships! Sam was quite awed, seeing Lord Stannis conferring with all sorts of rough looking captains and intimidating Royal Marines, ordering them to do this or that with his serious voice. Father said that other lords who wasted time reading and sitting about weren’t strong lords at all, but it couldn’t be so, for Lord Stannis won battles for the King during the Greyjoy Rebellion, hadn’t he, and commanded fighting men of the Royal Fleet! Sam even got to go the training yard of the Red Keep and see how Lord Stannis was one of the few who could regularly spar with the King, and he even sometimes won bouts! The King was so powerful and bellowed so fearsomely while merely sparring, he really must have been a Demon of the Trident during the Rebellion! Lord Stannis was big and strong! While reading and writing! Sam thought it would be wonderful to have a fancy folio of his own and a desk too, to do important, grown up reading and writing, so long as he did as Lord Stannis.

Cousin Lady Selyse was the most strange and wonderful. She told the funniest or scariest stories, she sang the most beautiful songs and her skill at the harp and dulcimer was the best he had ever
heard. He would be tempted to say she was better at singing and making music than even his Mother, but she was his Mother and surely she was the best in the world! When Mother’s Florent cousins sang together it was like magic and they would dance and laugh and it was wonderful. Even her little baby, wee cousin Armand was dear. Lady Selyse asked if he would help look after and protect Armand in the future. Sam had never thought that anybody would ask him for protection, but that was Lady Selyse for you. He promised that he would do his best to grow up to be a proper protector of his little cousin. He told her about how his father yelled at him for being fat. Selyse hugged him and said that perhaps he would always be their dear, stout, roly poly Sammy, but his shape didn’t matter so much as what he could do; he was keeping up with his cousins in play, wasn’t he? He wasn’t getting out of breath so much? Sam brightened at that. He was keeping up! She noticed! Selyse assured him that perhaps fewer tarts after dinner were appropriate, but it was better that he keep on keeping up. Once he was older, he ought to ask his Florent cousins about a weight-lifting regimen. Sam nodded. Cousin Selyse was very wise.

Unfortunately, his mother could only extend their visit to two moons and then they had to go back to Horn Hill. Sam wept at the idea, but then Omer and Merrell convinced their mother and father that they should like to visit Horn Hill for themselves. To say nothing of showing him Brightwater Keep, please, please? Alekyne was fully able to oversee the Foxhole himself. And so his Great Uncle Ser Colin and Great Aunt Rosamund with Delena, Omer, and Merrell were to escort him to Brightwater Keep to visit with Grandfather and Grandmother Florent for a few moons and then onward to Horn Hill. They could probably stay on for moons afterwards. Sam felt well about that. Near a year with his cousins!

Grandfather and Grandmother Florent were wonderful, as it turned out. Grandmother Florent always had cookies in a jar in her rooms for him if he could demonstrate a juggle of his soccer ball at least five times or more. Grandfather Florent was warm and not at all angry all the time like his father. He spoke so easily and clearly about the duties of being a lord that Sam started to understand what it meant to be an heir and was not intimidated by the prospect. He allowed Sam to sit next to him in his solar reading while he worked on raven messages or to watch him as he listened to petitions. They toured the cotton and wool mills and tin jar factory and Sam was a little afraid at first to meet so many strangers, but he rallied and bowed each time. It would not do for him to be present for too long while Lord Florent held business meetings during the day, so he was allowed to go to the childrens’ school on the property.

Grandfather and Grandmother Florent, since their own children were grown, were fostering a number of Reacher nobles’ children. Sam had been very nervous about meeting the fosters but the boys that Grandfather accepted were like him; able to sit still to read and do their sums. Maester Bryan taught the noble children especially about deeper history and principles of sound management of holdings and politics of Westeros. Grandmother Florent took it upon herself to oversee courtly manners, table etiquette, and the hiring of music and dancing masters. She was also headmistress of the millworkers’ children’s schools for Brightwater Keep, Horn Hill, and even the far away schools associated with the iron works and shipyard in the Crownlands, forever receiving and sending off ravens. The rest of the time, fosters were to learn in class with smallfolk children about math, reading, and writing; a little model of the Citadel's own teaching principles. He did the school work as instructed, did not make a fuss or put on airs (as Lord Renly recommended) and he found out that they knew about soccer! He showed them his ball and they played a few games after lunches and it was quite fun! Sam had not thought he could have fun with boys that weren’t Florents.

When it was time to face his father at Horn Hill, Sam felt that familiar quailing in his tummy that shamed him so, but he stood up straight and met his father’s eyes because Omer and Merrell did so. What’s more, he even noticed how his cousins even smiled at his father!
“Well met, Lord Randyll Tarly,” Omer said.

“Yeah,” Merrell added. “We trust you remember us?”

Lord Randyll growled at the cheek but as they were his guests and his wife’s blood, he had to let it pass. He sighed and demanded to know what Sam was up to in the past moons. Reading? He sneered.

Sam didn’t stutter when he said that he knew now how to properly shoot a bow and arrow. He was sure his father didn’t care about how well he did at soccer; it was a child’s game. His father sniffed and ordered that he should show him and if he thought he could get away with telling falsehoods, well, he’ll tan Sam’s hide.

Sam bowed and ran off to retrieve his little bow and quiver of arrows from his room. Omer and Merrell followed him to learn where the training yard of Horn Hill was and his father was waiting. His father took his bow from him and tested the pull on it. It must have met with his approval because he handed it back. The distance of a target was adjusted for the range of his bow.

Sam took his stance and took a deep breath.

‘I’m a Tarly,’ he thought to himself as he raised his bow and nocked. ‘I’ve a good an eye as any boy and I’ll feed myself from my own hunts if I have to. I’ll hit the target like Princess Merida!’

He pulled and released in a smooth motion as Uncle Alekyne taught him and the arrow flew out and hit the target. Not perfectly on center of the bull’s eye, but it was a fine shot. He lowered his bow and looked up at his father.

Lord Tarly said nothing, staring at the arrow at the mark.

“So you’re useful for something at last, boy,” he finally growled.

Sam noticed Omer and Merrell lurking at the edges of the yard and they both grinned their sharp grins at him, encouraging him to speak.

“I just needed better teachers, was all,” Sam said. “Uncle Alekyne says I should try for hitting rabbits to start. And he taught me how to campfire cook them too when he took me out hunting in the Kingswood. They taste good with rosemary and thyme.”

He was very squeamish the first time Uncle Alekyne took him out hunting (Florents had permission as good-kin to the King to hunt in the Kingswood) and he was shown how to properly skin and gut a rabbit for eating. Uncle Alekyne was very patient with his tears; after all, he explained, those meat pies he loved so much came from living things too. He had not thought of it before, but it was so. He paid attention then and very solemnly swore to give a firm killing blow to the animals he would hunt in the future and to not make a game of letting such creatures suffer just because they were fated to fill his belly.

Father scowled down at him some more until he was forced to lower his eyes.

“Don’t think this will get you out of proper arms training, boy,” Lord Randyll finally said.

Sam nodded, resigned. At least Omer and Merrell would teach him tricks on how to bear it and they wouldn’t ever laugh at him unlike all the stupid squires and pages here in Horn Hill.
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